

Interlude

The Arrivals

They started in the eighteenth century: my father's family emigrated from England to Virginia prior to the American Revolution. As one of the less-renowned strains, our family line migrated from Richmond, Virginia, to South Carolina, before eventually landing on the Red River outside of Colfax, Louisiana, in 1879. My mother's side of the family emigrated from France to New Orleans in 1830. Her great-great-grandfather, Napoleon Joseph Frémaux, was sent back to the Collège Louis-le-Grand in France for his education and then returned to Louisiana as a civil engineer. He was also a gifted cartographer and artist. Frémaux became a naturalized citizen in 1855 and shortened his name to Léon.

I was raised on the typical boosterism of family lore without much of the racial and extractive realities that undergirded it. Both of my great-great-grandfathers served as Confederate officers in the Civil War, which was fought to maintain slavery. My grandfather on my father's side was a cotton planter, owned a company store, and undoubtedly employed Black sharecroppers. He was a quiet man whose intimidating silence, I was told, belied incessant worry about the weather and the harvest. He was eventually forced to default on the terms of a loan and lost the family land in the early 1980s.

My maternal grandfather arrived in Louisiana in 1932 to work for the booming Standard Oil Co. in Baton Rouge. A self-described Pennsylvania Dutchman, he received his master's in chemical engineering from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology during the Great Depression and caught a steamer to Baton Rouge for a job at the refinery. He met my grandmother when she was an eighteen-year-old coed at LSU. He eventually became president of Esso International, later renamed Exxon, before losing most of his eyesight to macular degeneration and retiring early to my grandmother's birthplace in the southwestern Louisiana town of Crowley, whose square-mile city grid was platted in 1887 by Leon V. Frémaux, the son of the aforementioned civil engineer.

As I wake to the humid morning and hear the trilling of insects and birdsong at a writer's retreat to finish this book about the economic, racial, and environmental history of this place, I have to consider my own debt to the colliding histories that brought so many people to this delta. Walking the river in Plaquemines Parish, I see four Vietnamese fishermen hunched on an Igloo ice chest by a pair of buckets; some hard-hat workers waiting at the Port Ship West Bank landing for a transport to one of the oil platforms offshore; the seaman on the bulk carriers waiting for a berth at the Port of New Orleans; and the large, post-Katrina elevated estate homes, adjacent to modest trailers, horse stables, a nature rehabilitation center, and an artist's retreat donated to Tulane University. I wonder how to account for the dizzying collisions of interests and people on the river.