

## First Filipino Community in America

# St. Malo

### Remote Village Root of Cultural Diversity in Parish

By William de Marigny Hyland, St. Bernard Parish Historian

*Recreational and commercial fishermen are familiar with St. Malo, nestled along the shores of Lake Borgne and Bayou St. Malo.*

**V**ery few are aware of the fascinating history of the site, which likely extends back more than 1,000 years. St. Malo is a mound constructed by prehistoric Native Americans between 500 B.C. and 200 A.D.

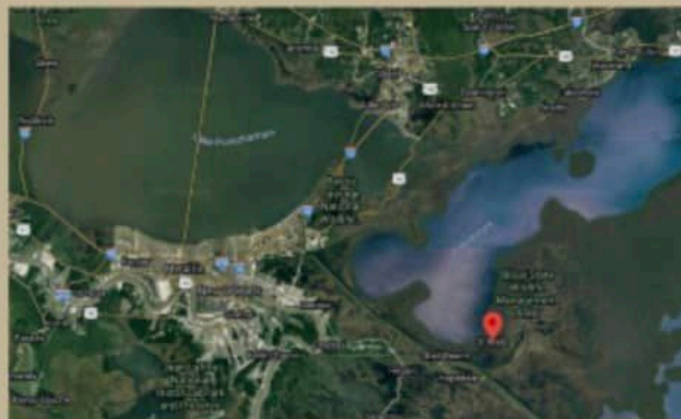
Native Americans were the first human beings to occupy the site. Later in the 18th century, Jean St. Malo established a colony of runaway enslaved people who were victims of a society built upon the injustice of slavery. Still later, perhaps in the very late 18th and 19th centuries, Filipinos occupied the site, which was celebrated throughout the late 19th century. This settlement became the very first documented (to date) Filipino community established in the United States.

### Native Americans

The abandoned bird's foot delta of the Mississippi River, today known as the Biloxi Marsh, began to form around 500 B.C. Native Americans were the first to inhabit the area. They were hunter-gatherers occupying areas with abundant seafood and game. Sherds of the pottery they made are

scattered throughout scores of Native American archaeological sites remaining in St. Bernard.

These people traded pottery for stone projectile points with tribes from areas north of this region. Stone hatchet points, arrowheads, cooking stones and bone tools are among the vestiges of this ancient culture still found in St. Bernard sites. Since these tribes existed during prehistoric times, their names remain unknown.



Location of St. Malo, southeast of Lake Borgne.

## Enslaved Africans

Following the introduction of slavery by the French in Louisiana during the 1720s, the enslaved made their mark on Louisiana. The modern Louisianan should never doubt that the enslaved built colonial Louisiana, introduced a cuisine rooted in the marriage of West African, Native American and European influences widely celebrated as "Creole cookery," and largely evolved a vernacular architectural style, known as Creole or Cajun, in reaction to the hot and humid climate encountered in western Africa, the Caribbean and Louisiana.

While the enslaved, through the Code Noir, were granted the right to be freed by their masters or to purchase their freedom, hence giving birth to the population of free people of color, others chose, inevitably, to run away, thus establishing a population of enslaved people known in French as Les Marons and in Spanish as Cimarrones or runaway enslaved people.



Rendering of Jean St. Malo from files of Ralph Zachary.

## St. Malo Martyrdom

Enter now Jean (Juan) St. Malo, an enslaved person working a plantation along the Mississippi River in the German Coast upriver from New Orleans from which he escaped during the early 1780s. St. Malo site is named for Jean St. Malo and recalls the Cimarron settlement he and his followers established. An area of wetland downriver from New Orleans known as Bas du Fleuve or the Côte D'en Bas (Lower Coast or perhaps more literally Down Below) included the modern-day St. Bernard Parish.

That area included the Gaillarde, La Maranga in Isleño Spanish, and now known as the Biloxi Marsh.

In that remote, virtually impenetrable wetland, teeming with fur-bearing animals, alligators, poisonous snakes, groves of trees and brush, plagued with gnats, multiple species of flies, mosquitoes – an indescribably hostile environment, St. Malo chose to establish his colony of Cimarrones along the shore of Lake Borgne. St. Malo was arrested and put to death by colonial officials in 1784. In death, St. Malo achieved martyrdom, becoming a symbol of the promise of freedom for enslaved Africans throughout the remainder of the 18th and 19th centuries until the American Civil War. Google maps show "Negro Lagoon" near the St. Malo site.

## Filipinos-Isleños Fishing

Filipinos began to occupy the shoreline of Lake Borgne reputedly in the very late 18th century at the end of the Spanish colonial period. They lived together with Catalan Spanish fishermen and the Cimarrones. By the late 1820s or early '30s, the Filipinos had established themselves firmly at St. Malo. They built a village that one could also see in the Philippine Archipelago. The Filipinos and Catalans were founders of the modern commercial fishing industry in St. Bernard and Louisiana.

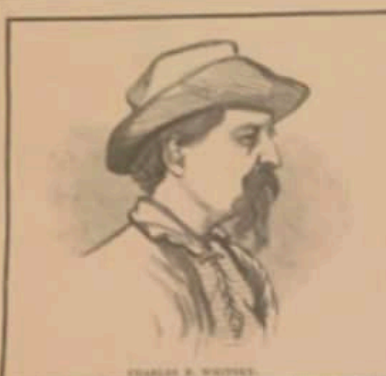
The original Canary Islanders or Isleños had been farmers but learned about commercial fishing in large measure from the Filipinos. Isleños learned about the value of dried shrimp and fish and over time extensively intermarried with Filipinos. Today, many St. Bernard families boast Isleños and Filipino roots.



Illustration of Bayou St. Malo

Oldest house in St. Malo





GEORGE B. WHIPPLE



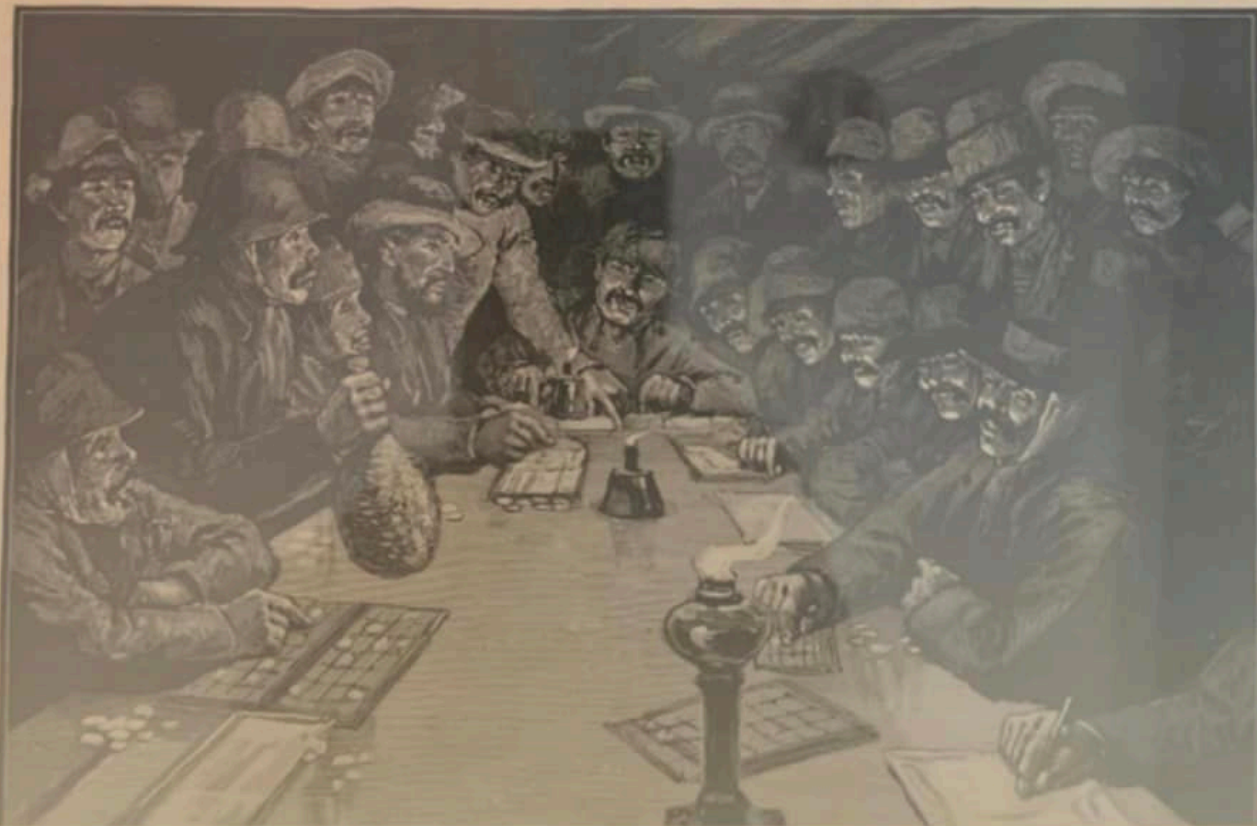
A. GREEN



LAFCADIO HEARN



VIEWS OF SAINT MALO SCENERY.—DRAWN BY CHARLES GRAHAM FROM SKETCHES BY J. O. BAYLOR.



In Harper's Weekly, March 31, 1883, the Filipino fishing village of St. Malo was documented as the country's first Asian-American community; illustrated by Charles Graham and reported by Lafcadio Hearn.

## St. Malo in Harper's Weekly 1883

Lafcadio Hearn, the great 19th century Louisiana journalist and author, wrote an article that was published in the Harper's Weekly of March 31, 1883. Hearn described a quintessentially Filipino cultural community, living in the remote reaches of St. Bernard. The illustrations showed structures built over the water; the high-hipped roofs clearly had a Philippine origin.

The Filipinos were an independent people with their own code of living. Louis Alfred Ducros, M.D., treated the Filipinos in the late 19th century and early 20th centuries. He had known them in his childhood and spoke Spanish with them. Ducros admired the innate integrity and fierce independence displayed by Filipinos, as did Hearn. While the catastrophic 1915 Hurricane destroyed St. Malo, resulting in the building of Manila Village in Jefferson Parish, Filipinos remained in St. Bernard Parish and continue to do so. Today, St. Malo is owned by retired attorney and community leader Anthony A. Fernandez Jr., who wants to transfer the remote site to a group, including the state of Louisiana, that will work to stabilize and preserve it.

## Historical Marker

University of New Orleans librarian Marina Espina met Frank Fernández, the first St. Bernard Parish historian, in the late 1970s and shared some of her research placing the first Filipinos in St. Bernard in the 18th century. Later, Honorary Consul General of the Republic of the Philippines in Louisiana, Robert Romero, began working with St. Bernard Parish Government and our local community to memorialize the highly significant Filipino presence in our history.

The Philippine Louisiana Heritage Society subsidized and erected a state historical marker in 2019 on the lawn in front of Ducros Museum and Research Library. There is a small exhibition of Philippine artifacts inside Ducros as well. Several hundred people attended the dedication ceremony including high-ranking Filipino diplomats and local elected officials. That night, a cultural gala was held in the Frederick Sigur Civic Center in Chalmette.

So, after 40 years of interest, the pivotal role of Filipino heritage in the history of St. Bernard, the state and nation were finally recognized locally in 2019. The Filipinos form an integral element in the mosaic of cultural diversity which distinguishes St. Bernard Parish in this region. Moreover, Filipino Asians represent an ongoing contribution to the fabric of life in Louisiana stretching over two centuries.



The erected St. Malo state historical marker in 2019 by the Philippine Louisiana Heritage Society.

*Join us this year as we celebrate  
Filipino heritage October 1 at  
Los Isleños Museum Complex in  
St. Bernard Village.*

*E pluribus unum –  
out of many came one.*



William de Marigny Hyland, of Creole descent, is the distinguished St. Bernard Parish historian who has authored publications on Isleños, Creole, African, Irish, Italian, Filipino Asian, German and American influences on Southeast Louisiana. Since 1997, he has served as site manager/director of the Los Isleños Museum Complex, owned by St. Bernard Parish Government, on Bayou Road.