

A History of Simmesport

By

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Simmesport is located in the southeastern portion of Avoyelles Parish on the west bank of the Atchafalaya River. In the 18th century the area was peopled by a native American tribe known as the Avoyelles. By the beginning of the 19th century the Avoyelles Indians had become extinct, presumably absorbed by the Tunicas.

The town itself is named for Bennett B. Simmes of Virginia who settled on the east bank of the Atchafalaya before 1837. Records show that Mr. Simmes purchased seventy-nine acres from Thomas Stouts & Francis Breaux on August 6, 1836 that was “*situated in the Parish of Avoyell[e]s on the waters of the Bayou des Glaze*”. He built a dock and a warehouse, or shipping port, along the banks where the Bayou de Glaises empties into the Atchafalaya River. Mr. Simmes is reported to have purchased large land holdings in the Bayou de Glaises area in 1837. According to records at the Parish Courthouse, Section 12 (which is the Simmesport Area) was given as a direct land grant from the government to Bazil C. Crow on December 17, 1838. Subsequently, Mr. Crow sold parcels of this grant to several early settlers including B.B. Simmes.

One of the oldest known records shows the establishment of a post office in 1840 called “Simmes Port”.

The Simmesport area came in for a share of Civil War action. A local volunteer company of 115 enlisted men and four officers was formed and departed for the fighting front in April of 1861. In February of 1864, a Union force of 10,000 men under General Nathaniel Banks landed at Simmesport. This was the beginning of the Red River campaign with its objective to march up the Red River and capture Shreveport. Banks never accomplished his objective, having been defeated at Sabine Crossroads and Pleasant Hill by Confederate General Richard Taylor.

Banks retreated to Alexandria and was later ordered to retreat to Simmesport. On this retreat to Simmesport, Banks was continually harassed by Confederates with skirmishes at Marksville, Mansura, Moreauville, and Yellow Bayou. The Confederate forces with inferior numbers were repulsed and prudently withdrew leaving the Union Forces to cross the Atchafalaya and proceed to Baton Rouge.

An interesting sidelight of this crossing was the improvisation, by a Colonel Bailey, of a sectional type bridge to cross the river. All similar bridges developed by the Army engineers were patterned after Bailey’s concept for this crossing and are famously known as “Bailey Bridges”.

Chronological List of Events Relating to the Simmesport Area

- 1700 - 1800 Inhabited by the Avoyelles Indians
- 1831 Mississippi meander and cut-off made by Captain Shreve
- 1837 First dock and river port constructed by Bennett B. Simmes
- 1938 Grant of land, Section 12 (Simmesport), given to Bazil C. Crowe
- 1840 Post office established
- 1854 First organization established, Masonic Lodge #163
- 1861 - 1864 Civil War action
- 1873 First church – Fairview Baptist Church
- 1969 First railroad called “Old Bailey” owned by St. Louis, Avoyelles, and Southwestern Railway Co.

- 1900 Texas & Pacific Railway acquired “Old Bailey”.
- 1905 First Public School
- 1912 Flood
- 1913 Commercial fish business established by Murphy Lacour
- 1915 First automobile to appear in Simmesport
- 1917 First ice house built
- 1925 Simmesport incorporated as a village. A branch of the People’s Savings Bank & Trust established, closed in 1931
- 1927 Great flood
- 1928 Railroad bridge opened
- 1935 First sawmill – Hyde Lumber Co.
- 1937 Ring levee constructed
- 1949 Simmesport becomes a town
- 1956 Simmesport State Bank established
- 1960 Avoyelles Parish Port Commission created

The Town of Simmesport was originally incorporated as a village in 1925 with W.D. Merrick as its first Mayor. It became a town in 1948.

In 2001 the Simmesport Atchafalaya River Festival was created to promote Simmesport’s commercial fishing industry and our town’s heritage being on the banks of the Atchafalaya River. Also, in 2001 the Simmesport Cares Senior Program was founded to give thanks to our seniors for what they did for this town.

In 2003 the Simmesport Mardi Gras Celebration was formed on Mardi Gras Day each year for the citizens of Central Louisiana.

GEOGRAPHIC LOCATION

Simmesport is located in the eastern portion of Avoyelles Parish. It is 44 air miles southeast of Alexandria and 53 air miles northwest of Baton Rouge. The town lies 122 air miles northwest of New Orleans and 156 air miles southeast of Shreveport.

The elevation at Simmesport is 45 feet MSL which falls off to 40 MSL on all but the northern side of town. Drainage is generally south to southwest into Brushy Bayou. The town occupies the meander belt ridge along Bayou des Glaises and the Atchafalaya River.

Avoyelles Parish is bounded by Rapides Parish on the west, LaSalle and Catahoula on the north, Concordia on the northeast, Pointe Coupee to the southeast, St Landry to the south, and Evangeline Parish to the southwest. The Red River flows through the northern section of the parish and forms the northeast boundary with Concordia Parish. The Atchafalaya forms the southeastern boundary. These rivers give access to the Mississippi and Black Rivers.

Avoyelles Parish has an area of 866 square miles and comprises 15,000 acres of water and 532,480 acres of land. The soils in the alluvial lands are very fertile, sandy to loam and clay to clay

loam soils at indefinite depths. The soils in the prairie and upland hills, though not as fertile, have become very productive as a result of better drainage, planting more adaptable crops and more extensive fertilization.

CLIMATE

The Simmesport area has an annual average temperature of 67.9° F, with mean yearly rainfall amounting to 62.26 inches and is classified as semi-tropical. From March 22 to November 3, there are 226 days when the temperature does not go below 35° F. Over a 24-year period, January was the coldest and one of the wettest months, with an average mean temperature of 53° F and an average rainfall of 6.37 inches. Prevailing winds are generally from the southeast at average rates of seven to ten miles per hour.

The “frost line” offers no problem as freezes occur infrequently. When they do occur, it is for a one to two-day duration and freezing of the soil is a rare happening. Snowfall is a rarity and slight in depth when it does, which is about once every seven years.

Sunshine appears in this area on the average of 230 days annually or 63%.

Unusual weather such as droughts and tornados are infrequent. The area is occasionally in the path of tropical storms and hurricanes, most of which have spent their major force before reaching this far inland. These storms affect only a relatively small area for a brief time and their frequency is quite low. Floods have been a problem to this area because of its location in the Red and Mississippi River drainage basins. These floods have resulted from runoff upstream and rainfall within the area has little influence on the river stages. However, since the completion of Old River Lock and the flood control structures, the distribution of flow between the Mississippi and Atchafalaya river outlets to the Gulf of Mexico can now be regulated at the structure site. This control structure, according to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, together with the two major levee systems in the Red and Atchafalaya basins, will prevent severe damage from floods in the area. Experience and modern engineering knowledge have done wonders in flood control.

In contrast to these occasional adverse features cited above, one should note the mild and short winters, abundant precipitation, the long growing (frost-free) season, freedom from extreme weather, and the delightful spring and fall weather.