

## HOUMA'S HISTORY

The recorded history of the city of Houma began in 1834, when the newly formed parish of Terrebonne needed a more centrally located and accessible seat of government. Originally part of Lafourche Parish, "the interior", as the new area was called, was formally annexed in 1822 as a separate parish named "Terrebonne" - "the good earth". As they had done along Bayou Lafourche and the Mississippi before, immigrant farmers (mostly of French descent) cleared the higher ground along Bayou Terrebonne and established farms and plantations in the southern sections of the parish. When Terrebonne was created, the parish seat was located at Williamsburg (4 miles northwest of present day downtown Houma), near the junction of Bayou Cane and Bayou Terrebonne. Before any official buildings were erected at Williamsburg, government leaders decided that a site to the south along Bayou Terrebonne, at the convergence of five other bayous, was a more appropriate location for the seat of government. The proximity to six bayous would allow for better access to the developments spread throughout the parish and would encourage commerce. All land owners in that vicinity received requests by government officials for a donation of a tract upon which to build a courthouse. On 18 March 1834, Richard H. Grinage and Hubert M. Belanger, realizing the development of a village would enhance the value of their property, donated one piece of frontage along Bayou Terrebonne for the new seat of government. Grinage and Belanger are looked upon as the "fathers of Houma", for it was around this plot of ground that the city of Houma developed.

Once the land was subdivided around the new courthouse, a "town" began to take shape from the wilderness. But there was still the problem of what to call this new collectivity of buildings and people. Many names (mostly of French derivation) were considered, but "Houma", named after an Indian tribe living in the parish, was finally chosen. The word "houma" (or "ouma" in some publications) means "red" in the tribe's language. The name may have referred to the sun, or possibly to the Houmas' war emblem, the crawfish. Contrary to common belief, the tribe was not native to the area, but instead originated from the north of Baton Rouge (West Feliciana Parish/Wilkinson County, Mississippi). After losing a war to the Tunicas in 1706, the Houmas Tribe moved several times, eventually settling in Terrebonne Parish in the mid to late eighteenth century). A camp on Ouiski Bayou on high ground northwest of present day downtown Houma was established. When European settlement increased in the late 1700s and early 1800s, the tribe drifted from the "highlands" of the north to the coastal regions of the south. It is here that the remnants of the Houmas Tribe can be found today.

Soon after becoming the home of the parish government, the town began to grow, and Houma was incorporated as a city by an act of the legislature in 1848. Plantation homes, with their vast agricultural lands, dominated all high ground property development outside the city along the watercourses. Also a major part of

the local economy were the industries of seafood, fur trading, and logging. Canals, such as the Barataria and Lafourche Canals (completed in 1840), were dug as short cuts to link some bayous. These canals decreased travel time within the parish and made trade more efficient. A railroad spur, running from the main east-west track (New Orleans to Morgan City) was built in 1872 from Schriever south to Houma. This railroad spur linked Houma to the outside world by a means of conveyance other than boats. The railroad was instrumental in the growth of the city by providing easy access to goods and people both within and outside of the area. A trip from Houma to New Orleans that once took three days by boat was reduced to a mere few hours with the advent of the railroad.

By 1900, Houma had become an agricultural and seafood purchasing center. Seafood products (such as shrimp, fish, and oysters) from the coastal marshes and Gulf of Mexico were processed and canned in factories along Bayou Terrebonne. Oyster harvesting, in particular, grew in importance as Terrebonne oysters became internationally known as the finest in the world. Production of raw and refined sugar, however, continued to be the major industry in the area. Two large mills, South Coast Mill in Montegut and Southdown Mill in Houma, provided year-round employment.

In 1923, the Intracoastal Waterway connecting to Bayou Terrebonne was completed to the east of the city. Abandonment of the once important Barataria and Lafourche Canals soon followed. Later, in 1934, the Intracoastal was extended to into Lafourche Parish and to Bayou Lafourche, increasing the city's importance as an inland port. During World War II, Houma became home to an LTA (Lighter Than Air) Blimp Navy Station. In operation from May 1943 to September 1944, the naval base housed one of only two blimp squadrons patrolling the coastline for enemy vessels.

Perhaps the most far-reaching development in Houma and Terrebonne's history occurred in June 1929. In the marshes near Lake Pelato and Lake Barre in the far southern regions of the parish, the Texas Company (later to be renamed Texaco) discovered oil. Major changes initiated by this discovery were to be fully realized during the post-war years. The dominant industries of the past, seafood and sugar cane production, although still playing a major role, took a back seat to the industry of the future -oil and gas exploration and production. Like most cities and towns in the post WWII era, Houma grew tremendously. By 1960, the prosperity of the rich land, the productive waters, and the natural mineral resources of Terrebonne Parish made Houma one of the fastest growing cities in the United States. Because most of the oil activity took place to the south of the city, direct water access to the to the Gulf of Mexico from Houma would add to the city's already established importance as an inland port. The Houma Navigational Canal, finished in 1961, provided a 30-mile link to Terrebonne Bay and to the Gulf of Mexico.

By the 1970s, the sugar cane industry was no longer viable in Terrebonne Parish. The last processing facility in the parish, Southdown Mill, closed in 1979. It was dismantled, sold and reassembled in Guatemala. In the meantime, the oil and gas industries continued to flourish. Thousands of jobs directly related to these industries were brought into the area during the 1970s and early 80s. A snowball effect occurred, in that services not directly related to oil and gas depended upon these industries for their very existence. The city lived and died by oil. In 1981, it looked as though the growth would never stop. But by 1983, the oil bust began. Cheaper oil abroad, as well as an oil glut, made domestic drilling less appealing to the oil companies.

While oil still remains king, its turbulent period in the 1980s has led to more diversification in the local economy in recent years. A world-class medical industry has blossomed in the Houma area. Like the oil business, the medical industry has created a need for support services that feed directly from it. In addition, the coastline portions of Terrebonne, although eroding at an alarming rate, continue to provide for a fruitful seafood industry, with the parish providing over 20% of Louisiana's seafood production. Another growing industry in Houma and Terrebonne Parish is tourism. An authentic French Acadian culture, a beautifully preserved downtown, museums, plantation homes, excellent food, and some of the world's most breathtaking wetlands are just some of the attractions for the tourist visiting the area. Close proximity to New Orleans (about a one hour drive), makes Houma and Terrebonne Parish an easy day trip for the traveler interested in an authentic taste of the Cajun culture.