



A Bit of History:
The Cut Off Canal and the War of 1812
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A historical marker now designates the site of the Cut Off Canal from which the community of Cut Off derives its name. The canal is located on Highway 308 on the east back of Bayou Lafourche. Excavation was begun in 1865 and completed in 1857, and it was used primarily as an outfall canal. Originally built thirty-five feet wide and five feet deep, it is now only twelve to fifteen feet wide. For many years, the canal was overgrown and half filled with debris. The present owners, Mr. and Mrs. Roland Guidry, and Mr. Kirk St. Pierre, have cleaned the canal and it is once again functional as a drainage canal.

For over a thousand years, Bayou Lafourche flowed from the Mississippi River to the Gulf of Mexico at Fourchon. In 1814 Bayou Lafourche was 15 to 20 feet deep and carried rich alluvial soil, which it deposited along the banks of the bayou. Green trees, mostly willows, grew along the banks.

During the War of 1812, General Andrew Jackson made a military decision that altered the flow of Bayou Lafourche. In 1814 he ordered that trees be cut down along the banks and be placed into the deep waters of the bayou. These obstructions covered a long distance. Its purpose was to prevent the ascent of the British navy to Donaldsonville via Bayou Lafourche, then on to the Mississippi River, which would have enabled the British to attack New Orleans. Fortifications were built of earth and logs on the banks of the bayou and manned by troops and local militia.

After the war ended in 1815, the soldiers left but the obstructions remained. Silting began and eventually the bayou was only two and one half to three feet deep for several miles. This prevented large steamboats from traveling down the bayou and only the small vessels could sail or cordell up or down the bayou.

The obstructions caused a lot of silting, which slowed the flow of the bayou. Consequently, water rose higher and higher and “Crevasses” occurred, flooding plantations along its bank. Plantation owners complained that flooding was ruining their crops and something had to be done.

State and federal engineers made several suggestions: build locks at Donaldsonville, dam the bayou, or cut outfall canals to relieve the flooding. It wasn't until 1854 that State Engineer, Lafayette Caldwell drew up plans for an outlet canal.



This “cut off” was to be dug on the northern edge of a plantation owned by a Mr. Para located about fifteen miles below Lockport.

In 1856 the dredge boat Harmanson was sent to commence the excavation of the “cut off” outlet. This vessel was not well suited for digging canals so work progressed slowly. Repairs and adjustments were made which increased production, so that in August of 1857 the Harmanson finished the canal to Bayou de Amourous. The people of the area soon adopted the name of Cut Off for their community.

While this outlet canal helped to alleviate flooding, it did not solve the problem; the obstructions still remained. It was not until 1873 that Congress authorized funding to remove the obstructions and not until 1879 that actual funding was approved.

The Corps of Engineers set Lt. O.T. Crosby to oversee the operation. State vessels and employees were used to do the work. From 1881 to 1885 over thirty miles of obstruction and sediment were removed from below Lockport to a point below Cut Off. The spoils were used as a foundation for both Highway 1 and Highway 308.

In the course of time, the Cut Off Canal served many purposes. First, to disperse floodwaters, then as a temporary route to Little Lake, and it is even rumored to have been used during Prohibition. Today the Cut Off Canal is still significant for its rich history, but more importantly, for lending its name to the community.