Only a few tombs, sinking into the mud of the roza grass wilderness near the passes by which the Mississippi escapes into the Gulf of Mexico, remain to mark the site of the Balize.

This was once a brisk community with a population of a thousand or so, a church, a school, a postoffice, well-stocked stores and pleasant houses. For more than a century and a half it symbolized journey’s end for those who dared the sea lanes, the landfall for which sailing masters strained their eyes, the beacon pointing the way to the excitement of New Orleans, less than a hundred miles away.

When LaSalle, exploring the Mississippi downstream from Canada, reached the delta in 1682, he explored the three principal mouths of the river, South Pass, Southwest Pass and Pass a l’Outre, which connected with Northeast Pass. Iberville and Bienville, sent by France to take possession of the Louisiana Territory which LaSalle had claimed for it, probably entered the river by the Pass a l’Outre route.

Bienville made this the channel for ocean vessels when he founded New Orleans in 1718 and three years later built a pilot station near the head of Pass a l’Outre. He erected there a 62-foot beacon. This gave the place its name, La Balize, the French word for beacon.

Ulloa, the first governor Spain sent to Louisiana after its cession to that country by France in 1762, received the transfer aboard his ship anchored at the Balize. There he waited for and married his sweetheart from Peru; there he built Fort Real Catolica in 1766. The second Spanish governor, Alexander O’Reilly, abandoned the fort and it quickly disappeared. Under French and Spanish rule the Balize made virtually no growth, because the colonial policies discouraged trade.

Conditions changed after the United States took over the Louisiana Territory in 1804. Major Amos Stoddard, who acted as civil and military governor until Congress established a government for the Territory, states that “the East Pass, called the Balize,” is the one “usually navigated” by the larger ships. It then had “17 feet of water on the bar.”

Barges, keelboats and (after 1815) steamboats poured the production of the Mississippi Valley into New Orleans, and world trade increasingly sought this growing market. These ships needed pilotage across the bar and towage to New Orleans, services which centered upon the Balize. The community grew steadily in importance for several decades. Later a steady decline set in which climaxed when the jetties of Captain James B. Eads opened South Pass to navigation in 1879 with a nearly 31-foot depth over the bar.