

## Trip 2 – Episode #6: The Evangeline Trail

One of the reasons to go to New Iberia was to begin following “The Evangeline Trail”. We saw the first nod to the story in downtown New Iberia, where the theatre is named after the Acadian heroine.



For those who are unfamiliar with the tale (like me), the story is that Henry Wadsworth Longfellow heard about the expulsion of the Acadians in Nova Scotia, and in particular, one woman, Evangeline, who was separated from her lover and spent the rest of her life trying to find him.

The story may or may not be based on an actual person, but the poem Longfellow wrote became hugely popular and shone a light on the plight of the Acadians, many of whom ended up in this region of Louisiana.

Our first stop was the Longfellow-Evangeline State Historic Site, the first state park in Louisiana, opened in 1934. The exhibits, video and historic buildings tell the story not just of the poem but of the significance of the Acadian and Creole culture in the region.

Évangéline, imaginaire ou réelle?

*As* Acadians struggled to maintain their culture despite external forces, a far-away poet created a new Acadian legend that sparked interest in the people's history and identity.

Acadian culture flourishes thanks to the resilience and determination of the Acadians. Yet, even their commitment to maintaining their heritage once brought the Acadians ridicule and persecution. When a New England writer unexpectedly re-imagined their story, Acadians found themselves associated with a newly created heroine named Evangeline.

*At a dinner party around 1840, the Reverend Hector Connolly treated Henry Wadsworth Longfellow to a tale he had heard from a French Canadian woman.*

Captivated by this telling of a legend of long-suffering love, set against the Acadian exile, Longfellow began writing a poem. Excerpts from his personal diary give us insight into the epic's progress:

*Lors d'une soirée vers 1840, le Révérend Hector Connolly a reglé Henry Wadsworth Longfellow avec une histoire que lui avait racontée une Canadienne française.*

Captivé par ce conte d'un couple acadien séparé par l'exil et de leur amour languissant, Longfellow a commencé à écrire un poème épique. Ces citations de son journal personnel expliquent le progrès du poème:

Evangeline was a hit.

The poem brought the story of the Acadians to national attention, and was taught in schools across the country. Americans began linking Longfellow's romantic characters with Louisiana's genuine Acadians. Acadian pride swelled as businesses, churches and streets were named after the poet's fictional creation. Acadians had a new—and widely appreciated—reason to celebrate their heritage.

*The poignant legend of faithful Evangeline endured decade after decade, gaining fans and namesakes, and even inspiring other writers.*

Sidonie de la Houssaye created a Creole version of the tale, titled *Pouppone et Balthazar*, in 1888. Another new dimension was added when Louisiana playwright, Judge Felix Voorhies, published *Acadian Reminiscences With the True Story of Evangeline* in 1907. The title effectively disguised the book's fictional content, causing confusion that continues today.

Specifically, Voorhies renamed the heroine "Emmeline Labiche" and gave her a new fate—meeting her beloved under an oak tree in St. Martinville. Touched by the star-crossed romance, readers made pilgrimages to the city, where local entrepreneurs were quick to point out the "Evangeline Oak" further cloaking the myth in the trappings of reality.





A nice touch was that the video they showed in the visitor centre featured the home of the Olivier family, and at the end of the video, the screen, which was in front of a large window, rose to reveal the actual home on the grounds of the park.



There were several buildings depicting different periods and lifestyles on the lovely grounds.





As we walked through the Olivier home, a docent, Jolene, approached and offered to tell us more about the people, their way of life and the forces that brought the different peoples together.





Our next stop was Vermilionville, which was one of the earliest settlements on the banks of the Bayou Vermilion. The land was originally a sugar plantation. Eventually the area grew to be the city of Lafayette.



Today, its history is told in The Vermilionville Living History Museum & Folklife Park, with a village of historical buildings. There, we learned quite a bit about the complicated history of the area, and how the French, Spanish, Creole, Cajun, Native American and African American people all played a role in making Louisiana so culturally rich.





When you walk through the back door of the visitor centre, you find yourself in a village of buildings, showing the way of life of people between 1765 and 1890.



Along with seeing the buildings, tools, décor and clothing from the periods, we also got some personal insights provided by docents who greeted us in the various buildings.



This friendly gentleman played us some music, told us some tales – and even recommended a restaurant in Lafayette where we could eat and listen to some local Cajun/Zydeco music. (Which we took him up on!)









The woman in this home is using traditional quilting techniques to create this quilt, which she's been working on since 2017. If you look closely, you can see some ropes at each corner, from which the quilt is suspended. She explained that when the woman was finished working at night, she would use the ropes to raise the quilt up out of the way so the room could be used as a bedroom.

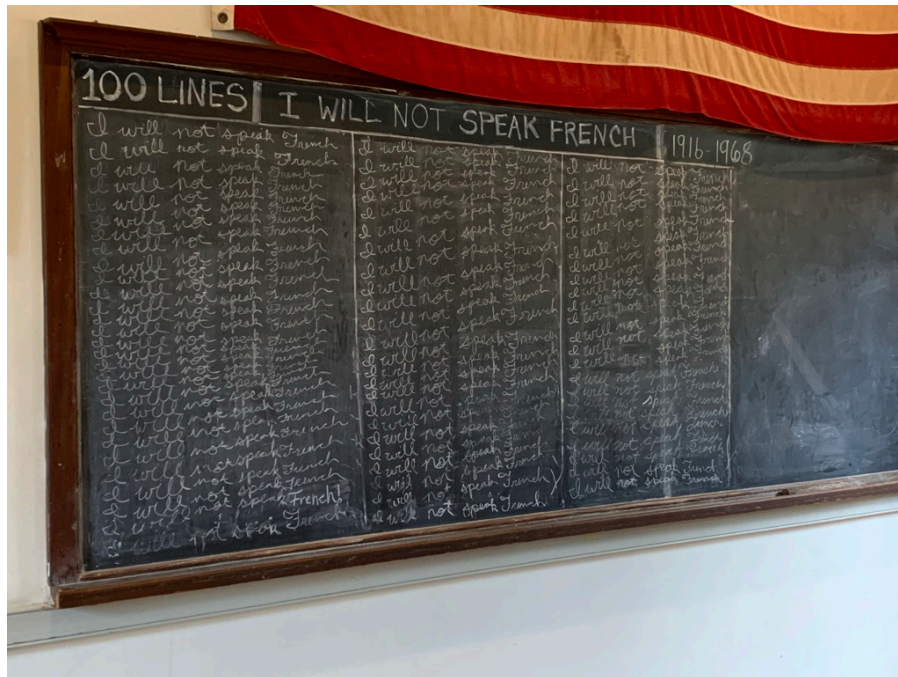


She's making the quilt for her sister's 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. (She was actually supposed to have it done last year, but you know, COVID...)





In the schoolhouse, we learned that from the years between 1916 to 1968, speaking French was forbidden and people were ridiculed or punished if they were caught breaking the rule.



This small garden of sugar cane is representative of the main crop in much of the area. And still today, sugar cane fields are everywhere. One area of Louisiana we drove through was known as Sugarland.





Entertainment and tools were so different then...



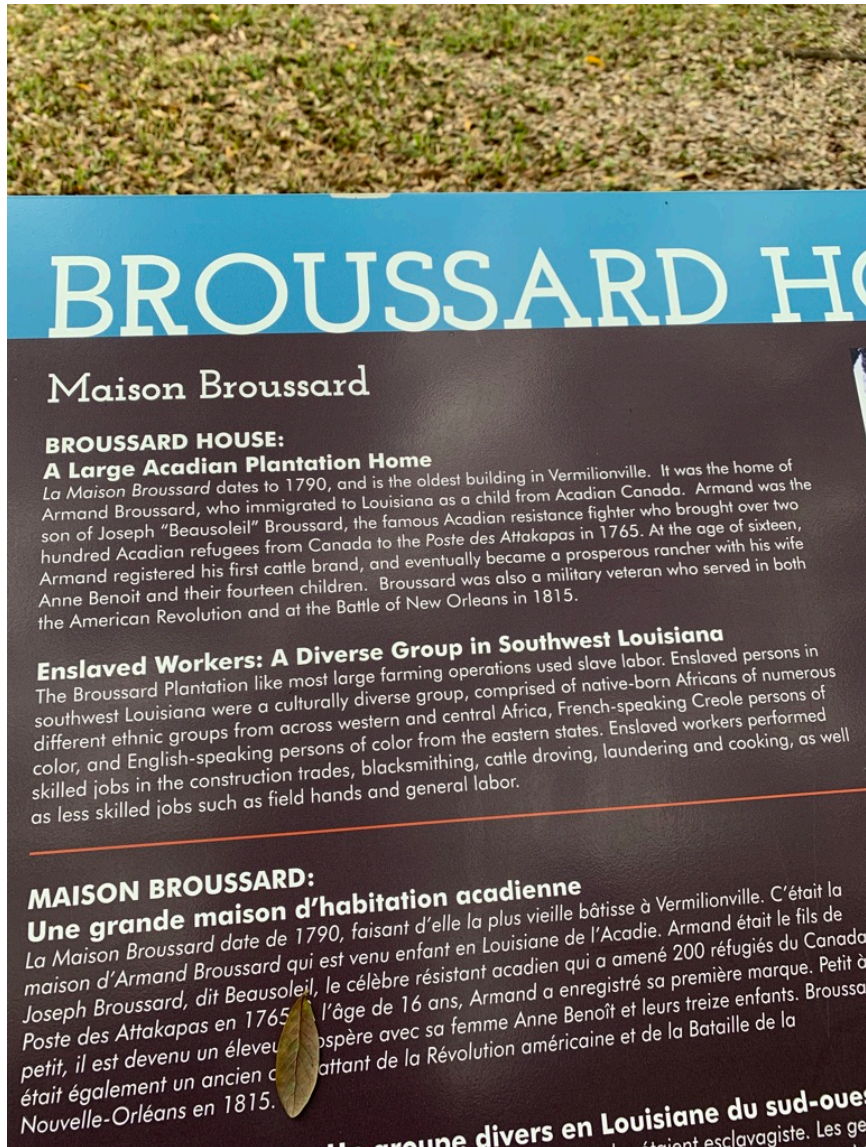


This is in the presbytery,  
where the priest lived. It's  
like they worked extra  
hard to make it  
uncomfortable and  
asymmetrical.





It was certainly evident which families had money.









They even had  
a three-holer!



They still keep some sheep on the property,  
and we were told that the donkey actually  
protects the sheep. He's a guard donkey! But  
he didn't seem to mind me scratching his ear.

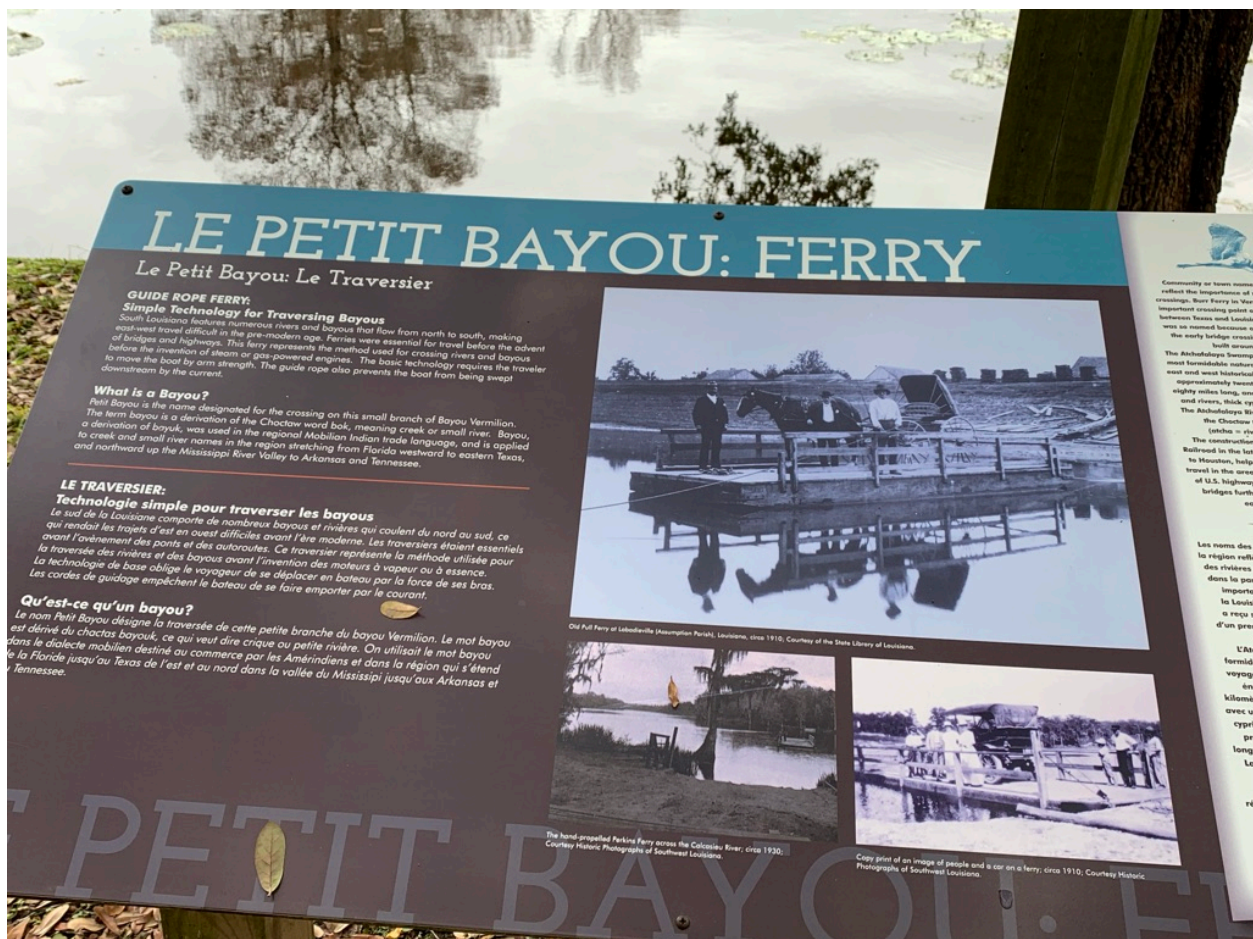




The grounds by the Vermilion Bayou were lovely...



... And we were charmed by Le Petit Bayou Ferry which is still in "operation"...





... As long as you do the operating! Never saw a hand-powered ferry before.



All in all, our time exploring “The Evangeline Trail” and the history of this very interesting part of the South was fun and fascinating.

During the rest of our time in Lafayette we enjoyed the vibrant, busy city it is today.



There were lots of cool, fun restaurants and cafes. Like this one, which was formerly a gas station.



And the last Borden's Ice Cream Shoppe in the world. (Remember Elsie??)  
Of course, we had to support it. As we were trying to juggle our ice cream cones to take a selfie in front of the store, a woman, who'd obviously done this a lot, insisted on taking our picture and gave us lots of direction.





When we found a café that bore the name of our mantra, we had to check it out.



There was a farmer's market that was small but offered something for everyone. Especially if you're Jim...





We took a chance and bought tickets to see the new West Side Story in a VIP theatre which was, as we'd hoped, pretty empty. Loved the show and felt quite safe.



And we finished off the day going to the Hideaway on Lee, the restaurant recommended by our accordion-playing docent at Vermilionville. The food was great, the music was fun, it was a kick to see people dancing and enjoying themselves (it was outside, so we felt safe.)





And we finally had beignets!



After thoroughly enjoying our days in New Iberia and Lafayette, it was time to head farther south to the Gulf Coast.