

Mermentau River & Skull Island

As the train crosses the Mermentau River, an island out there among the reeds is as shrouded in mystery as it is shrouded from your view. Imagine yourself in the shoes of John Sweeny in 1867 as he explored the swampy island. Legend has it that he had become separated from a party of men and was alone, disoriented in the fog, when he

came across hard, brittle objects underfoot. A closer look revealed numerous human skeletons and lengths of heavy chain.

For many years, it was not known why the skeletons inhabited this mysterious place, legends about ghosts and haunted happenings abounded, and the townsfolk began to call it “Skull Island.” The truth is far worse than the ghost stories. It is now thought that operators of a slave ship, The Huntress, upon arriving from the coast of the Congo in 1865, learned that slave trade had been ruled illegal, and any captain of a slave ship could be arrested and hung for piracy. In a depraved act of desperation, the crew abandoned their cargo of 200 slaves, bound by heavy chains.

Today the swampy land on and around Skull Island has been converted to rice fields. If you look closely, you may be fortunate enough to spot some of the state’s common water birds standing among the reeds. The tall, grey, long-necked birds with black brows are Great Blue Herons – they like to feed on fish, frogs, invertebrates, and if lucky, a tasty snake. You may also be able to spot an egret or two. Along with the herons and the egrets, sandpipers and other shorebirds call this swampy landscape home.

Not much is known about the Mermentau area’s early history. What we do know is that smugglers, outlaws, slave runners, and pirates frequented the region due to its remote locale and proximity to major waterways. By the late 1850’s the economy shifted from a smuggling base to the more legitimate pursuits of a saw mill, cotton gin, dry goods store, and river ferry. When the railroad came to town in the late 1850’s shipping became a part of everyday life for the community. Today Mermentau’s 700 residents hold a wide range of jobs to maintain their quiet riverside community.

Source(s):

Hoffman, Eva J. "A Guidebook to Amtrak's Sunset Limited." Flashing Yellow Guidebooks, Golden, CO, 2009.

<http://www.city-data.com/city/Mermentau-Louisiana.html>

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