

ABC-CLIO Textbook Entry for Saint Malo

Manilamen at Saint Malo

The history of Filipino migration to the United States begins with Filipino sailors known as Manilamen. As early as the eighteenth century, Manilamen started to quit their ships at the port of New Orleans and settle in Louisiana. Long before mass migration of Filipinos to the US in the twentieth century, Manilamen established the first permanent Asian American settlement in the United States. Although often excluded in reductive historical narratives, the establishment of Filipino communities in Louisiana is a significant first chapter in Asian American history.

Manilamen in the Galleon Trade

Filipino migration to the Americas began in the sixteenth century. Manilamen worked the Spanish galleons that brought goods from East Asian markets to Spanish colonies in the Americas. From 1565 to 1815 Spanish Galleons sailed from Manila to Acapulco bringing Asian goods and Manilamen to the Americas. The first recorded foray into what is now the United States by a Filipino occurred in 1587 when a landing party of Spanish and Filipino sailors from the galleon *Nuestra Señora de Buena Esperanza* went ashore at Morro Bay in present-day California. The Filipino American National Historical Society erected a historical marker at Morro Bay to commemorate this landing.

First permanent Filipino settlement in the United States

Saint Malo was the first permanent Filipino settlement in the United States. From as early as Louisiana's Spanish colonial period (1763-1802) Manilamen left their ships in Louisiana ports. At first, Manilamen settled in established communities, but they eventually established Saint Malo on the southern shore of Lake Borgne at a site previously settled by indigenous peoples and Maroons. We are uncertain of the exact date the village was established, but oral accounts indicate that in the 1830s Filipinos were living in palmetto palm huts on Bayou Saint Malo. By the 1880s, Saint Malo was the largest fishing village on Lake Borgne, a prosperous community of over 150 Filipino fishermen who lived in large cypress buildings constructed over the wetlands. A series of destructive storms led to Saint Malo being abandoned early in the twentieth century. Today the Manilamen of Saint Malo are remembered as pioneers, Filipinos who explored a region others thought was dangerous and uninhabitable. Their willingness to live deep in the marsh positioned them to build a seafood industry capable of supplying New Orleans with a steady supply of fish, shrimp, and oysters.

Filipino Community in Louisiana

Some of the Manilamen who worked in Louisiana would eventually return to the sea or migrate to other regions. Others remained in Louisiana to establish stable communities. In the nineteenth century with no native-born Filipino women in the US, Filipino men married across

ethnic and racial lines. Community ties and a practice of second-generation daughters marrying newly arrived Filipino sailors allowed these multicultural families to maintain a Filipino identity. The Filipino immigrants that arrived after the US annexation of the Philippines in 1898 is often described as the first wave of Filipino migration, but at the time there were approximately 2,000 Filipinos in Louisiana.

Economic success and community stability led to the establishment of several Filipino community organizations. In 1879, *Sociedad de Beneficencia de los Hispanos Filipinos* became the first chartered Filipino organization in the United States. The benevolent society provided members social and material support.

The cohesiveness of the Filipino community was evident in 1860 when, in perhaps the first instance of Asian American protest, Filipinos from New Orleans organized to defend Saint Malo fishermen. The growing Filipino presence in Lake Borgne threatened a Spanish monopoly on the fishing industry. A simmering conflict escalated when a vessel bringing fish from Saint Malo was attacked and two Filipinos were killed. Initially, local officials ignored the murders, leaving the bodies of the victims unattended on the beach. A week after the murders the news reached the Filipino community in New Orleans. The next day a crowd of Filipinos descended on the courthouse to demand that the judge issue warrants for the arrest of the perpetrators. Their demands were met, and the killers were apprehended.

Manila Village

In the 1880s, Filipino fisherman and Chinese entrepreneurs established a dried shrimp industry in Louisiana. They erected shrimp-drying villages over low barrier islands. Filipinos established several villages including Clark Cheniere and Manila Village. As the largest and most notable Filipino shrimp-drying village in the state, Manila Village replaced Saint Malo as a symbol of the large Filipino presence in the region. Louisiana state historical markers commemorate the significance of Saint Malo and Manila Village to the history of the state.

Filipino in the War of 1812

Second-hand accounts tell us that Augustin Feliciano arrived in Louisiana around 1807, before the territory was a US state, joined the legendary pirate Jean Lafitte and his band of Baratarians, and fought with the US in the War of 1812. If true, the story makes Feliciano the first named Filipino to settle in what is now the US and the first Filipino to serve the US in a war. Feliciano's story illustrates the difficulty of recording the history of early settlers of a still developing nation. Like the stories of Lafitte, some of what we know about Feliciano is probably true, and some myth.

The historical record tells us that the story of the Manilamen of Louisiana is a significant first chapter in Asian American History. The Manilamen who settled in Louisiana were the first to establish a permanent Filipino settlement and charter a Filipino organization in the US. They were perhaps the first Asian Americans to organize a protest and perhaps the first to fight for US in a war. The significance of these settlers goes beyond their initial achievements. They stayed in Louisiana and established a Filipino community that continues to thrive.

Randy Gonzales

Further Reading

Filipino La., <https://www.filipinola.com>.

Gonzales, Randy. *Settling St. Malo: Poems from Filipino Louisiana*. Lafayette, LA: University of Louisiana at Lafayette Press [2023].

Hearn, Lafcadio. "Saint Malo: A Lacustrine Village in Louisiana." *Harper's Weekly* March 31, 1883.

Works Cited

Espina, Marina. *Filipinos in Louisiana*. New Orleans: A.F. Laborde, 1988.

Gonzales, Randy. "Stories Told about the Nineteenth-Century Filipino Settlement at St. Malo, Louisiana." *Louisiana Folklore Miscellany* 29 (2019): 5–22.

Hearn, Lafcadio. "Saint Malo: A Lacustrine Village in Louisiana." *Harper's Weekly* March 31, 1883.

Ignacio, Abraham. "1763: A Historical Fiction: Revisiting Early Filipino Presence in Louisiana and Examining the Sources." *The Filipino American Center of SFPL*. November 9, 2014. <https://filipinoamericancenter.blogspot.com/2014/11/1763-historical-fiction-revisiting.html>

Jean Lafitte National Historical Park. *Ethnohistory of Filipinos of Southern Louisiana*. By Herschel A. Franks, Debra M. Stayner, Kenneth R. Jones, and R. Christopher Goodwin. New Orleans, LA: 1986.

"The Largest Colony of Filipinos in America." *The Filipino*, 1, no. 2 (1906), 19-20.

"The Proctorville War Renewed." *The Daily Delta*. August 21, 1860.

"The War of the Fishermen." *The Daily Delta*. July 18, 1860.

Whitney, Charles. "St. Malo - the Times-Democrat Expedition to that Mysterious Island." *New Orleans Times-Democrat*, March 14, 1883.