



National Trust for Historic Preservation

lists

West St. John the Baptist Parish

America's 11 Most Endangered Historic Places 2023

“Since 1988, the National Trust has used its list of America's 11 Most Endangered Historic Places to raise awareness about the threats facing some of the nation's greatest treasures. Now in its 36th year, the annual list has identified more than [350 sites to date](#), and it has proven so successful in galvanizing preservation efforts that only a handful of sites have been lost.

The diversity of sites on this year's list mirrors the diversity of the American experience, part of the National Trust's continued commitment to [telling the full American story](#). What's more, the stories behind these places illustrate the complexities and challenges that have always been part of what it means to be American, but that have not always received the attention they deserve.

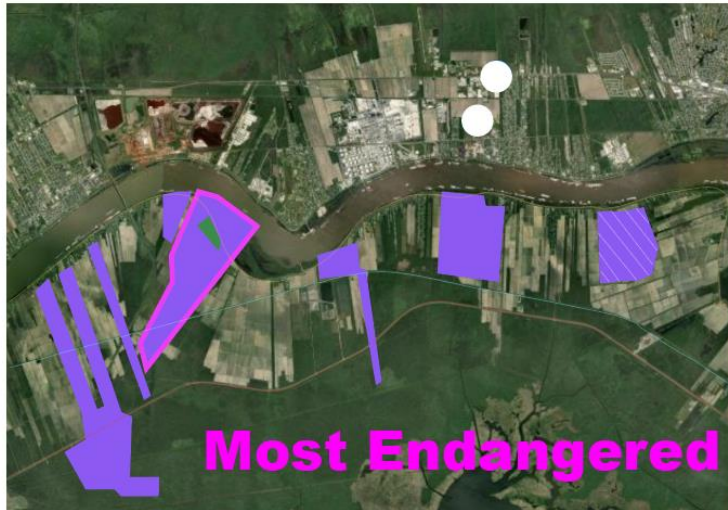
One thread running through [the 2023 list](#) is the power of multicultural communities to use their distinct identities and histories to directly combat cultural erasure—the gradual disappearance of community landmarks that help tell the story of those who've called a place home, along with the loss of treasured local businesses, restaurants, customs, and traditions. By rallying around the places that symbolize their history and stories, neighborhoods and communities are fighting overdevelopment, displacement, gentrification, and other threats, finding empowerment in their unique pasts.

Just as the tireless work of the National Trust, its partners, and local preservationists across the country have saved dozens of previously listed sites and set many more on a path to a positive solution, so now can we work together on behalf of these endangered places. Join us in our efforts to [save America's historic sites](#).”

<https://savingplaces.org/americas-most-endangered-historic-places>

What is driving heavy industrial development on the eleven mile stretch of West St. John along the great River Road?

1. The State of Louisiana
2. St. John Parish
3. The Port of South Louisiana
4. The Mississippi River
5. Cheap Natural Gas
6. Union Pacific Railroad
7. The 3127 Highway Corridor
8. The New Orleans Airport
9. The Proximity of New Orleans
10. Louisiana's Succession Laws



	LED Certified Sites		Lucy Eurochem		Union Pacific Railroad
	Highway 18		Highway 3127		Greenfield Grain Elevator Site

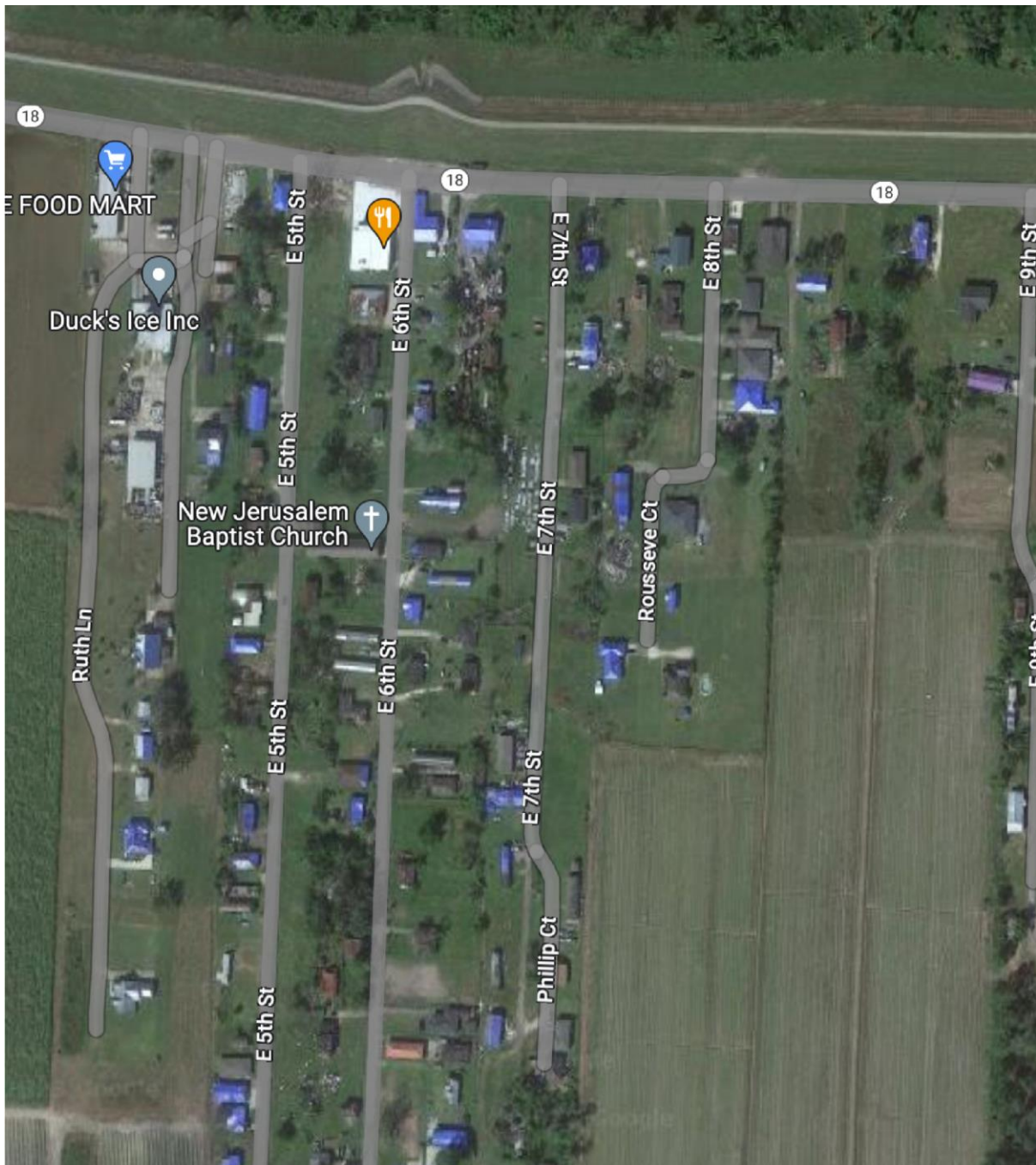


<https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/united-states-seeks-preliminary-injunction-against-denka-performance-elastomer-immediately>

at Edgard

Endangered from Hurricane Ida and future storms, hurricanes, tornadoes, and floods

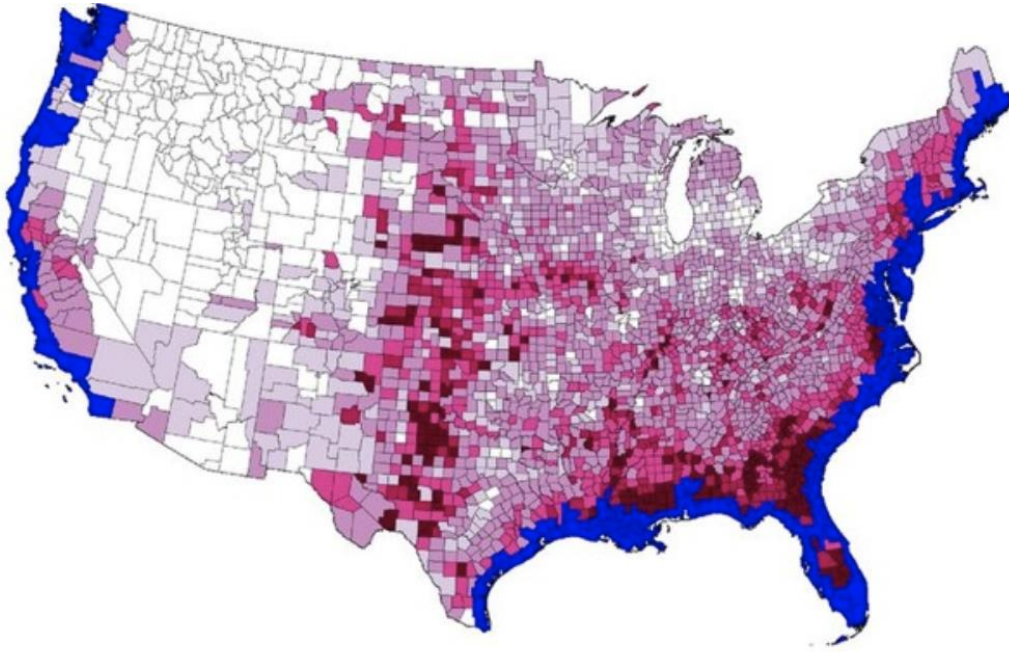
2023 Satellite view of Tigerville community, downriver from Edgard.
Blue (tarped) roofs still evident after Hurricane Ida's impact in August 2021.



Climate Threats

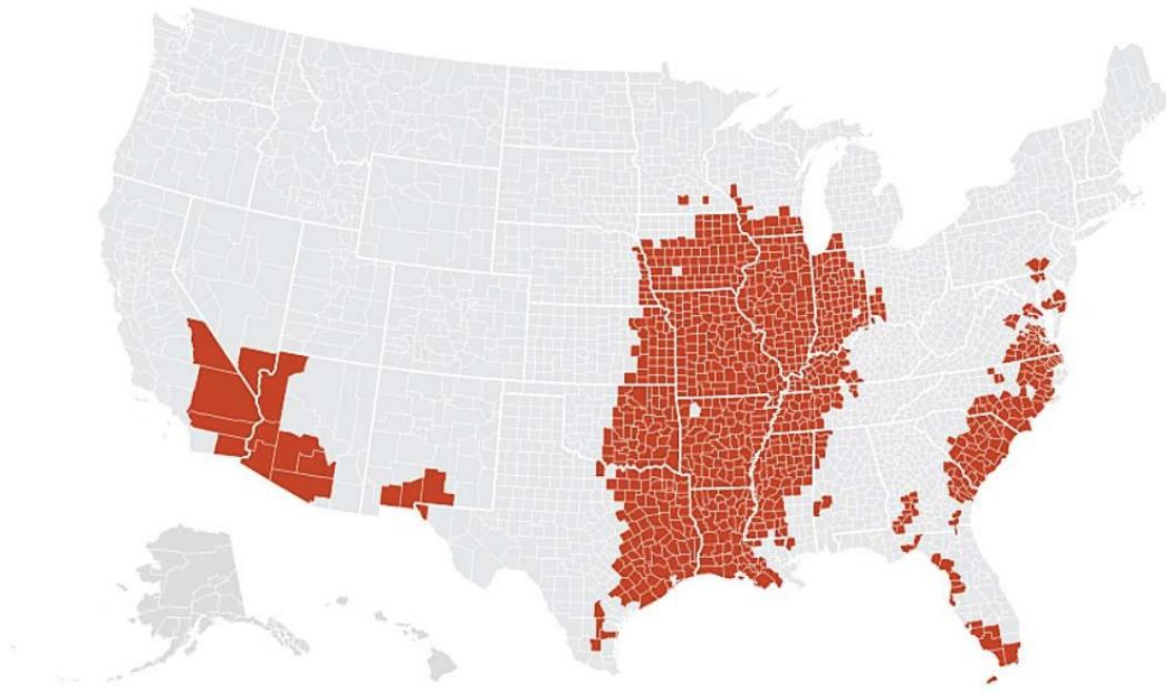
The situation now is a statewide issue

Migration Due to Sea Level Rise

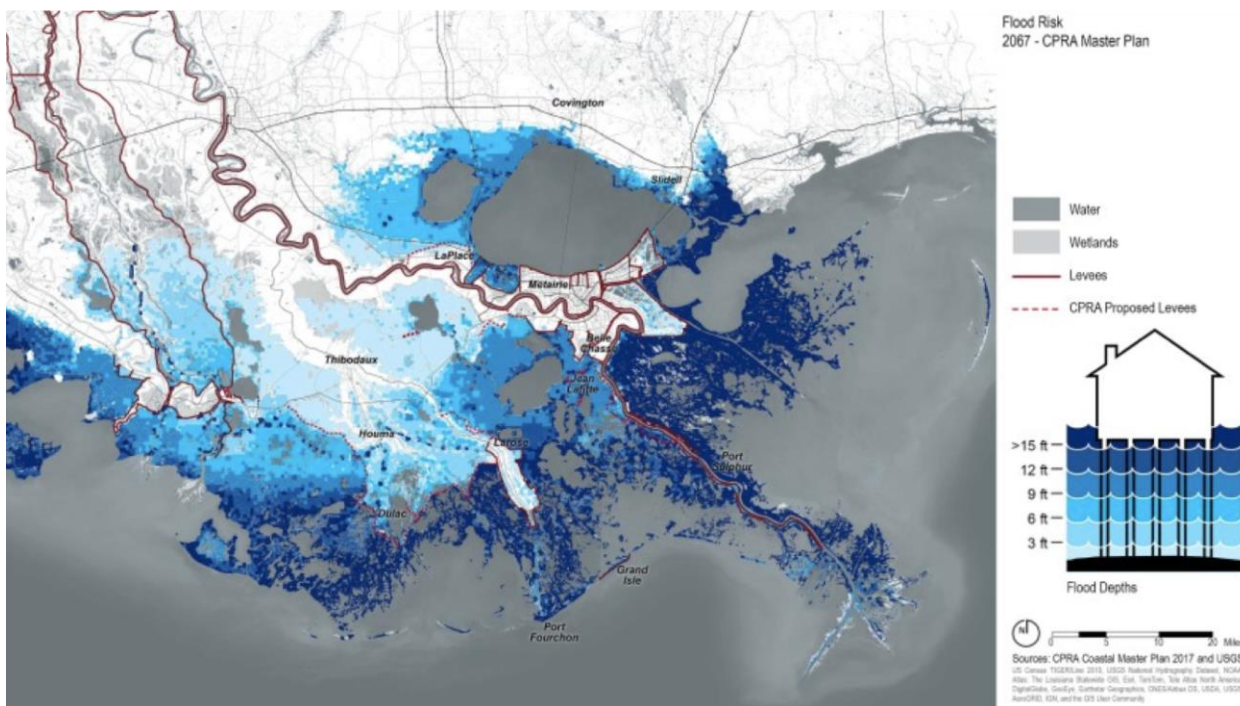


Blue counties will lose land. Red counties will see increased migration, with the shade proportional to the increase.

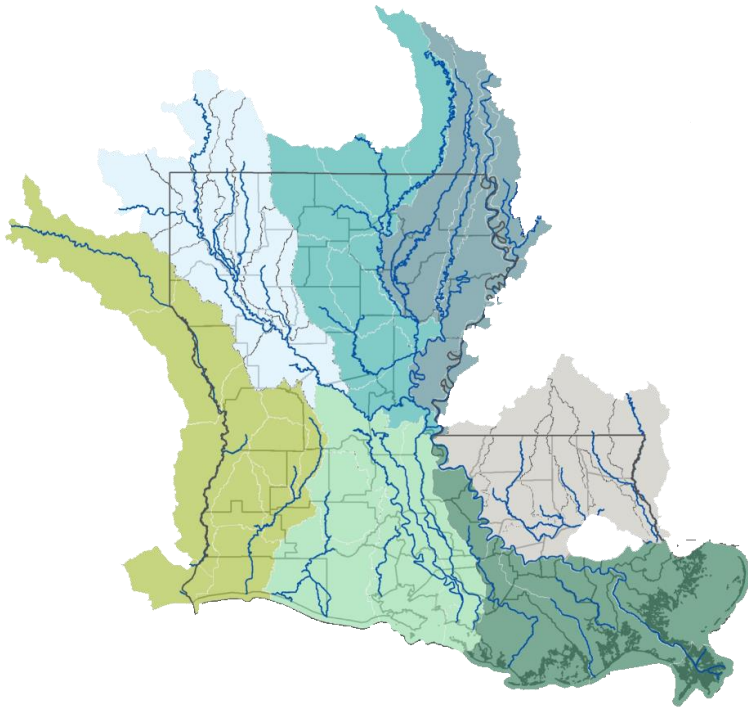
--Arstechnica.com 2020



Counties predicted to have a heat index of 125°F on .5 days or more by 2053
Data: First Street Foundation. Map: Axios Visuals.



Flood Risk – Sea level rise and watershed flooding. CPRA Master Plan



Flood Risk is not only a coastal issue.

Louisiana Watershed Initiative



Climate-related hazards in the US in real-time.

Current and future assessments of wildfire, drought, inland flooding, coastal flooding, extreme heat

<https://resilience.climate.gov/>

at Lucy

Endangered by the existing Industry across the Mississippi River on the Eastbank

Environmental Justice Screen: West Bank of St John Parish, Louisiana

September 6, 2022

Adrienne Katner, D.Env.jj, M.S.

Program Director, Environmental and Occupational Health Sciences,
School of Public Health, LSU Health Sciences Center

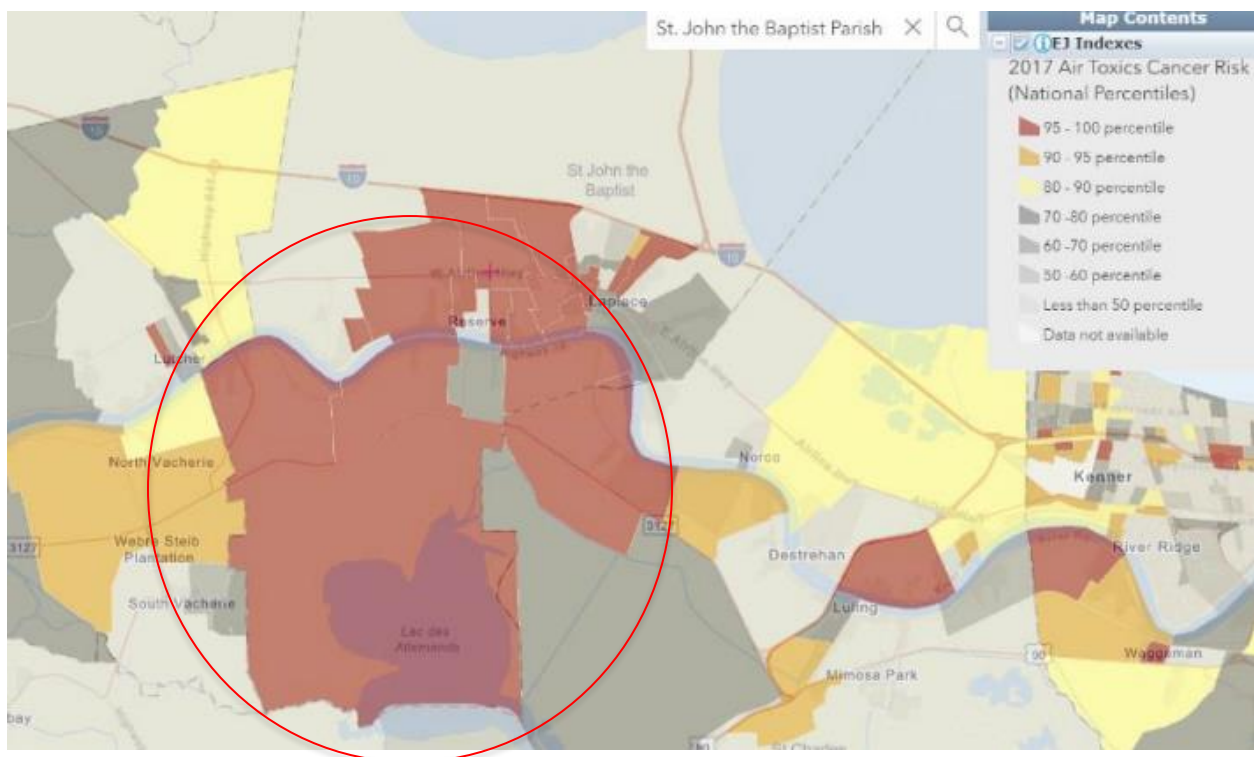


Figure 1. Air Toxics Cancer Risks (National Percentiles) Source: EPA EJ Screen (2017)

Westbank Cancer Health Risks

This map presents tract-level lifetime cancer risk from inhalation of air toxics (as risk per lifetime per million people) (Figure 1). These cancer risk estimates are based on EPA's 2017 National Air Toxics Assessment (NATA) data for St. John the Baptist Parish, LA.

Air emissions cross political and geographic boundaries. The block groups indicated here in dark brown/red have the highest cancer risks in the US (95th-100th percentile). This means that at least 95% of census block groups throughout the US have cancer risks lower than census block groups indicated here in dark brown/red. The west bank of the St. John the Baptist parish has cancer risks within the top 95-100th percentile in the nation from toxic air emissions. The primary source of toxic air emissions in these block groups are stack and fugitive air emissions from industrial facilities which are either across the

Mississippi River, and/or neighboring parishes. Cancer risks from industrial air emissions are not limited to those block groups in which the facility is located.

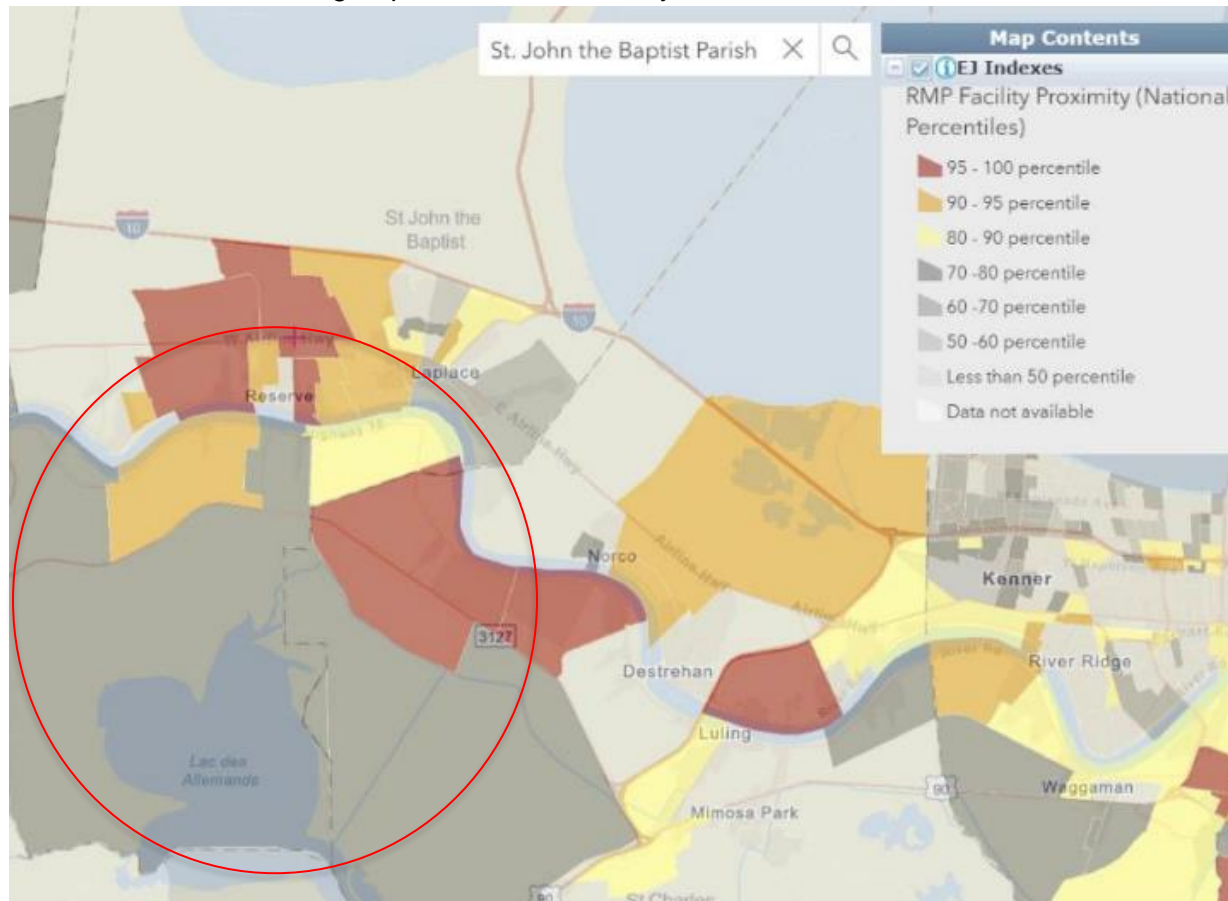


Figure 2. RMP Facility Proximity (National Percentiles) Source: EPA EJ Screen (2017)

Westbank Facility Hazards

Census block groups on the west bank of St. John Parish are also within the top 95-100th percentile of block groups in the nation with the most “RMP” facilities (count of facilities within 5 km that are required to have a chemical accident risk management plan) (Figure 2). RMP facilities are highly regulated facilities as they use extremely hazardous substances, that in the event of an accident, may pose a serious threat to the surrounding community.

This would not be a significant concern, except for the fact that St. John Parish consistently made the top ten parishes with the highest industry-reported accidental releases for each year these data were collected (Figure 3). Between 2001 and 2014, there were 1,877 hazardous substance release emergency events in the Mississippi River Industrial Corridor (MRIC), which made up 67% of all events in the state.¹ These events involved 234 victims, 64% of which were members of the public. Health effects from fixed facilities involved in these events were most frequently respiratory (47%). A total of 3,121 substances were involved and most of the releases were to air (84%). During this period, there were 22 orders to evacuate within the Mississippi River industrial corridor and 37 shelter in place orders.

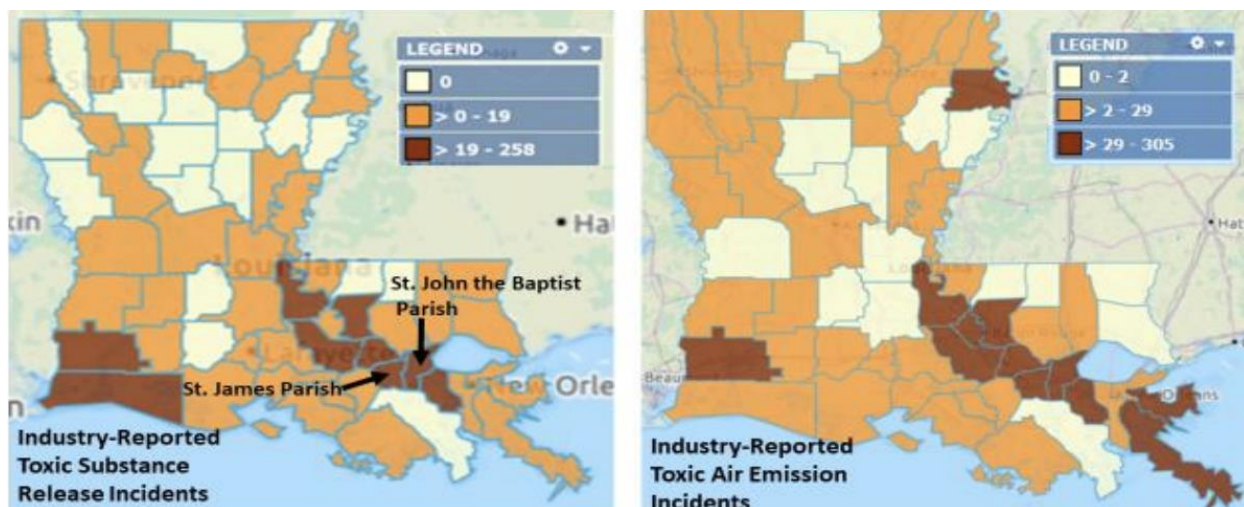


Figure 3. Reported Industrial Accidents by Parish. Left: Rate of all reported acute toxic substance release incidents per 100,000 in LA (2010). Right: Rate of reports of acute toxic substance “air emission” release incidents per 100,000 (2010).

Westbank Respiratory Risks

The west bank of St. John also has one of the highest respiratory hazard indices in the nation (again, within the top 95-100th percentile) (Figure 4). This value, air toxics respiratory HI or hazard index, represents a sum of non-cancerous risks from air toxics with respiratory health outcomes, that are based on the estimated air concentration relative to the health-based reference concentration. These data are also based on EPA’s National Air Toxics Assessment data for 2017.

Thus, cancer risks are not the only concern to communities on the west bank. Other adverse health outcomes like asthma, lung disease, and COPD are among the respiratory health outcomes of concern to these communities. Indeed, St. John the Baptist Parish consistently experiences exceptionally high emergency room visits for asthma compared to both the state and the nation (Table 1). The parish is consistently among the top five parishes in the state with the highest age-adjusted incidence rates of emergency department visits for asthma in the state every year.

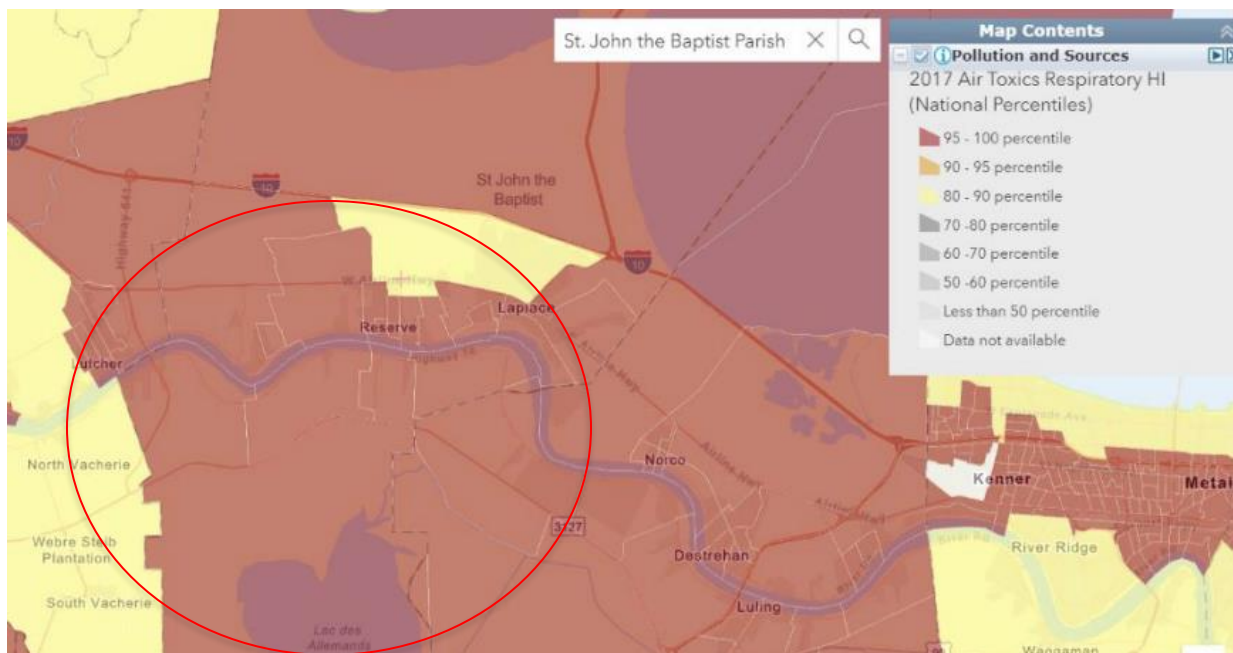


Figure 4. Air Toxics Respiratory Hazard Index (HI) (National Percentiles)
Source: EPA EJ Screen (2017)

Table 1. Age-Adjusted Rate of Asthma Emergency Department (ED) Visits Per 10,000 Population

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
St. John	97.7	93.3	103.7	88.4	100.7
Louisiana	50.3	54.1	59.4	57.8	63.1

Source: LA Environmental Public Health Tracking Program. [LINK](#)

Low Quality Housing

As is commonly the case in many fenceline EJ communities, low-income minority communities are not only impacted by industry releases. Often their health risks are compounded by other environmental conditions in the community, such as the poor state of housing. Like most historical areas with old housing, lead exposure from the historical use of lead in paint, and often times from the use of lead service lines in water distribution systems, are an especially egregious exposure of concern to developing children and women of childbearing age, as it can impact the developing brain and nervous systems of growing children, leading to later life impacts such as learning disabilities, impulse-control problems, hearing and speech problems, and later on, adverse reproductive health outcomes and cardiovascular disease. The westbank of St. John includes block groups in the upper 95-100th percentile in the nation with the highest anticipated levels of lead exposure based on age of housing (Figure 7).

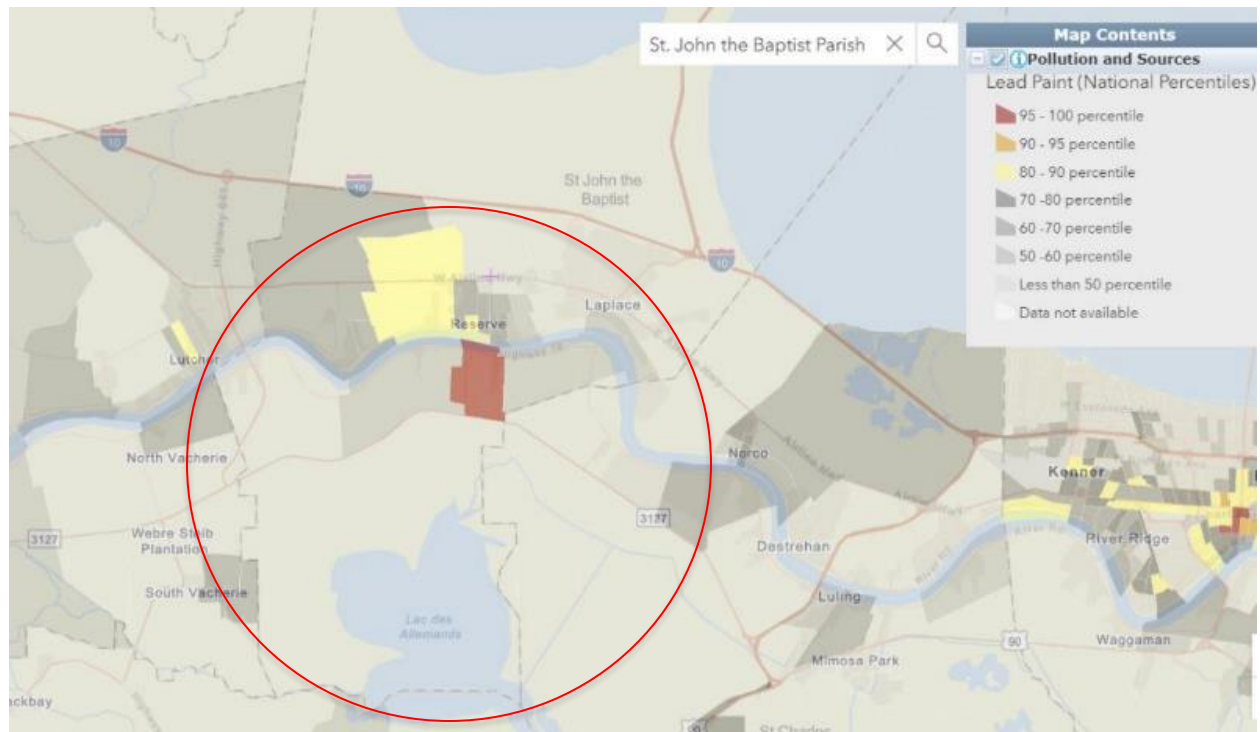


Figure 7. Lead Paint (National Percentiles) Source: EPA EJ Screen (2017)

Vulnerable and Susceptible Populations

This is a serious concern given the high proportion of children under age 5 on the west bank of the Parish (Figure 11). Children are vulnerable to air emissions from industry in this area given the proximity of industry and the ability of industrial air emissions to be transported to school locations, a situation highlighted in an NAACP-funded report. Inherent factors to their physical predisposition makes children particularly susceptible to environmental pollutants, and external factors like school proximity to industry make them additionally vulnerable.

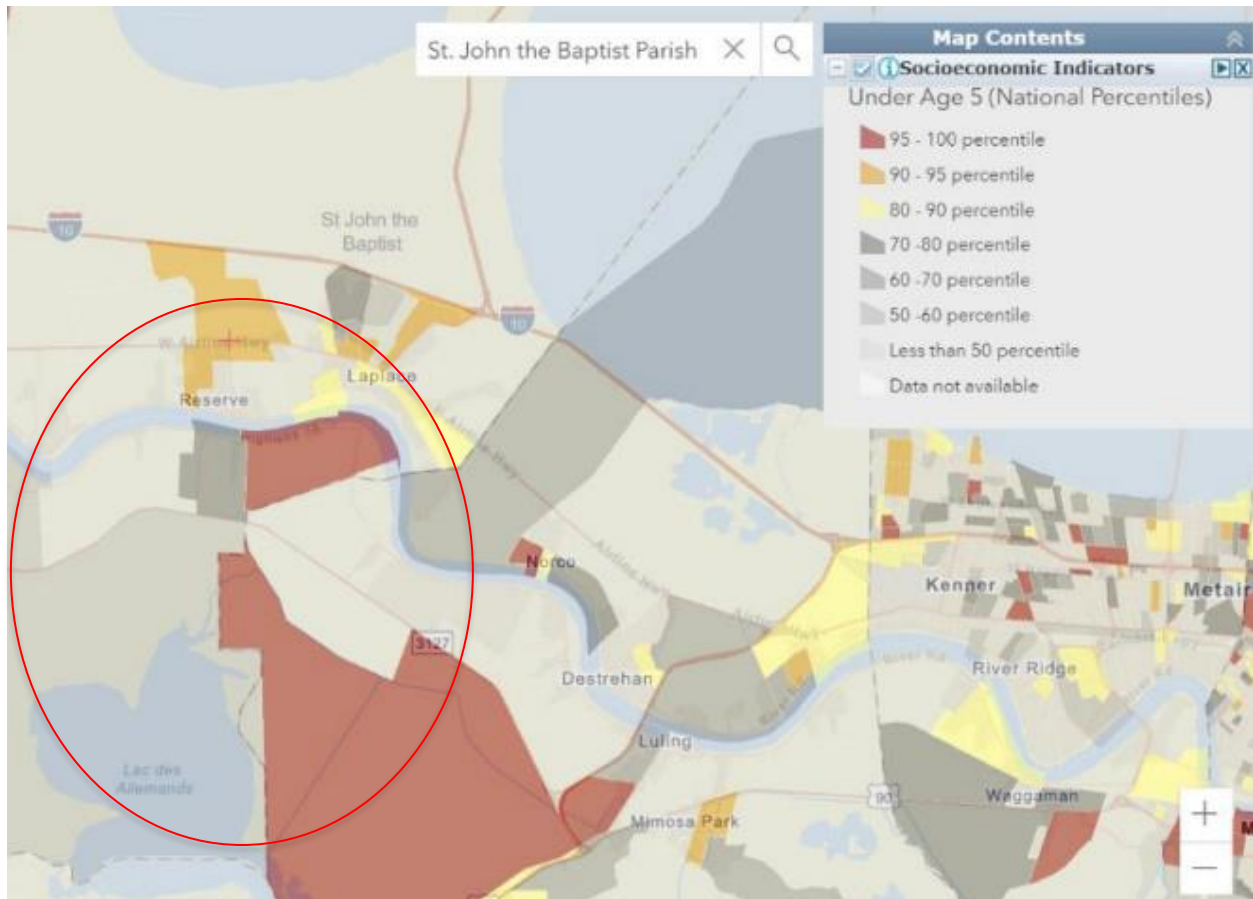


Figure 11. Under Age 5 (National Percentiles) Source: EPA EJ Screen (2017)



(His)tory is my story

What I've learned from interviewing my grandfather

February 25, 2021 [Julian E.J. Sorapuru](#)

Julian E.J. Sorapuru is a junior media studies major.

It started as a way to stave off pandemic-induced boredom. I couldn't make many new memories of my own, so I figured I'd listen to someone else's. Since I returned home to New Orleans in March, I have been interviewing my grandfather, Jude Sorapuru Sr., about his life. As time wore on, I couldn't help but become increasingly introspective about the stories my grandfather, whom I call Poppa, told me.

I started seeing the threads that linked his life and mine — delicately interconnected, like a spider's web. The choices Poppa made

in his life have directly impacted my own. Hearing Poppa's life story, which is living, breathing Black history, not only helped me to understand him better, but also to understand myself and my own circumstances.

Lucy, Louisiana is our ancestral home, a little village of 300 people about 40 minutes outside of New Orleans that hugs a not-so-mighty portion of the Mississippi River. Poppa was born there in 1937 to a family of sugar cane farmers during the Great Depression. As the second of seven children, he said, growing up, he never slept in a bed alone.

The Sorapuru family's main concern was their farm. The life of a farmer was grueling, and Poppa had no interest in living it. Poppa said there were no "I love you"s or pats on the back dished out at his house.



Poppa always had a competitive spirit and a thirst for knowledge, and this allowed him to excel in the only school for Black children in Lucy, which was held in a converted cow barn. No matter what grade he was in, he always wanted to learn what the grade above him was doing.

While unraveling his story, I learned that Poppa's academic excellence wasn't just a personal achievement, but one to honor his father as well.

Poppa's eyes well-up and his voice quivers when he talks about his father; even today, it's hard for him to contend with the rage his father lived with. He told me that his father was angry at the world because he was smarter than what his opportunities allowed him to become — the case for many Black folks at that time. While my great-grandfather only had an eighth grade education, he still read newspapers and always made Poppa promise him, "I'm gonna fight 'em like Thurgood Marshall."

My great-grandfather's dreams had been deferred, so he passed them on to his son.

In 1952, Poppa left Lucy and enrolled at Dillard University in New Orleans. Having skipped a number of grades, Poppa headed off to college — the only member of his family to do so — at the tender age of 15. Since his immediate family practically had no money, Poppa had to rely on the generosity of other family members and friends to pay his \$300 tuition and provide him room and board.

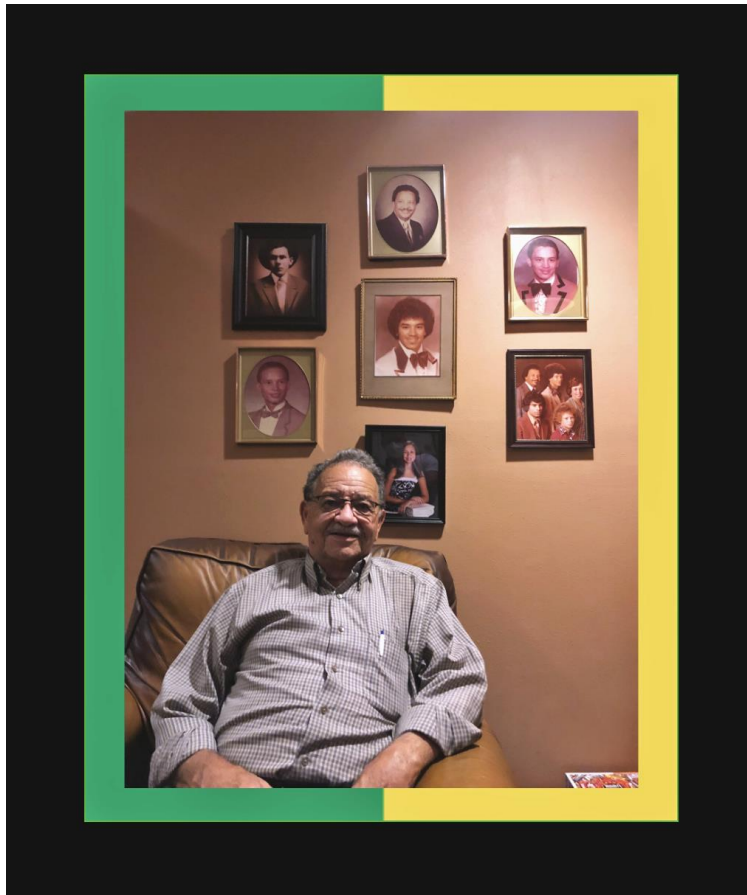
The transition to college was not easy. In New Orleans, there were many distractions for a kid from the country who was still just that — a kid.

Poppa grew up without electricity, a car, or even indoor plumbing, so the city and its amenities were a mystery to him. Not to mention that he was woefully unprepared to receive a collegiate education. Poppa's graduating class in high school, the first to graduate in the school's history, had only 14 students and three teachers. Instead of learning history, Poppa was taught animal husbandry.

Despite the challenges he faced in the city, Poppa said he was even more afraid of returning home to Lucy without his degree. Knowing what so many people had sacrificed to get him to college, failure was not an option. He eventually graduated from Dillard with a degree in education in 1956, and down the line, was able to get his master's and doctorate degrees.

A penniless farmer's son today holds the title of Dr. Sorapuru.

The \$20 bill Poppa discreetly handed me when I got A's on my report card as a kid took on a whole new meaning after learning about his educational journey. My grandfather's education was his ticket



out of poverty, out of Lucy, and the farmer's lifestyle which awaited him there. How different would my life have been if Poppa never went to college?

I've always had the privilege of education as a guarantee, this is only possible as a direct result of Poppa's own choices. My grandfather caught some lucky breaks, had some truly amazing people in his life, and was determined to pursue his education, which made life better for himself and his family.

I'm frugal, just like him. His cheapness is understandable knowing the time and place he comes from, while mine is an anomaly given my

upper-middle class upbringing. I'm also competitive and knowledge-hungry like him as well. Not because having those traits represents my only chance at success in this life like it did for him, but because that's what I saw modeled by Poppa and by my own father. I guess some philosophies have a way of sticking around despite circumstance.

Poppa is the manifested hopes and dreams of his father, and so am I.

Poppa's life story not only gave me a new understanding of myself and my lifestyle, but also contextualized our modern day race relations. As a man who has seen America change so much (and in other ways, so little) in his 83 years, my grandfather was deeply concerned about the state of the nation this past year.

What he saw on the news every day shook him. He would often cancel scheduled interviews between us. These conversations were short. I could hear the somber tone in his voice over the phone; he would say, "Hey, Ju. Not today, buddy."

Like many Black Americans, I have both Black and white ancestors and Poppa has always been interested in our family history — a complicated mess of mixed race heritage. It is not uncommon to

find that Black folks in Louisiana, many of whom identify as Creole, have last names which are of French or Spanish origin, like my own (Sorapuru, which is Basque).

I remember Poppa lecturing my siblings and I (as a lifelong educator tends to do) about our family's heritage from an early age. He'd bust out this booklet, containing family tree diagrams with deep roots, photos of Sorapuru's past and present, and maps of relevant places to our family history.

Poppa cares about our family history so much that he successfully got our ancestral home put on the national registry of historic places. When the house went on the registry, its existence also became known online. A white man in his 60s from Washington, with the last name Sorapuru, reached out to Poppa after discovering the house on the registry. He inquired about the possibility that we were related and whether he could come down to Louisiana to visit the property.

The man from Washington did visit in 2014 and it turns out we are distantly related (usually a safe bet with a last name like ours). I still remember meeting him and his family at my grandparents' house, one of the few times I can ever remember white folks being there. He gifted my younger brother a Seattle Seahawks cap (even though we're all die-hard Saints fans).

But there was a thread to this story with which I was unfamiliar until I started interviewing Poppa. That distant white cousin from Washington died only a few months after his visit to Louisiana. Apparently, one of his dying wishes was to be buried in the same tomb in Lucy as the rest of Poppa's family.

In death, he had chosen to be with his Black family members. This was incredibly moving to Poppa, and he told me it filled him with hope for the future of race relations.

That hope only lasted a few years. When our "cousin" visited Louisiana, he brought his son, who was about 40 at the time. Poppa and my grandmother went out to dinner with them on their last night in town. Poppa said he remembers the son hugging him when dinner was over and telling him that he loved him; the way you would tell a family member you've known all your life. The son came back to Louisiana a few more times after his father's death. When he was here, he would always come visit Poppa. He even considered moving his family down here.

In 2020, Poppa checked Facebook and was shocked to see the son had posted a picture with an AK-47, advocating a strong pro-gun rights stance. Throughout the next few months, the son revealed more and more of his political views online; he was a hardcore Trump supporter.

"It hurts me everytime I see that," Poppa told me in a September 2020 interview. "I couldn't understand it, I still can't understand it. It broke my heart, to be honest."

How could a man hug you and tell you he loves you when his politics say he doesn't value your life? Poppa decided that both versions of the son (the Trumpist and the one who said he loved him) could not co-exist; one had to be a lie. As a man who had lived through segregation in the South, Poppa knew which version not to trust.

History rhymes with the present. Understanding its old rhyme structure is imperative to writing a new one. What we don't often realize is that history is right in front of us: in the buildings we inhabit, the culture we consume, and most importantly, in the people we love.

Our grandparents and other elders in our lives have so many stories to tell, lessons to teach, and words of wisdom to pass on. This transfer of stories is not only fulfilling for them, but also invaluable for us, who receive the gift of perspective.

So take the time to learn your elders' stories. The clock is ticking and history awaits.