Economic Prosperity And Settlement Aided By Plaquemine Lock

The Mississippi River and surrounding waterways have long been vital to the people and economy of Louisiana. The waters have also posed a serious threat of flooding to the low-lying areas of the state, making control of the waterways as important as the waters themselves.

As a distributary of the Mississippi River and a route to the heartland of Louisiana through the Atchafalaya Basin, Bayou Plaquemine was used as a navigable artery centuries before the age of European exploration. The bayou was documented as early as 1699 in the journal of Pierre le Moyne, Sieur d'Iberville, who noted the large amount of debris lodged at its mouth. For the next century and a half, the waterway was dredged and widened, making it navigable during high water to most vessels plying the Mississippi River. During this time, Bayou Plaquemine served as a commercial transport route, promoting settlement and economic prosperity in southwest and northern Louisiana via the Atchafalaya, Red and other rivers.

After the Civil War, Bayou Plaquemine's natural access to the Mississippi River was terminated. The repeated flooding of Iberville Parish necessitated the construction of a levee across the mouth of the bayou to function as a dam and bridge. At the same time, through-traffic via the bayou was shut down.

Lock Structure Needed

Eventually Congress was petitioned by the residents of Iberville Parish to authorize funding for a lock system to control the water level between Bayou Plaquemine and the Mississippi River. The original projects for improving the bayou were approved by Congress under the provisions of the Rivers and Harbors Act of 1882 renewed again in 1888. These acts provided for a lock at the intersection of the river and bayou, and for the clearing and dredging of the channel to a depth of six feet and a width of 60 feet. Subsequent modifications by federal law provided for navigation by vessels with a deeper draft. Construction on the lock began in 1895.
State Historic Site

The Plaquemine Lock was designed by Colonel George W. Goethals (1858-1928), the assistant to the chief engineer of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Goethals later gained distinction as chairman and chief engineer of the Isthmian Canal Commission for the design and construction of the Panama Canal. He became the first civil governor of the Canal Zone.

When completed in 1909, the lock was significant for having the highest fresh-water lift of any lock in the world—51 feet—and a unique engineering design that utilized a gravity-flow principle. This was later modernized by the installation of hydraulic pumps. The lock served its purpose well by providing a short-cut from the Mississippi River into Louisiana's interior. By 1925, Bayou Plaquemine had become the northern terminus of the Intracoastal Canal system. Increased river traffic during and after World War II put a severe strain on the lock's capacity and demand increased for a larger lock at Port Allen. In 1961, a larger set of locks began operating at Port Allen and the Plaquemine Lock was closed after 52 years of service. Thirteen years after closing the lock, the Corps of Engineers supervised the construction of the present levee across the mouth of Bayou Plaquemine at the Mississippi River, giving the historic structure greater stability and providing flood protection, while closing off access to the Mississippi River through Bayou Plaquemine.

In 1972, the Plaquemine Lock structure was placed on the National Register of Historic Places, an honorary designation for significant historic sites. In 1978, ownership of the lock was transferred from the Corps of Engineers to the State of Louisiana. The property is now a state historic site.

In addition to the lock, the area includes the Gary James Hebert Memorial Lockhouse, which serves as a museum and visitors center. Hebert worked to
prevent the destruction of the lock by the Corps of Engineers and campaigned to have the area preserved as a historic site.

Facilities also include a stylized adaptation of the resident engineer's house, which provides open-air pavilion space for display of various water craft used when the lock was operational. A 40-foot tall observation tower gives visitors a visual command of the Mississippi River and the lock complex.

The lockhouse controlled the passage of thousands of river craft between 1909 and 1961.

**Nearby Attractions**

**Old City Hall**—(across the street from the lockhouse, south of the lock)—Built as the Iberville Parish Courthouse in 1849 and later served as Plaquemine's first City Hall, this Greek Revival building served first as the parish's, and then as the city's, seat of government until 1985. The building is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and now houses a parish museum.

**St. John the Evangelist Catholic Church**—(located across Main Street from Old City Hall)—Considered the purest example of Italian Romanesque architecture in the South, it features a beautiful balustrino altar. It was completed in 1926.

**Old Homes of Turnerville**—(23230 Nadler Sr., just across the bayou, within walking distance of the lock)—Two-century-old, antique-furnished Acadian cottage homes are located on La. 1, just north of Plaquemine. Daily tours. Bed & Breakfast.

**St. Basil's Academy**—(23515 Church Street, Plaquemine, La. 70765)—Originally built as the Scratchley family mansion and now the residence of former Louisiana Lieutenant Governor Robert L. Freeman and his wife, the building is the only one remaining of the many buildings which served as a Catholic school and residence for the Sisters Marianites of the Holy Cross from 1859 until 1976.

**Nottoway Plantation**—(30970 Hwy. 405, White Castle, La.)—Eight miles south of Plaquemine is the South's largest plantation home, built in 1859. This awe-inspiring home is a classic Greek revival structure with 53,000 square feet of floor space and 50 rooms. Tours offered. Bed & Breakfast, restaurant and gift shop.

**Water Levels Controlled** - In its 52 years of operation, the Plaquemine Lock controlled water levels and allowed thousands of river craft swift access into the interior of south Louisiana from the Mississippi River.

Before a boat could enter, the level of the water in the lock chamber had to be the same as that of the Mississippi River. When the riverside gates opened, the boat entered the lock.

After the riverside gates closed, valves in the bayou-side gates opened. Water flowed from the locking chamber into Bayou Plaquemine. It was not pumped, but flowed by gravity.

When the water in the lock chamber reached the level of Bayou Plaquemine, the emptying valves closed and the bayou-side gates opened. The boat then left the lock and continued on its journey.