



Lake Pontchartrain Basin Maritime History Briefs

Ship Building in the Basin during the 18th – 20th Centuries

The Works Progress Administration (WPA) Reports of Ship Registrations and Enrollments by the U. S. Customs Office in New Orleans lists over 25 active ship building sites in the Basin during the 66-year period (1804-1870) covered by the Reports. Only nine of the sites were reported to have built 10 boats or more. These nine sites and the number of ships built were: Tchefuncte-Madisonville (28); Bayou St John (15); Bonfouca (28); Tangipahoa (17); West Pearl (11); Bayou Lacombe (18); Algiers (47); New Orleans (47); and Pearl River (10). The latter site may have been in Louisiana or Mississippi depending on which bank the shipyard was located. The specific location of the building site designated as New Orleans has yet to be established. Other minor ship building sites, some outside the Basin, include but are not limited to: Chef Menteur; St Landry Parish; St Tammany Parish; Lafourche Parish; Covington; West Pearl River; Assumption Parish; Ponchatoula River; Bayou Labranche; Amite River; Opelousas; St Mary Parish; Atakapas (Franklin); Tickfaw River; Bayou Fusillier; and St Helena Parish.

The listing of Tchefuncte- Madisonville accounts for the somewhat complicated history of the area which became Madisonville. In 1785, Jean Baptiste Baham was awarded a Spanish land grant of the area and founded Madisonville in 1800. Initially known as Coquille Village, it was renamed Madisonville in 1811 in honor of President James Madison. The current street plan for the town was established in 1814 by Ellis McCarty. There is evidence that Baham and/or one or more of his sons developed and operated a shipyard in what is now referred to as Madisonville as early as the late 18th century and extending into the early 20th century. According to the listing in the WPA Reports, ESPERANCE, the earliest vessel listed was built in the Madisonville area in 1797.

ESPERANCE, Schooner, 44' 6" long, 13' beam and 5' 2" draft. One deck, two masts and square stern. Hailing port- Bayou St John; Owner- Peter Bailey, Jr., trader, New Orleans; Master- Joseph Robasso.

However, it's very likely that vessels were built in the Madisonville area and at other sites in the Basin earlier in the 18th century, but such records have not been located. The ESPERANCE was alternately Registered (permitted to engage in foreign trade) and Enrolled (permitted to engage in domestic trade only) as late as 1826 at which time she was altered in tonnage, beam, and draft. For a wooden vessel, a usable life of almost 30 years would be considered somewhat exceptional.

Vessels continued to be built in Madisonville and the other building sites as late as 1870; that is, the extent to which data are available from the WPA Reports. With respect to Madisonville specifically, another source indicated that sailing vessels continued to be built at that site as late as 1898. The overwhelming majority of vessels built at all sites were one deck, two-masted shallow draft (3'-5') schooners with square sterns and lengths varying from 40' to 70'. Somewhat of an outlier was the ROBERT SPEEDEN, a 74' long schooner built at Madisonville in 1849. It wasn't until 1829 that the description of any schooner built in the Basin indicated the presence of a centerboard. Interestingly, that schooner, built in Bonfouca, carried the same name as that of the first reported schooner built in Madisonville- ESPERANCE. In 1837, the 42' sloop, DOLPHIN, said to have been built simply on Lake Pontchartrain was reported to have centerboard.

Unfortunately, I have only been able to locate a limited number of photos of 19th and 20th Century schooners. The photo on the right shows two two-masted, gaff-rigged schooners docked along the New Basin Canal in the 1930's. As noted in the next paragraph, the first steamboat built in the Basin dates to 1820. It is significant that schooners were still in use over 100 years after the introduction of the steamboat in the Basin. The American artist William Henry Buck (1840-1888) created this painting, labeled "A schooner at sunset on Lake Pontchartrain," in 1882. It depicts a two-masted, gaff-rigged schooner



State Library of Louisiana (<http://www.state.lib.la.us>)

The first steamboat listed as being built in the Basin was the ALEXANDRIA, built in New Orleans in 1820. She was 105' 4' long, 14' 9" in the beam and with a draft of 5' 2". The steamboat was reported to have no masts, one deck, a square stern, and a hurricane house on deck.

In 1905, Fritz Jahncke, an immigrant to New Orleans from Hamburg, Germany in 1870, acquired full ownership of the Baham Shipyard which he and subsequently his sons operated until the late 1960's. Before Jahncke became involved in ship building, he began paving mud

sidewalks in New Orleans. Needing construction materials for the sidewalks, he rented a steam-powered suction dredge that he used to collect sand and shells from the Tchefuncte River and other area rivers. He is credited with significant contributions to modernizing New Orleans with paved streets and sidewalks; developing the New Basin Canal; and helping to build the Port of New Orleans. While no definitive evidence exists, it is likely that Jahncke transported construction materials from the north shore of the Lake to the New Basin Canal on barges constructed at the shipyard and pushed or pulled by steam-powered tugboats.

Following his death in 1911, his three sons assumed management of the shipyard and received



a contract from the US Navy in 1917 to build six wooden cargo steamships, each of which was 300 ft long and weighed about 3,000 tons as completed. A workforce of

over 2,000 workers was required to construct five of the ships somewhat simultaneously, arranged side by side. This massive effort required housing and feeding of workers, the building of sawmills and shops, effective management processes, and transport and auxiliary vessels of all types.

Within less than a year, the SS Bayou Teche was launched in March 1918 followed by the SS Balabac in September of that same year. To launch the ships from the shipways located on the west bank of the Tchefuncte River, an area on the east bank of the River was dredged to provide an area wide enough to launch the ships. Today, that area is occupied by Marina Del Ray.

The bar at the mouth of the River posed a barrier to moving the ships from the River to the Lake where they were to proceed through the Rigolets to the Mississippi Sound and beyond. This obstacle was overcome by floating the ships on large pontoons for crossing the shallows at the mouth of the River.

Two additional ships were launched in 1919, the SS Abbeville and the SS Pontchartrain. President Herbert Hoover attended the dedication of the latter ship. The remaining ship under construction at that time was never finished. It was reported that the hull of that ship was

moved to a location on the east bank of the River, south of the present location of Marina Del Ray, and burned. At low water, the burned-out hull of that ship may still be visible.

Jahncke Services continued to operate as a shipyard and supplier of concrete and construction materials into the 1960's at which time it was sold. By 1970, the new owners had shuttered the shipyard for good. The only remaining remnants of the Jahncke Shipyard in Madisonville are several concrete foundations in the green space between Main and Pine Streets near Bordeaux Street.

The impact of both Jahncke and his enterprises on the growth and development of both Madisonville and New Orleans is difficult to judge in measurable terms. However, to say that it was immense is not unreasonable. I was particularly impressed by the Company's motto:

We shall build good ships here

At a profit if we can

At a loss if we must

But always good ships

See scenes of early Madisonville and the Shipyard at <https://vimeo.com/29775734>

The data provided in the Ship Registers and Enrollments of New Orleans, Louisiana, WPA Reports generally list the shipwright and the vessel's master. However, I have yet to locate a significant body of information concerning the sources, training, and experience of these individuals. In the case of the shipwrights, what was the basis of the design of the vessels. Did they use half-models? If so, what was the source of the model? Did they prepare and use a detailed set of plans? There is also the issue of shipyard workers- their source, skills, and training.

The WPA Reports listed almost 50 vessels built in New Orleans during the period 1804-1870 but the exact site was not identified. One would generally conclude that this building site was located on the west bank of the Mississippi River because the east bank at New Orleans was dedicated to docking, freight, and passenger operations. Certainly, the 20th Century saw the development of significant shipyards and ship building on the west bank of the Mississippi River in the Algiers area. A brief overview of the two most important shipyards in that area follows, both of which were established in the 20th Century:

Avondale Shipyards (Avondale Marine Ways) was founded in 1938 primarily as a repair and barge construction site for craft working the Mississippi River. However, during World War II, they were awarded contracts to build tugboats, destroyers, and destroyer escorts. After the war, they built drilling barges, offshore rigs, and other commercial vessels. They again produced military vessels during the Korean and Vietnam Wars. In 1998, the shipyard received

a major Navy contract to construct two ships- a landing platform dock ship and an amphibious assault ship. In 2013, Northrup Grumman, the then owner of the shipyard, moved its Gulf Coast ship building operations to its yard in Pascagoula, MS.

Todd Shipyards was established on the West Bank of the Mississippi River in the 1920's. They initially engaged in the construction of military vessels. During World War II, the yard again built and repaired military vessels including submarines. The yard continued to operate into the 1980's at which time the demand for commercial vessels waned and the yard fell on hard times. After a strike of its workers in June 1985, the yard closed and filed for bankruptcy in early 1986.

Unlike the two previously discussed shipyards, the Bollinger Shipyards was founded in 1946 along the banks of Bayou Lafourche and began constructing barges, work boats and fishing boats. In 1978, the company established a second yard near Larose, LA. About that time, the company secured a contract with the Panama Canal Company to build three tugboats. In 1984, the company was contracted by the U. S. Government to provide thirteen 110-ft Island Class cutters to the U. S. Coast Guard. By the early 1990's, a total of 49 cutters had been delivered to the U. S. Coast Guard. To date, a total of over 170 cutters have been delivered. In 1991, the U.S. Navy awarded the company a contract to build 13 fast, shallow-water patrol boats. Within the past year, Bollinger acquired Gulf Island Fabrication Shipyard's Houma facilities. This acquisition included existing contracts to build Towing, Salvage and Rescue (T-ATS) ships for the U.S. Navy and Regional Class Research Vessels for the National Science Foundation and Oregon State University. While well outside the boundaries of the Lake Pontchartrain Basin, the shipyard has and continues to play an important role in the maritime history of what might be termed the "basin region."

Somewhat further afield is the Ingalls Shipbuilding Corporation founded in 1938 on the east bank of the Pascagoula River in Mississippi. Initially focused on building commercial vessels, in the 1950's the company began bidding on work for the U.S. Navy and won a contract in 1957 to build 12 nuclear-powered attack submarines. The company was acquired by Litton Industries in 1961 who expanded the shipyard to the other side of the river in 1968. In 2001, the Northrup Grumman Corporation acquired Litton Industries. In the 2000's and to the present day, the company has continued to be a major ship building contractor for the U. S. Navy.

Sources

Ship Registers and Enrollments of New Orleans, Louisiana, Survey of Federal Archives in Louisiana, Division of Community Service Programs, Work Projects Administration - Volume 1, August 1941; Volume 2, February 1942; Volume 3, March 1942; Volume 4, March 1942;

Volume 5, March 1942; and Volume 6, March 1942. (Note: Access to copies of these volumes is available on The Digital Library of the HathiTrust.)

Madisonville Bicentennial 1811-2011, Pickets 'n Posts Home Tour Brochure

Meagan Hill, <https://jahncke.com/Shipyard/default.htm>

Content for the descriptions of the 20th Century shipyards were drawn from the online Wikipedia Encyclopedia