

**Remembering and Forgetting the Past on the Mississippi River:
Toward an Environmental History of Catholicism**

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ABSTRACT

After the Flood of 1927, the U. S. government decided to master the Mississippi River. Nowhere was this state-sponsored determination more evident than in the lower Mississippi River delta. An historical examination of a cluster of Catholic churches in Pointe Coupée Parish, Louisiana, permits some understanding of how physical and material alterations to the river landscape are not easily traced, especially when we consider the temporal and spatial scales of change to the Mississippi over the last one hundred years. In that time, Catholics of Pointe Coupée Parish have managed to retain, erase, and revise aspects of their bonds to a river once central to the lives of their ancestors. This is not at all surprising, as the fallibility of memory is made apparent every time we try to tell stories about our pasts. Pointe Coupée Parish is one site where we can explore how alterations to a landscape have an impact not only on the trajectory of a Catholic community's future, but also on access to its past. Absences of memory in the living, combined with the erasure of material remains in modified landscapes, challenge us to consider how we might account for the relationship between Catholicism and the built environment throughout American history.

I drive along the Mississippi River whenever I can. I live in Louisiana, where the largest watershed in the United States funnels its way to the Gulf of Mexico. The weird thing about driving down Louisiana's river road, however, is that I rarely see the river. The gently sloping, green grass levees don't let me. Over 600,000 cubic feet per second of water churns just on the other side of the manmade barrier, but I'd just as well be cruising along any country road in America. "You hardly ever see the river," the ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax observed, "but in fact it is immense – higher and longer than the Great Wall of China, very likely the biggest thing that man has ever made." Why construct such a massive earthwork? From the perspective of Lomax, "it was the principle human response to the titanic power of the great river."¹ The

decision to comprehensively and systematically levee the Mississippi goes back to the nineteenth century, when the Mississippi River Commission and the Army Corps of Engineers determined that a levees-only policy would provide the most effective means of flood protection along a corridor so vital to the nation's economy. Following the flood of 1927, Congress passed legislation that declared flood control a "legitimate federal responsibility," kickstarting decades of additional funding for networks of levees, outlets, reservoirs, dikes, and dams, effectively designing the Mississippi River to be out of sight and out of mind.²

The benign, almost boring visual quality of the levee means that my attention usually shifts across my car windshield to the interior landscape of farms and forests and buildings that line river road. Two structures stand out – the Morganza Control Structure and the Old River Control Structure – for their monumental size and their consequentiality to flood protection. **[See Image 1 and Image 2]** It could be said that these structures are in the middle of nowhere, as they are isolated from population centers and embedded into the infrastructure of the rural civil parishes of Concordia and Pointe Coupee. But if we take a bird's eye view, we notice that these structures are indeed somewhere, as they are positioned at points on the Mississippi River where water wants to break free from the constraints of the levee. If this were to happen, the Mississippi River would change its course through Old River and into the Atchafalaya River all the way down to the Gulf of Mexico, with disastrous consequences to the people of the Lower Mississippi River Delta. In one especially dire report published in 1980, investigators predicted that it "is simply a matter of time" before "this river of Hammerstein and Twain, of industry and recreation ... write[s] another chapter in its colorful history by drastically altering its course in the lower 300 miles of its length."³

Fortunately, no such prediction has come to fruition. The Old River Control Structure and the Morganza Control Structure still work their magic in the twenty-first century, putting this easily forgettable region of east-central Louisiana at the epicenter of flood control on the Mississippi River. Mindful of the high stakes and the history of disaster, I like to look at churches along the levee and imagine their pasts, presents, and futures. On a four-mile stretch of river road leading to the village of Morganza, Louisiana, I pass four churches. First is Fairland Baptist Church. Its hand-painted sign invites me to “Come Fellowship With Us!,” but its parking lot is empty. Second is a church with exposed insulation and a blank wooden sign. Google Maps says it is Morning Star Baptist Church. Third is Sixth Ward Baptist Church. I see its sign through a chain-linked fence next to an open gate leading to a rusted tin-roof church and a cluster of white-topped tombs that extend for over a quarter of a mile. And lastly is St. Francis Catholic Chapel. Its wooden sign reads, “A Eucharistic Community since 1728,” and includes a painting of a thatched roof church floating on top of what could only be a crude representation of the Mississippi River.

There’s something about these churches that redirect my attention away from the unseen river and toward the mute endurance of a built environment surrounded by levees and dotted with sites sacred to some. Dozens of similarly constructed and deteriorated churches line the levees and bayous protected by the Old River Control Structure and the Morganza Control Structure. The people who worshiped in their sanctuaries and were buried in their cemeteries experienced one of the most monumental engineering projects in American history. Their stories speak to the cultural consequences of controlling the Mississippi. They also invite inquiries into the memories of peoples and places. After all, memory is about remembering *and* forgetting. It’s about having and not having the wherewithal and resources to recall the past. “Sites of memory,”

to use historian Pierre Nora's phrase, are locations where the past resides in physical and imagined forms, in material objects and immaterial thoughts that are always subject to deformation, manipulation, and appropriation over time.⁴ In such a highly engineered landscape, where so many of the physical and emotional scars of floods are erased, sometimes there isn't much to go on. The past is accidentally located in physical elements of the landscape – here an abandoned irrigation ditch, there a collapsing fence line – and in material and oral artifacts – here a family Bible, there a conversation at a gas pump. The survival of such memorial fragments are entrées to new lines of inquiry that ultimately amount to stories told through generations of church members who are physically and imaginatively disconnected from so much of their past, but who are also the bearers of personal experiences that, taken together, lead us back to the Mississippi.

A cluster of Catholic churches in Pointe Coupee Parish, Louisiana, accounts for almost three hundred years of living and dying on the Mississippi River. They are connected through time and space because of their Catholicism. They are also connected through time and space by the Mississippi River. **[See Image 3]** Those who study Catholic history typically position Catholic groups, beliefs, and practices at the center of their analysis. This is not an unreasonable approach. Catholics do Catholic things because they're Catholic, after all. However, Catholics aren't just Catholic. They flex their Catholicisms to social, cultural, and political conditions in ways that produce considerable diversity and division within the Catholic Church. The same can be said of environmental conditions, both natural and built, in how Catholic individuals and institutions resist, adapt, and succumb to the physical and material worlds around them. By tracking the movements of Catholics and their churches along the Mississippi River, it's possible

to map an environmental history of Catholicism onto an examination of the spaces and places remembered and forgotten by those who once knew what it was like to flood.

FORMING A CONNECTING LINK

On January 4, 1872, Octavia Clarisee Baillio sold twelve acres of land to the Archdiocese of New Orleans for one hundred and sixty dollars. The lot “front[ed] the Mississippi River from the middle of the public levee running parallel lines on both sides back to the middle of Pays Bayou ... for the purpose of building a Church thereon.”⁵ This riverfront area was called Raccourci, or “short cut,” named for a portage cut by French settlers at a bend in the Mississippi during the eighteenth century. Also known as New Texas Landing, the future church site was situated at a steamboat landing approximately fifty miles upriver from Baton Rouge. New Texas Landing, or Raccourci, was home to a growing Catholic population almost ten miles away from the nearest church in Pointe Coupee Parish.

Archbishop Napoleon Joseph Perché appointed Father Felix Charpentier as pastor of the new parish of Our Lady of Seven Sorrows at Raccourci in 1872. The boundaries of Seven Sorrows – also referred to as Seven Dolors in contemporary records – were expansive, winding along the Mississippi to the east and stretching north and west to the Atchafalaya River and south to False River and the village of Grosse Tete. Based on the first parish report issued by Charpentier, Catholic residents in the vicinity of Raccourci contributed over four hundred dollars to Seven Sorrows for pew rentals, burials, high masses, marriages, baptisms, and a cemetery.⁶ They built a temporary chapel and rectory with the initial proceeds and continued to raise funds for the construction of a permanent church structure through the 1880s. The first recorded funerals at the site of Seven Sorrows occurred in July 1883 – Euphemie Bienville, a colored

woman, and Pauline Landewitch, a white woman. By 1885, a parish report estimated that one thousand French- and English-speaking Catholics – 800 white and 200 colored – resided within the sparsely populated parish boundaries. Only 555 communions were administered from July 1884 to July 1885, due in large part to the rural terrain and primitive transportation routes.⁷ Five years later, the pastor revised the number of Catholics to 850; fundraising was up to seven hundred dollars and a new school included almost forty white students.⁸ Also, in 1887, a prominent resident of the parish donated two acres of land near Red River Landing to the archdiocese, where the modest St. Joseph Chapel was built. Located in the northern reaches of the parish, the pastor of Seven Sorrows visited the chapel every first Sunday of the month and offered the sacraments to those living in the vicinity of Red River Landing and the small settlement of Torras.⁹

Five pastors came and went before Archbishop Francis Janssens dedicated the finished church at Raccourci in 1892. [See **Image 4**] Editors of *The Banner* – the local newspaper of Pointe Coupée Parish – publicized the ceremony as “the grandest ... ever seen in the parish.”¹⁰ Joined by the bishop of Oklahoma and an entourage of local priests, Janssens consecrated the church by circumambulating the structure and knocking on the door with his crozier. He entered the church to the singing of a visiting choir. He blessed a mixture of water, salt, ashes, and wine, known as “Gregorian water.” He also blessed the church bell, nicknamed “Francis Fabian,” and nine statues of saints imported from Paris. Father Fabian LaForest, the new pastor of Seven Sorrows, then officiated high mass for “the largest concourse of people ever congregated at New Texas,” followed by an outdoor feast.¹¹ Thus did the church and congregation of Our Lady of Seven Sorrows rise next to the Mississippi River.

At the same time, just ten miles downriver from Seven Sorrows, the Church of St. Francis of Assisi was collapsing into the Mississippi River. The origin of the Church of St. Francis dates to the 1730s, when a Capuchin priest oversaw the construction of the first of three churches named for the patron saint of Italy. It is believed that the first church, located on the banks of the Mississippi, was destroyed during a storm in the 1750s. The second church, built in the 1760s, also rested near the Mississippi. **[See Image 5]** By the 1880s, parishioners started to move the bodies of their deceased relatives to safer burial grounds after authorities built a new levee behind the church, leaving them unprotected from flood and erosion. In response, *The Weekly Picayune*, a newspaper in New Orleans, published an article in 1891 with the headline: “A PRICELESS LANDMARK; the oldest church in Louisiana, that of St. Francis in Pointe Coupee; threatened with destruction by the encroaching waters of the Mississippi; the unnamed tombs wherein the rude forefathers of the hamlet sleep; the duty of the living to protect the precious souvenirs of the dead.” In dramatic but also accurate fashion, the *Picayune* described St. Francis as a church “situated on the very edge of the mighty father of waters... threatened every day by the rising river to be dropped into complete oblivion beneath the flowing Mississippi.” Such was not always the case, however, since the church “stood originally a long distance back from the bank, and there seemed no possibility that the Mississippi would ever reach it.” However, the Mississippi, with its the power to alter both the landscape and the people who lived and died on it, had other plans: “As years rolled along the dashing current, its seaward search, slowly wore away the river edges and came nearer and nearer to the little house of worship, as if it wished it for a victim.”¹²

Editors of *The Banner* covered the story of St. Francis with similarly morose gusto and civic boosterism. “[D]eath, removals, and disasters of overflow,” according to an 1891 editorial,

“decimated and impoverished the community” in the vicinity of St. Francis, compelling the archbishop to make Seven Sorrows the chief church in the region. The endangerment of St. Francis signaled the loss of memory: “The venerable building with all the hollowed memories which attach to it [have] been suffered as it were to pass into oblivion.” Moreover, “of the thousands of graves which surrounded it ... many have gone into the Mississippi, while nothing remains to mark those that are left but crumbled piles of bricks, stone and rubbish, overgrown with vines and woods.” The editorial marked the start of a fundraising effort to provide for the dismantling of the church of St. Francis and the reconstruction of a new church in a more secure location. “We hope to see prompt measures set on foot,” the editors wrote, “for preserving this venerable and sacred relict – it is a duty that we owe to ourselves, to our parish and we may say to our God.”¹³

By August 1892, parishioners finished the demolition of St. Francis, “having ... clutched from the hungry jaws of the Mississippi that priceless relic, that revered temple around which such tenderest of memories cluster, that historic landmark which for nearly two centuries has reared its quaint and beautiful architecture in defiance of the hand of time and which it would surely have been a lasting shame and disgrace to have suffered to sink into destruction and oblivion.”¹⁴ Prior to its completion, Father Fabian LaForest, pastor of Seven Sorrows, apologized that “the style of architecture of old St. Francis will not be adhered to in the new building ... owing to the partially decayed condition of the timbers” and insufficient funds. “Much smaller than the old,” LaForest nonetheless promised to use whatever materials could be salvaged to build a “quite modern” church “with the help of God and a proper display of zeal on the part of the Catholics of the old St. Francis church congregation.”¹⁵

It wasn't until 1895 that Archbishop Janssens dedicated the third and final church of St. Francis, again located just steps away from the Mississippi levee, and which still stands today. **[See Image 6]** Editors of *The Banner* estimated that “fully one half of the population of the lower portion of the parish” attended the ceremony.¹⁶ The choir of Seven Sorrows sang during the high mass. Afterwards, attendees enjoyed an outdoor celebration of food and games, followed by the administration of the sacrament of confirmation and a sermon on the life of St. Francis of Assisi. Organizers praised the event for “forming a connecting link between the future and the glorious past history of the hallowed edifice saved by demolition three years ago from the encroachment of the Mississippi.”¹⁷

DESOLATION UNMEASURED

At the site of the old Church of St. Francis, the Mississippi claimed the physical remains of unclaimed loved ones. Those who could afford reburial moved their deceased relatives to the cemetery of St. Mary's Church in the town of New Roads, located almost 3 miles from the Mississippi on the bank of an oxbow lake known as False River. Back at the Church of Our Lady of Seven Sorrows in Raccourci, Catholics buried approximately 200 deceased relatives during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹⁸ With a presumption of finality common to most burials, they observed All Saints Day by visiting “the last abodes of the cherished dead,” washing and decorating the gravestones with flowers, and “giving testimony of the loving remembrance in which is held those whose last resting place is marked.”¹⁹ They did so for decades within sight of levees they knew were prone to break and a river they knew was likely to flood.

The backdrop to the relocation of the Church of St. Francis and the construction of the Church of Our Lady of Seven Sorrows was a recent history of flooding. Most parishioners of Seven Sorrows and St. Francis would have remembered the flood of 1882 – the most costly flood to date in terms of land inundation and economic impact – which caused two levee breaks in the immediate vicinity of Raccourci. As one resident wrote in a letter to the editor of *The Banner*, “we might unfortunately say we are now connected to the lower end of our heretofore prosperous [civil] parish by a vast ocean.”²⁰ Another resident speculated that “[t]his is probably the first time in the history of this [civil] parish that the Catholic churches have not been crowded with worshipers every day during Holy Week.”²¹ The water was too high and too wide to celebrate Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection at Easter.

Like so many times before, most residents reacted to the receding waters with a determination to remain in place and to rebuild what the flood of 1882 destroyed. “The overflowed region has received a shock from which it will be slow to recover,” wrote the editors of *The Banner*,

but give us complete levee protection and in time we will recuperate. We have the same rich soil, to yield up its treasure to man’s industry. We have the same energetic population; the same blue sky above us; the same beneficent Creator to watch over us and we should not look back upon the past.... [E]nlightened and patriotic legislation will build bulwarks to drive back the angry waters ... and the iron energies of our people will make us what God intended we should become, a happy, prosperous and enlightened community.²²

Despite such progressive prognostication, levee protection did not come quickly. In 1884, two more levees broke at Raccourci. And in 1890, a crevasse measuring 380 feet formed a mile north

of Seven Sorrows, flooding the church and cemetery. Baton Rouge's newspaper *The Daily Advocate* covered the events of the flood of 1890 with the following apocalyptic headline: "The End at Last ... Desolation Unmeasured."²³

The Mississippi River Commission – established by Congress in 1879 to build a comprehensive flood protection system – responded to the flood of 1890 with the construction of 128 miles of levees above and below Raccourci over the next decade.²⁴ Joseph Torras – founding member of Seven Sorrows and donator of St. Joseph Chapel at Red River Landing – kept locals apprised of levee building activities in his capacity as chairman of the Board of Commissioners of the Atchafalaya Basin Levee District. Local newspapers covered the public debate over the pros and cons of a "levees-only" policy versus a combined levee-outlet system. In one such report, newspaper editors represented the consensus opinion among policymakers and engineers in their conclusion "that there can be no perfect and complete levee system. It is impossible for the hand of man to rear a series of earthworks that will withstand the mighty current and wash of the Father of Waters." They went on to state that

[t]he effort has been made not once, not twice, but hundreds of times, with the same result and effect. When the pressure becomes too great the levees collapse and that is all there is about it. The levees must continue to collapse so long as the great accumulation of water in the Mississippi Valley is supposed to find its way through the narrow channel erected at the mouth of the river. It is impossible for all the water to go through that small opening – a fact recognized by all and admitted on every hand, save by those whose personal interest it is to maintain the all-levee system.... [O]utlets are an actual necessity to carry on the flood water of the Mississippi river, and until outlets are established, the yearly crevasses, floods, suffering, starvation, ruin and death must continue to exist and

prevail. These disasters are a part and parcel of the levee system. The one goes with the other. Maintain the levee system and trouble follows. Combine the levee system with proper outlets and the result is safety, happiness and prosperity.²⁵

Despite such grave predictions, residents continued to receive more positive messages from local, state, and federal officials about the effectiveness of the improved flood protection system. With confidence came forgetfulness. “The high water is getting to be talked of as a thing of the past,” the editors of *The Banner* announced in 1891. “No one entertains the remotest fear of it now and the river news of the dailies are being scanned with less and less attention day by day.”²⁶ With optimistic reports on the future improvement of levees came a general disregard for lessons learned in the past. “How peaceful and happy to know,” reported *The Banner* in 1891, “that on the entire of levees we will have great earthen mounds that will beat back the waters of our mighty river and that our fields, our pastures, our gardens and yards are dry, our stock safe and our crops promising certain and rich returns.” In this levee-lined Eden, “[o]ur population doubled in a single decade and property revive[d] ten fold in value,” which led the editors of *The Banner* to predict that “[l]abor and emigrants will flock here.”²⁷

The combined efforts of the Mississippi River Commission and state and local agencies resulted in a reduction in the frequency and magnitude of floods for the first decade of the twentieth century. Weather conditions in 1912, however, foiled even the best-laid plans. Higher-than-normal precipitation in the Missouri and Ohio River Valleys sent water rushing down the leveed corridor of the Mississippi, reaching record-high gauge readings and testing the hypothesis that with more efficient levees came higher water levels. In an environment of public confidence in the existing flood protection system, residents of Pointe Coupée Parish experienced the first major flood in over twenty years. The first levees to break were along the

west bank of the Atchafalaya River, followed by breaks along the west bank of the Mississippi River. Tensions ran high. A guard patrolling the levee at Morganza accidentally shot a fellow guard on April 16.²⁸ *The Banner* ran the headline: “Guns Bristle on Dikes. Guards Thick Day and Night at Torras.”²⁹ The *New Advocate* ran a similar headline: “Every Foot Guarded on Levee from Red River to the Gulf.”³⁰ The reasons for levee patrols were twofold: to prevent locals from blowing up the levee to protect their property upriver and to provide early warning of impending crevasses caused by scouring.

On the evening of May 1, the levee broke at Torras. “The break came without warning,” *The Banner* reported. Though “[t]he levee had been weak for several days ... the people of Torras paid little attention to the boils that had been spouting water from the base of the levee.” [See **Image 7**] The rushing of water and the sounding of alarm produced “absolute chaos” in the streets. “Women screamed and men yelled as they rushed into their homes, grabbed their children and a few articles of clothing and ran for the levees or the Texas & Pacific Railroad embankment.” The very levee that failed the people of Torras was also their salvation. By May 5, approximately 900 displaced residents of Torras had arrived by boat, train, and automobile at refugee stations in and around Baton Rouge. South of the crevasse, it was “feared there may be drowning in the interior. The water is rushing through the country so fast that some may not be able to escape.” Thousands of people were stranded atop houses, barns, cotton gins, churches, railroad tracks, and levees throughout the region. [See **Image 8**] Rescue efforts were immediately underway. By May 6, the waters reached Morganza, some twenty miles south of Torras. Members of the Louisiana National Guard forced many African American men, described in the *Times-Democrat* as “loafers,” at bayonet point to work on the Morganza levee alongside prisoners of Angola State Penitentiary. By May 8, the Torras crevasse measured three

thousand feet in length. By May 13, the floodwater could be seen across the Mississippi River from the top of the State Capitol Building in Baton Rouge. Also, by that time, the official death toll had reached twenty-eight people, most of them African Americans.³¹

Based on initial estimates of the impact of the flood of 1912, a contributor to the *Bulletin of the American Geographical Society* reported ten million dollars in financial loss and 30,000 homeless residents. Why so many people and so much damage? “As the settlements on the flood plain are tending to increase,” the *Bulletin* contributor wrote, “partly because of the protection during periods of minor floods given by the levees and partly because of the confidence invited by the Mississippi River Commission, the problem grows yearly more and more intricate.” In other words, the success of the Mississippi River Commission to control the river also magnified the danger to communities during years of exceptional rainfall and flood conditions. Moreover, the previous emphasis on levee improvement, coupled with an insufficient amount of attention to alternative means of flood control, contributed to the magnitude of damage to life and property. After the experience of the Torras crevasse, most agreed with the American Geographical Society that “[j]ust meeting the limit of strain or preventing a break only by excessive vigilance and energy or saving from disaster by some mitigating circumstance is not the end to be aimed at.”³² Such a comprehensive change in approach to controlling the Mississippi would not come quickly or easily. In the meantime, with floodwater still covering much of Pointe Coupée Parish, the Board of State Engineers announced that the Torras levee would be rebuilt by the end of the year. Indeed, it would be “the highest yet built” in the nation.³³

MEMORY IS SHORT-LIVED

Lawmakers and engineers reacted to the events of 1912 with new flood control legislation and designs. At the same time, the Catholic population started to move away from the rural settlement of Raccourci – an area with inadequate electricity, railroad, and road infrastructure – to the growing town of Morganza – the commercial and agricultural hub of the region. In 1913, the pastor of Seven Sorrows reported to the archbishop that “a chapel in Morganza would promote the interest of religion in the section of Morganza.”³⁴ In 1918, following the construction of a chapel and rectory, the pastor recommended that “the title of the Parish should be transferred from Raccourci to Morganza.”³⁵ And finally, in 1922, the archbishop officially “erect[ed] and establish[ed] the Parish of St. Anne [sic], Morganza ... giving and conceding thereto the right to have and establish a cemetery, baptismal font, belfry and all and every other usual rights of a Parish.”³⁶ [See Image 9] Now living in Morganza, the pastor celebrated mass every Sunday at St. Ann, every other Sunday at Seven Sorrows and St. Francis, and on some weekdays at the Torras chapel.

Almost two thousand Catholics were members of St. Ann Church when floodwater filled the “sugar bowl” that separated the Atchafalaya River from the Mississippi River in May of 1927. Crevasses on Bayou des Glaises – located northwest of Pointe Coupée Parish near the headwaters of the Atchafalaya – sent thousands of residents fleeing for high ground atop levees near their homes or in refugee camps downriver. Experts speculated and rumors spread that the Mississippi River might shift its primary course down the Atchafalaya River. With such an unprecedented amount of water scouring the levees of the Atchafalaya, two thousand men worked around the clock at a weak point facing the east bank settlement of McCrea. “It may be saved,” the *State Times* reported, but only “by the almost superhuman efforts which are being

expected to hold it.” A brief break in inclement weather, so the *State Times* printed, brought residents “renewed hope of victory to men fighting [the] river at McCrea.”³⁷ But during the early morning hours of Tuesday, May 24, the Atchafalaya broke through the wall of sandbags at McCrea, quickly producing a 1000 feet long crevasse. According to the Associated Press, “A wall of water 40 feet high and almost 20 miles wide tonight was ... cutting a path of desolation across the length of Louisiana.”³⁸

Morganza – site of St. Ann Church – started to flood the following day, as did Torras – site of St. Joseph Chapel. But Raccourci – site of Our Lady of Seven Sorrows Church – was largely spared, an accident of falling water levels on the Mississippi, its distance from the McCrea crevasse, and the fortuitous configuration of surrounding levees and railroad embankments. However, the archives of the Diocese of Baton Rouge doesn’t hold records pertaining to the immediate impact of the flood of 1927 on the affected Catholic churches. There are no extant journals, diaries, or letters written by church members about their experiences of an event that has received a considerable level of historical inquiry, then and now. From contemporary accounts to recent investigations, historians have strained to give voice to the people whose homes were flooded, who pitched tents on levees, who took trains to refugee camps, and who returned to rebuild in places they knew could and, if history was any indication, would flood again.

Lyle Saxon, then a writer for the *Times Picayune*, was one of the first serious authors to cover the flood of 1927. A native of Louisiana who grew up in Baton Rouge and worked as an adult in New Orleans, Saxon published his first book of creative nonfiction, *Father Mississippi*, in 1927, which included his first-hand observations of the flood, his conversations with victims of the flood, and his opinions about the politics of the flood. Or, in his words, “this volume is

like a scrap-book in which I have collected men's thoughts, my own thoughts, and the thoughts and experiences of other men." Saxon intended *Father Mississippi* to be a reminder to the nation that while "we have been building levees for two hundred years, they have never been and never will be strong enough." Still in the immediate aftermath of what U.S. Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover called "the greatest peace-time calamity in the history of the country," Saxon begged his national audience not to forget what happened in 1927. "The public memory is short-lived," he warned, but "the valley hasn't forgotten those terrible days in April and May when the dikes were crumbling from Illinois to Louisiana.... The valley wants assurance that it will not happen again."³⁹

But that was then and this is now. Had the historian John Barry not published his book *Rising Tide* seventy years after the fact, it's likely that today's public memory of the flood of 1927 would be largely limited to the public relations department of the Corps of Engineers and Randy Newman's song "Louisiana 1927." As a book about big men making big decisions on behalf of a nation of bystanders, *Rising Tide* can only take us so far down the path to understanding how people on the ground and in the water remembered the flood that changed America. This isn't necessarily Barry's fault, because, aside from newspaper accounts and government documents, the flood of 1927 is an oddly under-recorded event in American history.⁴⁰ Most of the people who experienced the flood in places like Raccourci and Morganza didn't write down their diluvian tales. And even if they did, libraries and archives usually didn't collect them. Rather, the flood existed in oral history, in the spoken words of parents and grandparents to children and grandchildren that were rarely recorded. Today, those who experienced the events of 1927 as children are over ninety years old, or they're dead.

Seated in the back pew of St. Ann Church, I listened to the stories of an elderly married couple with memories of the flood of 1927. “I would have been seven” years old, the wife told me as she started her recollection of growing up in Raccourci. “We got about 2 inches of water in the house ... so we moved out of the house onto the levee and my daddy built a camp.” It was there that “we spent our time on the levee with the chickens, the hogs, whatever we had.” She didn’t remember how long they camped on the levee, but she did remember playing in a canoe with her three-year-old sister. She didn’t recall feeling afraid or anxious about what was happening. On the contrary, like many oral histories preserved in a few libraries in Louisiana and Mississippi, she associated the flood with fun and excitement.

Her husband, quiet for most of our conversation, held a manila folder in his lap as his wife spoke to me. When she finished, he opened the folder to reveal a photograph of he and his two siblings standing knee-deep in water, flanked by a white wooden fence and a Model-T Ford. **[See Image 10]** Accompanying the photograph was a computer printout of a May 2011 article from the *Times-Picayune*, when the Corps of Engineers opened the Morganza Control Structure for only the second time in its history. The title was “Curiosity Seekers Inundate Small Town Near Morganza Spillway.” The article contained a photograph of the 91-year-old parishioner holding the same photograph that he just showed me, wearing the same shirt that he was wearing in front of me, and standing on the grounds of a gas station that had been in his family for over 90 years. “When the levee broke,” he told the reporter, “daddy put us in the Model-T and hauled us to Baton Rouge.” Referring to the photograph, he said, “Kids don’t worry about all the consequences. All we did was think about how we could have fun in the water.”⁴¹

THUS OBLITERATING IDENTITY

President Calvin Coolidge signed into law the Flood Control Act of 1928, authorizing \$325 million for Mississippi River flood control. The Corps of Engineers and the Mississippi River Commission battled with each other and with Congress over how to spend the money. The Flood Control Act of 1936 reinforced some of the mandates contained in earlier flood control acts, finally making the federal government responsible for flood control of the Mississippi and initiating the development of the Morganza Control Structure and floodway.⁴² The attention of the Corps of Engineers quickly shifted to the purchase of flowage easements from property owners in the proposed floodway, as well as the construction of floodway guide levees and an intake control structure at a juncture between the settlement of Raccourci and the village of Morganza.⁴³ Raccourci fell inside the boundaries of the spillway and Morganza fell inside the boundaries of the leveed protection zone. As a result, the Church of Our Lady of Seven Sorrows would have to be demolished and its cemetery would have to be moved.

Father Paul Gauci, pastor of St. Ann Catholic Church in Morganza, discontinued church services at Our Lady of Seven Sorrows in November of 1939. “‘Old Man River’ has claimed another land mark in Pointe Coupée parish,” the *Banner* reported. “The old New Texas Catholic church, Our Lady of Seven Sorrows, built about 1876, and the cemetery adjacent thereto have had to give way to the Morganza Spillway.” The pews went to the St. Francis Chapel “for the greater comfort of its congregation,” while arrangements were made between the Corps of Engineers and the Archdiocese of New Orleans to cover the costs of church demolition and grave removal. With the permission of Archbishop Joseph Rummel, Gauci acted quickly to demolish Our Lady of Seven Sorrows, using the salvaged lumber to erect a church hall adjacent to the church of St. Ann in 1940.⁴⁴ Plans to move the graves, however, were put on hold as the U.S. government’s attention shifted to military conflicts in Europe and Asia.

Five years later, Jules Turregano, a representative of the Corps of Engineers, notified the Archdiocese of New Orleans that it might be necessary to open the Morganza Floodway in light of recent water level increases in the Mississippi River. According to the vice chancellor of the archdiocese, Turregano “said the cemetery is a little more than a mile from the place where the break in the levee will be made and that it has about 390 bodies in it, 25 in 10 brick vaults, 40 in graves marked with monuments, 125 covered with marble slabs, and 200 without markers, about half of which could be identified by relatives who know their location.” Turregano based his grave count on property surveys conducted during the assessment of flowage easements in the late 1930s. The Army Corps “strongly” recommended “that all markers of graves be pegged down and that all other precautions be taken to keep anything from being carried away by the current.”⁴⁵ In the event that the Morganza Floodway was opened, the Corps of Engineers promised to “repair all damage caused by the present projected opening ... and will eventually remove the bodies interred in the cemetery in question to another location” at government expense.⁴⁶

After all was said and done, the Corps of Engineers did not open the Morganza Floodway in 1945. Nevertheless, as a precaution, Rupert Hodges, chief of the Real Estate Office of the Mississippi River Commission, worked with Gauci to conduct a revised survey of the Seven Sorrows cemetery “in order that data will be available for the relocation thereof in the event silt deposit is such as to cover the tombs or slabs, thus obliterating identity.”⁴⁷ It was also decided that representatives from the Corps of Engineers and the archdiocese would meet as soon as possible “in regard to the transfer of bodies interred in the Morganza-Racursi [sic] Cemetery which lies in the area included in the Morganza Spillway.”⁴⁸ Gauci complained that he “had been

urging that this work [of grave removal] be done for the last three or four years.”⁴⁹ It took a high water emergency to get all of the parties to the negotiating table.

Due to U.S. involvement in World War II, however, it wasn’t until 1950 that all of the Raccourci graves were finally moved to Morganza. In the interim, the Corps of Engineers misplaced the previous surveys of the Seven Sorrows cemetery. As a result, Granville Alpha, the new real estate chief for the Corps of Engineers, asked Gauci “to furnish this office with the names of the persons interred in” the cemetery “and of the next of kin, or that records of his church be made available to a representative of this office for preparing the lists.”⁵⁰ The archdiocese instructed Gauci “to comply with his request in a spirit of whole-hearted cooperation.”⁵¹ Presumably the pastor provided the Corps of Engineers with the required information, but no record of the original list of names or survey of graves exists in the archives. It took the Corps of Engineers almost a year to finish the job. A list of reinterred bodies appeared in a 1968 issue of the *Louisiana Genealogical Register*, in which the editor “saw no purpose in copying the grave numbers of bodies listed as ‘unknown.’”⁵²

Today, the site of Our Lady of Seven Sorrows is inaccessible to the public. With the permission of the Corps of Engineers, however, one can drive the two miles east of the Morganza Control Structure down the guide levee to a patch of land that bears no marks of a church or a cemetery. The movement toward erasure started after the flood of 1927, when the federal government took unprecedentedly aggressive steps to physically control the Mississippi River. Indeed, the very success of the Corps of Engineers and the Mississippi River Commission to prevent massive floods of the kind once experienced on a regular basis has encouraged forgetfulness on the part of descendants who still live and die behind the safety of levees. Memory, in the case of Our Lady of Seven Sorrows, is not like hindsight – it is not 20/20 – a

condition that makes it all the more difficult to track back in time by relying upon the artifactual remains of the present.

The archival record of church demolition and body removal leads us away from the deterritorialized Morganza Floodway to the reterritorialized town of Morganza, from Our Lady of Seven Sorrows to St. Ann, to a present place with imperfect ties to a past place. My interest in understanding how churches were affected by changes to the landscape stems from the scholar Thomas Tweed's insight that, "whatever else religions do, they move across time and space. They are not static. And they have effects. They leave traces. They leave trails."⁵³ Given this understanding of religion, and indeed of most institutions, my objective has been to shrink the distance between then and now by scrutinizing the archival remains and personal memories embedded in the few material artifacts and living beings that have survived the protective and destructive powers of flood control. It is with these physical objects and human memories that partial recovery of a time and place before the Morganza Floodway is possible, as well as the emotional and intellectual bonds between Our Lady of Seven Sorrows and St. Ann that barely remain intact.

Based strictly on the archival representation of the process of burial removal, we are left with a fairly clinical procedure for moving objects from one place to another. We could just as well be reading about the relocation of cattle from one pasture to another. The time and effort that went into the endeavor, however, speaks to the Corps of Engineers' interest in avoiding, to paraphrase one of its representatives, the obliteration of the identities of the dead. Speaking of the period of reburial, the church historian of St. Ann recalled how the relocated cemetery was very systematically done. They drew a map; the government did. And they numbered all the graves up there [at Our Lady of Seven Sorrows] and then they moved them back here [to St.

Ann].” In all, the Army Corps disinterred and reinterred almost 400 sets of bones from Raccourci to Morganza. Those marked “Unknown” were probably already unknown to parishioners of Our Lady of Seven Sorrows, leaving approximately 250 people with at least their names safe from erasure. **[See Image 11 and Image 12]** Descendants of the deceased were also given the option to rebury their loved ones at sites other than the relocated cemetery, and over 50 families did exactly that.

Though we know that the government covered the logistical support and financial cost of reburial, what we don’t know are the personal feelings of those whose family members were moved. And we probably will never know. Without an archival record of the reactions of church members, only a few childhood memories remain available to the few people who choose to listen. As for the current condition of the relocated cemetery, the church historian knows of only “a few families, but not many,” who “take care of it.” She “wish[es] we could get a grant to get the government to come repair because the stones that they made [are] falling. It looks bad.” Moreover, “because we’re running out of space in the front [main cemetery],” the church historian notified me that “we are starting to bury people back there” in the relocated cemetery. Aside from the groundskeeper’s weekly ritual of mowing the lawn, it is rare to witness the meeting of a living St. Ann parishioner with the buried remains of those who once lived in what would become the Morganza Floodway.

THE DISTANT PAST RESOUNDS WITH ECHOES

It seems, then, that the obliteration of the identities of Our Lady of Seven Sorrows is almost inevitable, and not at all surprising. It doesn’t always take floods and levees to erase the past. It just takes time. It started when impoverished families of Raccourci buried their dead

without headstones. It continued when the living and the dead moved to Morganza. And it is made manifest today as the generational distance between then and now reaches the point of indifference to the memory of those long dead, which is a kind of forgetting. “Through the brilliance of an image” like a grave, to use the words of the philosopher Gaston Bachelard, “the distant past resounds with echoes, and it is hard to know at what depth these echoes will reverberate and die away.”⁵⁴

That being said, sounds of the distant past that seem irretrievable can be recovered, albeit in fractured tones. The graves of the Morganza Floodway teach us that when we do the difficult sleuth work that is historical ethnography – when we keep following the traces left in the archives, in the landscape, and in the people who have stories to tell – we can sometimes find ourselves face to face with objects that physically bridge the temporal and spatial divide between the churches of Our Lady of Seven Sorrows and St. Ann. As is so often the case, however, those who behold such objects rarely know from whence they came. Their pasts are effectively hidden in plain sight and in a manner not dissimilar from the invisible waters of the Mississippi flowing behind levees. We know they’re there, but we know only little of what they did or do. Just as we have to go out of our way to climb up a levee to see the river, so too do we have to put ourselves in situations that sometimes lead to the discovery of objects that speak, ever so faintly, for those who lived before the Morganza Floodway.

In addition to the graves of the relocated cemetery, material artifacts once situated in the Morganza Floodway are interspersed throughout the church and adjoining buildings of St. Ann. Only a handful of parishioners are familiar with their origins, which, even then, are filtered through the memories of deceased relatives and left to the recollections of the living. St. Ann’s historian directed my attention to several images and objects in the church with roots in Our

Lady of Seven Sorrows. “We definitely know that St. Joseph came,” she said while pointing at “that statue on the right [side of the altar]” with lilies and a ruler in his hand. Turning to face the ceiling, she said, “We’re sure the chandeliers did [too].” She then escorted me to the rectory, where she removed two brass chalices from a glass case “that came from over there” in Raccourci. Our last stop was the church hall, a simple structure built out of salvaged wood from the church of Our Lady of Seven Sorrows. A wooden plaque in the threshold welcomes visitors to the Msgr. Paul J. Gauci Church Hall, “erected in 1940, dedicated January 20, 2008, honoring the memory of its founder.” Also in the church hall threshold is glass cabinet containing a Roman Missal, a ciborium, and a reliquary from Our Lady of Seven Sorrows. **[See Image 13]**

My tour nearly complete, I got the impression from my hosts that the material legacy of Our Lady of Seven Sorrows was not terribly important to the everyday life of St. Ann. It was a matter of simple fact, not a source of significant meaning, that bits and pieces of the old church were present in the new church. Perhaps the scholar David Morgan, speaking of the history and theory of religious images, was right: “Ordinary reality takes root as we come to take its familiar features for granted, that is, as we forget or release from conscious attention the conditions that relate us to the world and to one another.”⁵⁵ The statue of Joseph above the altar – seen by thousands of parishioners thousands of times for decades – doesn’t direct people’s imaginations to the world as it was known by residents of Raccourci and parishioners of Our Lady of Seven Sorrows. Rather, it cues people to consider the life of the husband of the Virgin Mary and the stepfather of Jesus who lived two thousand years ago and halfway around the world. Similarly, the various sacramental vessels encased in glass are more akin to dusty artifacts in a poorly funded museum than cherished relics of a bygone but not forgotten era. I wanted to see memories of the Mississippi in the objects we beheld, but what I got was a reminder from Michel

de Certeau that “memory is a sort of anti-museum: it is not localizable,” no matter how hard I looked and listened.⁵⁶

As I packed my belongings in the sanctuary of St. Ann after a day of talking and touring, it occurred to the historian of St. Ann to look over her shoulder, nod toward the ceiling, raise her eyebrows, smirk, and say, “The bell is up there.” “Really?” I asked, almost joyfully. “Well, yeah,” she chimed, “but I don’t know if the bell rings.... I don’t think it does.” I asked if I could see it, at which point she conscripted her husband to show me the way. He led me up a narrow staircase to the choir loft and pointed at a square portal in a wall the size of an oversized computer monitor. “It’s in there, up in the steeple. I’ll take you.”

My guide, in his seventies, slid through the hole and disappeared into the steeple interior. I followed him. “It’s up there,” he pointed through a web of cross beams, sun rays, and floating dust particles. “I haven’t been up there in years, but it should be safe.” Twenty feet of body contortions and handfuls of mouse droppings later, I reached the top. And there it was. An iron bell, three feet in diameter, green with rust, sprinkled with bird shit, and etched with the inscription: “Most Rev. F. Janssens, Archbishop of New Orleans, LA / Rev. F. LaForest, Pastor / New Texas Landing, LA / 1892.” **[See Image 14]** And there I was. An historian, out of my element, streaked with sweat, camera in hand, and thinking to myself: “Well, I guess I should go down now.” The bell didn’t ring while I was in the steeple, because it never rings. It just hangs from where it was affixed over eighty years ago, out of sight, out of sound, and out of mind except to those who’ve heard the story of its trek down the Mississippi River via steamboat from Raccourci to Morganza after the church of Our Lady of Seven Sorrows was demolished to make way for a floodway.

After I climbed down the St. Ann steeple and thanked my hosts for their hospitality, I hit the road – river road – and returned to my home in Baton Rouge. I drove along the levee. Because I love driving along the levee. Those drives always make me think about Lyle Saxon’s warning that memory is short-lived, which makes me question something that he said about the Mississippi River in the immediate aftermath of the flood of 1927. “We never have the river ‘off our mind,’ those of us who live behind the levees,” Lomax wrote in *Father Mississippi*. “We should know whereof we speak, for we have thought of little else for many years.”⁵⁷ Many years later, the writer John McPhee described Pointe Coupée Parish as full of “landscapes so quiet they belie their story.”⁵⁸ The quietude of change that followed the flood of 1927 was similar to the quietude of change that came to the Catholic community of the region. What remains are recollections, cemeteries, churches, and mementos. In her book *The Lives of Objects*, Maia Kotrosits recognizes the “unreliable value and mobility of meaning” in objects, but also a “curious solidity, a steadiness” that persists. “In and among all the confused narratives of what happened ... the repeated reconfigurations of proximity to and distance from people and places, there is the blunt and unequivocal object.” Objects like churches and bells serve as remnants that “contain pasts by externalizing memories,” while their “obvious form of presence might also offer a more subliminal reassurance that *some* things, some *things*, remain (whether we’d like them to or not).”⁵⁹

Reflecting on the time I spent with living and dead Catholics in Pointe Coupée Parish – in interviews and in archives and in the ground – part of me is at a loss when it comes to understanding how Catholicism informed their interactions with and reactions to the transformative and destructive waters of the Mississippi River. Sure, there were references to God here and there, but nothing to suggest a distinctively Catholic way of conceiving of nature

and disaster. Could I have missed something in the archives? Of course. Could I have not asked the right questions of my interlocutors? Definitely. Could I have forgotten to talk to the decayed bodies of the dead? No, I didn't forget; I chose not to. Such an absence of clear, succinct, and obvious references to Catholic theology is telling. It tells me that the natural and built environment bears its own weight on the lives of Catholics, nudges them to build a church here and rebury a loved one there and save a relic elsewhere. In the case of a cluster of Catholic churches in Pointe Coupée Parish, Louisiana, sometimes this weight came with the cataclysmic force of a flood, but most of the time it softly, even imperceptibly, eroded the capacity to notice change at all.

¹ Alan Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993).

² Kristi Cheramie, "The Scale of Nature: Modeling the Mississippi River," *Places* (March 2011).

³ Raphael G. Kazmann and David B. Johnson, "If the Old River Control Structure Fails (The Physical and Economic Consequences)," *Louisiana Water Resources Research Institute Bulletin* 12 (September 1980), 1, 5.

⁴ Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire," *Representations*, no. 26 (Spring 1989): 7-24.

⁵ Land Transfer from Octavia Clarisse Baillio to Reverend Father Charles Tanguerey, Pointe Coupée Parish, 4 January 1872, St. Ann (Morganza) File, Land Grant Files, BX/06/203, Archives of the Diocese of Baton Rouge, Louisiana (hereafter ADBR).

⁶ Recettes, Eglise de la Pointe Coupée, January-July 1872, St. Ann (Morganza) File, Parish Financial Reporting Files, BX/04/1875, ADBR; Recettes, Eglise de la Pointe Coupée, July 1872-January 1873, St. Ann (Morganza) File, Parish Financial Reporting Files, BX/04/1875, ADBR.

⁷ Parish Report of the Church of New Texas Landing, Reverend Charles Clark to the Archbishop of New Orleans, 1 July 1884-1 July 1885, St. Ann (Morganza) File, Parish Financial Reporting Files, BX/04/1875, ADBR.

⁸ Annual Report of the Church of Seven Sorrows, Reverend Charles Clark to the Archbishop of New Orleans, 22 March 1890, St. Ann (Morganza) File, Parish Financial Reporting Files, BX/04/1875, ADBR.

⁹ Transfer of the Sale of Property from Mr. Joseph Torras to Reverend Francis Xavier Leray (Archbishop of New Orleans), 23 April 1887, St. Ann (Morganza) File, Land Grant Files, BX/06/203, ADBR.

¹⁰ "Consecration," *Pointe Coupée Banner*, 18 June 1892. See also "Dedication of New Texas Catholic Church: The Blessing of the Bell and Nine Beautiful Statues," *Pointe Coupée Banner*, 3 September 1892.

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- ¹¹ "Dedication of a Church and Blessing of a Bell," *Pointe Coupée Banner*, 17 September 1892.
- ¹² "A Priceless Landmark," *Weekly Picayune* (New Orleans), 30 April 1891.
- ¹³ "St. Francis Church," *Pointe Coupée Banner*, 21 February 1891. See also "Old St. Francis Church," *Pointe Coupée Banner*, 18 April 1891, 23 April 1891, 2 May 1891, 16 May 1891, 30 May 1891, 6 June 1891, 13 June 1891, 26 June 1891, 23 April 1892, 21 May 1892.
- ¹⁴ "St. Francis Church," *Pointe Coupée Banner*, 13 August 1892.
- ¹⁵ "St. Francis Church," *Pointe Coupée Banner*, 26 November 1892.
- ¹⁶ "The Dedication of St. Francis Church," *Pointe Coupée Banner*, 1 June 1895.
- ¹⁷ "Church Dedication," *Pointe Coupée Banner*, 25 May 1895.
- ¹⁸ From 1895 to 1918, annual parish reports suggest that between 150 and 250 people were buried in the cemetery of Seven Sorrows. A precise number is unattainable due to the irregular reporting practices of pastors.
- ¹⁹ "Whisperings from Raccourci and New Texas," *Pointe Coupée Banner*, 3 November 1894.
- ²⁰ Letter to the Editor, *Pointe Coupée Banner*, 22 March 1882.
- ²¹ Letter to the Editor, *Pointe Coupée Banner*, 8 April 1882.
- ²² Editors, *Pointe Coupée Banner*, 20 May 1882.
- ²³ "The End at Last. Morganza Gone. Two Smaller Crevasses. Desolation Unmeasured," *Daily Advocate*, 23 April 1890.
- ²⁴ Martin Reuss, *Designing the Bayous: The Control of Water in the Atchafalaya Basin, 1800-1995* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2004), 87.
- ²⁵ "Outlet and Levee System Combined vs. All-Levee System," *Pointe Coupée Banner*, 8 June 1898.
- ²⁶ Editors, *Pointe Coupée Banner*, 23 April 1891.
- ²⁷ "The Atchafalaya Levee District," *Pointe Coupée Banner*, 20 August 1892. See also Editors, *Pointe Coupée Banner*, 14 November 1891; "Morganza Solid," *Pointe Coupée Banner*, 14 May 1892.
- ²⁸ *Pointe Coupée Banner*, 20 April 1912.
- ²⁹ *Pointe Coupée Banner*, 27 April 1912.
- ³⁰ *New Advocate*, 29 April 1912.
- ³¹ Newspaper accounts taken from Costello, *Desolation Unmeasured*, 96-127.
- ³² Robert M. Brown, "The Mississippi River Flood of 1912," *Bulletin of the American Geographical Society* 44, no. 9 (1912): 654, 655.
- ³³ *Pointe Coupée Banner*, 6 July 1912.
- ³⁴ Annual Report of the Church of Our Lady of Seven Dolors, Reverend Joseph M. LeBerre to the Archbishop of New Orleans, 1 January 1913, St. Ann (Morganza) File, Parish Financial Reporting Files, BX/04/1875, ADBR.
- ³⁵ Annual Report of the Church of Our Lady of Seven Dolors, Reverend Dominic Perino to the Archbishop of New Orleans, 1 January 1918, St. Ann (Morganza) File, Parish Financial Reporting Files, BX/04/1875, ADBR.
- ³⁶ Archbishop John Shaw, Canonical Erection of St. Anne Catholic Church, 16 February 1922, St. Ann (Morganza) File, Parish Financial Reporting Files, BX/04/1875, ADBR.
- ³⁷ Costello, *Desolation Unmeasured*, 154.
- ³⁸ John Barry, *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), 284.
- ³⁹ Lyle Saxon, *Father Mississippi* (New York: Century, 1927), v, 279.

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- ⁴⁰ Barry, *Rising Tide*. See also Pete Daniel, *Deep 'n as It Comes: The 1927 Mississippi River Flood* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1996); and Adam Mandelman, *The Place with No Edge: An Intimate History of People, Technology, and the Mississippi River Delta* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University press, 2020).
- ⁴¹ Paul Rioux, "Curiosity Seekers Inundate Small Town near Morganza Spillway, *The Times-Picayune*, 13 May 2011.
- ⁴² Flood Control Act of 1936, get citation
- ⁴³ "First Payment Made in Flowage Easement," *Pointe Coupée Banner*, 26 January 1939.
- ⁴⁴ Paul Gauci to Archbishop Joseph Rummel, Morganza, Louisiana, 23 May 1940, St. Ann (Morganza), Historical Files, BX/04/1875, ADBR; and Archbishop Joseph Rummel to Paul Gauci, New Orleans, 1 June 1940, St. Ann (Morganza), Historical Files, BX/04/1875, ADBR.
- ⁴⁵ Charles Plauche (Vice Chancellor of the Archdiocese of New Orleans) to Paul Gauci, New Orleans, 6 April 1954, St. Ann (Morganza), Historical Files, BX/04/1875, ADBR.
- ⁴⁶ Charles Plauche to Rupert Hodges (Representative of Army Corps, New Orleans District Flood Control), New Orleans, 6 April 1945, St. Ann (Morganza), Historical Files, BX/04/1875, ADBR.
- ⁴⁷ Rupert Hodges to Charles Plauche, New Orleans, 12 April 1945, St. Ann (Morganza), Historical Files, BX/04/1875, ADBR.
- ⁴⁸ Joseph Rummel to Charles Denechaud, New Orleans, 9 May 1945, St. Ann (Morganza), Historical Files, BX/04/1875, ADBR.
- ⁴⁹ Paul Gauci to Charles Plauche, Morganza, Louisiana, 10 April 1945, St. Ann (Morganza), Historical Files, BX/04/1875, ADBR.
- ⁵⁰ Granville Alpha to Francis Rummel, New Orleans, 10 June 1947, St. Ann (Morganza), Historical Files, BX/04/1875, ADBR.
- ⁵¹ Charles Plauche to Paul Gauci, New Orleans, 11 June 1947, St. Ann (Morganza), Historical Files, BX/04/1875, ADBR.
- ⁵² "List of Bodies Moved from the Site of St. Ann Cemetery in the Morganza Floodway, Pointe Coupee Parish, Louisiana," *Louisiana Genealogical Register* (June 1968): 74-76.
- ⁵³ Thomas Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 62.
- ⁵⁴ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), xvi.
- ⁵⁵ David Morgan, *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 204.
- ⁵⁶ Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 108.
- ⁵⁷ Saxon, *Father Mississippi*, 307.
- ⁵⁸ John McPhee, *The Control of Nature* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989), 8.
- ⁵⁹ Maia Kotrosits, *The Lives of Objects: Material Culture, Experience, and the Real in the History of Early Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), 1.

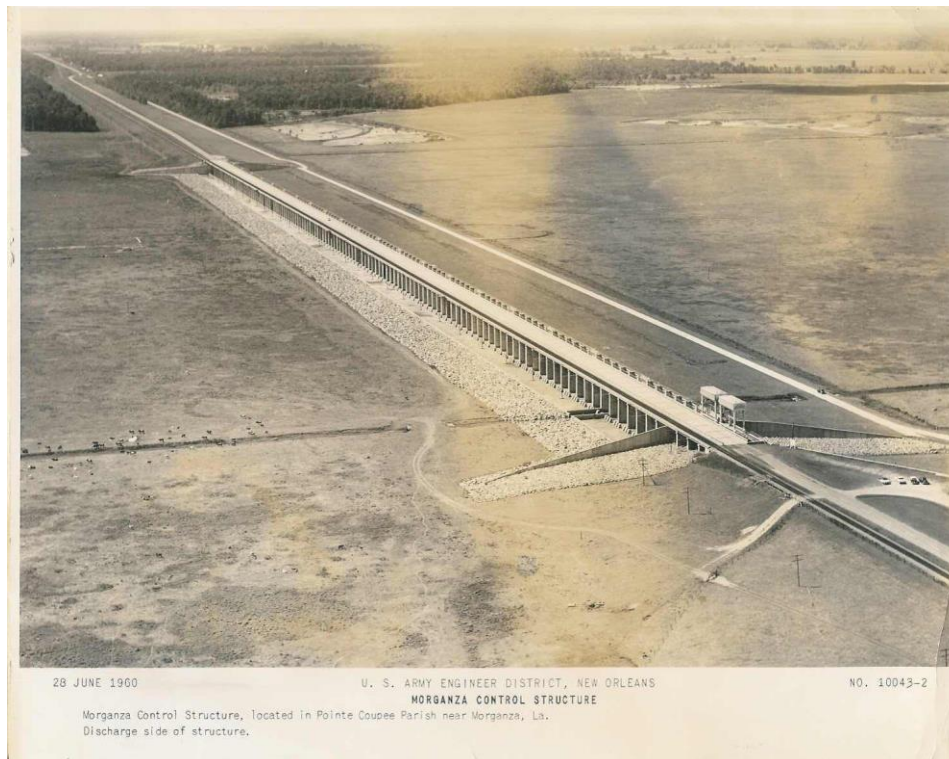


Image 1: Morganza Control Structure, Morganza, Louisiana. Construction completed in 1954.



Image 2: Old River Control Structure, Vidalia, Louisiana. Construction completed in 1963.

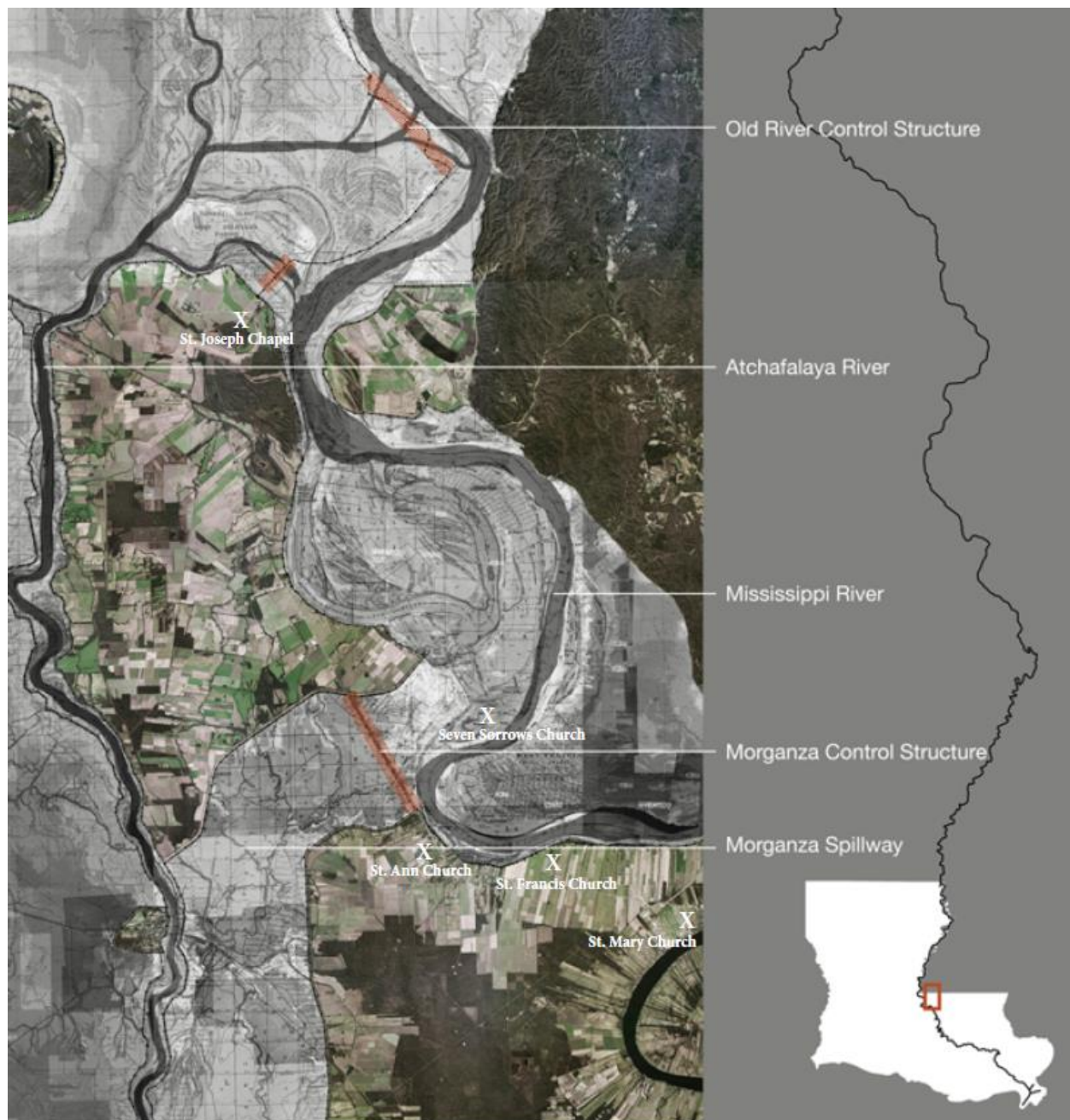
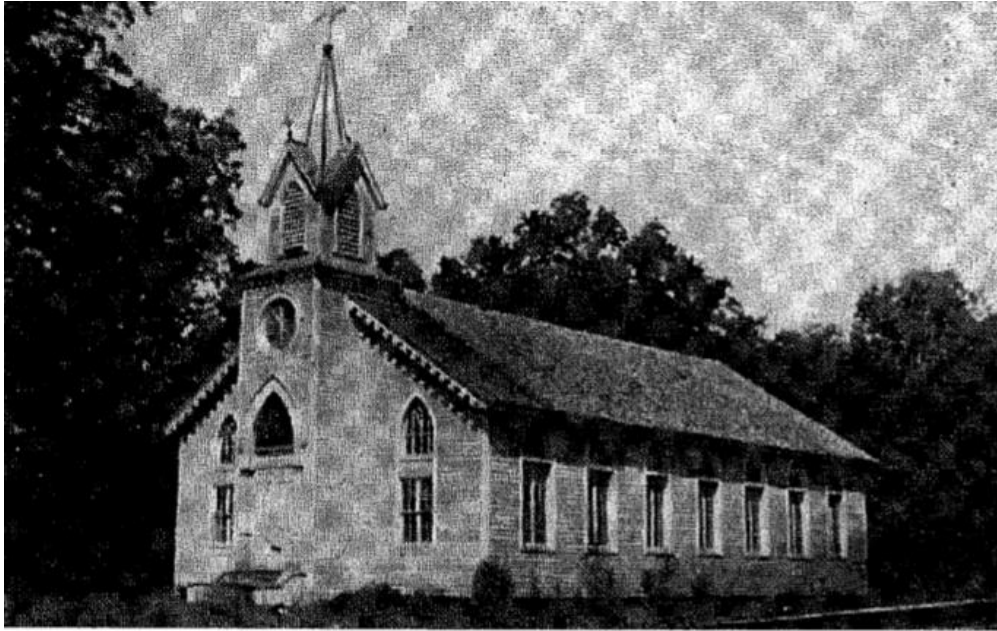


Image 3: Map of the Morganza Spillway and the surrounding area. Includes sites of the four churches under consideration in this essay.



Raccourci Church, demolished 1940

Image 4: Our Lady of Seven Sorrows Catholic Church, Raccourci, Louisiana. Founded in 1892. Demolished in 1940. Stood in what would become the Morganza Spillway.



Image 5: St. Francis of Assisi Catholic Church, New Roads, Louisiana. Founded c. in 1760. Demolished in 1892. Stood on the riverside of the Mississippi River levee. Notice the tombs that were ultimately removed at the time of church demolition.



Image 6: St. Francis of Assisi Catholic Church, New Roads, Louisiana. Founded in 1895. Located on the interior side of the Mississippi River levee. Today it is a chapel and museum.



Image 7: Crevasse on the Mississippi River in Torras, Louisiana, 1912. Located upriver from Our Lady of Seven Sorrows Catholic Church and St. Francis Catholic Church.



Image 8: Levee encampment on the Mississippi River during the flood of 1912.



Image 9: St. Ann Catholic Church, Morganza, Louisiana. Founded in 1922.



Image 10: Children standing in floodwater during the flood of 1927, Raccourci, Louisiana.

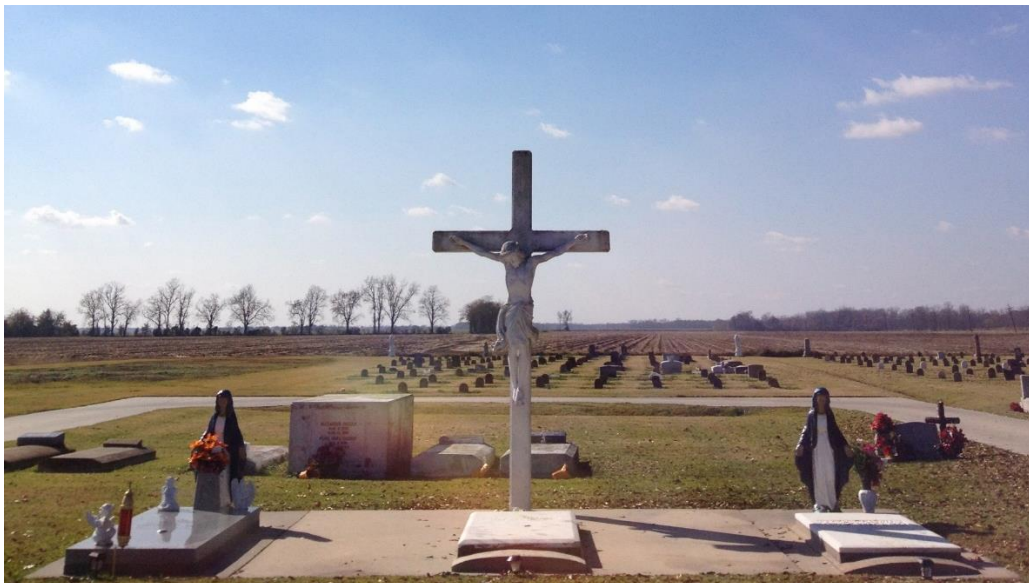


Image 11: Cemetery of St. Ann Catholic Church, Morganza, Louisiana. Notice the separate burial ground in the background, which contain the remains of those relocated from Our Lady of Seven Sorrows during the 1940s.



Image 12: Cemetery of St. Ann Catholic Church, Morganza, Louisiana. These are the graves of those relocated from Our Lady of Seven Sorrows.



Image 13: Cabinet containing a reliquary, Roman Missal, and ciborium, located in the church hall of St. Ann Catholic Church. These items were originally located at Our Lady of Seven Sorrows Catholic Church. The church hall was built out of salvaged wood taken from Our Lady of Seven Sorrows Catholic Church.



Image 14: Bell in the steeple of St. Ann Catholic Church. Originally located at Our Lady of Seven Sorrows Catholic Church. Currently inoperable.