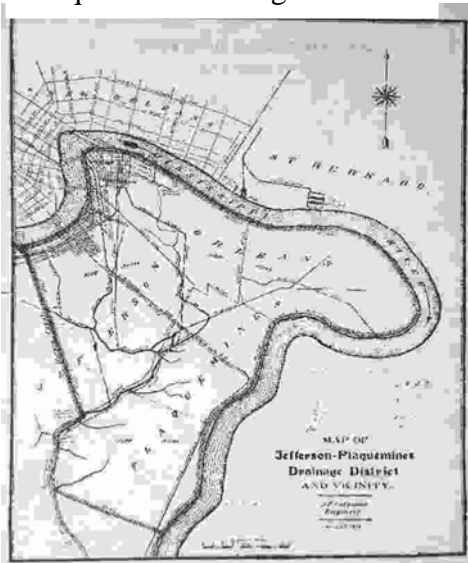


History; New Orleans; Drainage; West Bank; Gretna; Algiers; Harvey Belle Chasse

Prior to 1912 there was no mechanical drainage systems on the West Bank of New Orleans including Algiers in Orleans Parish, Gretna and Harvey in Jefferson Parish and Belle Chasse in Plaquemines Parish. The Yellow Fever epidemic of 1905 prompted action. Walter Reed and Roger Post Ames had recently demonstrated in Cuba that mosquitoes caused Yellow Fever. It was then recognized that the periodic epidemics in New Orleans were caused in large part by mosquitoes being blown across the Mississippi River from the marshes behind the land along the Mississippi River.

An entrepreneur, George Hero (1854-1932), recognized the problem and saw a solution. The West Bank of the Mississippi River forms a great loop below New Orleans. Bayou Barataria was the natural drainage back to the Gulf Of Mexico via Barataria Bay. The central area was cypress swamps and Pifinne prairies. The original French and Spanish land grants were generally 40 arpents deep ( 1 arpent= 191.8 ft.). They recognized that only the land fronting on the river was dry enough to be usable. The front portion could be used for buildings and crops. The rear lands were primarily used for grazing back to the swamps. The Mississippi regularly overflowed its banks during the spring rise as snow melted in the northern Mississippi valley. Many of the old grants specified that the landowner build a three-foot levee across the property. As more of the river was contained these levees had to be continuously raised. The owners usually cooperated to build drainage ditch or canal along the rear. In much of the area a “40 Arpent Canal” is still in use.

Original Map of the Jefferson-Plaquemine Drainage District



The big loop brought the upstream and down stream levees reasonably close together. In the 1840's J. H. Harvey built a small canal from Bayou Barataria to the River for boats to bring produce to New Orleans. The canal had a towpath that formed a partial levee back to the bayou. If a levee were built from Bayou Barataria to the River down stream, it would allow a pumping plant to drain the whole area across from New Orleans.

In the late 1800's A. Baldwin Wood was appointed superintendent of the New Orleans

Sewerage and Water Board with a mandate to drain the back land behind New Orleans to Lake Pontchartrain. To do this he invented the Wood Screw Pump. This was essentially a siphon with a propeller in the top that could move large volumes of water a few feet uphill over a levee efficiently. The City purchased a large number of 8' diameter pumps to install in new pumping plants built in the deepest part of the marshes behind New Orleans. The levees along canals from these pumping stations to Lake Pontchartrain are the ones that failed during Hurricane Katrina. These pump were eminently suitable for use on the West Bank.

George Hero recognized the possibilities of accomplishing the drainage of the West Bank with Baldwin Wood's pumps and profiting from the newly usable land that would be available after drainage. He purchased much of the "back land" behind the 40 Arpent Lines. Then he lobbied the Louisiana State legislature to establish the Jefferson-Plaquemines Drainage District with taxing authority to pay for drainage as a mosquito control measure to prevent Yellow Fever. This would allow bonds to be issued to pay for a pumping plant, canals, and levees. The project was approved.

With the help of engineers, J.W. Coleman and Allen Hackett, the drainage system was designed and constructed. President Warren Harding started the Hero Pumping Plant's pumps in 1915 by telegraph. The New Orleans Times Picayune ( Feb. 13,1915) newspaper hailed the project as an economic boon to the area by putting useless wetlands into commerce. The area drained now consists of Algiers, Gretna, Terrytown, Harvey and Belle Chasse. The original Drainage District was bisected by the Intracoastal Canal Bypass in 1958. The industry along Peters Road, Engineers Road and the Belle Chasse Naval Air Station were all made possible by this drainage project. The area consisted of approximately 37,000 acres. The original pumps were 10 feet in diameter and were at the time the largest in the world. The same design was copied in the Netherlands and other low places. The pumps were huge but the area was vast. As development increased five additional pumping plants were constructed to allow quicker drainage in the heavy tropical rains that occur every few years.

George A. Hero III