**Where was the baton rouge?**

Why are Iberville and the famous "red stick" depicted atop the bluffs north of Baton Rouge, the reporter wanted to know.

Iberville’s journal suggests the explorer and his party went ashore at present-day Baton Rouge in what we’d call a wetland.

The Advocate’s Peter Shinkle had called Richard K. Condray, associate professor in LSU’s Department of Oceanography, for help with a story he was doing for the paper’s 200th-anniversary of Baton Rouge edition.

Condray, an ecologist, is interested in how the Gulf, its deltas and land contiguous to the Gulf have changed since Iberville’s time. Condray thinks Devil’s Swamp a more likely location for the legendary red stick that gave Baton Rouge its name.

Condray used maps at LSU’s Hill Memorial Library to trace Iberville’s travels through this part of Louisiana (http://digital.theadvocate.com/digitalarchive).

There was a red stick, baton rouge in French, but the pole, stained red and decorated with animal parts, wasn’t atop the Mississippi River bluffs at the edge of present-day Southern University, Condray decided.

According to Rose Meyers, who wrote “A History of Baton Rouge: 1699-1812,” historians have placed the red stick in different places over the years — including the place Condray’s research suggests.

Condray cites this passage from Iberville’s Gulf of Mexico journal, March 17, 1699.

“Five leagues and a half from our last stop for the night we came on the right side of the river to a little stream (Bayou Baton Rouge) in which the Indians informed us that there were great numbers of fish. Here I had nets set out but caught only two catfish. The Indians having stopped two leagues below to hunt bear, where they say there are a great many, my brother (Iberville) stayed with them. This stream (Bayou Rouge Bayou as it flowed into Devil’s Swamp) is the dividing line between the Oumoa’s (sic) hunting ground with the Bayougna’s (sic). On the bank are many huts roofed with palmettos and a mappale with no limbs, painted red; several fish heads and bear bones being tied to it as a sacrifice.”

“There can be a red stick on Scott’s Bluff,” Condray said. “It just can’t be Iberville’s red stick.”

“Peter Shinkle asked why people say the red stick was on Scott’s Bluff when Iberville describes a wetlands area. I was working on the general subject of Iberville, but it was Peter who raised the question.”

Condray will publish a paper this summer that traces the location of the red stick in Iberville’s journal.

Condray doesn’t hold his findings up as any Northwest Passage. He wants only to be as accurate as possible when talking about Iberville’s travels.

Condray wants to draw attention to Iberville’s voyages and travels through some of the state’s threatened wetlands. He hopes that attracting Iberville’s name to country that the explorer crossed will be added reason to protect the land from pollution and erosion.

Condray attributed the story of a red stick atop Scott’s Bluff to some LSU professors writing in the 1930s and 1940s.

The stories popularized another journalist’s accounts of French travels in south Louisiana, Condray said. The journalist, Andre Penicaud, a carpenter on one of Iberville’s ships, was a better tale spinner than geographer, Condray said.

To read the journals of Iberville is to be transported to a fabulous time, Condray said. Iberville and the other European explorers were courageous, ruthless, driven by their rulers to lay claim to huge tracts of land.

The explorers, to say nothing of their Indian guides, had amazing senses of direction.

I took “Iberville’s Gulf Journals,” translated and edited by R.G. McWilliams, University of Alabama Press, to the beach for a couple of days.

Condray is right. Reading the journals does transport the reader to another time.

My reading gave me renewed appreciation for air conditioning and clean sheets.

Condray’s field isn’t history, but he’s become an expert on Iberville and the Gulf of Mexico as it may have looked 300 years ago.

He sketches a new image of Baton Rouge 300 years ago — one of a Mississippi River bluff without a red stick.

E-mail Ed Cullen at ecullen@theadvocate.com