

## Lagniappe

The Gulf Intracoastal Waterway is part of the larger Intracoastal Waterway, which stretches some three thousand miles along the U.S. Atlantic coast from Boston, Massachusetts, to Key West, Florida, and along the Gulf of Mexico coast from Apalachee Bay, in northwest Florida, to Brownsville, Texas, on the Rio Grande.

**Right:** The Native Americans called the Ouachita River “the river of sparkling silver water.”

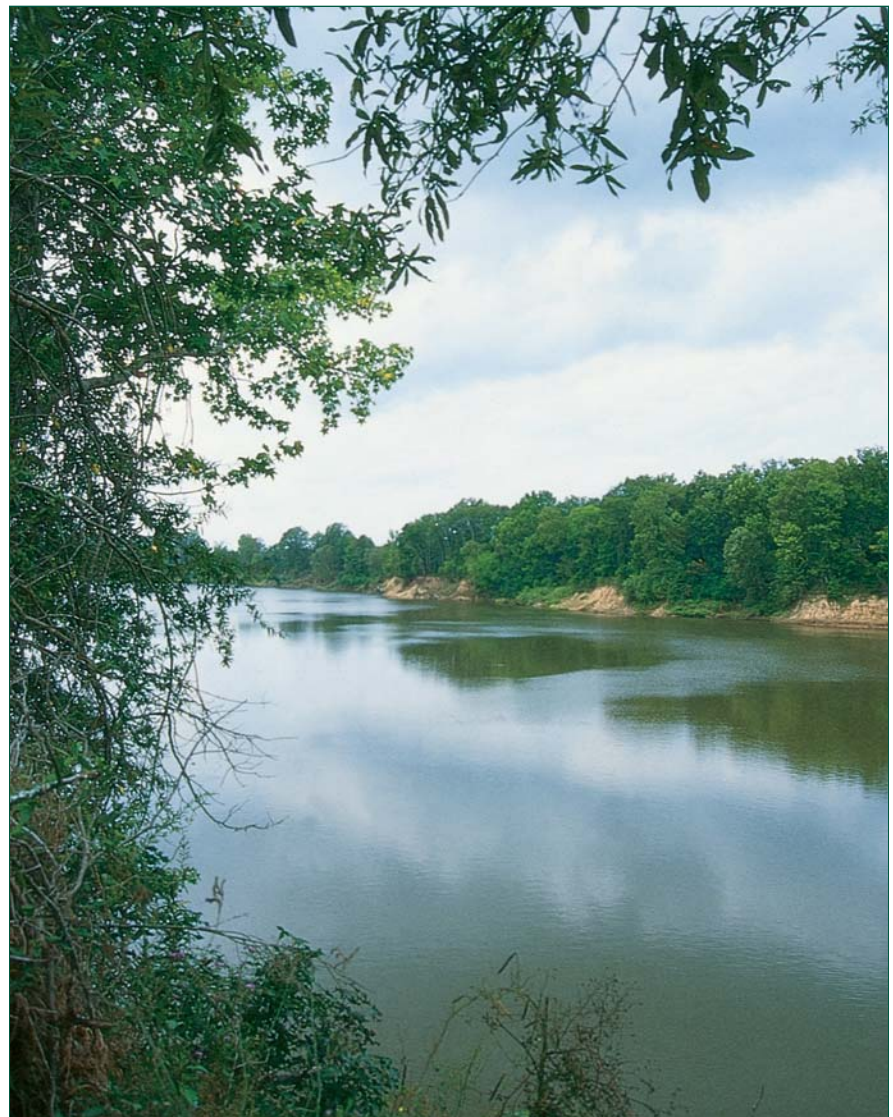
**Terrain:** Physical features of an area of land

# Louisiana's Waterways

As you read, look for:

- Louisiana's major rivers and lakes, and
- vocabulary terms **navigable** and **bayou**.

Louisiana's waterways define its geography. Water is not only the dominant feature of Louisiana's environment, but it has shaped the state's physical landscape.







The largest body of water affecting Louisiana is the Gulf of Mexico. The Mississippi River ends its long journey in the Gulf's warm waters. The changing Mississippi River has formed the terrain of the state.

Louisiana has almost 5,000 miles of navigable rivers, bayous, creeks, and canals. (**Navigable** means the water is deep enough for safe travel by boat.) One waterway is part of a protected water route from the Atlantic Ocean to the Gulf of Mexico. The Gulf Intracoastal Waterway extends more than 1,100 miles from Florida's Panhandle to Brownsville, Texas. This system of rivers, bays, and manmade canals provides a safe channel for ships, fishing boats, and pleasure craft. Part of this passage parallels Louisiana's Gulf Coast.

## Map 5 Louisiana's Rivers and Lakes

**Map Skill:** In what direction does the Calcasieu River flow?



**Above:** The Mississippi River is at its deepest—about 200 feet—at New Orleans.

## Rivers

The many names for the Mississippi show its importance in the history of North America. The Algonquin Indians named it *Messipi*, meaning the “great river.” Some French explorers used that name, but others gave it new names to honor saints or important people in France. The Spanish called it the *Rio del Espiritu Santo*, the “river of the Holy Spirit.”

“The basin of the Mississippi is the body of the nation,” begins Mark Twain’s *Life on the Mississippi*. Later, another writer called it the “Nile of America.” The story of Louisiana cannot be told without the Mississippi River representing both the stage and its main character.

The Mississippi River area covers more than 1,245,000 square miles, draining at least part of thirty-one states. The Mississippi funnels 375 billion gallons of water through Louisiana each day. That process also brings 256 million tons of sediment down the river each year.

The second largest river drainage area in Louisiana is the Red River. It begins as a creek in the high, cold plains of eastern New Mexico and ends its journey in Avoyelles Parish, where commercial fishing boats harvest catfish from their hoop nets.

The Ouachita River begins as a stream in the Arkansas mountains of the same name. In Catahoula Parish, the Little River and the Tensas River join the Ouachita to form the Black River. The Black River then flows into the Red River, which in turn connects with the Atchafalaya.



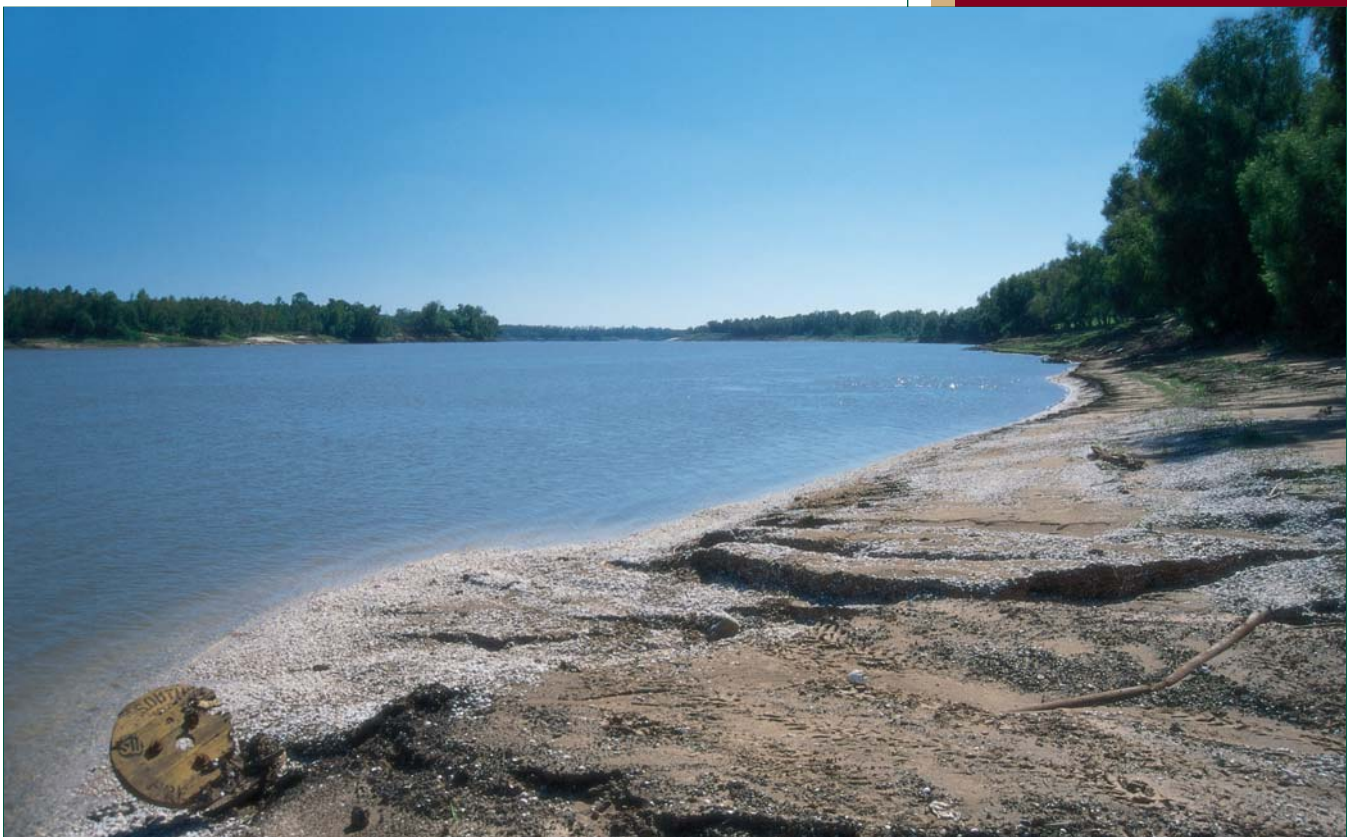
The name *Atchafalaya* is based on the Choctaw words *hache*, meaning “river,” and *falaia*, meaning “long.” This river has been altered more than any other Louisiana river. In the 1830s, the river was cleared of logs, which increased the flow of the water. Then, Captain Henry Shreve created a shortcut for steamboats on the Mississippi at Turnbull’s Bend. This sent water from the Red River into the Atchafalaya. Today the Atchafalaya River still gets the water of the Red River plus 30 percent of the water volume of the Mississippi River.

The Pearl River begins in east-central Mississippi and flows to Lake Borgne (BORN). After forming part of the boundary between Louisiana and Mississippi, the river divides into the East and West Pearl Rivers. The area between the two branches is a prized natural habitat, Honey Island Swamp.

The Calcasieu (KAL ka shoo) River begins in the hills of Vernon Parish, east of Leesville. In 1926, a deepwater channel was dug to connect Lake Charles to the Gulf of Mexico. The Gulf Intracoastal Waterway canal connects the Calcasieu with the Sabine River to the west. Because of these improvements, Lake Charles is now the third largest port in Louisiana.

The Sabine River is part of the geography and history of both Louisiana and Texas. It rises in the uplands of east Texas, then turns south to form the boundary between the two states. Joining in a major project in 1967, Louisiana and Texas engineered a giant lake, Toledo Bend. As the largest reservoir in Louisiana and the fifth largest in the United States, Toledo Bend covers 186,000 acres. It provides electricity, a water supply, and great fishing and boating.

**Below:** The Atchafalaya River gets much of its water from the Mississippi and Red Rivers.





**Above:** The Toledo Bend Reservoir on the Sabine River is the largest manmade lake in the South.

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Cutoff lakes are also called *oxbow lakes*, because the shape reminded early settlers of the bow-shaped harnesses worn by their oxen.

## Lakes

Toledo Bend is just one of many manmade lakes in Louisiana. You can go fishing or water-skiing on Lake D'Arbonne in Union Parish, Lake Claiborne in Claiborne Parish, Sibley Lake in Natchitoches Parish, or Lake Chicot in Evangeline Parish.

The largest natural lake (625 square miles) in Louisiana is Lake Pontchartrain. Thousands of vehicles cross the lake every day on a 24-mile-long causeway bridge. The lake is just 10-16 feet deep, a tidal lagoon that connects to the Gulf of Mexico by a narrow passage. Because of that connection with the Gulf, the water in Lake Pontchartrain is *brackish*, a mixture of seawater and freshwater. Lake Maurepas (MAHR i paw) is another large lagoonal lake just to the west of Lake Pontchartrain.

The rivers of Louisiana have created many lakes. *Cutoff lakes* are formed as the rivers seek shorter, straighter courses through flat terrain. The bends in the river become lakes when the river takes a straighter route. False River in Pointe Coupee Parish, Lake Bruin in Tensas Parish, and Larto Lake in Catahoula Parish are cutoff lakes.

One interesting cutoff lake in Natchitoches charms the tourists who visit there. This 39-mile-long lake was formed when the Red River took a shortcut and left the town without a river. The scenic attraction is called Cane River Lake, although it is a little confusing to call it both a river and a lake. Perhaps because it had first been a river, the name stuck.

The Red River created another kind of lake—*raft lakes*. Huge logjams or rafts of logs blocked the flow of the river. One nineteenth-century explorer described





**Above:** Cypress trees grow in the shallow waters of Lake Bistineau, an example of a raft lake. Raft lakes are created when massive logjams block the flow of a river. **Left:** Lake Bruin at Lake Bruin State Park is an example of a cutoff lake, formed when the Mississippi River changed direction.



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Part of Shreveport is in Bossier Parish because of a change in the Red River.

the raft as “a matted mass of tree tops and trunks, weeds and canes, with cottonwood and willow trees growing on its surface.” This mass acted like a dam blocking the flow of the river. The swamps near the river filled with water, forming lakes.

Caddo Lake in Caddo Parish and Lake Bistineau (BIS tin o) in Bossier and Webster parishes are raft lakes. Both feature the cypress trees and Spanish moss seen in the romantic Louisiana pictures recognized around the world.

Another kind of lake is found in the marsh. These *marsh lakes* form where the high ridges called chenieres (sha NEER) slow the rivers’ progress to the Gulf of Mexico. These are freshwater lakes because the chenier ridges block saltwater from entering the lakes. White Lake in Vermilion Parish, Grand Lake in Cameron Parish, and Calcasieu Lake in Calcasieu Parish are all marsh lakes.

**Below:** Bayou Lafourche, seen here at Thibodaux, flows through Ascension, Assumption, and Lafourche parishes.

## Bayous

No other waterway name is more connected with Louisiana than **bayou**. In fact, one of the state’s most popular slogans is “Louisiana, The Bayou State.” But it is hard to find someone who can give you an exact definition, because so many kinds of streams in Louisiana are called bayous.







The word *bayou* comes from the Choctaw Indian language and means “creek.” The early French called bayous “the sleeping water.” Some bayous are very small and slow moving, but others can send floodwaters rushing out of their banks. Some are miles long and deep enough for large boats, but others are less than a mile long and shallow enough to walk across.

Hundreds of bayous thread across the landscape of Louisiana, with interesting names hinting of stories and legends. Some of the most well-known bayous were once channels of the Mississippi River. Bayou Lafourche (lah FOOSH), called “the longest main street in the world,” has been the center of life for the people whose houses line this water-road. Bayou Teche offered a navigation route for steamboats traveling to St. Martinville.

**Top:** Bayou Robert, in the Atchafalaya Basin, is a perfect picture of “sleeping water.”

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*Teche* is a Native American word meaning “snake.”

### Check for Understanding ✓

1. What is the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway?
2. What are the three largest rivers in the state?
3. What is Toledo Bend?
4. What is the largest natural lake in Louisiana?
5. Name two important bayous.