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# *The Ouachita River Flood in Monroe, Louisiana, 1932*

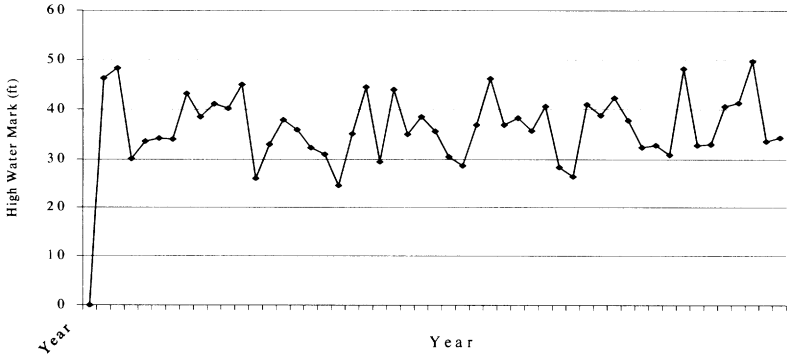
By THOMAS AIELLO\*

On May 4, 1927, the Ouachita River rose to near record levels at Monroe, Louisiana in what most locals assumed to be the flood of the century. However, less than five years later, in February 1932, with lingering debates about how to prevent another disaster still raging in the papers and the courts, the river rose 1.5 feet higher than in 1927. The inundation exacerbated the environmental impact an already bone-chilling winter and destroyed much that had survived the Great Depression's ravages. This was Monroe's benchmark catastrophe, a calamity in which necessity bred resolve, hardship accumulated upon agonizing hardship, and disaster fed a desire for prevention reform. In a community shaped by its relationship to water, the 1932 disaster overshadowed local political and legal squabbles, social divisions, and years of neglect and compelled Monroe residents to protect themselves.<sup>1</sup>

\*The author is a doctoral candidate in the Department of History at the University of Arkansas.

<sup>1</sup>The flood of 1927 inundated far more than Monroe, La. Robert Hunt, then a freshman at the University of Arkansas, recalled, "In some places such as between Arkansas and Mississippi, the river overflowed its banks to spread out for a width of over 100 miles." Robert H. Hunt, "The Worst Flood of the Century [1927]" unpublished manuscript, Robert H. Hunt War Publicity Collection, box 1, #466, Reminiscences/Essays, Special Collections, University of Arkansas; *Annual Highest and Lowest Stages of the Mississippi River and Its Outlets and Tributaries to 1960* (Vicksburg, 1961), 241; hereinafter cited as *River Stages*. In Ouachita Parish alone, flooding inflicted \$528,400 in property damage in 1927. *Losses and Damages Resulting from the Flood of 1927, Mississippi River and Tributaries, in the*

**Table 1**  
**Ouachita River High Water Marks, 1884-1934**



Each dot represents the annual high-water mark. Flood stage for the Ouachita is forty feet. The Ouachita reached a flood stage of 48.6 feet in 1927 and 49.7 in 1932. The river topped fifty feet twice after 1934, but after the floodwall was built, inundations proved less catastrophic. Data from *Annual Highest and Lowest Stages of the Mississippi River and its Outlets and Tributaries to 1960* (Vicksburg, 1961), 241.

Fifty years prior, in 1882, water from the Ouachita had also reached higher levels than in 1927. W. T. Atkins, editor of the *Monroe Bulletin*, anticipated the actions of his counterparts generations later by calling for more effective levees: "The possibility of a cotton crop on overflowed lands, with poor teams, no forage and no credit, is but a shadow." Something had to be done, "as it is more than folly to suppose that any planter can risk his labor any longer on such levees as have been. He must feel secure in his belief that the river is compelled seaward within its banks." As in 1932, Mayor Fred Endom echoed the editor's sentiments, calling for citizens to be "universal in their assistance." He asked the population to remember a prior natural disaster for historical assurance—the 1874 Ouachita flood, whose high water mark of over forty-nine feet was only exceeded during the 1932 flood.<sup>2</sup> (See Table 1.)

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*States of Illinois, Missouri, Kentucky, Tennessee, Arkansas, Mississippi, and Louisiana* (Memphis, 1927), 94.

<sup>2</sup>*Monroe Morning World*, February 13, 1932; *Monroe Bulletin*, March 29, 1882; *River Stages*, 241-42.

**Table 2**  
**High Water and Its Relationship**  
**to Weather, 1884-1954**

<i>Mid-March-Mid-November</i>	<i>Late November-Early March</i>
1884	1885
1886-1888	1889
1890-1892	1893
1894-1897	1898-1899
1900-1905	1906-1907
1908-1915	1916
1917-1918	1919
1920-1923	1924
1925-1930	1931-1932
1933-1935	1936-1937
1938-1940	1941
1942-1945	1946
1947-1948	1949-1950
1951-1954	

Cold-water high river marks were less frequent than warm-water high river marks, but they were not unheard of. This chart demonstrates the time of the year high water marks for the Ouachita occurred. The water only reached higher than the forty-foot flood stage in 1884, 1885, 1890, 1892, 1893, 1894, 1903, 1905, 1912, 1916, 1920, 1922, 1927, 1930, 1931, 1932, 1937, 1938, 1939, 1944, 1945, 1946, 1948, 1949, 1950, and 1953. For most of these years, the river's peak was less than two feet above flood stage. After 1934, a flood wall protected both sides of the Ouachita from waters up to fifty feet. Data from *Annual Highest and Lowest Stages of the Mississippi River and its Outlets and Tributaries to 1960* (Vicksburg: U. S. Army Corps of Engineers, 1961), 241-42.

In the first week of January 1932, government forecasts predicted a high water mark of forty-six feet. "It is unfortunate," read a *Monroe Morning World* editorial, "that the task of dealing with high water should be added to the general economic difficulties which are common throughout the country. But there is nothing in the situation that should cause us to lose our equilibrium." The editorial worried that undue apprehension could create a panic that might affect relief efforts. "No such situation as that which prevailed in 1927 need be feared at this season of the year, in spite of the fact that the present overflow is in itself un-

usual." In 1927, Monroe and West Monroe had felt the brunt of the Mississippi River inundation. A crevasse at Arkansas City, Arkansas, fed water into the Boeuf and Tensas basins, flooding the area. In early January 1932, however, West Monroe faced an overflow from bayous Black and Toni, two tributaries unable to drain into the Ouachita, which had surpassed flood stage. The situation, reported the *Morning World's* editorialist, "adds to the prevailing economic distress."<sup>3</sup>

The economic distress inflicted by the Great Depression hit Louisiana hardest following Franklin Roosevelt's election in November 1932. But widespread economic distress existed long before the stock market crashed. The cotton market's decline began in earnest in the mid-1920s, and the downturn was exacerbated by the 1927 flood and bank closures across the nation. In northeastern Louisiana alone, the Mississippi River Flood Control Association estimated the 1927 flood damage at over \$17 million dollars.<sup>4</sup> Roosevelt's Emergency Relief and Construction Act and Louisiana's corresponding Unemployment Relief Committee would not emerge until July 1932, after the Ouachita had fully receded. Between 1930 and 1935, total assessed property value in Ouachita Parish plummeted from almost \$65 million to just over \$43 million. The area's agricultural income fell by almost 65 percent. Similar drops in total payroll and retail sales stood as testaments to the region's economic devastation.<sup>5</sup>

The flood that exacerbated those problems was not entirely unexpected. Though 1932 was the first local winter flood of signifi-

<sup>3</sup>*Memphis Commercial Appeal*, January 2-8, 1932, reported rises in the upper Ouachita River, as well. *Monroe News Star*, January 10, 1932; *Morning World*, January 10, 1932; *Vicksburg Evening Post*, December 23, 1931; *Commercial Appeal*, January 1, 1932.

<sup>4</sup>The official estimate of 1927 losses in Northeast Louisiana is \$17,082,290. The estimate for the entire state was \$38,389,814; Betty Jo Hazlip Harris, "The 1927 Flood in Northeast Louisiana" (M.A. thesis, Northeast Louisiana University, 1994), 12. For an intensive treatment of the 1927 flood in and around the Monroe area, see *ibid.*, 146-86.

<sup>5</sup>Retail sales dropped from \$22,452,000 to \$13,597,000 in the five-year span. Retail payroll fell from \$2,477,000 to \$1,514,000. The drop in agricultural income went from \$2,976,134 to \$1,150,000. *Louisiana's Resources and Purchasing Power* (Baton Rouge, 1938), 188; Betty M. Field, "Louisiana and the Great Depression," in Edward F. Haas, ed., *The Louisiana Purchase Bicentennial Series in Louisiana History, Volume III, The Age of the Longs in Louisiana, 1928-1960* (Lafayette, La., 2001), 4-5.

cant magnitude, it was not Monroe's first experience with winter flooding.<sup>6</sup> (See Table 2.) Though the temperature had yet to drop below freezing in the Monroe area in early 1932, ice was reported in several areas, and icy ground reduced the earth's capacity to absorb excess water.<sup>7</sup> On January 3, Kate Key, Monroe's weather recorder, received word from the New Orleans weather bureau that the river would continue to rise. In addition, dockworkers and riverboat pilots warned Monroe's citizens through the newspapers that both the Ouachita and Mississippi valleys would continue to take on water.<sup>8</sup>

The Ouachita flows not into the Mississippi River, but the Black River at Jonesville, which empties into the Red River seventy-five miles south. The Red flows into Old River seven miles prior to reaching the Mississippi. The Ouachita divides the parish that bears its name. A 1994 FEMA flood survey noted that "the land adjacent to the Ouachita River and Bayou DeSiard forms natural levees and slopes gently away from these streams into backwater swamp areas." In the first decades of the 1800s, soon after the formation of Ouachita Parish, officials began constructing roads (still the backbone of the local transportation system) upon the natural levees fronting the rivers.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup>Monroe lies in a barotropic region characterized by saturated air and a year-long susceptibility to severe fronts. Rainfall is frequent, and storms often appear in bunches. *River Stages*, 241-42; Bruce P. Hayden, "Flood Climates," in Victor R. Baker, R. Craig Kochel, and Peter C. Patton, eds., *Flood Geomorphology* (New York, 1988), 22-4; Roy Ward, *Floods: A Geographical Perspective* (New York, 1978), 15.

<sup>7</sup>In the aggregate, Monroe's winter would be relatively warm. Cool moist winters in the region are "typified by a low zonal index and unusual southward displacement of the jetstream." Increased precipitation results, as do slightly warmer temperatures. (Again, typical results appear in the aggregate totals. Area newspapers throughout the flood months reported consistent cold with some freezing.) For example, January and February average monthly temperatures were 54.4 and 60 degrees Fahrenheit, respectively. In 1931, those averages were 49 and 54.9, in 1933, 55.7 and 51 respectively. Michael R. Helfert, *Climate and Climatic Normals of Monroe, Louisiana, 1887-1977*, Northeast Louisiana University Climatic Research Center, No. 1 (Monroe, 1978), 10-11, 60.

<sup>8</sup>*Morning World*, January 3-4, 1932.

<sup>9</sup>The heart of Monroe is located at the intersection of South Grand Street along the Ouachita River and DeSiard Street along the bayou of the same name. Louisiana Historical Records Survey, *Inventory of the Parish Archives of Louisiana*, No. 37, *Ouachita Parish (Monroe)* (Baton Rouge, 1942), 17-18; "Flood Insurance Study: Ouachita Parish, Louisiana and Incorporated Areas," Volume I, Federal

As the floodwaters from the Ouachita rose, however, city officials occupied themselves with the Mississippi's potential to rise. The United States Supreme Court opened its 1932 session January 4, and the first case on the docket was a Monroe test suit submitted in its final form as *Hurley v. Kincaid*. Mayor Arnold Bernstein traveled to Washington to view the proceedings. W. E. Wilson, head of the Tensas Basin Levee Board, also made the trip to lobby Sol. Gen. Thomas D. Thatcher. As Ouachita Parish battled the 1932 inundation, it sued the United States Secretary of War to ensure that the Army Corps of Engineers' floodways would not exacerbate the region's distress. As the cold water crept in around them, Monroe awaited a verdict.<sup>10</sup>

R. Foster Kincaid, Sr. owned 160 acres of land in the Boeuf Basin, the fertile region along Monroe's southern boundary that served as the town's economic backbone. He and many others in the area stood helpless in 1928, less than one year removed from the then-largest flood in Ouachita Parish's history, as U. S. legislators and the Army Corps of Engineers battled in the halls of Congress to pass a flood control bill that would provide public safety and satisfy their own states' interests. The debate was divisive, to say the least.<sup>11</sup> The plan of Army Engineer Maj. Gen. Edgar Jadwin competed with that of Sen. Wesley L. Jones of

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Emergency Management Agency, March 15, 1994, 1.209:220136/ETC/994/v.1 (1 of 39), 8; George W. Cry, "Surface Waters of the Lower Mississippi River Region," *Geoscience and Man*, 19 (1978): 66; *Morning World*, April 13, 1932; February 15, 1932.

<sup>10</sup>*Morning World*, January 2, 3, 1932.

<sup>11</sup>Col. John R. Fordyce Scrapbook, box 1, 1428, Special Collections, University of Arkansas; *Morning World*, January 3, 5, 1932; Pete Daniel, *Deep'n As It Come: The 1927 Mississippi River Flood* (1977; reprint ed., Fayetteville, Ark., 1996), 205-8; Matthew T. Percy, "After the Flood: A History of the 1928 Flood Control Act," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, 95 (2002); [http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_qa3945/is\\_200207/ai\\_n9105154/](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3945/is_200207/ai_n9105154/), accessed October 9, 2005; John M. Barry, *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America* (New York, 1997), 400-01. Percy and Barry arrive at different conclusions about the impetus for legislation. "Politicians," notes Percy, "rather than engineers, drove the formation of federal flood control policy in the United States." He interprets the debate as a product of a conservative executive and a Republican-controlled legislature. Barry notes, however, "It was not Congress or the White House that decided these things [the final terms of flood legislation]." He argues that a lobbying group of Mississippi Delta politicians held the strongest hand in formulating policy. See Percy and Barry for more on the machinations of 1928 flood control legislation.

Washington. There were engineering debates from all corners, including the Mississippi River Commission, but funding issues dominated the headlines. Missouri Sen. Harry B. Hawes endorsed Pres. Calvin Coolidge's demands that local levee districts and state governments be required to share flood restoration and protection expenses. Arkansas Gov. John E. Martineau countered that "control of the floods of the Mississippi and its tributaries is a national responsibility, the cost of which should be borne solely by the federal government and not by the states or local communities which lie along these rivers." In a legislative session filled with unpopular engineering and appropriation compromises, Martineau's argument won the day, largely on the strength of Sen. Joseph Ransdell's legislative efforts. The Lake Providence native argued that the federal government should "no more think of demanding local contributions than it would require border states to contribute toward the expense of repelling a foreign invasion!" Swayed by these arguments, the House stood firm in affixing the financial burden upon the federal government.<sup>12</sup>

Kincaid's test case against the government, representing the interests of 70,000 landowners, argued a different funding issue. The flood protection plan, set in place by Jadwin and overseen by Sec. of War Patrick Jay Hurley, was devised to channel floodwaters from the next Mississippi River overflow into the Boeuf Basin, thereby flooding Kincaid's property. Kincaid's lawyers argued that lands used for floodway drainage must be purchased by the government prior to use, pursuant to the dictates of the Fifth Amendment. In Federal District Court for the Western District of Louisiana, Judge Ben C. Dawkins ruled in Kincaid's favor. In a series of late-1929 decisions, he acknowledged that the govern-

<sup>12</sup>Col. John R. Fordyce Scrapbook; *Special Report of the Mississippi River Commission on Revision of Plans for Improvement of Navigation and Flood Control of the Mississippi River* (Washington D. C., 1928), 71-3; "An Act for the Control of Floods on the Mississippi River and Its Tributaries, and for Other Purposes," *Statutes at Large*, May 15, 1928, Ch. 569, 534-39; Matthew T. Percy, "A History of the Mississippi River Commission, 1879-1928: From Levees-Only to a Comprehensive Program of Flood Control for the Lower Mississippi Valley" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of North Texas, 1996), 167-70; John E. Martineau, "Why Investors Should Be Interested in Flood Control of the Mississippi and Its Tributaries," in *Proceedings of the Sixteenth Annual Convention of the Investment Bankers Association of America* (Chicago, 1927), 149. See also, Martin Reuss, "The Army Corps of Engineers and Flood-Control Politics on the Lower Mississippi," *Louisiana History*, 23 (1982): 131-48.



ment had the right to appropriate lands it deemed necessary for federal use, but ruled that landowners must be compensated for that use. Dawkins issued an injunction against the project until a monetary settlement could be reached.<sup>13</sup>

As the floodwaters in Monroe rose, however, the Supreme Court chose to disagree. The money that so many farmers hoped for never arrived, as a unanimous Court, in an opinion written by Justice Louis Brandeis, removed the injunction, maintaining that the Fifth Amendment did not require payment in advance for lands that might be taken. The opinion also questioned whether occasional flooding even constituted "taking." If, wrote Brandeis, the floodwaters did destroy Kincaid's land and a court deemed that destruction "taking," he could then sue for recompense. But no sooner.<sup>14</sup>

The *Morning World* placed a positive spin on the decision, emphasizing that Brandeis still upheld the right of payment for expropriated lands. In addition, the polarizing nature of the case, coupled with the simultaneous suffering of flood victims in and around Monroe—even though the damage came from another source—led the House Flood Control Committee to hold hearings preparatory to revising the 1928 Flood Control Act. Rep. Riley J. Wilson, a Democrat from nearby Ruston who was vocal in his displeasure with the Republican administration's response to his state's 1927 disaster, chaired the committee. Under his leadership, the hearings resulted in an amendment authorizing pay-

<sup>13</sup>After winning in District Court, *Kincaid* successfully passed muster in the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals in 1931 before arriving at the Supreme Court. *Kincaid v. United States*, 35 F.2d 235 (August 13, 1929), District Court, W. D. Louisiana, Monroe Division; *United States v. Stubbs, et al.*, 35 F.2d 357 (October 7, 1929), District Court, W. D. Louisiana, Monroe Division; *Kincaid v. United States, et al.*, 37 F.2d 602 (December 13, 1929), District Court, W. D. Louisiana, Monroe Division; *United States, et al. v. Kincaid*, 49 F.2d 768 (May 15, 1931), Circuit Court of Appeals, Fifth Circuit; Fifth Amendment, U. S. Constitution. See also *Morning World*, December 1929. Almost daily, the paper engaged in exposition and opinion on the legislation and Kincaid's initial challenge of it.

<sup>14</sup>*Hurley v. Kincaid*, 285 US 95 (1932); *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, February 24, 1932; Alan Romero, "Takings By Floodwaters," *North Dakota Law Review*, 76 (2000): 811-12. The case remained significant for more than just Ouachita Parish. Eighteen subsequent Supreme Court opinions cited *Kincaid*, most recently in the 1980s. In *First Lutheran Church v. Los Angeles County*, the most recent pertinent decision, the Court actually overturned the *Kincaid* ruling, describing land-use regulations as "taking," even prior to flooding. *First Lutheran Church v. Los Angeles County*, 482 US 304 (1987).

ment of private citizens for land potentially flooded by the Army Corps of Engineers. Later, a revised Flood Control Act of 1936, introduced by Louisiana Sen. John H. Overton, compelled the government to abandon the Boeuf floodway.<sup>15</sup>

The Ouachita, however, caused the damage in 1932. "Let's put the blame for our present predicament where it belongs," railed the *Ouachita Citizen*. On November 11, 1927, responding to local damage from the summer flood, the police jury passed Ordinance No. 979, which zoned West Monroe as Gravity Drainage District No. 1. The board of commissioners for the new district submitted a proposal calling for a system of canals, retaining walls, pumps, floodgates, and spillways. The project was to be funded by a \$125,000 bond issue to be retired over twenty-five years. On February 7, 1928, the measure was defeated by the district's property owners in a local referendum.<sup>16</sup>

Some of the voters rejected the tax because they wanted federal action, some because they assumed that a flood like 1927 could never again occur, and some because the flood had left them with no money, no property, and little hope for the future. "The same proposition that was defeated in 1928," crowed the *Ouachita Citizen*, "would be overwhelmingly approved in 1932." The West Monroe newspaper endorsed the 1928 local plan of a floodwall along the Ouachita as the best protection plan, noting "the time to start it is immediately after the present emergency."<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup>Rep. Riley J. Wilson, who would continue to be influential, pressed for changes to the original bill throughout the 1930s. *Improvement of the Lower Mississippi River and Tributaries, 1931-1972*, U. S. Army Corps of Engineers (Vicksburg, 1972), 10-11; *Morning World*, January 10, 27, 28, 30, 1932, March 2, 3, 8, 1932; *News Star*, January 26, 1932, March 2, 8, 1932; *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, February 6, 1932; Percy, "After the Flood."

<sup>16</sup>*Morning World*, January 18, February 11, 1932; *Ouachita Citizen*, February 4, 1932.

<sup>17</sup>Homer M. Adkins, Internal Revenue service collector for the District of Arkansas in 1939, and later governor, blamed the unchecked growth of willows and the accumulation of gravel beds on the Ouachita as increasing the risk of flooding. Adkins would continue to make control of the northern part of the Ouachita, including its expansion for use of barges, a top priority of his administration. In 1932, floods in the Arkansas portions of the Ouachita fed the floodwaters in Louisiana portions. "Adkins to Norrell, January 24, 1939," "Norrell to Adkins, July 11, 1941," William F. and Catherine D. Norrell Collection, Series 1, Subseries, 4, Flood Control, box 23, #11, Special Collections, University of Arkansas. See remainder of box 23 for more. *Ouachita Citizen*, February 4, 1932.

As January progressed, the flood showed no signs of abating. The popular comic strip, "Tarzan," portrayed a violent rainstorm throughout early January, an irony not lost on Monroe's residents. An anonymous article in the *Morning World* compared waterlogged West Monroe to Venice. "Of course," the writer noted, "there are vagaries in any comparison." The local gondolas, for instance, "are somewhat different, architecturally, if compared with those of Venice (Italy or California), and many of them are equipped with outboard motors." During the first weeks of January, women and children played barefooted in the rising water, and reportedly "an enjoyable time was had by all."<sup>18</sup>

Meeting in special session, the Ouachita Parish Police Jury called upon citizens to cooperate with authorities in any way necessary. Meanwhile, the *Morning World's* editor agonized publicly about the problems frequently associated with refugee camps. "Women and children will suffer from cold and exposure unless proper shelter is provided," the newspaper warned. "Above all things, it is essential that the establishment of a refugee camp of tents shall be avoided."<sup>19</sup> Nonetheless, even as the police jury met, frantic West Monroe citizens, fleeing the rising Black and Toni bayous, moved south of town and established a tent city. Black and white citizens crowded into the area, living side by side in a way that would have been unthinkable in permanent settlements.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup>*Insurance Map of Monroe and West Monroe, Louisiana, 1932* (New York, 1932), Composite, 18:28-30, 19:26; *Morning World*, January 13, 1932. The author also found great assistance in the use of photographs taken during the early days of February by a local photographer. These photos proved invaluable. See Griffin, *Flood Scenes; Monroe, Louisiana 1932*, SC La 971.63 Gri, Ouachita Parish Public Library, Special Collections, Monroe, La. Many of the photos can also be accessed through the Ouachita Digital Archive. See <http://ipacopl.ouachita.lib.la.us:8080/ipac20/ipac.jsp?session=X11930H919G25.367&profile=mo&menu=search&submenu=power&ts=1119307919656>, accessed September 29, 2005.

<sup>19</sup>Police juries in Louisiana act in much the same capacity as boards of county commissioners in other states. The twelve-member bodies were originally charged with "execution of whatever concerns the interior and local police and administration of the parish." "Police Jury Form of Government," *Calcasieu Parish Police Jury*, <http://www.cppj.net/pjury.asp>, accessed November 26, 2005; *Morning World*, January 14, 1932; "Proceedings, January 13, 1932: Regular Session," Minute Book 12, Ouachita Parish Police Jury, 1931-1935, 813-15, Ouachita Parish Public Library, Special Collections.

<sup>20</sup>*Morning World*, January 15, 1932.

There were also more tragic examples of need trumping racial divisions. For instance, at 7:30 p.m. on February 10, twelve miles northeast of the Monroe city limits, J. G. Pate, his wife, and their two children, ages four and two, began paddling a small boat through the backwaters of the Ouachita from Sterlington to Fowler to visit Pate's mother. Violent winds blew freezing water into the boat, and, as the boat began sinking, one child clasped her mother's hand. As Mrs. Pate searched unsuccessfully for her other child and her husband, she floated through the freezing water to a barbed wire fence. She screamed for help, and Gus Tarver and three of his friends ran to the sound of her terrified voice. Tarver, a black man, was able to rescue Pate, a white woman, but Pate's children and husband drowned.<sup>21</sup>

Such racial cooperation was notable, for Monroe was generally regarded as a bastion of white supremacy notorious for its occasional lynchings.<sup>22</sup> But the urgency of the situation transcended racial prejudice. When area towns sent aid to the city, black workers accompanied whites, and the integrated crews ate sandwiches and drank coffee together in cramped quarters before manning the sandbag lines for shifts lasting between twelve and fourteen hours. "Not merely hundreds, but thousands of white and black workers have been brought into the city to lend their aid in filling sandbags and building up the temporary protecting dykes about the two cities," noted the *Morning World*.<sup>23</sup> Although no direct connection can be documented, it is worth noting that as the flood waters receded and the baseball season began, Monroe's white population flocked to see its Negro Southern League baseball team, the Monroe Monarchs, reach the Negro World Series against the Pittsburgh Crawfords. The *Monroe Morning World* and *Monroe News Star* also carried more black baseball coverage per capita than any other white papers in the nation in 1932.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup>*Morning World*, February 11, 12, 13, 1932; *News Star*, February 11, 1932.

<sup>22</sup>William Ivy Hair, *The Kingfish and His Realm: The Life and Times of Huey P. Long* (Baton Rouge, 1991), 98-9, 130-33.

<sup>23</sup>*Morning World*, January 31, 1932, February 6, 1932.

<sup>24</sup>Thomas Aiello, "The Confusion of Multiple Clarifications: Black Newspapers' Presentation of Black Baseball in 1932" (unpublished manuscript); Thomas Aiello, "The Casino and Its Kings are Gone: The Transient Relationship of Monroe, Louisiana with Major League Black Baseball, 1932," *North Louisiana History*, 37 (2006): 15-38.



Southern Monroe, looking up Grand Street. The submerged trees and buildings indicate the normal water line for the Ouachita River. Picture from the Ouachita Parish Digital Archive, part of the Special Collections of the Ouachita Parish Public Library, Monroe, Louisiana.



Coleman Avenue, West Monroe. In 1932, West Monroe was a small, rural community. Picture from the Ouachita Parish Digital Archive, part of the Special Collections of the Ouachita Parish Public Library, Monroe, Louisiana.



The eastern bank of the Ouachita River, just south of downtown Monroe. Picture from the Ouachita Parish Digital Archive, part of the Special Collections of the Ouachita Parish Public Library, Monroe, Louisiana.



Even the animals at the local zoo were not spared the ravages of the flood. Picture from the Ouachita Parish Digital Archive, part of the Special Collections of the Ouachita Parish Public Library, Monroe, Louisiana.



Above: A view from the southernmost point of the Monroe city limits.  
 Below: McCraine residence at end of McKinley Avenue. Pictures from the Ouachita Parish Digital Archive, part of the Special Collections of the Ouachita Parish Public Library, Monroe, Louisiana.





South Grand Street, the main thoroughfare from south Monroe to the downtown area, bore the brunt of the flood damage. Picture from the Ouachita Parish Digital Archive, part of the Special Collections of the Ouachita Parish Public Library, Monroe, Louisiana.



West Monroe residents prepare for travel aboard wooden boats with outboard motors. Picture from the Ouachita Parish Digital Archive, part of the Special Collections of the Ouachita Parish Public Library, Monroe, Louisiana.





Above: A view of West Monroe from atop a Monroe high-rise. Below: Emergency levee behind homes on South Grand. Pictures from the Ouachita Parish Digital Archive, part of the Special Collections of the Ouachita Parish Public Library, Monroe, Louisiana.



Likewise, relief groups presented helpless members of both races whatever meager supplies they could spare. The Monroe Welfare Association, headquartered at South Grand and Grammont Street downtown, aided the depression's unemployed. Mrs. W. P. McCall, the organization's director, worried that flood victims would overrun the group's resources. In December, the Welfare Association had made 840 contacts, undertaken 155 visits to investigate the legitimacy of relief claims, and distributed 250 food baskets to needy families. During the first week of January, the number of needy locals rose sharply. W. L. Workman, head of the Monroe branch of the Salvation Army, also worried about the drain on resources. "Conditions are becoming increasingly serious," he reported on January 8. Fifty-two families were added to the Salvation Army relief roles in the first week of the new year. "We will take anything," said Workman, "groceries, clothing, bedding, and distribute it without cost to the city. . . . We are working 18 to 20 hours a day, and on insufficient funds and donations, we cannot meet the needs of our requests."<sup>25</sup>

This dire situation prompted Mayor Arnold Bernstein to create a central committee to coordinate area relief. W. L. Ethridge chaired the committee, which included John Breard, president of the Ouachita Parish Police Jury, as well as the president of the Ouachita National Bank, the mayor of West Monroe, and the city commissioner of Finance and Public Utilities. The flood, the committee noted, was not creating a relief burden; it was adding to an already difficult regional financial situation. Relief efforts required money, and relief agencies were operating with few resources. The Red Cross reported \$2,983 cash on hand, the Salvation Army \$3,000. The Monroe Welfare Association reported less than \$350 dollars, while its West Monroe counterpart had only seven dollars available.<sup>26</sup>

The committee distinguished the problem of unemployment relief—an ongoing problem in depression-era North Louisiana—from flood relief, and concerned itself solely with the economic problems existing before the waters began to rise. The new committee estimated that "an irreducible minimum" of \$31,000 would

<sup>25</sup>*Morning World*, January 8-9, 1932.

<sup>26</sup>The Monroe Welfare Association would add another \$100 to its coffers later that evening, as organizers of a talent show at a local high school donated all proceeds to the organization. *Morning World*, January 9, 1932.

be needed over the next four months to provide a base of adequate care for those in need. The *Morning World* noted, "Experience in the last few weeks seems to prove conclusively that the public either cannot or will not voluntarily contribute any adequate sum for welfare and unemployment relief," and suggested that requests for federal aid might be necessary.<sup>27</sup>

The pressing needs of the local indigent population soon proved even more challenging to local agencies. In the first two weeks of January, almost 2,500 refugees—constituting 349 families—registered with the Red Cross, headquartered on Cotton Street in West Monroe. By February 5, the relief agency was aiding 1,646 families (representing more than 6,500 people) in eight northeastern Louisiana parishes.<sup>28</sup> Non-traditional relief agencies also contributed to the effort. The Paramount Theater hosted a variety program sponsored by the Monroe Playground and Recreation Department with proceeds earmarked for flood victims. On January 13, members of the American Legion, led by John Bailey, began transporting refugees from newly inundated areas to higher ground. They rescued almost 500 persons on the first day, using thirty-five wagons and an equal number of trucks. The Veterans of Foreign Wars followed the American Legion's lead, launching refugee rescue efforts throughout the parish. Though the Emmanuel Baptist Church of West Monroe was inundated, Rev. H. L. Driskell pledged its use as a refugee shelter as soon as water pumps made the building habitable. Citizens in the Monroe suburb of Swartz held a "stunt night" at city hall, complete with a puppet show, skits, and songs, to raise money for local children who were leaving schools in large numbers due to insufficient food and clothing.<sup>29</sup>

The Northeast Louisiana Press Club conducted a bread drive, placing boxes in public places, and using the local newspapers to encourage citizens to put bread, canned goods, or money into

<sup>27</sup>*News Star*, January 10, 1932; *Morning World*, January 10, 1932.

<sup>28</sup>For its total work in Louisiana and Mississippi, the national Red Cross reported expenditures of \$118,179.28, just over \$10,000 emanating from private donations. It provided food to more than 5,000 Louisiana families, who had been driven from 1,237,800 flooded acres. *The Louisiana-Mississippi Flood of 1932: Official Report of Relief Operations of the American National Red Cross* (Washington, D. C., 1932), 2, 10; *The Mississippi Valley Flood Disaster of 1927: Official Report of the Relief Operations* (Washington, D. C., 1928), 117, 120-21.

<sup>29</sup>*Morning World*, January 14, 15, 16, 22, 1932, February 6, 1932.

them. All proceeds were turned over to W. L. Workman and the Salvation Army. The Boy Scouts, led locally by J. Noble White, endorsed the Press Club's plan and pledged its young membership to assist the food drive. Local Sur-Wa five and dime stores featured the bread boxes, as did the Monroe Furniture Company, Paramount Theater, and all of the local schools.<sup>30</sup> In other parts of the flooded area, particularly in western Mississippi and Caldwell Parish, relief efforts were less organized by private organizations or local relief agencies. Seeing the success of the Northeast Louisiana Press Club's bread campaign, the Caldwell Parish Red Cross invited representatives of the group to Columbia to start a similar drive there. The representatives reported back that "Columbia is a doomed city," noting that farmers of the Boeuf Basin, the economic backbone of Caldwell Parish, were precisely the refugees who had fled to the parish seat—a catch twenty-two that led the representatives to believe it "doubtful, due to the greater poverty of the towns of Caldwell Parish, of as great success in that parish as in Monroe."<sup>31</sup>

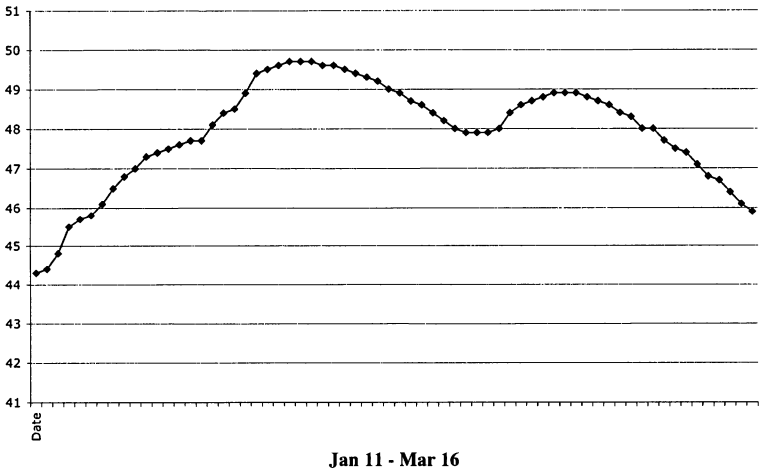
On January 27, with the Ouachita River at levels higher than in 1927, over a thousand men, many recruited from relief lines and refugee camps, went to the flood lines to fill sandbags. The state highway department supplied the machinery that carried the sand from the pits to the water. All work was overseen by the Tensas Basin Levee Board, whose makeshift headquarters were on the fifth floor of Monroe's Virginia Hotel. The Board was led by Lynton Ethridge, who predicted that the new effort would create a barrier strong enough to withstand a fifty or fifty-one foot rise. Men were recruited throughout Northeast Louisiana, as January 30 appeals by Ouachita Parish Sheriff Milton Coverdale, and Mayor Bernstein attracted workers from Rayville, Farmer-ville, Tallulah, Bastrop, and other areas.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>30</sup>Throughout the flood experience, the *Morning World* printed updates on the amount received, including the names of larger donors, to encourage those with the means to give what they could. *Morning World*, January 18, 19, 22, 23, 25, 1932.

<sup>31</sup>*Morning World*, January 25, 26, 1932.

<sup>32</sup>Calhoun, Ferriday, Columbia, Oak Ridge, Ruston, Clarks, Delhi, Wisner, Mer Rouge, Gladin, Newellton, St. Joseph, Waterproof, Alto, Delta Point, and Sterlington also supplied workers to the relief effort. *Morning World*, January 28, 31, 1932; *News Star*, January 31, 1932.

**Table 3**  
**Ouachita River Stages, 1932**



Each dot represents the next day's high water mark. Flood stage for the Ouachita is forty feet. The Ouachita stayed at 49.7 feet, its peak, from February 3 through February 5. The local newspaper, the *Monroe Morning World*, began publishing the daily river stages on January 11, and by March 16, though the river was still well above flood stage, it had begun a steady progression below forty feet that would culminate on April 12, when the river would reach a high water mark of 39.8 feet. *Monroe Morning World*, January 11, 1932–April 13, 1932.

"Like an army trooping into battle," the local newspaper reported, "volunteer workmen from surrounding parishes and cities poured into Ouachita Parish and Monroe yesterday to help city, state, and federal forces battle the rampant Ouachita River." Water had risen less than a tenth of a foot by 2:30 a.m., but it placed water levels above 49.3 feet—a regional record—and water began spilling over the levees in many places. (See Table 3.) A break in a levee just south of Sterlington (fifteen miles northeast of Monroe) raised fears that Monroe's levees would be next. Many young men attending Ouachita Parish Junior College and Ouachita Parish High School volunteered their services. Charles E. Kenney, principal of Neville High School (Monroe's other large

high school), suspended classes to allow his male students to man the levee lines.<sup>33</sup>

Hundreds of women from Monroe and West Monroe also supplied food and clothing to workers and refugees. "They do it all with a fervor and a grace that are only matched by the cheerful demeanor which belies tired bodies and aching muscles, unaccustomed to long-continued and strenuous labor," the *Morning World* editorialized. "Monroe will not be likely to forget what its women have done in this crisis." Women were particularly active in the Red Cross and Salvation Army—Red Cross workers in the canteen on the corner of Grand and DeSiard streets, Salvation Army volunteers in the basement of the Ouachita Parish Courthouse.<sup>34</sup> On January 26, as local Red Cross workers served sandwiches and coffee to levee workers, June Lonas, state Red Cross representative, announced that the national body, represented by George Meyer, was on its way to Monroe to organize relief efforts—particularly food drives in Ouachita and outlying parishes.

Upon arrival two days later, Meyer spent the day touring Monroe and West Monroe, before traveling to adjacent damaged regions on the twenty-ninth. Red Cross food relief surged with the national organization's appearance; numerous donations from Louisiana companies throughout the state were stored in a vacant building on the corner of Trenton and Wood streets in West Monroe. The needy applied for relief through the Monroe Welfare Association and received a ration slip to present at the makeshift warehouse. The largest donation came from the Salari Grocery Company of New Orleans, which donated hundreds of pounds of rice, beans, flour, and sugar.<sup>35</sup>

After a January 31 meeting of Red Cross officers with city and parish officials at city hall, the national organization agreed to assume direction of Monroe's relief operations. "The situation is

<sup>33</sup>Ouachita Parish Junior College would grow, embark upon a series of name changes, and eventually become the University of Louisiana at Monroe. The students at all of the institutions returned to school the following week. *Morning World*, January 30, 1932, February 2, 1932; *News Star*, February 1, 1932.

<sup>34</sup>*Insurance Map of Monroe and West Monroe, Louisiana, 1932* (New York, 1932), Composite, 18:28-30; *Morning World*, February 3, 1932.

<sup>35</sup>*The American National Red Cross: Annual Report for the Year Ended June 30, 1932* (Washington, D. C., 1932), 45-7; *The Louisiana-Mississippi Flood of 1932*, 5-7; *Morning World*, January 27, 29, 1932; *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, January 27, 1932.

grave," said George Meyer. "Nevertheless, we are prepared to aid the local chapter in the work that they have already undertaken." Operations did not undergo substantive changes readily evident to the refugees; organizational responsibility simply shifted to the national Red Cross, which cooperated with city and parish relief workers, the American Legion, and other relief agencies. "The announcement," noted the *Morning World*, "was received with feelings of profound thankfulness on the part of the people of Ouachita Parish."<sup>36</sup>

On February 4, with the majority of refugees and applicants for relief housed in Monroe, the Ouachita Parish Red Cross moved its headquarters from West Monroe to 129 South Grand Street in downtown Monroe near the food warehouse. Meyer also established the national Red Cross headquarters on the fifth floor of the Ouachita National Bank building. Even with the relief situation seemingly in hand, the local Red Cross still found resources running thin as the month wore on. A meeting of the local body prompted Mrs. W. M. Holstein, the chapter's executive secretary, to announce that "requests for clothing from the Ouachita Parish chapter of the Red Cross have become greater than we can supply." By February 22, 1,100 families had received aid in Ouachita Parish alone. In addition, over 5,000 levee workers manned sandbag brigades. The Red Cross and Salvation Army fed them, and the National Guard mailed their letters home at no cost. All of the relief organizations continued to solicit donations of food and funds to help the increasing logistical problems among the levee worker groups.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>36</sup>The relief efforts in Ouachita, Avoyelles, Grant, Rapides, Catahoula, LaSalle, Concordia, Richland, Caldwell, Natchitoches, and Red River parishes were placed under the direction of the national Red Cross. *Morning World*, February 1, 1932.

<sup>37</sup>Monroe's population rose from 5,480 in 1900 to over 24,000 by 1930. This demographic growth resulted primarily from the availability of carbon black and paper mill jobs. These workers, already laboring for low wages, were the most susceptible to the economic ravages of the Great Depression and to the flood. They constituted a majority of the levee workers. According to the 1930 census, Monroe's population was 38.9 percent black and 60.9 percent white. In Ouachita Parish, blacks constituted 35 percent of the population, whites 64.8 percent. "Population: Table 13-Composition of the Population, by Parishes: 1930," *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930*, vol. 3, part 1, Alabama-Missouri (Washington, D. C., 1932), 983; "Population: Table 15-Composition of the Population, for Cities: 1930," *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930*, vol. 3, part 1, Alabama-Missouri (Washington, D. C., 1932), 990; "Monroe, Louisiana," *Works Progress*

On February 3, the federal government assumed responsibility for feeding the levee workers, subsequently instituting a ticket system to validate requests for meals. Levee workers received a ticket for their shift, which they could redeem at various downtown centers. The Salvation Army, Veterans of Foreign Wars, and other local groups already active in feeding the weary workers remained on the job, and their efforts garnered praise from federal officials.<sup>38</sup>

Improved logistical support helped keep the legions of levee workers in the field, but the long hours and arduous work regiments took their toll on workers. By early February, the Tensas Levee Board realized that its manpower was wearing thin. The Board consequently released a statement warning that a new call for men might be necessary, while also discouraging volunteers from the outlying areas because of the overwhelming challenge of feeding and housing the workers already in the field. At the beginning of February, St. Francis Sanitarium established an emergency ward at the downtown hospital and within the week treated 490 men for colds, flat feet, and blisters. One worker, sixteen-year-old Allen Coates, collapsed after working continuously on the levees for three days and three nights. Another worker, suffering from pneumonia and attempting to return from Monroe to his home in Arkansas, fell unconscious into an abandoned cotton press on South Eighth Street on Monroe's outskirts. He was discovered by a group of children and sent to the hospital, becoming in the process one of hundreds helped by the Ouachita Parish Health Unit, St. Francis Sanitarium, and the Red Cross medical unit.<sup>39</sup>

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Administration Writer's Project, 1937, Ouachita Digital Archive, 3-4; *Morning World*, February 2, 5, 23, 1932.

<sup>38</sup>Vigilance was required to prevent abuse of the new system. On February 12, a woman entered the Baer Building on St. John Street, where a makeshift cafeteria had been established for levee workers, her head hung low with a man's coat and cap covering her hungry female body. Only a ticket demonstrating that the patron had worked on the levees could garner a hot meal. The woman presented such a ticket, but women were not allowed to work on the levees. "Hey, look here," yelled the Rev. Tom Roberts, state chaplain of the American Legion and manager of the operation, "we've got a girl dressed like a man." Following an encounter with the police, the girl left the cafeteria without food. *News Star*, February 4, 1932; *Morning World*, February 4, 13, 1932.

<sup>39</sup>The situation of the Monroe levee workers was commonplace throughout northeastern Louisiana, western Mississippi, and southeastern Arkansas. The



On February 7, the Red Cross reduced the number of levee workers by more than a thousand. Each worker was provided an identification number, and laborers were paid with federal funds in the order in which their identification numbers were issued at staggered gatherings. At one gathering, as workers stood in long lines for their pay, a confidence man trolled the queues, charging workers fifty cents to "put each contributor at the head of the line." The ruse was not discovered until after the thief had escaped.<sup>40</sup>

Disease was also increasingly problematic. Dr. John W. Williams, director of the Ouachita Parish Health Unit, administered a regional typhoid vaccination project, traveling to various outlying areas and assuring the wary that the medicine was free and that "these vaccinations will incapacitate them in no way." His efforts to stave off an epidemic were ongoing since mid-January. "I cannot stress the importance of these vaccinations too strongly," he announced. "The flood waters are contaminated beyond realization, and while there is no danger in drinking water in the city mains, one is very likely to contract typhoid from merely wading and working in the flood districts." Williams also began a campaign to raise local awareness about the dangers of malaria from an increasingly severe mosquito infestation. The standing water provided a fertile breeding ground for the insects, particularly as the temperatures began to rise in late February and early March, and Williams reminded parish residents that "there are strict state laws compelling the people of Louisiana to oil pools of water to kill mosquitoes, and the city ordinances also cover such conditions."<sup>41</sup>

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broader history of the entire flood and flood relief effort throughout the region has yet to be written. For more on the flood east of Ouachita Parish, see the *Vicksburg Evening Post*, December 28, 1931 to February 24, 1932. Continuing flood coverage continues throughout, predominantly as front page leads. *Morning World*, February 4, 6, March 2, 1932.

<sup>40</sup>Joseph McDaniel of Marshall, Ill., however, proved far more willing to part with his income. Interested in returning home before his pay was due, McDaniel attempted to cede his wages to the Reverend Tom Roberts. The government, however, insisted that he be the one to take the pay. "Mr. Roberts has treated me fine," said McDaniel. "He's a regular prince, and I wouldn't mind turning my money over to him. Now I'm going to wait for it, I guess." *Morning World*, February 8-10, 19, 24, 25, 1932, March 11, 1932.

<sup>41</sup>*Morning World*, February 17, 1932, January 22, 1932, March 2, 1932.

Local livestock also faced the threat of disease as a result of the inundation. More than 7,000 head of cattle Ouachita Parish received anthrax (*charbon*) vaccinations to combat potential illness arising from the flood conditions. In addition, in January and February, invading buffalo gnats attacked local livestock.<sup>42</sup> (The flood, however, also acted as a natural insecticide, eventually drowning millions of insects.<sup>43</sup>)

Other animals faced a more critical threat from rising waters. The Red Cross sent rescue boats to various parts of the parish, and on February 4, one mission brought to West Monroe 112 cows from an outlying area. The cold water inundating the area also threatened the animals in the local zoo. On January 13, director Harry McLeod moved both the elk and buffalo to pens across the street at a slightly higher elevation. The following day, many other animals found temporary homes in the dressing rooms at Forsythe Park, the baseball field for the minor Cotton States League Monroe Twins.<sup>44</sup>

Animals and humans both felt the brunt of the cold snap on January 30, when the temperature dropped below freezing for the first time. Harry D. Wilson, Commissioner of Agriculture and Immigration, surveyed the resulting damage. After touring relief operations, he urged the rest of the state to donate food, clothing, and money, observing that "our rural friends" would not be able to return to their farms for a minimum of two months.

Wilson's inspection tour was widely publicized, as was the arrival of Maj. Thomas B. Larkin of the Vicksburg District of the Army Corps of Engineers. Larkin was to direct plans for a reinvigorated campaign to protect the city, and he promised that the army engineers, working with area engineer C. K. Young, would do everything in their power to stem the rising tide. The army engineers at Vicksburg shipped 1.3 million sand sacks for labor-

<sup>42</sup>Along with smoke to drive bugs from the animals and ammonia to cure their ills, parish agricultural agent E. R. Strahan recommended local farmers "spray animals twice daily with a mixture of one part of oil of tar in eight parts of discarded auto oil or crank-case oil." *Morning World*, February 4, 1932.

<sup>43</sup>R. H. Murdaugh, ranger at Camp Kiroli and director of natural history museum work for the Boy Scouts, came to this conclusion while examining the flooded lands for new specimens.

<sup>44</sup>During the 1927 flood, the zoo made arrangements for possible evacuation of animals, but in the end, did not need to carry out the plans. Harris, "The 1927 Flood in Northeast Louisiana," 162; *Morning World*, February 5, 9, 14, 1932.

ers who, working through Saturday night, filled the bags and plugged various potential trouble spots; meanwhile, the Ouachita reached 49.5 feet by Sunday morning (January 31). Most of the overnight work was performed along South Grand, where water had poured into the street and flooded expensive riverside homes. Outlying areas fared far worse, as land from Bosco to Columbia was inundated by new sheets of floodwater from the Boeuf Basin south of Monroe. Water also covered over two hundred yards of Missouri Pacific Railroad track, making the local line inoperable.<sup>45</sup>

As the floodwater rose, city employees and prisoners filled sandbags and built temporary levees under the direction of Monroe Commissioner of Streets and Parks R. D. Swayze. Gov. Alvin O. King arrived on February 1, and the sight of Monroe, West Monroe, and their surroundings shocked him. King sent a telegram to Pres. Herbert Hoover immediately following the brief tour, urging the Army Corps of Engineers to take over flood control, much as the national Red Cross had assumed command of relief efforts. He also requested an appropriation of between \$250,000 and \$300,000 through section seven of the 1928 Flood Control Act. Similar telegrams went to the Army Corps of Engineers, Cong. Riley J. Wilson of Ruston, and Sen. Huey P. Long. On February 8, the War Department appropriated \$200,000 for flood protection on the Ouachita River at Monroe. Sec. of War Pat Hurley appointed Thomas H. Jackson, president of the Mississippi River Commission, to ensure that any emergencies were met swiftly in Monroe, Ouachita Parish, and throughout the affected areas of north Louisiana.<sup>46</sup>

To give officials and media representatives a better understanding of the scope of difficulties in the area, Delta Air Service treated them to an aerial view of the city. Participants estimated that as of January 31, a full 25 percent of the city was submerged as the *Morning World* reported: "Looking down from a height of 1,000 to 2,000 feet above the surface of the earth, and glimpsing

<sup>45</sup>"Monroe will not be lost," Mayor Bernstein reported to James Eddie Reed, secretary of the Louisiana Flood Control Committee. "The white workers wear a uniform of khaki trousers, buckskin wind breakers and high hunting boots, the negroes [sic] are clad in blue overalls. Every one is covered with mud and a growth of beard." *New Orleans Item*, February 3, 1932; *Morning World*, January 31, 1932, February 5, 1932.

<sup>46</sup>*Morning World*, January 14, 1932, February 2, 9, 1932.

the vast expanse of water that covers so large a space of that surface, the beholder absorbs some idea of the magnitude of the pervading flood."<sup>47</sup>

Aerial views showed that much of the farmland outside the city limits also was underwater. The winter flood exacerbated the effects of a fluctuating cotton market that left the one-crop region vulnerable to a volatile depression economy and only augured more future problems in more normal flood seasons. In response a group of parish farmers formed the Ouachita Valley Truck Growers' Association. Supported by area banks, the group emphasized diversification through "truck crops" and melon cultivation. "By such diversification of crops, with smaller acreage planted to cotton, farmers of this section will depend less on the cotton for income," directors explained, "with less danger of loss of crops." The farmers brought in agricultural agents, fruit supply companies, and railroad executives to learn about the transportation and sale of melons. At the initial meeting, 250 acres were devoted to cantaloupes, with more to be added.<sup>48</sup> That figure soon grew to more than 500 acres with over 100 farmers participating in Ouachita Parish alone. The Fruit Supply Company of St. Louis, Mo., and the Missouri Pacific Railroad, the companies who would sell and transport the cantaloupes, predictably forecast unqualified success for the new product, assuring farmers that the investment would be worth their while. The seed would be offered on loan by the Missouri Pacific until a successful crop came to St. Louis to be sold under the Crown brand name. The Truck Growers' Association, in conjunction with the various corporations, sought to develop a crop that would be ready after the fruit harvest in South Louisiana and before Arkansas's similar experiment with the melon.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>47</sup>The young Delta Air Service specialized in crop dusting and small-range transportation. Founded in Monroe, the company would soon move its headquarters to Atlanta and become one of the largest airlines in the world. *Morning World*, February 1, 1932. See also Geoff Jones, *Delta Air Lines: 75 Years of Airline Excellence* (Charleston, 2003). A week later, an entrepreneurial photographer advertised in the local paper that he could provide flood scenes "with the usual Jared quality." One phone call would give the customer an opportunity for postcards and photographs. "FREE: One Air View With Each Dozen Postals!" *Morning World*, February 7, 1932.

<sup>48</sup>*Morning World*, February 17, 1932.

<sup>49</sup>*Ibid.*, February 20, 1932.

By February first, more than eight hundred acres had been pledged to the project, with the Truck Growers emphasizing that other "truck" crops could come later. "The idea," said board member Thomas J. Sandridge, "is to include in our program those crops which will market best." The cantaloupes were supposed to be ready by June, "when the only competition of any consequence [was] from California and Arizona." The Fruit Supply Company pledged crates and packing supplies along with seed loans, and the parish agricultural agent, E. R. Strahan, produced a pamphlet with planting, cultivating, and fertilizing recommendations. The cantaloupe seed arrived on March 10 and was housed at the Chamber of Commerce in the downtown Virginia Hotel. Agricultural agents assured the public that "the shortage in peaches will cause a corresponding increase in the demand for cantaloupes." Planting was to begin on March 25.<sup>50</sup>

The floodwaters had long since receded when the plan failed. While the agricultural agents preached the compatibility of North Louisiana's soil with the nutritional needs of cantaloupe seeds, they failed to consider the area's humid climate. Cantaloupes are unique among melons in their susceptibility to fungal diseases, making the arid air of places like California, Arizona, or Colorado necessary. Years later, strawberries would grow successfully in Ouachita Parish, but in a year when new pools of water inundated an already humid region, the saturated air never created the conditions needed for the Truck Growers diversification plan to succeed.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>50</sup>Monroe and surrounding parishes were not alone in their desire for new crops. Mississippi, also ravaged by both depression and flood, also felt the repercussions of a one-crop system, and its farmers searched for suitable alternatives. By March, Richland Parish farmers, declaring the perceived virtues of cantaloupes formed the Ouachita Valley Fruit Growers Association with comparable goals. Crossett, Ark., followed the lead of Bastrop, La., in attempting a raspberry crop. Calhoun, La., farmers similarly discussed diversification programs, but could not agree on a suitable alternative to cotton. *Morning World*, February 21, 1932, March 4, 10, 11, 18, 1932.

<sup>51</sup>By 1935, the state produced strawberries, tomatoes, and watermelons, along with a miniscule amount of "citrus fruits" that might well have been scattered successful cantaloupe crops. This is doubtful. The state's Agricultural Extension listed the crops by the carload along with sweet potatoes, Irish potatoes, snap beans, cabbages, sweet peppers, shallots, endive, and escarole. In all, throughout the state, just over 12,000 carloads were inspected. The remaining "citrus fruits" were the last item listed. The new alleviation experiments of Monroe and Ouachita Parish as of 1935, among white and black farmers, were meat curing and

As the farmers pursued false hopes, the situation was improving. On February 11, the Missouri Pacific railway line resumed service between Monroe and Farmerville. Though water remained on portions of the route, the journey was finally manageable.

With the water receding and the cold winter air warming in March, discussions turned to flood prevention. Five years earlier, people thought there would never be an equal catastrophe, but 1932 surpassed all prior devastation. On February 11, Illinois Cong. Frank R. Reid, who had sided with Monroe in its *Kincaid* complaint against the Jadwin floodway plan, argued that the floodwall promoted by the *Ouachita Citizen*—a holdover from the post-1927 flood prevention debates—was indeed the best method of prevention. "I am a friend of the people of this section," he announced in a press conference at the Virginia Hotel, "and I want to see you get this floodwall." Reid praised the resiliency of local residents and marveled at the 2,800,000 sandbags employed in temporary floodwalls lining the river's east and west banks. "You know now the danger you face from the Ouachita River, and it is those waters you must be protected from." He assured his hosts that his prevention endorsements were in no way related to the federal plans for the Mississippi floodway that had caused them so much trouble and left promising them that he would champion their cause.<sup>52</sup>

A month later, Maj. Gen. Lytle Brown, Jadwin's replacement as head of the Army Corps of Engineers, spoke in Monroe to business leaders, local government officials, and flood experts from throughout the Mississippi Delta. He advocated a floodwall and promising his cooperation in the endeavor. "A city with so many lives and so much valuable property as Monroe," he told them, "should be protected." Brown also denounced Jadwin's flood con-

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canning, bee keeping, and diversified subsistence home gardens. J. W. Bateman, *Annual Report of Agricultural Extension Work in Louisiana, 1935* (Baton Rouge, 1935), 35, 37-38, 61; J. W. Bateman, *Annual Report of Negro Agricultural Extension Work in Louisiana, 1935* (Baton Rouge, 1935), 13-15; "An Executive Assessment of Cantaloupe: Executive Summary," USDA, <http://www.rma.usda.gov/pilots/feasible/txt/cantloup.txt>, accessed November 24, 2005.

<sup>52</sup>*News Star*, February 12, 1932; *Morning World*, February 11, 12, 1932.

trol plan and expressed his sympathy with Monroe's arguments against that section of the Flood Control Act of 1928.<sup>53</sup>

It was March. The cold was breaking, and though the Ouachita would not dip below flood level until April 12, people were hopeful and determined—with a firm resolve that only comes from a protracted battle against the elements—to ensure their safety from future inundations.<sup>54</sup> By 1934, a local floodwall was in place. Three years later, a Works Progress Administration history was able to attest that "Ouachita Parish, through the depression, bore the reputation of being in much better condition than a large portion of the country."<sup>55</sup> Their resiliency, in fact, made the most trying flood of the twentieth century disappear from historical memory. The disaster acted as the catalyst for development of a flood prevention plan. It fostered racial cooperation. It led farmers to attempt radical alternatives to staple-crop dependency. Each effort to bring about change, whether successful or unproductive, chipped away at the apathy, blame, and gridlock lingering in the wake of "the [1927] flood of the century."

<sup>53</sup>Of course, Brown's message was a political act. When he assumed direction of the Army Engineers, Brown, according to a Monroe report at the time, "left no doubt in the minds of those present that he has no intention of eliminating the Bouef floodway from the lower Mississippi project." Brown publicly stated in 1929, "the floodways are essential to the preservation of the levees. They should be the first work done. Those who are bringing suits in advance and who are criticizing plans for one reason or another are the ones responsible for any delay at all." *Morning World*, December 11, 1929, March 10, 11, 1932; *News Star*, March 10, 1932.

<sup>54</sup>The last frost of 1932 occurred on March 13. There were only 3.87 inches of rain in March, only 2.53 in April. Helfert, *Climate and Climatic Normals*, 75, 87.

<sup>55</sup>[no first name indicated] Lecky, "Monroe and Ouachita Parish History," Works Progress Administration Writer's Project (date unknown), 30; "Flood Insurance Study," Federal Emergency Management Agency, 10; *Morning World*, April 13, 1932.