

HISTORY OF ENVIRONMENTAL RACISM IN THE GULF SOUTH

1836: The Allen brothers, real estate speculators from Syracuse, established what became Houston where Buffalo Bayou and White Oak Bayou converged, even though boat access from the Gulf of Mexico was difficult that far from the coast. Not long after the new state Capitol was constructed, there were rains so heavy that all of the buildings flooded and people had to walk through knee-deep water.

1836-1936: Houston experienced sixteen major floods, some of them cresting at over forty feet.

June 28, 1879: Congress established the Mississippi River Commission, allowing the Army Corps of Engineers to push for building levees to prevent flooding instead of using safer ways to drain high water. This approach would lead to floods becoming much more damaging to people and property.

Early 1900s: The construction of new canals to drain water from Lake Okeechobee and the Everglades opened extremely fertile land to farming and protected the crops from flooding.

September 8, 1900: A Category Four hurricane hit Galveston Island, Texas with a fifteen foot storm surge and caused the deaths of at least 8,000 people, making it the deadliest hurricane in U. S. history. Along with the cost of lives and property, the newspapers spread false rumors about African Americans looting the bodies of the dead, leading to white vigilantes lynching dozens of people. Many Galvestonians and their businesses moved to Houston, fifty miles inland.

1901: Galveston established a commission form of city government which ensured that black voters would always be outnumbered in local elections. The local African American newspaper complained that "The colored man is good enough to save the lives of the little white babes, white women and even men, but not good enough to even be represented as a committeeman."

1910-1914: After Harris County voters voted to dredge to a depth of twenty-five feet the fifty-mile Houston Ship Channel to the Gulf of Mexico, with the help of matching federal funds, Houston's future as a major port for the oil and gas industry was assured.

1918-1923: The Industrial Canal, created to allow ships to move cargo between the Mississippi River and Lake Pontchartrain, cut the Lower Ninth Ward off from the main segments of New Orleans. Although over 25,000 people lived in the Lower Ninth, officials claimed the area was uninhabited.

March-April 1927: The most destructive river flood in the history of the United States occurred, as the Mississippi River became sixty miles wide south of Memphis and caused at least 246 deaths. About 70% of the over 325,000 people forced into relief camps were African American. Afterwards, the Army Corps of Engineers built even more levees on the river, preventing enough silt to be in the South Louisiana wetlands to protect the city of New Orleans from some of the worst hurricane damage.

September 16, 1928: The Okeechobee Hurricane (also called the San Felipe Segundo Hurricane) was the second deadliest tropical cyclone in the history of the United States, killing at least 2,500 people. Because of a storm surge of twenty feet of flooding on the southern side of Lake Okeechobee, about 75% of the dead were migrant farm workers, most of whom were black. Most of their bodies were bulldozed into an unmarked mass grave in West Palm Beach, where later there was a garbage dump, a slaughterhouse, and a sewage treatment plant. Zora Neale Hurston described the storm's impact in the novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

1920s-2015: The spread of oil drilling through southern Louisiana gave a few members of the Houma Nation new jobs but also destroyed much of their land through the digging of channels; the taking over of land in order to build oil rigs; and the widespread toxic air, water, and soil caused by oil leaks.

May 31, 1929: Close to fifty feet of rain pelted Houston, with the San Jacinto River about thirty feet above normal.

1930s-2002: The proliferation of petrochemical plants along much of South Louisiana led at least five independent African American towns (Mossville, Diamond, Morrisonville, Sunrise, and Revilletown) to demand that the companies take responsibility for the diseases and deaths caused by the toxic air and water. In the end, they have usually had to agree to sell their property to the company.

December 6-9, 1935: Storms led to the bayous in and around Houston cresting at over fifty feet above normal. The city's pumping station was unable to supply water for several days. Seven people died, including five children.

April 23, 1937: In reaction to the 1935 storm in Houston, the Texas state legislature created the Harris County Flood Control District.

1941: A levee was built along the north shore of Lake Apopka (north of Orlando, Florida) to drain 20,000 acres of shallow marsh for farming. Over the next five decades, pesticides poisoned the lake and the workers.

1950-1980: Houston had major flooding at least twenty-one times.

September 11-12, 1961: At least forty-six Houstonians died in Hurricane Carla in spite of the largest evacuation in the country's history.

September 9, 1965: Hurricane Betsy destroyed entire communities in St. Bernard and Plaquemines Parishes. A storm surge poured so much water into the Industrial Canal that the levee broke in several places, drowning people in their attics. At least eighty-one people died in the Lower Ninth Ward. So many residents of that neighborhood heard what sounded like an explosion that they are still convinced that someone bombed the levee to keep the water from hitting the wealthier parts of New Orleans.

1996: In order to restore the health of Lake Apopka, the government of Florida paid the farm owners \$103 million to leave their property and spent possibly \$3 million to investigate the excessive deaths of birds and the hormone problems of alligators caused by the use of pesticides. No government agency spent any money to investigate and treat the many physical problems of the 2,500 African Americans, Haitians, and Mexicans working on the farms.

June 5-10, 2001: Tropical Storm Allison dumped as much as eighty percent of the Houston area's annual rainfall, causing at least twenty-two fatalities and major property damage.

August 29, 2005 and soon after that: Hurricane Katrina hit land and, after levees in the Industrial Canal and the Mississippi River-Gulf Coast Canal ("Mr. Go") broke, led to over 1800 deaths, most of them in poor communities of color in Louisiana and Mississippi. Some elders died from the stress in the following days and weeks. As of 2010, 700 people were still missing. At least 1000 of the known dead victims were from the Lower Ninth Ward. Over a million people evacuated from the Gulf Coast. About 100,000 of them from New Orleans had not returned home by 2010.

September 4, 2005: One week after the storm, six New Orleans police officers fired on six unarmed civilians crossing the Danziger Bridge. Two of them died. The officers were later convicted of murder, but in August 2015, an appeals court ruled that they had the right to a second trial.

September 24, 2005: Hurricane Rita hit the coasts of Louisiana and East Texas. Although the worst of the storm missed New Orleans and the death toll (120) was smaller than Katrina's, Rita destroyed

more property than Katrina in segments of south Louisiana, particularly areas inhabited by the Houma Nation and other indigenous groups. The combination of the two hurricanes so close together turned about 200 square miles of wetlands into open water, taking away many people's homes and livelihoods.

October 5, 2005: The state closed Charity Hospital, the main source of free health care for poor people in New Orleans since 1736, even though it would have been cheaper and faster to repair the building than to build a replacement. The poor had to depend on a number of clinics and temporary state services until a new, privately contracted University Medical Center New Orleans opened almost ten years later. There are fears that the decision to serve wealthy patients in the new hospital will limit the care for those without insurance.

September 13, 2008: Hurricane Ike made landfall at Galveston after 50,000 people had evacuated. At least 28 Texans died, while the total for all of the countries hit by the storm was at least 195 deaths, including 74 in Haiti and seven in Cuba. There was also major flooding and some deaths in Louisiana and a number of other states. Many people in Houston and elsewhere were without electricity for over a month, but the storm moved so quickly that Houston did not experience major flooding. The closing of chemical plants and oil refineries led to an increase in the prices of gasoline, home heating oil, and natural gas.

April 20, 2010: An explosion on a British Petroleum (BP) drilling rig off the coast of Louisiana led to the deaths of eleven workers and the largest oil spill in U. S. history, almost five million barrels of oil over 87 days. Both the oil and the chemical dispersant Corexit used to turn the oil into small droplets have caused untold damage to marine life in the Gulf and along the coast; to the fish, shrimp, crab, and oyster industries; and to the health of people of the Gulf Coast.

October 2010: The U. S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) threatened to take over enforcing part of the Clean Water Act in Alabama if the Alabama Department of Environmental Management (ADEM) didn't force cities to keep waterways cleaner.

December 3, 2010: Advocates for Environmental Human Rights (Louisiana) and Gulf States Human Rights Working Group (Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana), helped and endorsed by an impressive list of regional and national organizations, submitted to the United National Universal Periodic Review of the Human Rights Council "The Human Rights Crisis in the Aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, a report on 'the US Government's violation of human rights in connection with Hurricane Katrina.'"

April 20, 2015: On the fifth anniversary of the BP oil spill, the 17,000 members of the United Houma Nation petitioned the Obama administration to support their fight for federal recognition. They were denied federal grants after the oil spill, as well as after Hurricane Katrina because they did not have federal status as a nation. The Louisiana Land and Exploration Company, a subsidiary of ConocoPhillips, and other oil companies oppose the petition to take more Houma land.

July 3, 2015: The Justice Department reached an agreement for the payment of \$18.7 billion (spread over 18 years) by BP for the Deepwater Horizon spill in the Gulf of Mexico, the largest fine for environmental damage ever. The settlement also ends all other pending federal or state government suits for the spill and its impact.

General Circumstances in 2015: There are about 191 major pipeline systems along the coastal zone of Louisiana and over 3500 oil rigs in the Gulf of Mexico covering 39 million acres, 3-230 miles off of the Louisiana coast. BP has received forty-three leases from the Department of the Interior and now has more oil rigs in the Gulf than at any other point.

Compiled by Project South member Cita Cook for the Southern Movement Assembly, 2015 and 2017.