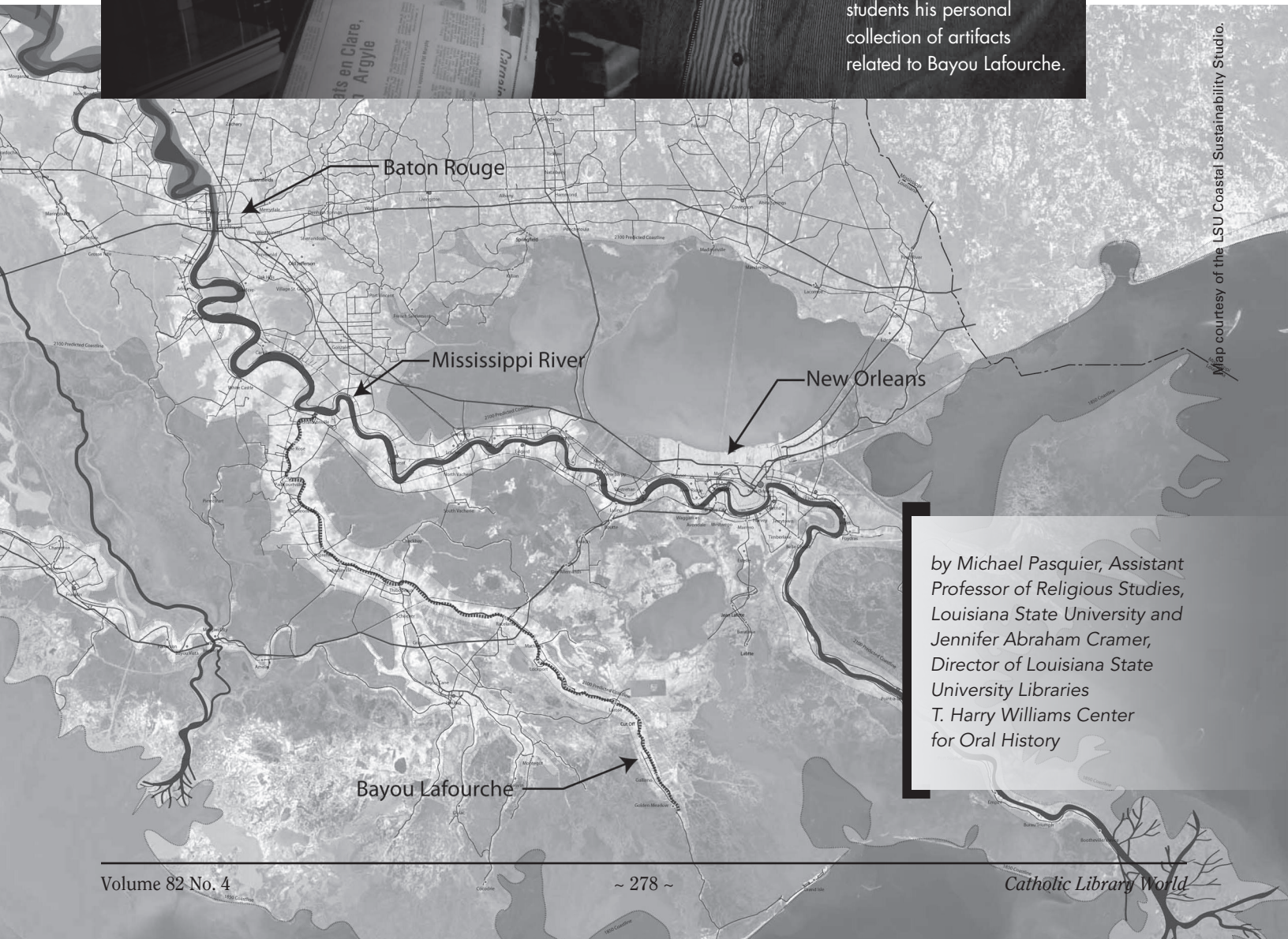


The Bayou Lafourche Oral History Project:

Understanding Environmental Change and Religious Identity in Louisiana

A.J. Leblanc, resident of Larose, Louisiana, shows Louisiana State University students his personal collection of artifacts related to Bayou Lafourche.



by Michael Pasquier, Assistant
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Much of the religious history of Louisiana is Catholic history. And much of what is known about the history of Catholicism in Louisiana goes back to one man's lifelong commitment to finding, organizing, and interpreting that history. His name was Roger Baudier. For his work, and especially for his six-hundred-page book *The Catholic Church in Louisiana* (1939), Archbishop Joseph Rummel named Baudier the "Official Chronicler of the Archdiocese of New Orleans." Considered by some to be the definitive history of Louisiana Catholicism, Baudier wrote his *magnum opus* out of an obligation "to fill a longfelt need among librarians, journalists, teachers, professors of history, writers, research workers, the clergy and religious and the public in general as well, for a complete history of the Catholic Church in the state of Louisiana."

An altogether different historian was T. Harry Williams, a professor of History at Louisiana State University (LSU) and author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning book *Huey Long* (1969). Key to Williams' success as an educator was his groundbreaking use of oral histories to write about the history of the U.S. South and Louisiana. "It's no secret," Williams once said, "that I am a great believer in oral history. Trained researchers using a tape recorder ought to interview people to get the information that is in their heads and no place else." Key to best practices in the field of oral history is the democratic idea that the role of oral history is to document those missing or underrepresented from mainstream historical sources. One of the main objectives in the field is to balance history by recording multiple perspectives of society. Donald A. Ritchie (2003) discusses the importance of oral history on community history, in particular, because researchers "carefully [record] times past, seeking lessons from traditions which may be creatively applied to present realities."

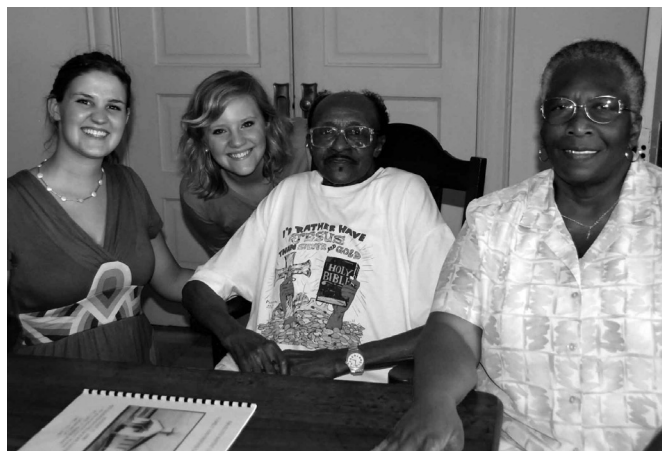
Teachers have conducted oral history projects in high school and college settings for decades. Not only does a classroom-based oral history project enhance students' educational experiences, but it also helps document community culture and history. The T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History at LSU, upon its founding in 1991, embarked upon a five-year project to document a historical African American community in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Now known as the McKinley High School Oral History Project, it has served as a national and international model for incorporating oral history into both secondary and university classrooms. A free guide and accompanying video written and produced by the project partners can be found online at the Williams Center's website (<http://www.lib.lsu.edu/special/williams/>). Since then, the Williams Center staff have worked with dozens of education-based partners to build and improve upon their initial success.

Incorporating the Williams Center's oral history model and channeling the spirits of Baudier and Williams, Michael Pasquier, assistant professor of Religious Studies

at LSU, and Jennifer Abraham Cramer, director of the Williams Center at LSU, spent the fall semester of 2010 leading forty undergraduate students in a project that applied oral history techniques to the study of religion in Louisiana. More specifically, Pasquier and Cramer teamed up with the LSU Coastal Sustainability Studio and the LSU Communication Across the Curriculum Studio to interview twenty people from an area of coastal Louisiana with a long history of Catholicism that has experienced considerable environmental changes throughout the twentieth century.

The overall goals of the project were fivefold:

1. To introduce students to the religious lives of people who call Louisiana home.
2. To introduce students to the cultural consequences of environmental change in Louisiana.
3. To provide students with training in interview strategies and audio editing technologies.
4. To partner with organizations at LSU and the community to achieve learning objectives.
5. To produce professional quality oral histories for cataloging, preserving, and public access in and through the LSU Libraries.



Student interviewers with J.B. Barnes and Albertha Campbell, members of Israelite Baptist Church in Lockport, Louisiana.



The Place

Michael Pasquier chose Bayou Lafourche as the site of investigation. Roughly fifty miles south of New Orleans, people of French and Spanish descent started to settle along the banks of Bayou Lafourche during the eighteenth century. Throughout the nineteenth century, Anglo-Americans, African Americans, Italians, and others started to merge with the Francophone culture of Bayou Lafourche, but never enough to counteract the prevailing French and Catholic traditions associated with Louisiana's Cajun communities. The twentieth century experienced more dramatic changes, due in large part to the damming of

Bayou Lafourche (a former distributary of the Mississippi River) in 1904, the oil boom of the post-World War II years, and the construction of levees around most of the bayou during the 1960s and 70s. These alterations to the infrastructure and economy of Bayou Lafourche had astounding environmental results associated with wetlands loss, saltwater intrusion, hurricane frequency, and sea-level rise. Correspondingly, settlement patterns and cultural practices adjusted to the changing landscape, including the construction of churches, the placement of cemeteries, and the performance of religious beliefs.



The Partners

The T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History at LSU is one of the premier organizations in the United States devoted to the qualitative method of collecting and preserving unrecorded information about the past that fills gaps in the written record and results in the creation of primary sources. As a branch of the larger LSU Libraries Special Collections, the Williams Center contains more than sixty series and more than three thousand interviews totaling more than five thousand hours of recordings. Under the direction of Jennifer Abraham Cramer, the Williams Center conducts training workshops, consultations, and collaborations with individual researchers, community groups, classes, and institutions, all of which enhances oral history collections throughout the state of Louisiana and provides those collections to the listening public and scholarly researchers alike.

The Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at LSU is home to a faculty that is committed to the college education of Louisiana's youth and the public education of Louisiana's citizens. Course offerings include surveys of religious traditions, biblical studies, and special topics related to theories and methods, philosophy, and religion in the United States. In his General Education course "Introduction to the Study of Religion," Michael Pasquier formulated an oral history project that required students to consider the "lived religion," the everyday beliefs and practices of religious adherents that include but is not limited to church attendance, of the people of Bayou Lafourche.

The Bayou Lafourche Oral History Project was a part of a larger trans-disciplinary project sponsored by the LSU Coastal Sustainability Studio that considered the environmental and social history of Bayou Lafourche. The oral histories, with their local knowledge, were valuable sources of information that complemented research conducted by architects, designers, and urban planners. Planning for the future of coastal living in Louisiana, Pasquier and his colleagues at the LSU Coastal Sustainability Studio found, demands a deep understanding of how people lived resiliently in the past, and oral histories allowed them access to the people who know Bayou Lafourche best.

With forty students traveling several hours to conduct twenty oral histories in the field, it was necessary to team up with the LSU Communication Across the Curriculum Studio to train and equip students with audiorecording devices and editing software. The staff of Communication Across the Curriculum provided the expertise and facilities necessary for introducing novice interviewers to the basic and intermediate skills vital to oral history taking.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, Pasquier developed a partnership with the Bayou Lafourche Folklife and Heritage Museum in Lockport, Louisiana, to coordinate interviews with residents of Bayou Lafourche. The partnership was a perfect fit, especially considering the museum's mission to preserve, promote, and interpret the human history, cultural heritage, natural history, and arts and folkways of the Bayou Lafourche region.



The Project

The combination of so many students and partners required a very clear plan that made sense to both students of LSU (the interviewers) and residents of Bayou Lafourche (the interviewees). The project also needed to follow university protocol for human subject research and to create products that adhered to the archival repository's collection criteria. These were easily navigated by advanced planning. Pasquier consulted Cramer in regards to the latter, seeking advice specifically about copyright and intellectual property issues in addition to information on the subjects of oral history best practices, archival preservation, and public access. Pasquier also relied upon the expertise of LSU's Institutional Review Board to ensure the safety and welfare of those who agreed to tell their story.

The next important step in the process was training the students to conduct oral histories. Cramer conducted a three-hour workshop over the course of two classes that introduced students to oral history theory, interview methods, questionnaire development, an interactive listening exercise, and human subjects protocol. It was a lot to pack into an oral history workshop, so Pasquier supplemented the information with brainstorming activities and mock interview sessions during the first few weeks of the semester in anticipation of actual interviews.

Students worked in pairs, with one person acting as the interviewer and the other the engineer in charge of sound and recording. Each two-person team practiced with the audio recording equipment before conducting the interview at the LSU Communication Across the Curriculum Studio, where they were able to get assistance with any technical difficulties.

With help from the director of the Bayou Lafourche Folklife and Heritage Museum, Pasquier connected with individuals from the Bayou Lafourche area and explained to them the goals of the project and what to expect from the

students. Pasquier assigned each team a resident of Bayou Lafourche. Students were responsible for contacting and scheduling a meeting with their assigned resident. Students were also given brief biographies of their subjects, with which they were required to tailor questions based on the particularities of the lives of the subjects based on gender, occupation, religion, age, and any other information that might make the line of questioning more personal. In a region known for its Catholic history, it is not surprising that nineteen of the twenty interviewees identified themselves as Catholic. Eighteen men and six women were interviewed for the project ranging in age from their mid forties to late eighties. Several older men interviewed were once employed in the fishing, shrimping, or oystering industries. Many of the 60 year old men and younger had been employed in oil and gas industries and services. Some people had started out in a paper mill or in an oil field, but had transitioned to insurance agents or salesmen. One man is a biology professor, one woman worked as a florist, and one woman was a teacher. Many of those interviewed were of Cajun French descent and some spoke French growing up. Several interviewees had Native American ancestry, and one person was African American.

The questions concentrated on two major themes, religion and the environment. After covering basic biographic information like family background and current activities, students were encouraged to focus their questions on the “lived religion” of the interviewees, which is to say the personal beliefs and practices as understood and articulated in lay terms. It was also important to educate the students on the environmental history of Bayou Lafourche and how the landscape changed throughout the twentieth century in ways that impacted religious traditions on a social level and influenced religious perspectives on an individual level.

For example, students discovered how the most southerly church on Bayou Lafourche, the church closest to the Gulf of Mexico that falls inside the protection of the levee system, is devoted to Our Lady of Prompt Succor. Why is this significant? Because Our Lady of Prompt Succor is the cult of the Virgin Mary to whom Catholics of South Louisiana pray for protection during hurricane season. “It isn’t an accident that the last Catholic church on Bayou Lafourche is named after the Mary that protects people from hurricanes,” one student reported to the class after conducting an oral history. “The people of Bayou Lafourche know what it’s like to live through hurricanes, and to pray before, during, and after hurricanes.”

On a more personal note, one resident told a team of oral history students about the time he evacuated his home during Hurricane Betsy in 1965. “By the time we got [to my aunt’s house in a safe location up the bayou],” he said, “things were really bad.” He continued,



Ophelia Lefort, self-taught artist and resident of Larose, Louisiana, shows her personal collection of paintings and sculptures.

“We got out, we went in the house and it was late. It was almost time to go to bed but as a kid, I was petrified. I was a nervous wreck. I couldn’t possibly go to bed.... So mom was nervous, everybody was nervous. They wanted the kids in bed and away. So... I was nervous. I threw up in bed. I remember that the boards that my aunt had put against her window were pounding and one of the windows crashed on top of me so there was no way I was getting back in bed so I was a wreck all night. But the most harrowing thing was when the men got together to murmur the Rosary. When women pray, it’s alright. When men pray, you know something’s wrong.... It wasn’t the nervousness, it wasn’t ‘cause my dad wasn’t there although those were tremendously big emotional things. It wasn’t the glass falling on me. When my grandpa and the other men started praying, that was scary.”

By requiring students to conduct oral histories in the area of investigation, it was possible for students to not only hear the words of those who live along Bayou Lafourche, but to also see it for themselves. One resident told a team of students about a family cemetery that had been “pulled into” the bayou because of coastal erosion, sea-level rise, and saltwater intrusion. “What once was a cemetery on solid ground,” the student mentioned to the class, “is now almost entirely underwater. I can’t think of a more tangible way to see how the environment affects religion.”

This student is articulating one of the goals of oral history methodology and one of the overall objectives of the class project: to demonstrate, through the process of interviewing, how each aspect of culture is connected to, or integrated with the whole of society. So for example, when one aspect changes, such as the disappearance of land and sustainable fishing waters, other cultural elements, like economy, family, and religion are impacted simultaneously. Interviewing multiple people on varied topics is integral

to achieving this goal. Especially important is an understanding of oral history best practices, which are designed to carefully document history to elicit lessons applicable to present situations. The Bayou Lafourche project was organized, through various aforementioned partnerships, to achieve this goal by interviewing a diverse group of community residents to determine some of the cultural consequences of environmental change in south Louisiana.

In the end, the students seemed to appreciate the innovative use of oral history in an introductory religion course. That being said, some of the students expressed concern at the beginning of the process, due primarily to the fact that they had never conducted a formal oral history in their life. This attitude, which is completely understandable, made it all the more necessary for Pasquier and Cramer to design the project in simple, straightforward, and detailed terms. The only thing that was left to the imaginations of the students was the actual sit-down interview, where the students brought all that they had learned about the environmental and religious history of Bayou Lafourche to bear on their personal encounters with people who wanted to talk about life in coastal Louisiana. Furthermore, several months after the semester, a student who was now working as an intern for a magazine in New York City emailed Pasquier and thanked him and Cramer for teaching her how to prepare, conduct, and edit interviews. "I had no idea that I would take what I learned in a religion course and apply it to my job as a journalist," she wrote. "Thank you!"



The twenty oral histories are now in the hands of the Williams Center staff. Cramer is overseeing the processing and preservation of the original audio files for inclusion in the LSU Libraries Special Collections, where they will be made publicly available to researchers. The time-consuming process of transcribing or thoroughly indexing each oral history is underway. Once complete, the transcripts and audio recordings will be available to read and hear online at the LOUISiana Digital Libraries (<http://louisdl.louislibraries.org/>). In addition, there is a podcast featuring a discussion between Pasquier and Cramer about the project, project photographs, and several audio clips from the interviews.

Since finishing the Bayou Lafourche Oral History Project, Pasquier has continued to study the relationship between religion and the environment in Louisiana. In partnership with the LSU Coastal Sustainability Studio, he and several colleagues have received a National Endowment for the Arts grant that will augment the scope of oral history taking in Bayou Lafourche and bring attention to the cultural consequences of what are sometimes avoidable changes to the environment. ■



Notes

For more information about the services of LSU's T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History, please contact Jennifer Abraham Cramer (jabrah1@lsu.edu) or visit the website (<http://www.lib.lsu.edu/special/williams/>) and blog (<http://oralhistory.blogs.lib.lsu.edu/>).

For more information about Michael Pasquier's work in religious studies and coastal Louisiana, please contact him (mpasquier@lsu.edu) or visit the Bayou Lafourche project website (<http://css.lsu.edu/lafourche-overview/>).

For more information about the other partners associated with the Bayou Lafourche Oral History Project, please refer to the following websites:

LSU Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies (<http://www.artsci.lsu.edu/phil/>)

LSU Coastal Sustainability Studio (www.css.lsu.edu)

LSU Communication Across the Curriculum (www.cxc.lsu.edu)

Bayou Lafourche Folklife and Heritage Museum (<http://www.bayoumuseum.org>)

Michael Pasquier is assistant professor of Religious Studies at Louisiana State University. He is the author of Fathers on the Frontier: French Missionaries and the Roman Catholic Priesthood in the United States, 1789-1870 (Oxford University Press, 2010) and the editor of Gods of the Mississippi (Indiana University Press, forthcoming 2013), a collection of essays on the history of religion in the Mississippi Valley.

Jennifer Abraham Cramer is the director of Louisiana State University Libraries T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History, where she manages ongoing staff and partner projects and oversees the processing, preservation, and digitization of the Center's 4,000 hours of audio recordings. She also produces the Center's podcast, "What Endures" (<http://oralhistory.blogs.lib.lsu.edu/>), and currently serves as the media review editor for The Oral History Review. ■