Surveyor's 1807 Report Gives Grande Terre-New Orleans Trade Route

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Details about the Grande Terre-New Orleans smuggling route used by the Laffites have recently come to light from information gathered by a US surveyor in 1807 while he was checking out sites for a lighthouse on the Gulf Coast west of New Orleans.

The most astonishing fact about this route is the surveyor's statement that one could travel from Barataria Bay to New Orleans in as little as one and a half days, weaving through the bayous and a canal long used by area residents for coastal trading access. By comparison, when Commodore Patterson's forces raided Grande Terre, it took them four days to navigate from New Orleans down the Mississippi past the Balize to the Laffite stronghold.

After an 1806 Act of Congress directed a survey be made of the coast of the Territory of Orleans from the mouth of the Mississippi River westward, then Secretary of the Treasury Albert Gallatin appointed Lewis (or Louis) DeMun, a young French military officer working for architect Benjamin Latrobe, to be surveyor for the project under Latrobe's direction. Latrobe wanted DeMun to check out soil conditions at various sites, particularly at the location of Belle Isle, one of the salt domes on the Louisiana coastline:

"Belle Isle is one of the most remarkable objects on this coast: it is not an island, according to the general sense of the word, but only an island of high woodland, in the midst of very extensive marshes... In the vast and uniform level of marsh and water, which fatigues the eye, on this coast, it is truly surprising to see an island rise about 150 feet above the marshes, covered with the most beautiful trees. They are principally live oak and green oaks. Some of the former I have measured, and found to be from 14 to 18 feet diameter about three feet above the ground. There are the remains of the trunk of a live oak which has been burnt, which form a circle of twenty feet in diameter. The island contains between three and four hundred acres of most excellent land. There is, at the foot of the hill, on the north side, a sulphurous spring, about which pure sulphur is found in large veins, only a few inches below the surface of the ground."  

On July 20, 1807, DeMun made his report to Gallatin detailing his findings and complaining up front that the allotted work time of six months was insufficient for a proper survey of what he called "that very intricate and dangerous coast." DeMun had the misfortune of arriving in New Orleans from Philadelphia on Sept. 12, two days before a devastating hurricane struck the city and outlying area. Consequently, the revenue cutter which was to take him on the coastal survey had suffered damage to sails and rigging, and had to be repaired before he could begin, a delay of almost one month.

DeMun stayed at Belle Isle until Feb. 14, when bad weather compelled him to stop his coastal survey. He decided to ride out the storm in Barataria Bay, about 20 leagues to the west of the Mississippi River, and curiosity led to a quick exploratory venture up the bay from Grande Terre. He does not mention whether or not there were any
ships at Grande Terre at the time, but the following information makes it clear that he had discussed the assets of the area with some knowledgeable local:

"The bay of Barataria is the best harbor on all the coast from the Mississippi to the Sabine: ten feet of water can be carried in, and you may ride inside in six and seven fathoms in perfect safety. There is, also, a good communication, from this bay to New Orleans, for pirogues or boats, by going through several lakes and up the bayou Barataria, till you come to the race of a saw mill, up which you proceed to the mill. The boat must then be hauled through the mill by the works which bring up the saw logs. This race joins the bayou with the Mississippi, about three leagues above New Orleans; with a moderately fair wind you may go from the Bay to New Orleans in a day and a half or two days. This bay is an excellent harbor for vessels falling to leeward of the Mississippi; for, besides good shelter, water, fish, and oysters, are found in great plenty, and there are several little plantations along the coast, where cattle and poultry may easily be got."³

The sawmill that DeMun describes was operated by Francois Mayronne (aka Don Francisco Mayronne), who happened to own the island of Grande Terre during the time the Laffite settlement was there. The mill race's other name was Dubreuil's Canal, and since its creation in 1740 had served for many years as a major route of commerce and communication between the Gulf of Mexico and New Orleans. It was by no means a secret shortcut, but nevertheless was not widely noted in official communications or maps of the time. Probably dug by Dubreuil's plantation slaves, the canal was 25 feet wide and connected Bayou Fatma with Bayou Barataria, leading into the Bayou Rigolets, Little Lake Barataria, and Barataria Bay.⁴ It was the perfect smuggling route for quick access to New Orleans, and for New Orleans merchants and other residents to use to access the nearby Temple mound site where the Laffites held their auctions of smuggled goods. No doubt it was this excellent shortcut access to the port city plus the harbor's benefits that figured in to the Laffites' occupation of Grande Terre.

DeMun's report concluded with an important postscript which said although the mouth of the Atchafalaya was not very good as a military position, it did provide an access to inland navigation to New Orleans which could be accomplished in four to five days. Most interestingly, DeMun notes: "it is of immense importance to the interests of the United States...to possess a perfect knowledge of the whole of this inland communication, and to obtain a map of all the numerous entrances to the Mississippi between the Atchafalaya and New Orleans... (using an eastward path) an enemy, having a sufficient number of small boats, or seizing the pirogues of the country, could reach New Orleans without any notice of his approach." ⁵

Incredibly, this sensitive information was published in many Washington, D.C., area newspapers in the early summer of 1811. One can only wonder how British intelligence made use of the details in formulating their later plan to approach Laffite.

Since DeMun said it would take no more than 2 days to get from Grande Terre to New Orleans via the inland bayou/canal route, some new interpretations need to be made regarding what happened with Laffite after the British offer, and also with what happened once Patterson and the gunboats left for the Grande Terre raid early on the morning of Sept. 11, 1814. The Laffites probably knew about the coming raid by Sept. 13, which means they had three days to get ready for it by relocating some goods and ships. Speculation would say at least some of those flints and powder made it up the millrace to New Orleans before Patterson arrived at Barataria Bay.

The millrace canal still exists today, although the entry to the
Mississippi River has long been filled in. Dubreuil's Canal is now known as Gardiere Canal, just to the east of the Harvey Canal in the suburb of Harvey, La.  

ENDNOTES:

1. *American State Papers, Commerce and Navigation*, 1: 840-42, 1832. Gallatin fixed DeMun's pay at $6 per day including personal expenses, to be computed from the day he arrived at New Orleans, but not longer than 180 days; he also gave him $150 which Latrobe advanced the surveyor for passage and expenses, and the same was given to him upon his return to Philadelphia.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.


Mayronne’s Mill Race

Map detail from large map by Arsene Latour for the *Historical Memoir of the War in West Florida and Louisiana*, with Mayronne’s Mill Race marked with arrows.