

Mississippi River – Flooding Through the Ages

The Mississippi River has shaped this land throughout the ages, nurturing and then disrupting human settlements along its ever-changing course.

When you get a glimpse of the Mississippi River as the train crosses the Huey Long Bridge on the west side of New Orleans, try to picture the MS river valley just 400 years ago, before the French, Spanish and Acadian settlers began to build permanent settlements on its banks. During floods and whenever the river is running fast, it picks up sediment along all of its 2,346 miles ...and where the river slows, it drops the silt and sand. In past eras, seasonal floods spread the sediments over the river banks to the surrounding lands. Flooding has long sustained rich farmland with no need for additional fertilizers. When the ground became too high in one spot, the river would alter its course and follow a lower outlet toward the Gulf of Mexico.

Communities of Native Americans through the ages valued this river for transportation, commerce and fishing, just as we do today. When their riverside communities were flooded, or when the river found a new channel too far from their homes, they had to move and rebuild.

Our cities today are not designed to be so portable. When Sieur de Bienville first brought a work crew to build New Orleans in 1718 he saw the flood threat and had levees constructed along with the roads and buildings. Levees are used to keep water out of cities, but also to keep the river flowing close enough for convenient transportation and shipping. For several miles west of New Orleans, the train tracks closely follow the western bank levee which holds in the Mississippi.

New Orleans has experienced hurricanes and flooding throughout its history. In 2005 Hurricane Katrina's flood waters broke the levees in 22 places. It is estimated that nearly 2000 people died, and many more lost their homes and entire communities. About half of the population of New Orleans left and does not plan to return.

New Orleans relies on the river for transportation and commerce, as have many other communities along the Mississippi now and throughout time. Like the ever-changing river, people will continue to adapt new strategies to live with the river...and try to prevent the river from disrupting their lives and livelihoods.

Source(s):

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

<http://www.gatewayno.com/history/Mississippi.html>

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