

2018

Standing Their Ground: The fight against land loss and climate change in Dulac, Louisiana

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Recommended Citation

Hall, Bridget, "Standing Their Ground: The fight against land loss and climate change in Dulac, Louisiana" (2018). *Senior Honors Projects*. Paper 629.
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I chose my Honors Project in March of 2017 standing in the blazing sunlight near a collapsing graveyard in Dulac, Louisiana. I was visiting Dulac as part of a field seminar with the Williams-Mystic Maritime Program, and was learning about the impact of climate change on coastal communities and indigenous populations. Listening to Chief Shirell Parfait-Dardar of the Grand Caillou/Dulac Band of Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw tribe, or Dulac BCCM, describe the impacts of climate change and other environmental factors on her tribe's culture and heritage, I had a moment of clarity. I'd learned about the threat climate change posed to historic sites and cultural heritage in my classes at the University of Rhode Island, but had never fully comprehended the impact that these threats had on the communities to which those sites held the most meaning. Chief Shirell's stories brought this impact to intense and vivid life, and I knew in that moment that I wanted to learn more about this place, the people who lived there, and the impact climate change would have on both. Through this examination, I hoped to tell the story of a resilient and thriving community living on the frontlines of America's changing environment. I hoped to illuminate the impacts the changing environment would have on this community, and specifically highlight the often ignored impacts on cultural heritage. Finally, I hoped to uncover and understand what protections and programs, if any, existed to help mitigate the impacts of the changing environment and protect the community in Dulac.

When I returned to URI in the fall of 2017, I created a plan to turn my ideas and goals for my Honors Project into reality. I decided to focus specifically on the impact of climate change and other environmental factors on Prevost Cemetery, a privately-owned cemetery in Dulac that holds primarily indigenous remains. My overarching goal was to complete a scholarly research paper that examined the various factors impacting Prevost Cemetery, identified possible options for the mitigation of these factors, and recommended one or more options for the BCCM in Dulac to utilize in their decision-making regarding the future of Prevost Cemetery. To complete this paper, I planned to travel to Dulac, Louisiana and conduct interviews about Prevost Cemetery, the threat it faced, and options for the future

with numerous stakeholders. I expected this work would be able to be completed by the end of the fall semester.

As with most scholarly research, my project changed as I completed it. The first change occurred during the proposal process. As I worked with my mentor, Professor Rod Mather of the URI History Department, to complete my proposal, it became clear that I would need to apply for approval from the URI Institutional Review Board (IRB) to complete in-person interviews as part of my research. The process of applying for IRB approval took over half the fall semester to complete, and forced me to radically alter my research timeline and extend my project into a second semester. The delay necessitated by IRB approval was helpful, however, as it allowed me to plan a trip to Dulac, Louisiana in January, and apply for funding for that travel. I was fortunate to receive funding from both the Honors Opportunity Fund and an Undergraduate Research Grant from the URI Office of Undergraduate Research and Innovation for my travel to Dulac.

The second major change in my research occurred as I was planning my research trip to Dulac. In my conversations with Chief Shirell, she explained that her tribe was trying to purchase Prevost Cemetery and had recently entered into a fractious legal debate over this purchase. As a result, the tribe's legal representative had requested that any investigation into Prevost Cemetery, academic or otherwise, should be put off until the end of the tribe's purchase of the land. This change forced me to reconsider my research, specifically my tight focus on Prevost Cemetery as a case study of the impacts of environmental change on cultural heritage and coastal communities. I decided to continue with my research trip to Dulac, and use the trip as a chance to learn more about the community of Dulac and the BCCM, and the broader factors that were impacting these communities.

My trip to Dulac was both deeply rewarding and deeply challenging. I was able to spend a day visiting Dulac and understanding the community in more depth. I was also able to speak with Chief Shirell for over four hours, and she both described and brought me to significant cultural places for her

tribe and community in Dulac. I was inspired and moved by Chief Shirell's dedication to the land and her people, and her passion for finding ways to preserve her community. I was also deeply impacted by the beauty and vibrancy of Southern Louisiana and its people. However, it was overwhelming to learn just how many factors, both environmental and man-made, threaten Southern Louisiana and the Dulac and BCCM community. I left feeling honored to have been entrusted with the BCCM's story, but challenged by the task of adequately articulating, examining, and sharing this story with a broader audience.

The final change my project underwent was the format of the final product. Towards the end of the spring semester, my mentor and I began to discuss how best to articulate the story, issues, and options of the BCCM of Dulac and their struggle to maintain resilient in the face of environmental change. We determined that my original idea, a formal paper, would be too lengthy to be an accessible tool for understanding the problems facing the BCCM and the solutions they can utilize. It was important to me from the beginning that the end result serve a purpose for Chief Shirell and the BCCM in Dulac. I believe that creating a useable analysis of mitigation options is the only way to truly repay the tribe for allowing me into their world and community, and spending much of their time helping me understand the issues they face. Further, I believe our world needs problem solvers who to learn to understand and present solutions rather than simply articulate a problem. A useable, accessible presentation of my findings presents solutions and serve a purpose beyond my academic goals and career. To this end, my mentor and I decided to rework my final paper into a history-focused policy brief.

History-focused policy briefs are an innovative academic product that are only recently being created and utilized by historians and policy-makers alike. Unlike traditional policy briefs, these incorporate an extensive analysis of the historical context of an issue, and examine historic attempts to resolve the issue. In doing so, history-focused policy briefs are a direct attempt at actualizing the age-old

advice that learning from the past can inform the future. However, few policy-makers embrace the role of historical analysis in understanding and solving modern problems, and few historians apply their knowledge of past events and trends to examine the problems of today. As a result, few history-focused policy briefs exist. The University of Rhode Island's Applied History Lab is one of the few places currently developing these briefs. My mentor, Professor Rod Mather runs the URI Applied History Lab, and helped me reframe my ideas and the information I uncovered into the format of a history-focused policy brief. It is a project that is still ongoing, and will be finalized and sent to Chief Shirell and the Dulac BCCM in the coming weeks.

When I started planning my Honors Project, I established several learning outcomes that I hoped to be able to achieve through the course of completing my project. I wanted to improve my ability to conduct independent, scholarly, and interdisciplinary research, develop problem-solving skills informed by research and study, and become an advocate for an issue and community for which I hold a deep passion. Although my project changed, I was still able to meet these goals and learn other things that were beyond my initial conceptualization.

First, completing my Honors Project directly improved my ability to complete independent scholarly research. This was the first project of my undergraduate education that allowed and encouraged me to pursue my own questions about the world through scholarly research. Over the nine months it took me to complete my project, I was able to define, refine, and investigate my topic and focus on what I thought necessary to answer my questions. This independent process was deeply rewarding, and gave me invaluable experience in creating and answering my own scholarly curiosity. I know this experience will help me in my future, most specifically in my post-graduate work. Next, I was able to develop my skills as a problem solver. I developed skills born of necessity, as my research unexpectedly changed and I was forced to solve new problems to help my work come to fruition. Further, the process of identifying options and choosing a solution led me to think critically about the

balance between practical and ideal solutions, and the ways that this balance can be addressed. I know the skills I developed as a problem solver as a result of my work on this project will help me both in my future scholarship and in my life. Finally, I was able to become an advocate. Through my research trip to Dulac and conversations with Chief Shirell, I learned the story of a people, community, and culture that is invisible to most Americans. The story of Southern Louisiana, and the threats it is facing on the front lines of environmental change, is one that few people outside the region know about, and about which even fewer care. I feel fortunate to be able to use my project as a way to spread this story to my community at home and scholarly community at URI, and have my work act as a tool for advocacy for this community.

While I was able to achieve my overall learning goals during the completion of my Honors Project, I learned more lessons and gained more perspectives that I know will have a pronounced impact on my future. First, I learned about the formal process of conducting research with human subjects through my work with the URI IRB. I learned about the tenets of ethical research, and the institutional processes in place to enhance knowledge while protecting humanity. However, I also learned about the delicate interactions between this process and social science research. My research fell into a gray area, involving human subjects, but including none of the potential harms, such as deception, invasion of privacy, and invasive medical procedures, that IRB serves to protect against. As such, my work, like many other social science research projects, did not easily lend itself to the structures and procedures of the IRB approval process. I believe the perspectives of stakeholders who have personal knowledge and perspectives on issues of scholarly interest are vitally important to truly understanding the scholarly questions I find most interesting, and know I will continue to use this knowledge in my future work. Through my experience with my Honors Project, I will know how to navigate the IRB application and approval process and will not be deterred by its lack of direct applicability in the future. I also learned about the unpredictability of conducting research into the lives and realities of peoples and cultures.

Most of my undergraduate work has focused on removed analyses of problems that already occurred. I have done very limited work that has involved speaking to and working with people in real time. While I found this process immensely rewarding, it was also unpredictable. I had to adjust and refocus my entire project based on factors that I could not control and out of respect for my community of focus. This unpredictability forced me to learn how to be more flexible and open to change in my work. My research was especially unpredictable because of my work with an indigenous tribe. When starting my Honors Project, I was ignorant of the extent of the difficulties that are inherent in the lives of indigenous communities in America. My original conception of my project did not include these difficulties, and I only realized the critical importance of historic injustice and current discrimination to understanding my topic after my conversations with Chief Shirell. I know that gaining this perspective will make me a better and more inclusive scholar in the future.

In conclusion, I believe my Honors Project was one of the most consequential endeavors of my undergraduate career. Through the process of developing a research topic, following this topic throughout a year of work and numerous changes, applying and receiving grant funding for my work, planning and executing a four-day research trip to Louisiana, conducting months of independent research, and drafting a poster and final product, I have challenged myself beyond what I thought possible. The lessons and skills I learned as a consequence of completing my project have made me a better student, a better scholar, and a better advocate, and I would not have wanted to end my time at URI any other way.