

# History

## Early Days

Over 500 years define the history of the site of Ascension Parish, a location historically identified by the junction of the Mississippi River and Bayou Lafourche (pronounced “La-Foosh”). Until the early 13<sup>th</sup> century, the Mississippi River followed a more southerly course on its path to the Gulf of Mexico. As the result of periodic major flood events, the river’s course eventually changed to its present southeasterly course and the former southerly path became Bayou Lafourche. Bayou Lafourche became an important offshoot of the river inasmuch as it was substantial short cut to the Gulf. The Houma, Bayougoula and Tchitimacha tribes occupied the surrounding region. While primitive, they lived in organized communities with disciplined beliefs. They were hunters, farmers and mound builders, some of which have been preserved historic sites in the region. They knew pottery, basketry, and ceramics and they called the Great River ‘Michi Sipi’.

The first Europeans were Spanish explorers who arrived in the region in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century. In 1541, the conquistador Hernando de Soto was the first to write of the Great River, and his lieutenant, Luis de Moscoso, was likely the first European to travel the length of Bayou Lafourche from the Great River to the Gulf of Mexico. In this period the Tribes spoke openly of ‘the fork’ and ‘the bayuk’ in reference to Bayou Lafourche. But the entrance to Bayou Lafourche from the river was often concealed by high waters and vegetation and its mere existence was questioned by various explorers in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The search for ‘la fourche’ became an obsession, especially among French explorers.

In 1680, the French missionary, Louis Hennepin wrote of the strategic fork in the river. In 1682, Rene Robert Cavalier,

Sieur de La Salle, descended the Mississippi. In April, he found the Gulf, and claimed 'La Louisiane' for France. Due to seasonal high waters, he was unable to locate 'la fourche'. During the ensuing years, 'La Louisiane', for nearly twenty years Louisiana was mostly undisturbed other than by the 'coureurs-des-bois' (French trappers) roaming the territory. By 1698, France and Spain were competing for Louisiana. Serving France, in 1699, Pierre Le Moyne, Sieur d'Iberville rediscovered the Mississippi, and began colonization. With help from the Natives he found Bayou Manchaq, which today is one of Ascension's northern boundaries. 'La fourche', however, remained elusive.

In 1700, d'Iberville's brother, Jean-Baptiste le Moyne, Sieur de Bienville, with Louis Juchereau de St. Denis, and Henri de Tonti, found 'la fourche', and named it 'Les Riviere de Tchitimacha.' Iberville founded Mobile in 1702; St. Denis founded Natchitoches in 1714, Bienville founded New Orleans in 1718, and the French became firmly established. It is thought that a tiny village existed on the Mississippi at Bayou Lafourche at this time. The village was called 'La Fourche des Tchitimacha,' and later 'La Fourche.' In time, French, Canadians, Germans, Spanish, English, African and Native Slaves populated it.

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## **Agriculture is Established**

During this time the area's economy was agricultural: food crops, tobacco, and indigo. Sugar Cane was first planted circa 1700, but not formally established until circa 1795. Because adequate labor was needed, by 1717 some 3,000 African slaves were cultivating the land, and their number grew until slavery was outlawed.

By 1721, Louisiana was divided into nine districts with the New Orleans District representing today's Ascension Parish.

That year saw the arrival of German settlers (L'Allemands) on the river and in the Bayou Lafourche area. They suffered deprivation and great loss coming to Louisiana, but their hardiness was later credited with saving New Orleans. In 1762, France ceded Louisiana west of the Mississippi, and the 'Isle of Orleans' to Spain. The Isle was the area east of the river bounded by Bayou Manchac, the Amite River, Lakes Maurepas, Ponchartrain, and Borgne. All of today's East Ascension was part of the Isle of Orleans.

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## **Acadian Coast**

In 1755, an event critical to Ascension occurred in modern day Canada when England exiled the French-speaking people from of the Maritimes region known as Acadia. Acadian families were scattered and torn apart and many of them relocated to New Orleans and other areas of South Louisiana. Many settled in what is now Ascension Parish and the area was known at the time as the 'Acadian Coast', later as the 'Acadia District' and still later as 'Acadia County' in the early 1800's. The modern day reference to the descendants of these settlers as "Cajuns" is derived from the reference to the 'Cadian immigrant peoples.

Curious to the diverse people of Ascension at this time was the 'Creole.' Writers called them a 'created people.' They were first defined as the newborn French in the Louisiana Colony. In time, this was applied to the Germans, Spanish and Africans. Indeed, so popular was being identified as being Creole, even their produce held that important notoriety and was constantly sought-out by visitors. In 1772, at the village of La Fourche, the Ascension Church Parish, 'La Iglesia de la Ascension de Nuestro Senor Jesus Christo de La Fourche de Los Tchitimacha' was officially founded by Father Angelus de Reuillagodos. Because of this, La Fourche became known as 'L'Ascension.'

In 1778, Spain recruited settlers from the Canary Islands to help defend against the advancing English (L'Anglais). Called 'Islenos,' they founded two settlements near L'Ascension, 'Villa de Galvez' and 'Villa de Valanzuela.' English economic penetration was feared, and despite attempts to prevent it at L'Ascension, Baton Rouge and New Orleans, they became established.

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## **The American Revolution**

In 1779, the American Revolution visited Louisiana. Successfully defending the region were the Spanish and local troops of French, Canadian, Cajun, Isleno, German, African (Slave and Free), and Tribal Natives. Victories at Baton Rouge and Mobile were fervently hailed by the United States. In 1800, Spain returned Louisiana to Napoleon's France. Realizing the difficulty of defending Louisiana from the English, in 1803, he sold it to the United States. When news of 'The Louisiana Purchase' reached L'Ascension, English settlers were jubilant, while the French were dismayed.

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## **Creating Ascension Parish**

In 1804, The Louisiana Purchase was divided, with Louisiana as the 'Orleans Territory.' This was divided into 12 counties, with the L'Ascension area as 'Acadia County'; population 5,000. Due to its prosperity, Acadia became the 'Gold Coast.' In 1807, the Territory was divided into 19 parishes. 'Ascension Parish' was created from Acadia. In 1812, the Territory became 'Louisiana,' the 18th State.

Today, Ascension Parish is a true American treasure. It is the gateway to a glorious and sublime portrait of time and people spanning more than five centuries. Ascension Parish is an

immense collection of diverse histories deserving simply of recognition, celebration, and protection.

