

# THE TERM "BAYOU" IN THE UNITED STATES: A STUDY IN THE GEOGRAPHY OF PLACE NAMES\*

ROBERT C. WEST

*Louisiana State University*

## INTRODUCTION

**A**N astonishing volume of material has been published on place names in the United States. But when one examines this abundance one is impressed by the fact that practically all of the serious place-name studies have been done by philologists from a linguistic point of view; few of these studies have been done by geographers, or from a geographic point of view.<sup>1</sup>

Place names may be considered as significant in the cultural landscape as are house types, field patterns, or modes of transport. From this point of view, the classification and distribution of place names is as much in the field of geography as the etymology of these terms is in the field of philology. Moreover, place names are persistent cultural traits, the character and distribution of which may indicate the spread of people and ideas at various times. It is well known that European geographers and historians have long employed place names as aids in tracing human migrations and even in reconstructing the former vegetation cover of certain areas.<sup>2</sup>

For the geographer and historian one of the most significant aspects of place-name study involves the origin, spread, and present distribution of the generic parts of toponyms. Generic terms dealing with physical features in the United States, such as brook, run, butte, and hollow, are generally the more meaningful parts of geographic names, for they are durable language forms, originally associated with definite culture groups. The same can be said for generic terms that deal

\* This paper was read before the Association of American Geographers, April, 1953.

<sup>1</sup> See *Bibliography of Place Name Literature: United States, Canada, Alaska, and Newfoundland*, ed. by R. B. Sealock and P. A. Seely. Chicago, 1948. The few serious place-name studies that are geographically oriented include R. H. Whitbeck, "Regional Peculiarities in Place Names," *Bulletin of the American Geographical Society*, XLII (1911): 273-281; G. D. McJimsey, *Topographic Terms in Virginia*, American Speech Reprints and Monographs, no. 3, Columbia University Press, 1940 (See especially the Introduction, pp. 1-38); A. H. Meyer and N. Baumeister, "Toponymy in Sequent Occupance Geography: Calumet Region," *Indiana Academy of Science Proceedings*, LVI (1945): 142-159; H. F. Raup, "Place Names of the California Gold Rush," *Geographical Review*, XXXV (1945): 653-658. H. F. Raup and William B. Pounds, "Northernmost Spanish Frontier in California as Shown by the Distribution of Geographic Names," *California Historical Quarterly*, XXXII (1953): 43-48.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Hans Kretschmann, *Die -heim-Ortsnamen und ihre Bedeutung für Siedlungsgeschichte des Landes östlich der oberen und mittleren Weser*, Hamburg, 1938; Wilhelm Troll, "Die Bedeutung der Ortsnamen für die pflanzengeographische Forschung," *Zeitschrift für Ortsnamenforschung*, II (1926/27): 12-31; Leo Waibel, "Place Names as an Aid in the Reconstruction of the Original Vegetation of Cuba," *Geographical Review*, XXX (1943): 376-396.

with cultural features, especially certain suffixes of settlement names, such as -ton, -ham, -sted, and the like, the distribution of which has been so frequently used by English scholars to reconstruct past human movements in the British Isles.<sup>3</sup> Among the numerous generic terms used in place names of natural features in the United States, one of the most interesting is the word "bayou." It is proposed in this paper to show 1) the present distribution of the usage of the word as it is applied to the names of various kinds of water features in this country; 2) the present distribution of its usage as a folk-term; and 3) the origin and spread of the word, indicating its distribution at various time periods. It is hoped that such an investigation may reveal the value of the geographic treatment of generic terms as an aid to the study of imprints left on the cultural landscape by movements of ethnic groups.

#### THE PRESENT DISTRIBUTION OF "BAYOU"

The term "bayou" is ordinarily associated with sluggish channels and distributaries that occur within the lower Mississippi flood plain. Yet, Figure 1, which shows the present extent of the word as it is used in place names taken from modern topographic quadrangles and other large-scale maps, indicates a much wider distribution. From a focus in Louisiana, "bayou" encompasses most of the Gulf Coast. It extends northward up the Mississippi beyond Cairo, and is found occasionally along the lower Ohio and Wabash Rivers. A few bayous occur even on the upper Illinois and Maumee Rivers, and around Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin. Westward and northwestward from Louisiana, "bayou" place names continue into central Texas and up the Red, Ouachita, Arkansas, and White Rivers into Arkansas and Oklahoma.

Thus, "bayous" are not all confined to alluvial flood plains (Fig. 2). Although there is a close correlation of flood plain and bayou along the Mississippi and the Gulf Coast, the word exists also in the rolling uplands of northwestern Louisiana, eastern Texas, and northern Arkansas. Moreover, "bayou" is not restricted to names of full, sluggish streams, or distributaries. The distribution of four different modern connotations of the term appear in Figure 3.<sup>4</sup> Bayou as defined in the usual sense occurs mainly in the lower Mississippi delta area and in the alluvial coastal plain of eastern Texas. Northward within the wide Mississippi flood plain and along the Red River, bayous are chiefly intermittent, sluggish streams or flood channels, and, occasionally, ox-bow or other lakes. Similar features, sometimes called bayous, are found within the narrow flood plains of the Ohio, Wabash, and Illinois Rivers. Most of the bayous in east central Texas and those tributary to the Ouachita, Arkansas, and upper White Rivers, however, are mainly full-flowing

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, A. Mawer, *Problems of Place-Name Study*, Cambridge, 1929, especially Chapter 1, "Racial Settlement," pp. 1-40; Edward Taube, "Knock and Nickel: A Name Study," *Geographical Review*, XXXIV (1944): 428-435.

<sup>4</sup> *Webster's New International Dictionary of the English Language*, 2nd ed., 1939, gives six different usages of "bayou" as applied to water features. Four usages are defined in *Dictionary of American English*, I (1938): 167-168.

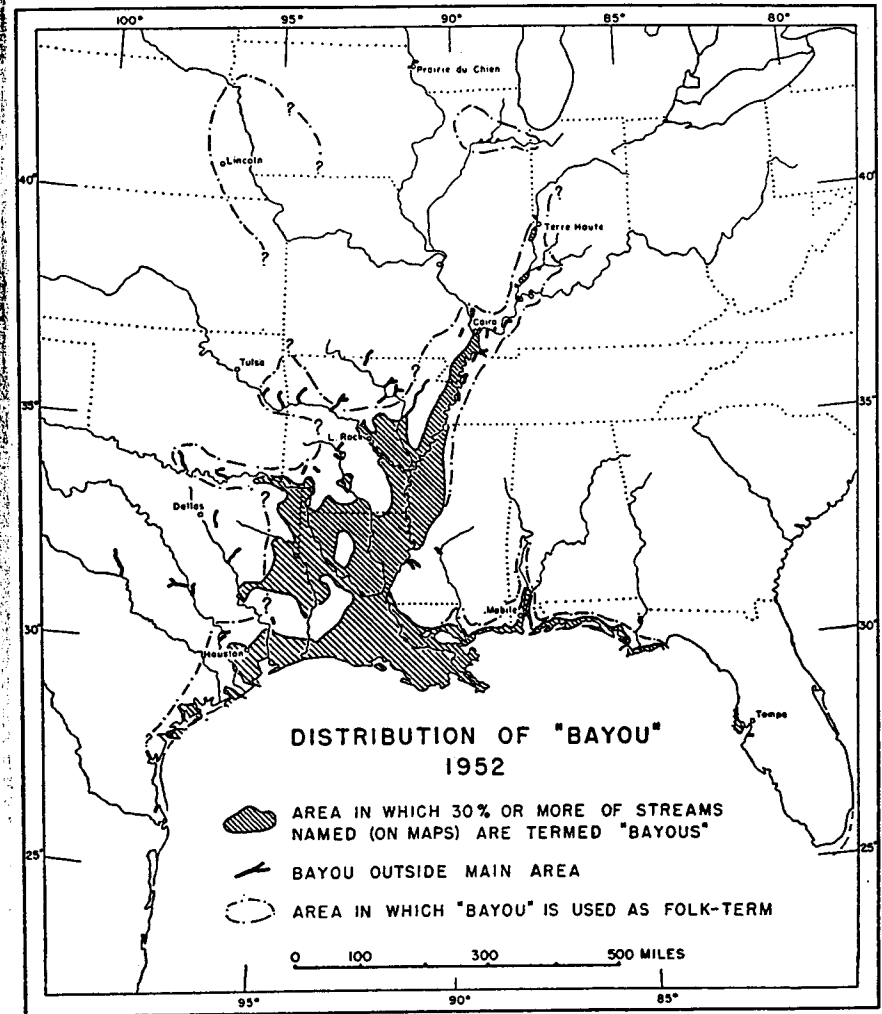


FIG. 1.

streams, clear and swift in their upper reaches, but usually turbid and sluggish near their confluence with larger rivers. Finally, along the Gulf Coast, the word "bayou" is applied to wide tidal inlets or bays and to tidal streams.

#### "BAYOU" AS A FOLK-TERM

It should be emphasized that the distribution of the term "bayou" as discussed above has been taken from place names shown on published maps. Maps, how-

ever, rarely indicate the true distribution of the generic parts of toponyms, particularly those of physical features, for such words are often employed as folk-terms, or are used in local place names in poorly mapped areas, or are applied to minor

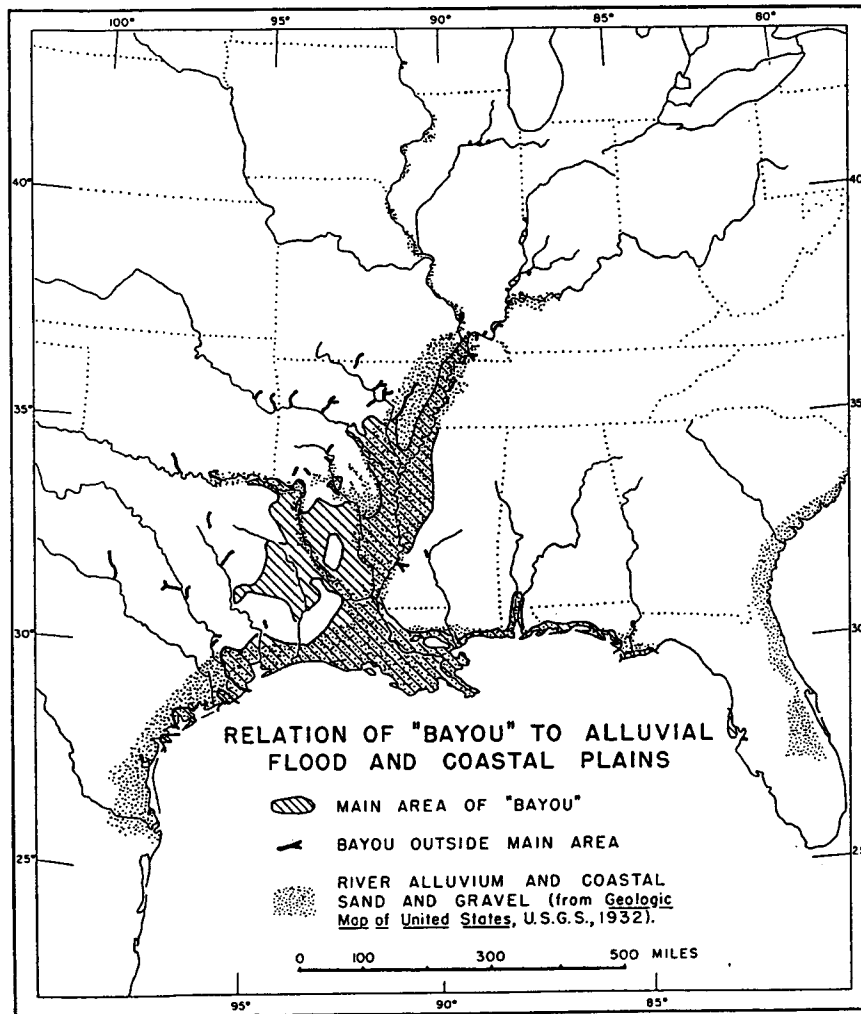


FIG. 2.

features that go unnamed on maps. On Figure 1 an attempt has been made to show the distribution of the local usage of "bayou." Although data are incomplete, it is seen that the word is employed in several areas outside those where the term is indicated on maps. For example, people in sections of eastern Kansas, eastern

Nebraska, and north central Illinois often use "bayou" to refer to small ox-bow lakes or channels along rivers, or to indicate low, wet spots in fields. Again, low, wet swales behind beach ridges along the southern shore of Lake Superior, north-

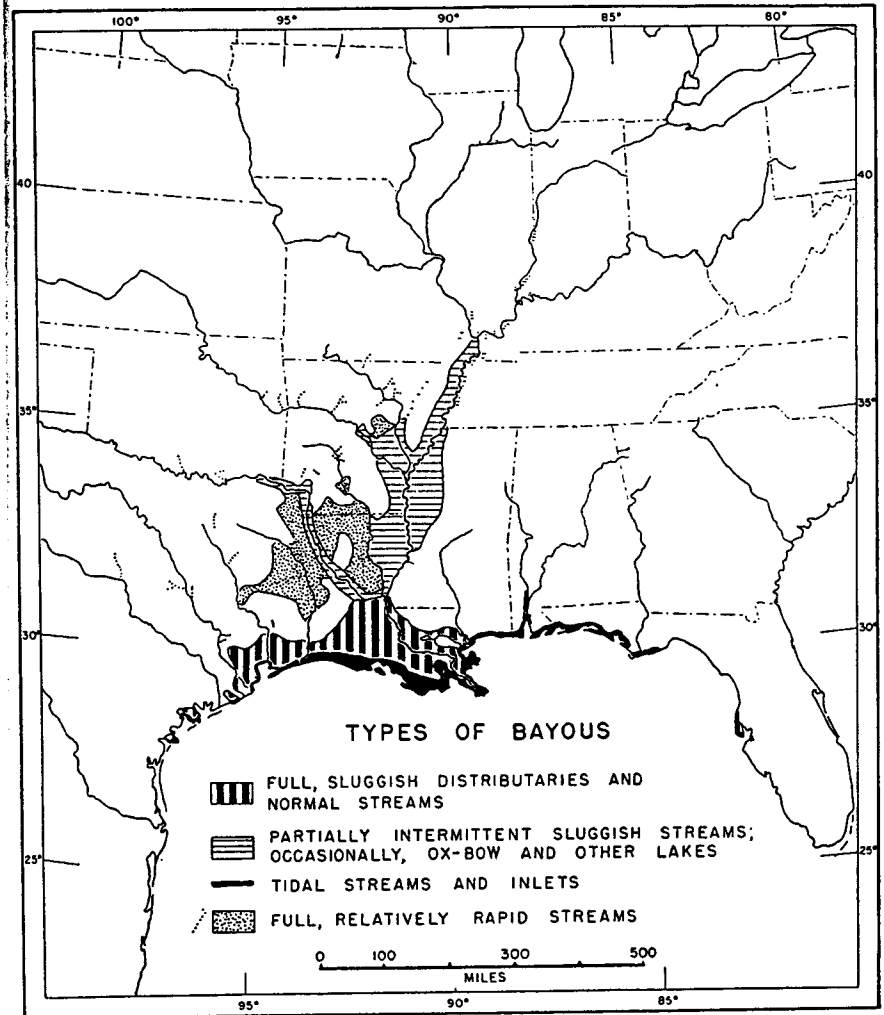


FIG. 3.

ern Michigan, are sometimes called "bayous" by local inhabitants.<sup>5</sup> The acquisition

<sup>5</sup> Most of the data on "bayou" as a folk-term were obtained by correspondence with persons living in, or acquainted with, the areas concerned. An occasional note on the use of the term in these areas was found in *American Speech*, e.g. IV (1914): 103; X (1935): 316; XIX (1944): 309.

of information on local usage of such terms is one of the most difficult aspects of place-name study, and requires extensive correspondence and field work.

#### ORIGIN AND SPREAD OF THE TERM "BAYOU"

The modern distribution of "bayou" immediately presents the problem of the origin and spread of the term. The facts that the word is characterized by a fairly continuous distribution and that it is replaced by Anglo-Saxon terms, such as slough and creek, near the periphery of its distribution, suggest that "bayou" was originally employed in place names by a particular ethnic group. The approach to the solution of this problem is obviously historical, and involves the study of the earliest maps and accounts of European settlement of the lower Mississippi area, the modern focus of "bayou."

The application of the term to streams in the Mississippi delta is associated with the earliest French settlement in that area at the close of the 17th century. Etymologically, however, "bayou" is not a French word, but is probably derived from the Choctaw *bayuk*, meaning a sluggish or stagnant water course.<sup>6</sup> Early 18th century accounts and maps apply the generic term *bayouc* or *bayouque* to the sluggish streams of the lower Mississippi and Gulf Coast areas. This fact gives credence to the supposition that the term was originally Indian. Later in the 18th century the word was shortened to its present form.

The term "bayouc" first appears in a French account of 1699, written by a member of a party exploring the northern shore of Lake Pontchartrain, which lies just north of present New Orleans<sup>7</sup> (Fig. 4). In the same year the first French settlement in the area was made near modern Biloxi, Mississippi, not far from the Mobilian Choctaw country. Probably these Indians gave the French the term "bayouc," for in their early exploration and trading expeditions in the lower Mississippi and Gulf Coast, the latter usually carried Mobilian guides, whose dialect had become the *lingua franca* in the delta area.<sup>8</sup>

During the remainder of the 18th century Louisiana French settlers, hunters, and traders spread the usage of the word "bayou" (Fig. 5). It was in the area

<sup>6</sup> The derivation of the word "bayou" from Choctaw *bayuk* was first suggested by A. S. Gatschet in 1884 (*A Migration Legend of the Creek Indians*, Philadelphia, p. 113). A similar origin was independently arrived at ten years later by W. S. Wyman ("The American word 'Bayou'," *The Nation*, XIX (1894): 361). But the Indian origin of the word was not generally recognized until stressed by W. A. Read in 1927 (*Louisiana Place-Names of Indian Origin*, University Bulletin, Louisiana State University, XIX n.s., no. 2: xii).

<sup>7</sup> "Rèlation de Pénicaut (1698-1699)," in Pierre Margry, *Mémoires et Documents Originaux*, Paris, 1887, V: 385, 387.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 425, 429 (1702), 442 (1704), 472 (1707). The word *bayuk* does not appear in *Byington's Dictionary of the Choctaw Language*, ed. by John R. Swanton and Henry S. Halbert, Washington, 1915. The word *bok* is given as the common Choctaw term for stream. It has been suggested that *bok* is merely a contraction of *bayuk*, but this change appears to be doubtful. The term *bok*, softened to "bogue," is still encountered in place names of streams in the old Choctaw country of central Mississippi and west central Alabama. *Bok* occurs unchanged as a generic term for some streams in southeastern Oklahoma, where the Choctaw were driven in the 1820's.

of permanent French settlement in the lower Mississippi and on the Gulf Coast from Lake Pontchartrain to beyond Mobile that the term became firmly established, especially after the founding of New Orleans in 1718. Moreover, French hunters and traders, going up the Red, Arkansas, and Ouachita to obtain buffalo hides and bear grease in the prairies of Arkansas and eastern Oklahoma for the New Orleans market, applied "bayou" apparently to the lower courses of tributaries of those rivers.<sup>9</sup> The term was even used as far west as the Rocky Mountains, where South

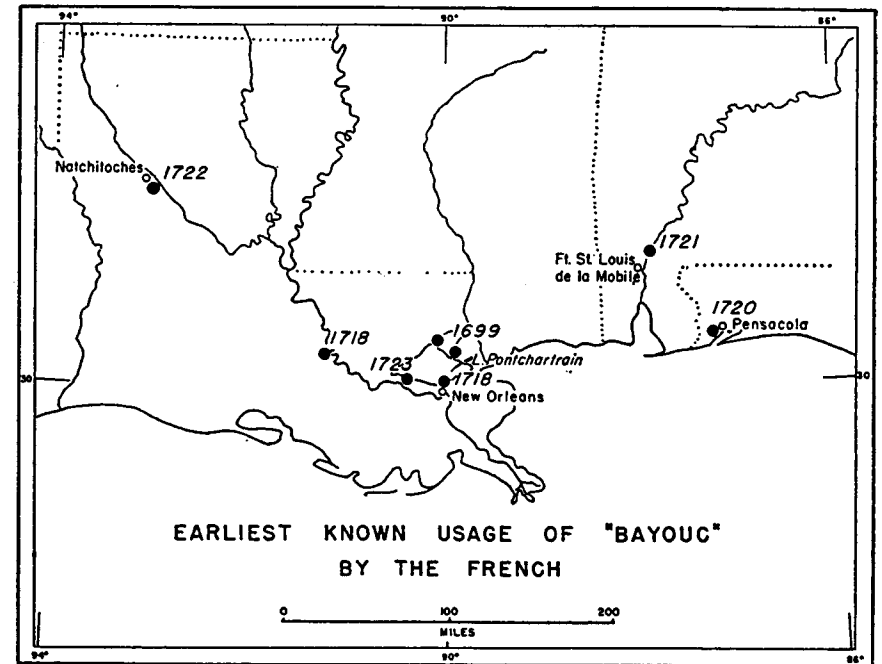


FIG. 4.

Park was once called Bayou Salade by the French hunters from the Arkansas.<sup>10</sup> On Figure 5, however, are indicated two areas in which during the 18th century "bayou" was used, but where the term is no longer current. One is the Alabama River, an ephemeral sphere of French activity in the first half of the century;<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Among the numerous early maps showing the distribution of "bayouc" in the lower Mississippi area, the more significant are *Carte de la Louisiane*, 1732, by d'Anville and *Carte Reduite des Costes de la Louisiane et de la Floride*, 1764, by S. Bellin.

<sup>10</sup> Frederick Ruxton, *Life in the Far West* [1847], University of Oklahoma Press, 1951, pp. 11, 23, 32; H. M. Crittenden, *The History of the American Fur Trade of the Far West*, New York, 1902, II: 749-750.

<sup>11</sup> The *Carte de partie de la Louisiane . . . 1733*, by Baron de Crenay, uses the word "bayouc" for many small tributaries of the Alabama River.

the other area is along the Mississippi above the confluence of the Ohio, where the term was temporarily introduced probably by Louisianans who had migrated to the small French Canadian settlements in the lower Illinois country during the mid-18th century.

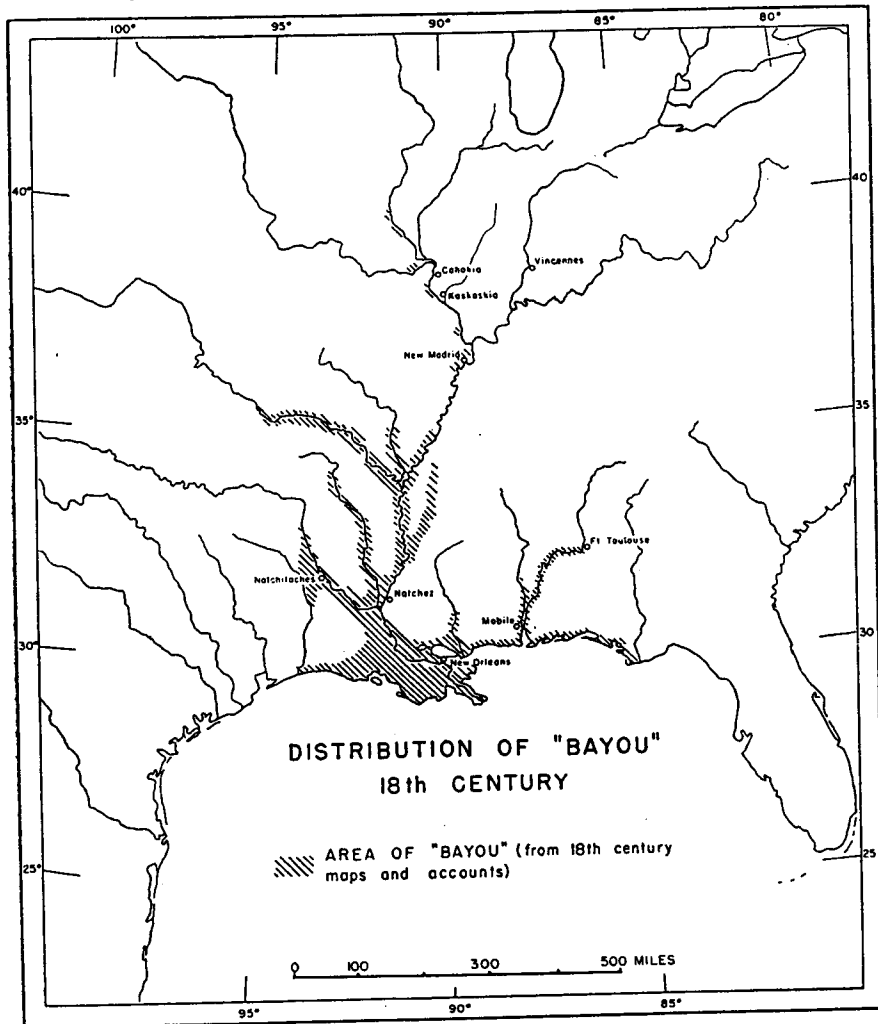


FIG. 5.

Figure 6, showing the distribution of "bayou" for the first half of the 19th century, depicts practically the modern extent of the term. The earliest map encoun-

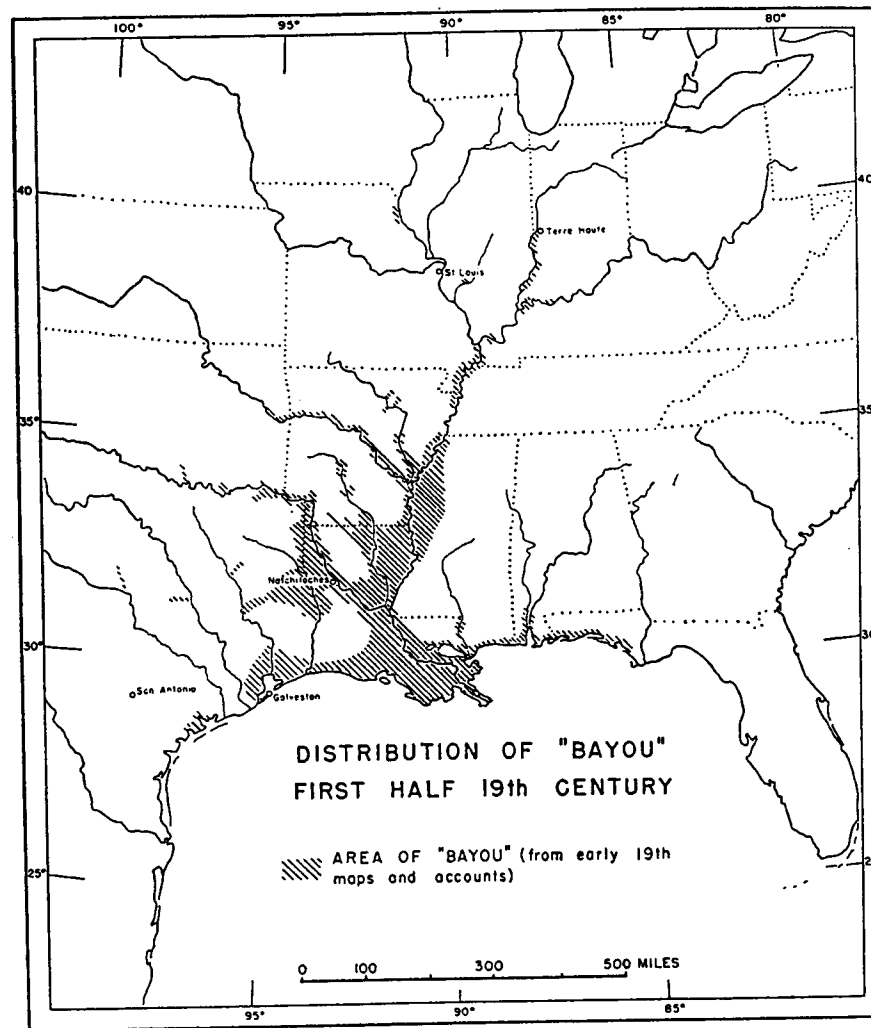


FIG. 6.

tered that indicates "bayous" on the lower Ohio and Wabash Rivers carries the date 1819.<sup>12</sup> Possibly, however, the term was first introduced into that area by

<sup>12</sup> H. S. Tanner, *The New American Atlas*, Philadelphia, 1819. An account of 1816 describing the Wabash, mentions frequently the term "bayou," meaning intermittent flood channels within the flood plain. ("Travels of David Thomas, summer of 1816," in *Indiana as seen by Early Travelers*, ed. by Harlow Lindley, *Indiana Historical Collections*, II: 42-135, ref. on p. 87).

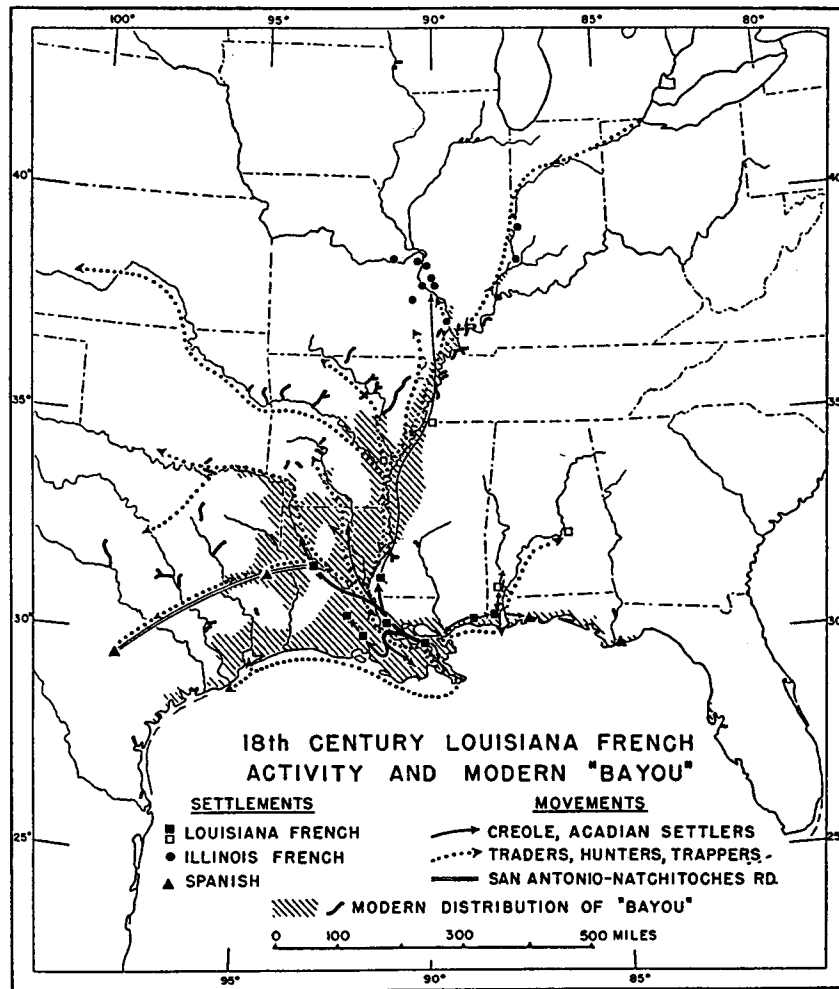


FIG. 7.

Louisiana French engaged in trade with Canada; for it is well known that during the 18th century the Wabash formed the most important route between the Great Lakes and the Mississippi. Even after the beginning of the 19th century, Louisiana French crews continued to man river boats on the Mississippi and its tributaries.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> For a detailed account of Louisiana French trade during the 18th century, see N. M. Surrey, *The Commerce of Louisiana during the French Regime, 1699-1763*, New York, 1916.

As in the case of the Wabash, maps and accounts do not indicate the spread of "bayou" into east central Texas until the early 19th century.<sup>14</sup> Again, it is likely that the term was applied to streams in that area at an earlier date, for the coincidence of the distribution of "bayou" with the Natchitoches-San Antonio trail strongly suggests that the word was introduced into eastern Texas from Louisiana through the medium of 18th century French-Spanish trade over that road. The occasional bayous that occur today in the center of Texas are difficult to explain, but it is known that French trading parties from Louisiana regularly entered that area in the mid-18th century to trade with Indians.<sup>15</sup> Again, the bayous of the east Texas coast may have been named first by French traders from New Orleans, who by the 1740's were anchoring their boats off the mouths of the Neches, Trinity, and Brazos Rivers to obtain skins and horses from the Attakapa Indians.<sup>16</sup> During the early part of the next century the presence of Louisiana pirates along the coast and subsequent French settlement from Louisiana, probably entrenched the term "bayou" in the Texas gulf area (Fig. 7).

The occurrence of "bayou" as a folk-term in areas outside those where the word is indicated on maps appears to be relatively recent. During the past 25 years, for example, people from Arkansas and southeastern Oklahoma, where "bayou" is currently used, have migrated into eastern Kansas and Nebraska. These migrants may have been instrumental in expanding the local usage of the term. Moreover, it has been suggested that the usage of "bayou" in north central Illinois might have been introduced after the Civil War by northern veterans of the Vicksburg campaign, which took place in bayou country.<sup>17</sup>

In some areas, however, where "bayou" appears on maps as the generic part of a formally recognized place name, the word may no longer be used as a folk-term. Parts of eastern Texas, northern Arkansas, and even sections of northeastern Louisiana are examples of such loss in folk usage.

## CONCLUSION

Since its usage in place names was spread chiefly by Louisiana French, the present distribution of "bayou" might possibly be employed as a partial index to the areal spread of the cultural influence of a given ethnic group during the 18th century. The outer margins of the present distribution of the term, however, appear to be contracting, especially in the north and west, where people of Anglo-Saxon origin have largely replaced the Louisiana French word with their own

<sup>14</sup> Tanner's *Atlas* (1819) shows many bayous along the central part of the Sabine, and a few along the central part of the Neches. *J. de Córdova's Map of the State of Texas . . .*, compiled by Robert Cruzbauer, Houston, 1849, shows approximately the modern distribution of bayou in Texas.

<sup>15</sup> Herbert E. Bolton (ed.), *Athanasie de Mézières and the Louisiana-Texas Frontier, 1768-1780*, I: 47-48, Cleveland, 1914.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53. The earliest map encountered that shows bayous along the Texas coast is that of Stephen Austin, *Mapa geográfico de la Provincia de Texas*, 1822.

<sup>17</sup> Professor John H. Garland, personal communication.

terms, such as slough, creek, lake, or pond. But within the core of its present distribution, in Louisiana, southern Arkansas, and southeastern Texas, the term appears to be firmly entrenched, in spite of the incursion of people of varied cultural backgrounds in the last 100 years. Studies of other generic terms in place names of physical features in the United States might uncover significant leads in tracing cultural diffusion.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> After this article had gone to press the writer was informed that the term "bayou" is used along the lower courses of the Kalamazoo, Grand, and Manistee Rivers in western Michigan. There it is applied chiefly to drowned river mouths of short streams tributary to the lower portions of those rivers. Unfortunately, it was not possible to indicate these bayou areas on the maps. Apparently, the use of the term in western Michigan is old, for "bayou" appears on maps of that area published in the early 19th century. (See, for example, *An Improved Edition of the Map of the Territory of Michigan, 1835*, compiled and edited by John Farmer.)  
*Accepted April 1953.*