

Remembering America's First Filipino Settlement Before It Vanishes Into The Sea

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Some Filipino Americans look to St. Malo as proof of their belonging in the U.S. What happens when it disappears?

By [Yasmin Tayag](#)



Michael Salgarolo

A view of St. Malo from the water. There are no structures left because the wetlands are sinking into the sea.

ST. BERNARD PARISH, Louisiana — On a cold day in November 2019, two podcasters and a historian boarded a small boat on the edge of Louisiana’s Lake Borgne and drifted into the bayou. They were bound for St. Malo, the first permanent Filipino settlement in the United States. Sailors from the Philippines, known as the Manila Men, settled there in the mid-19th century, decades before the Civil War.

Paola Mardo, a petite, fast-talking Filipina American journalist who flew in from Los Angeles with her partner Patrick Espino for the journey, wanted to gather recordings for “[Long Distance](#),” their podcast about Filipinos abroad. Mardo, Espino and Michael Salgarolo, a lean, bookish New York University historian who studies the Manila Men, wanted to see St. Malo before it disappeared from the map. All three identify as Filipino American. (Disclosure: Salgarolo is the writer’s partner.)

“We’re all in the diaspora,” Mardo said. “These Filipinos in St. Malo were the first.”

The travelers planned to join local Filipino Americans at a grand celebration of the community's history in Louisiana the next day. They passed through choppy waters and reedy spartina grass along the lake's south shore, where bustling fishing villages once thrived.

There are no structures left because the wetlands are sinking into the sea at a rate of **28 square miles per year**. Only 75% of the wetlands that existed in 1932 were still present in 2016, according to one U.S. Geological Survey **report**, and what remains is increasingly under threat. Coastal erosion and climate change, together with human destruction of the wetlands, are to blame.

St. Malo is something that a lot of people look to to say, 'Hey, we've been here a long time. We belong on American soil.' Michael Salgarolo, *historian*

Since St. Malo's founding over 170 years ago, its significance in Filipino and American history had never been acknowledged by the state or federal government. Over the past decade, local Filipino Americans have lobbied the Louisiana legislature to formally recognize St. Malo as the birthplace of their community, which has

grown to 12,000 people in the state and 4.2 million people across the U.S.

“For Filipinos, who are constantly portrayed as foreigners and outsiders in America, St. Malo is something that a lot of people look to to say, ‘Hey, we’ve been here a long time. We belong on American soil,’” Salgarolo said.

The Filipino American community in Louisiana was founded by descendants of the original St. Malo settlers and other early Filipino immigrants to the area. For decades, its leaders have raised awareness about their long and little-known history. In recent years, they’ve grappled with an unprecedented dilemma: how to preserve and memorialize their history when their oldest physical touchstone is vanishing into the sea.

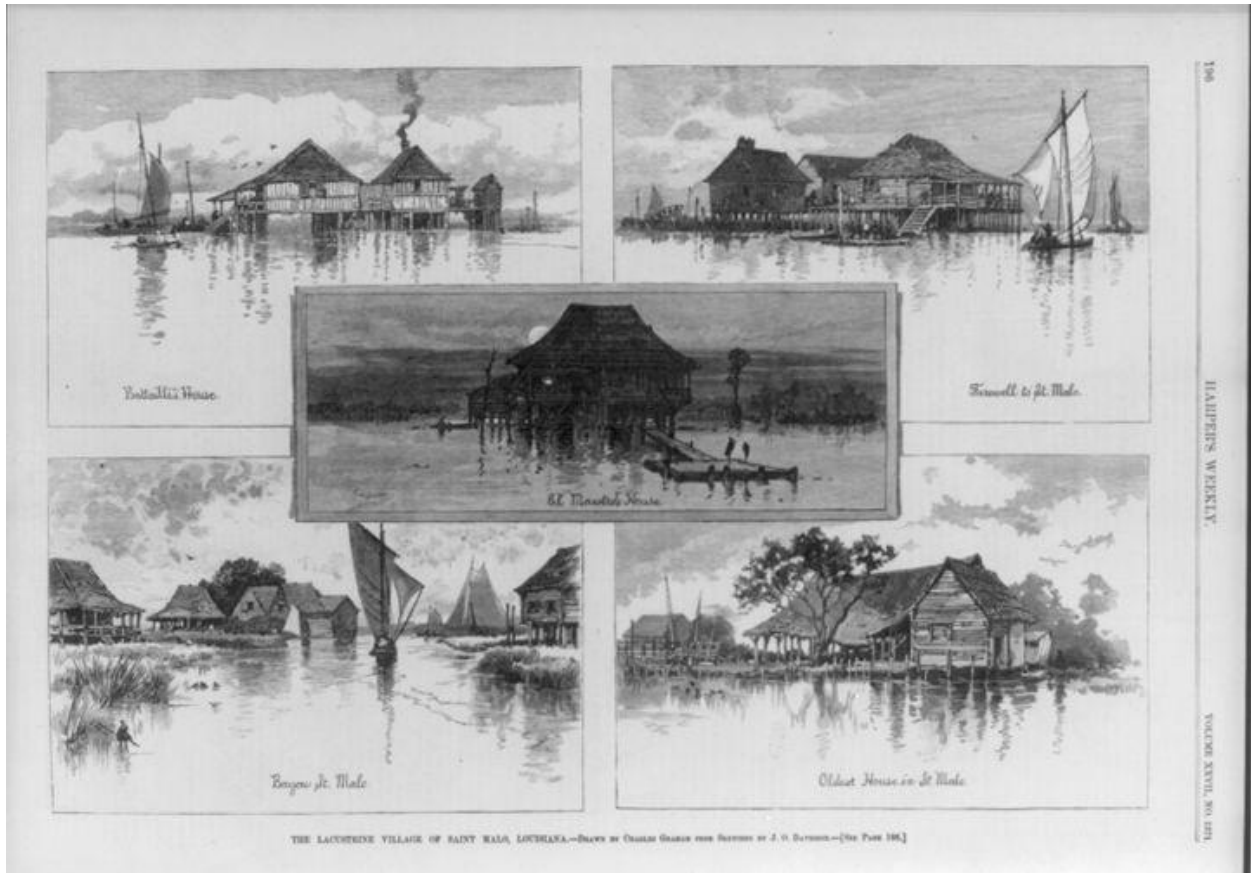
The History Of St. Malo

While a number of historians have studied St. Malo and its inhabitants, documents about the site are scarce.

Academics often cite an 1883 Harper’s Weekly article by journalist Lafcadio Hearn, who traveled to the site in search of the Filipino settlers.

Hearn described an eerie trip through the marsh that led to a hidden village of “fantastic houses ... poised upon slender supports above the marsh, like cranes or bitterns watching for scaly prey.”

The “cinnamon-colored” inhabitants were “strange, wild, picturesque,” he wrote, noting that they often sent money home to “aid friends in emigrating.” An illustrator named J.O. Davidson who traveled with Hearn sketched mysterious houses and swarthy men. His drawings were later made into engravings for the article and are now the only images of St. Malo that exist.



Library of Congress

Composite of five wood engravings of drawings by Charles Graham after sketches by J.O. Davidson, from the 1883 Harper's Weekly article by Lafcadio Hearn.

The Manila Men were sailors who worked on Spanish, American and British merchant ships that docked in the Philippines, which had been a colony of Spain since 1521. They faced violent working conditions and, in some cases,

were forced or tricked into labor. As a result, many deserted in busy ports around the world, like New Orleans, hoping to start over.

“These were poor folks from a colonized nation that did not have a lot of options available to them,” said Salgarolo.

In the bayou, the Manila Men were unbothered by American authorities. They soon established a successful fishing village, which gave them entry into the lucrative Louisiana seafood trade and access to American society. Some married white and Black women and started families in the surrounding areas, but many stayed in St. Malo.

Though violent storms regularly struck the village, the Manila Men kept rebuilding their homes. It wasn't until the great hurricane of 1893, which wiped out most of the houses, that they left the area for good.

Getting St. Malo The Recognition It Deserves

Over a decade ago, the Philippine-Louisiana Historical Society (PLHS) began lobbying the state to commemorate St. Malo with a historical marker. They wanted it to serve

as “a public statement of Filipino-ness and Filipino heritage,” said Randy Gonzales, the society’s co-vice president and an assistant professor of English at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. Silver-haired with a boyish face, Gonzales traces both sides of his family to Filipinos who joined the growing Louisiana community in the early 1900s.

The PLHS eventually won approval for the marker — but deciding where to put it was challenging. The historical society wanted it to be somewhere accessible but still meaningful. The French Quarter of New Orleans, for example, didn’t “give a sense of the land slipping away into the distance,” Gonzales said. After all, the whole point of St. Malo was to be remote.

But St. Malo itself was hard to get to, and besides, it was sinking. They had to be sure that the land where they put the marker wouldn’t disappear too quickly.

It was a tall order. Southeastern Louisiana is built on a precarious pile of sediment ejected from the mouth of the Mississippi over the last 3,000 years. There is no bedrock, just densely packed alluvial soil. It used to be replenished

by the river's regular deliveries of pulverized stone, but the flow of sediment has diminished.

The levees built along the lower Mississippi to prevent flooding after the great flood of 1927 “put the river in a straitjacket,” said Barry Keim, Louisiana's state climatologist. The problem with this, he explains, is that rivers are supposed to flood. That's how they deposit sediment. Furthermore, dams in Missouri and Ohio are holding back sediment upstream.

“The river just isn't the land builder that we're facing here,” Keim said.

Then there's the Mississippi River-Gulf Outlet Canal — locals call it “Mr. Go” — which cuts a straight line from the Gulf of Mexico to New Orleans, injecting saltwater directly into the wetlands. It was meant to allow fishing vessels to reach the city without having to navigate the serpentine bends of the Mississippi, but it was barely used after its construction in the 1960s.

After Hurricane Katrina, it was shut down and replaced with a dam, but smaller canals that oil and gas companies cut through the wetlands still exist. Water gets drawn out

from the peat underbelly of the swamps to cool power plants and oil refineries, further destabilizing the land.



The Washington Post via Getty Images

An aerial view of the Inner Harbor Navigation Canal-Lake Borgne Surge Barrier on Aug. 1, 2015, in New Orleans. The 1.8-mile barrier is located at the confluence of the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway (GIWW) and the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet (MRGO), about 12 miles east of downtown New Orleans.

“You put all this together, and you have a landscape that is degrading,” said Keim. “And then you throw in global climate change and sea level rise, and then you have the perfect storm brewing.”

According to Louisiana’s 2017 master plan for coastal restoration, the land around Lake Borgne could see flood depths of up to 15 feet in the next 50 years.

Gonzales and the PLHS ultimately decided they would place the marker on the lawn of the Los Isleños Museum Complex, a Canary Islander heritage site in St. Bernard Parish, just five miles from New Orleans’ French Quarter. It made sense because of the close ties between local Filipinos and Canary Islanders, both immigrants from Spanish colonies who arrived in Louisiana.

Importantly, Gonzales noted, the museum was protected by the Lake Borgne Surge Barrier, known to locals as the Great Wall.

“It was important for us that it was on the inside of the wall,” said Gonzales. “We knew that there was a significant time frame when people would be able to access it.”

The wall is 26 feet high and spans 1.8 miles at the edge of Lake Borgne closest to St. Bernard Parish and the parts of New Orleans that were devastated by storm surges during Hurricane Katrina. Completed in 2013, it was built to protect the area against a 100-year storm surge, or a storm that has a 1% chance of occurring each year.

“It’ll be there in my lifetime, at least,” said Gonzales of the marker. “It’s not going to be gone too soon. Hopefully.”



Yasmin Tayag

A marker commemorating St. Malo at the Los Isleños Museum Complex in St. Bernard Parish, Louisiana.

For most people who know about it, St. Malo is more of a historical concept than a place. Because it's so hard to reach, most people haven't been there and probably never will. But for Rhonda Richoux, St. Malo is very real.

Dark-haired with kohl-rimmed eyes, Richoux is descended from a fisherman named Felipe Madriaga who settled in St. Malo in 1848. She has dedicated her life to researching and preserving the history of Filipinos in Louisiana. Her life story is, in many ways, a chronicle of the community's history.

Raised in the New Orleans neighborhood known as the Marigny around the corner from the now-defunct Filipino-American Goodwill Society, the community's primary social club, Richoux recalls a happy childhood filled with picnics and celebrations with other Louisiana Filipinos. Her mother visited St. Malo when fishermen still worked there.

“In my mother’s lifetime, there were Filipinos who had rebuilt some of the camps and lived out there,” said Richoux. When Richoux was older, she often passed St. Malo on fishing trips.

“It’s more than just a Shangri-La,” she said. “It’s something that we know did exist. It’s historical fact. And it gives us a beginning here in this country, just like all of the other ethnic groups.”

The devastation left by Hurricane Katrina fueled Richoux’s drive to keep the community together. The storm destroyed the homes of many community members, she said. They escaped to a northern Louisiana campground, where they raised morale by telling stories about the Filipino elders who rebuilt Manila Village, a more recent local Filipino settlement, after every storm.

“They didn’t have the Red Cross, they didn’t have FEMA, they just helped each other. That’s just how they did, and they survived,” said Richoux. “If I didn’t know my family stories, I wouldn’t have made it through Katrina.”

But the catastrophe fractured the community. Some moved away; others abandoned their landlines and lost

touch. Since then, Richoux has worked fervently to rebuild those connections. She started a Facebook group, “Filipino-Americans in Louisiana,” to seek out descendants of the original settlers and introduce them to long-lost relatives. She’s part of an effort to revive the Goodwill Society, which was abandoned after its elder members died.

With Gonzales, she fought tirelessly for the St. Malo historical marker. In 2019, they finally won.

At Last, A Celebration

After a long journey, the boat carrying Mardo’s party drifted into an expanse of swamp. In the distance, a pair of rotting wooden poles jutted out from the green water. A large mound of shells, the remains of a clamming company that once operated in the area, formed a makeshift island. The party docked at the island and explored it in silence, shells crunching underfoot. They were cold and wet. For the first time, they were able to imagine what the Manila Men’s lives were like.

Besides a few empty bottles and beer cans, the site seemed empty. But eventually, they found a rusty United

States Geodetic Survey marker toppled over in the brush. Dated 1934, it was faintly labeled “St. Malo.”

“That’s how we knew this was the area where St. Malo was,” said Mardo. “It was kind of cool to see that.” As they drifted away from the island, Salgarolo wondered whether they’d ever see it again.



Michael Salgarolo

A U.S. Geodetic Survey marker found at St. Malo.

Each time Gonzales goes to St. Malo, he hopes to find some evidence of the Manila Men. The last time, he found the same field of golden marsh grass.

When you grow up in New Orleans, he said, you learn to accept that storms take things away and never give them back. Gonzales posited that Filipino Americans have a similar relationship with impermanence because they are so familiar with migration and movement.

“Things can live in our minds, in a way,” he said. “We don’t have to be there to know that they’re significant.”

The Philippines that Filipinos in America remember is often not the Philippines that exists today.

“St. Malo’s the same thing,” Gonzales said. “We can’t go back. We can’t know the history. But how can it be known in people’s minds and be something?”

The morning after the travelers journeyed to St. Malo, Filipino Americans in splendid embroidery gathered on the

sunny lawn of the Los Isleños museum and sang “The Star-Spangled Banner.” Then they turned to face a Philippine flag and raised their voices for their other national anthem, “Lupang Hinirang,” which means “chosen land.”

A lectern bearing the PLHS logo was set up in front of a yellow pavilion strung with cheerful pennants. Behind it, in the shade of mossy oaks, a sheet of blue velvet obscured a tall structure.

A string of local dignitaries gave speeches at the podium.

“I’m so, so happy that it’s finally been put here because it’s an important part of our history,” Richoux said. “Filipinos have been here for a long time, we’ve made contributions to America, and we’re not talked about as part of the fabric of this country.”

“This is absolutely long overdue for us,” said Howard Luna, a St. Bernard Parish councilman whose Filipino grandfather settled in Louisiana.

“We are here today so St. Malo doesn’t have to be discovered again,” Gonzales said.



Yasmin Tayag

The podium and local dignitaries at the St. Malo marker dedication ceremony.

Amid camera flashes, officials pulled away the blue velvet sheet to reveal the new state historical marker. Emblazoned with the state's affable pelican, it describes

St. Malo as “a symbol of the growing Filipino presence in Louisiana.”

Just three months after the marker was unveiled, COVID-19 struck, putting all local Filipino American community events on hold. Now, as Louisiana opens up, the PLHS is planning a small celebration for Filipino American History Month in October, and expects to bring back the full cycle of heritage events in 2022, including the Isleños Heritage festival — held on the Isleños Museum lawn — “which helps us stay visible in St. Bernard Parish,” said Gonzales.

The marker won’t be there forever. It might not even be there for long. But while it exists, it will serve as an anchor for any Filipino American who feels unsure about their place in the United States.

“I can finally tell people that this is legit,” said Mardo. “Go to Louisiana, go to St. Bernard Parish. There’s going to be a marker there about this community, the very first settlement of Filipinos in this country. You may not be able to see that settlement anymore, but this is the living proof that we have.”

It's very likely that the marker will eventually disappear. The hope is that by then, Filipino Americans will no longer need to prove that they belong.