**Louisiana Great River Road Interpretive Center and Museum**

Louisiana’s Great River Road winds along-side of the Mississippi River levee on the east and west banks of the river. It possesses some of the most intriguing and powerful history of the United States.

Early explorers arrived in Louisiana in the 1600s and 1700s claiming the lands along the Mississippi River. For France (1699-1763) and Spain (1763-1803). Soon after, French and Spanish land grants were awarded to wealthy, well-connected individuals. Plantations began to appear along the Mississippi River from New Orleans to Baton Rouge.

Between the late 1700s and the state of the American Civil War, planters had built grand estates with columned mansions and immaculate gardens. Colonial and Greek Revival architecture were preferred choices for most homes.

Each plantation complex usually consisted of the plantation home, sugar mill, sugar houses, barns, hospital, store, slave dwellings and many other buildings. The crops were sugarcane, corn, wheat, indigo, tobacco, rice, beans and other crops. Cypress swamps to the rear of the plantations were felled for lumber, and rich clay soil was used to make bricks to build the River Road structures.

Life along the Mississippi River changed abruptly during the Civil War (1861-65). The abolition of slavery and the post-Civil War era brought great struggles to the newly freed slaves, as well as the farmers, settlers, plantations and businesses which lined the banks of the Mississippi River. The plantation system evolved, some prospered and some declined.

Many of the plantation buildings were lost during the Civil War, many fell into disrepair from the late 1800s through the early 1900s. During the 1920s and 30s, more plantations were destroyed with the building of the railroads, and many plantations were demolished to make way for the new chemical industries corridor. Additionally, levee setbacks of the ever-changing Mississippi River, crevasses, and the construction of the Bonnet Carre Spillway took many of the lands and buildings for the modern levee system.

The Louisiana Great River Road Interpretive Center and Museum is a state-of-the-art $15 million facility that chronicles the history and tells the stories of life along the lower Mississippi River from Baton Rouge to New Orleans and to the mouth of the Mississippi River. It is located on the grounds of Houmas House Plantation, but is a separate, stand-alone structure. It is not connected specifically to the history of Houmas House, but rather connects the stories of the people to the land and Mississippi River from Baton Rouge to New Orleans – south. The Great River Road Interpretive Center and Museum received the largest National Scenic Byway grant for a single project in 2012. The grant awarded was $5.5 million.

As a visitor walks in to the doors of the 35,000 square-foot interpretive center and museum, its entryway has panels and artifacts telling the story of the early inhabitants of the region. It describes the Houmas Native Americans at length since Houmas House is named in honor of the Houmas Indians.

Next, there is an exhibit on the early explorers of the Mississippi River, including brothers Pierre LeMoyne D’Iberville and Jean Baptists Le Moyne de Bienville. D’Iberville discovered the mouth of the Mississippi River.

Through floor to ceiling columns, the visitor walks into the foyer that designed to look like a luxury steamboat. The pilot, manning the pilot wheel, greets visitors from the balcony overlooking the foyer.

To the left, double doors welcome visitors to exhibits that describe the New Orleans area and influential people who settled the lower Mississippi Region. John McDonogh – instrumental in Louisiana education, was a slave-owner who devised a system to free his slaves known as the McDonogh Experiment. The caveat was that the freed slaves agreed to travel to Liberia. On display are letters from former slaves who earned their freedom and made a successful voyage to Liberia.

In the same area, there are architectural drawings of homes and buildings in New Orleans. These buildings are vastly different than the many plantations and river estates located along the east and west banks of the Mississippi River. The display illustrates the early 1700s urban architecture influenced by the French and Spanish.

Lining two sides of Jackson Square are the resplendent brick row houses named the Pontalba Buildings, which were completed in the early 1850s and remain French Quarter landmarks. The Upper Pontalba Building—now owned by the City of New Orleans—is on St. Peter Street, and the Lower Pontalba Building, owned by the state, is on St. Ann Street.

The story of these buildings begins with Spanish colonial official Don Andrés Almonester y Roxas. Almonester became one of the richest men in Louisiana largely through acquisitions of land and enslaved people, and he was heralded for his sizable contributions to civic projects. After the fire of 1788, he funded the reconstruction of St. Louis Cathedral as well as the construction of the Cabildo and the Presbytère, all of which bordered the Plaza de Armas, as Jackson Square was known during the Spanish period.

Among Almonester’s many properties were two tracts of land perpendicular to the cathedral. Eventually these properties and his immense fortune descended to his heir and daughter, Micaëla Almonester, Baroness de Pontalba.

Continuing the stories of New Orleans include the street design and layout of New Orleans in squares and a timeline of the history of New Orleans. New Orleans, established in 1718, was the major trading, commercial, banking and social area in the region.

Most of the Louisiana Great River Road Interpretive Center and Museum focuses interpretation on the Marie Adrien Persac Map. Norman's Chart of the Mississippi River from Natchez to New Orleans, also known as the Persac map. The staff at the Louisiana Great River Road Museum conducted extensive research on the plantations listed on the map and has scoured archives and private and university collections to obtain architectural designs, history and photographs or drawings to illustrate the sites along the Louisiana Great River Road. This material is exhibited as part of the interpretive displays.

The map identifies properties, land owners, vignettes of New Orleans, Baton Rouge and plantations, and the decorated border is composed of cotton plants and sugar cane.



In 1858, the New Orleans Crescent described Persac's original map as offering a perfect picture of the windings of the Father of Waters from this city to Natchez, with every plantation on its banks, drawn out and colored, with the name of the owner and whatever name he may have given his plantation. Persac descended the river in a skiff, landing at every mile, and drawing every plantation line and taking down every name and landmark on both banks of the river.

Plantation exhibits are divided between those located on the east and west banks of the Mississippi River. Most all of the homes listed in the Persac map are depicted in the exhibits even though some are privately held and many have been destroyed by fire, changes in the flow of the river, construction of levees or have fell from neglect. The exhibits have drawings of the homes, information on the owners, crops grown and the lifeways on the plantation.

Interspersed with the plantation exhibits are displays on sugar cane – the largest and most profitable crop of this region, sugar cane manufacturing, Louisiana history (Louisiana Purchase, the War of 1812, the Louisiana Civil War), as well as displays on river towns and river trading, steamboats and navigation of the Mississippi River, levees and Mississippi River flooding. Exhibits also feature displays on the arrival of the Acadians (many who settled in the lower Louisiana Great River Road Region), religion, funerals and Mardi Gras.

Even though Whitney Plantation tells a full story of slavery, the Louisiana Great River Road Interpretive Center and Museum also tells the story of slavery life on the plantations and slave auction markets. Louisiana had the largest concentration black slave ownership. In 1860, there were at least six Negroes in Louisiana who owned 65 or more slaves. The largest black slave owner had 152 slaves.

Outside the Louisiana Great River Road Interpretive Center and Museum is Sweet Spot Landing, a 10-foot-wide walkway that crosses the road and leads to the levee top. Visitors can view the Mississippi River and see the great bend that river pilots refer to as a critical turn in the Mississippi River. From here, Viking Cruises and American Cruise Lines will be disembarking at Houmas House to tour the plantation home, gardens and the Louisiana Great River Road Interpretive Center and Museum.

The Houmas House Foundation continues to purchase collections with relevance to the lower Mississippi River. It has recently acquired the largest smoking pipe collection in the world and the artifacts from the Louisiana Maritime Museum. The smoking pipes collection was started when a neighbor found a pipe on the grounds of Houmas House dating over 2,000-years.

Photographs

Banner to the Great River Road Museum

Outside view of the Louisiana Great River Road Museum

Interpretive panels in the entryway include the Houmas Indians (namesake of Houmas House), early explorers

Foyer designed to look like a steamboat entranceway

Panels on the Louisiana Purchase

Arrival of the Acadians

Persac Map which illustrates the locations of plantations along the Great River Road from Natchez to New Orleans

Panels of architecture and culture in New Orleans

Panel illustrating plantations located south of New Orleans

Persac Map showing the plantation on the west side of the river

Persac map showing plantations on the east side of the river

Directional signage indicating other exhibits in the Louisiana Great River Road Interpretive Center and Museum

14 photographs showing a sampling of the plantations interpreted here. Each panel has renderings of the plantation homes, and descriptions of the history, owners, and life on the plantation.

Sugarcane exhibit – sugarcane was the most popular and most lucrative crop grown and harvested in the lower Mississippi River area from Baton Rouge to New Orleans.

Steamboats, navigation of the Mississippi River, riverboat gambling

Control of the Mississippi River through a levee system, crevasse and flooding

Slave Markets, slave auctions in New Orleans and Black slave owners.

Exhibit on the Battle of New Orleans – War of 1812

Succession and Civil War

1850 Census data, Free People of Color

Life on the Louisiana Great River Road – transportation, religion, voodoo, material culture (baskets, tools, utensils), Mardi Gras, funerals, river trading towns

Pedestrian bridge – built to allow easy access to the Mississippi River (handicapped accessible). Begins in the parking lot at Sweet Spot Landing, a 10-foot-wide concrete bridge goes over River Road and on to the levee. This is close to where Viking and American Queen will dock to visit Houmas House and the Louisiana Great River Road Interpretive Center and Museum

A mural displayed behind the bar at the café at the Louisiana Great River Road Interpretive Center and Museum depicts Louisiana steamboats. This mural was housed in a jazz club once located inside the Empire State Building in New York.