

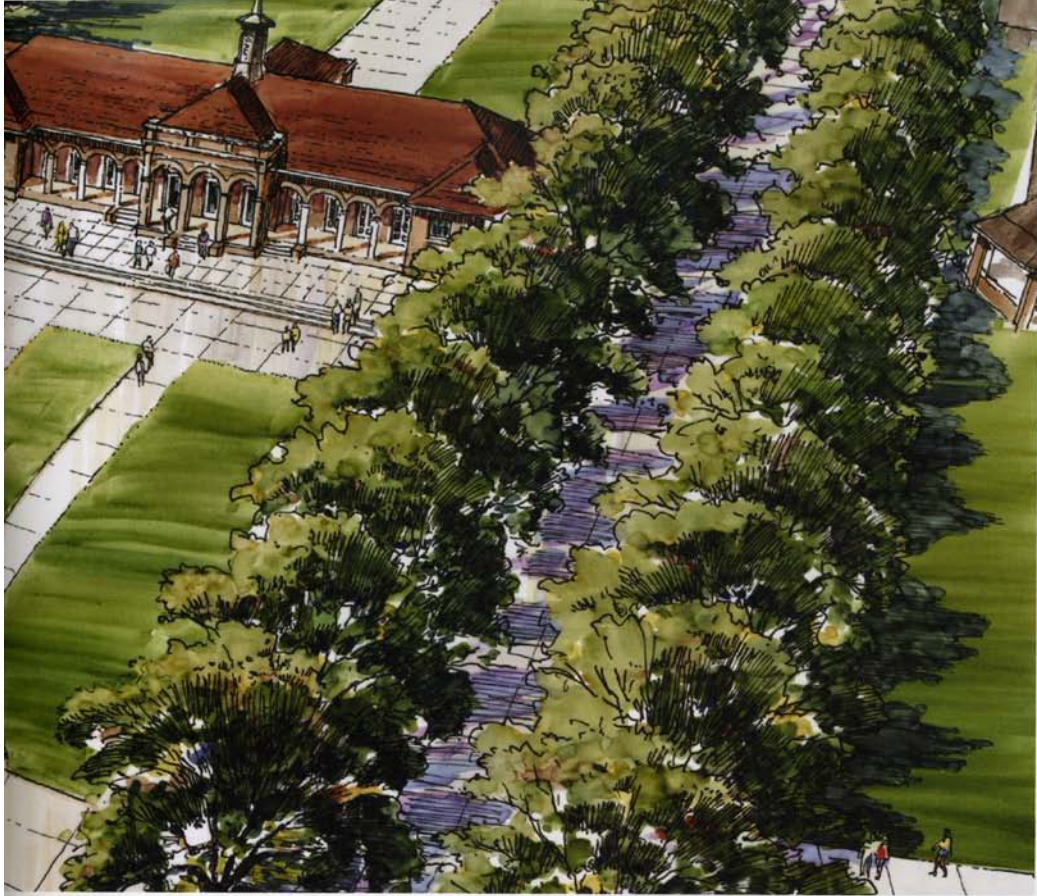


Lost and Found

The Gem of Fontainebleau State Park

by Leslie Richardson

Located on the second-largest salt-water lake in the United States is a remarkable 2,900-acre state park. Haven't heard of Fontainebleau? You're not the only one. And even people who've been to Fontainebleau haven't necessarily *been* there. Many of the remarkable aspects of the park — cultural, historical and ecological — have lain hidden for decades.



Fontainebleau's new master plan is the first of its kind commissioned by the Louisiana Office of State Parks. The state wanted to look holistically at the use, health and preservation of the park.

The members of the master planning committee, including landscape architect Salvador Impastato, took into account the fragile and sensitive features of the site, such as historical ruins and delicate ecosystems.

The Bathhouse

Some of the "lost" features of Fontainebleau State Park include structures built by the CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps) and the WPA (Works Progress Administration).

One of the most interesting WPA structures is the bathhouse, which served the lake and beach. When Fontainebleau's bathhouse was built in 1939, Americans didn't climb out of their cars in flip-flops and swimsuits. Rather, they arrived fully dressed and used the bathhouse to don their swimming gear. The changing rooms were large, with full-sized lockers. There were also event spaces and vending areas in the bathhouse.



"Back then, it was like something you'd see at a country club," Impastato says.

"However, when we took over the planning in 2000, the bathhouse was almost completely blocked off," he continues. "The historic WPA building served merely as restroom facilities for a swimming pool."

The pool was built in the 1960s because Lake Pontchartrain had become too polluted for swimming. Now, thanks to valiant efforts by the Lake Pontchartrain Basin Foundation within the "Save Our Lake" program, the lake is suitable for swimming again.

The newly designed and re-claimed bathhouse is designed to help welcome people back to Lake Pontchartrain.

"It is also a destination in itself," says Impastato. "People will be able to use the restored bathhouse and imagine what it was like to visit the lake in early part of the 20th century."

The Pier and Pavilion

Another way to bring people back to the water is the new pier and pavilion. The pier is designed to allow visitors to travel far onto the lake — three hundred feet. The pavilion will serve as a place for observation of the park and the lake. It will also be a visual

focal point, and the pier's architectural design will echo that of the bathhouse.

But the pier and pavilion aren't just about looks. "The pier serves another purpose as well," Impastato says. "It helps preserve the beach itself."

Since its initial measurements in 1940, Fontainebleau's beach has lost two hundred feet of beachfront. The lake's waves sweep east to west, moving the sand sideways, down the shore, and then back into the lake.

"We can build up the beach by bringing in more sand from the outside, certainly," Impastato says. "But the real goal is to address what's causing the sand loss."

One of the answers is the use of a long pier. As the east-west moving waves approach, the concrete base of the pier will interrupt the flow of the waves, breaking up and dispersing their kinetic energy.

The pier will help solve other problems as well. "Aquatic plants can't thrive in sand that is moving. The pier will help stabilize the sand beneath the water so more plants, such as underwater grasses, can take root," Impastato says. In turn, those plants will help slow erosion, filter lake water, and provide homes for fish and other aquatic life.

"Together, the pier and pavilion serve both ecological and recreational needs of the park," Impastato says.

Sugar Mill Ruins

Other cultural assets of the park include the ruins of a former sugar plantation and mill. The master plan calls for stabilization and development of these structures as an education venue under U.S. Department of the Interior Historic restoration standards. Antebellum structures, African history, historic sugar-mill architecture and more can be enhanced and preserved on this site.

"The sugar-mill kettles are gone, but their bases, chimneys and the outlines of buildings are still there. We will gently remove plant overgrowth and install cultural signage to explain and describe the archeological remains," Impastato says.

"Sometimes all you need to draw people's attention to something is to help them find their way to it. The new visitor's center will be built adjacent to the plantation grounds so visitors will more easily 'discover' those ruins and investigate them," Impastato says.

Fontainebleau's master plan also includes overnight camping facilities, lake and marsh cabin sites, habitat restoration, an equestrian center, nature trails and an Educational Interpretive Center.

"Overall, the plan for Fontainebleau includes a more sensitive and sophisticated understanding of the ecology and history of the park," Impastato says. "Conservation and renewal. Those are our goals here."



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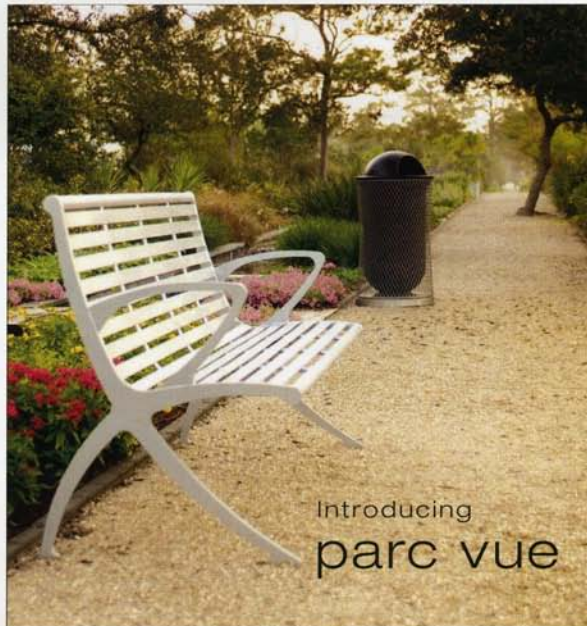


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