

David Levi Kokernot arrives in New Orleans with his father in 1817, takes to the sea, and moves to Texas

This extract from the life of David Levi Kokernot is a sample. Many pages as well as all citations are omitted. Contact the author if you are interested in the complete work.

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The Balize

“...a desperate, worthless, reckless class of men.” “...a scene of barbarous strife and drunken debauch.”

So witnesses described the pilots at the mouth of the Mississippi and the setting where they plied their trade, guiding ocean going ships over the bar and up the one hundred eleven miles of river to New Orleans. Countless others testified to the want of both competence and character of these men at their remote station, as we’ll see. Nevertheless, when Levi Moses Kokernot, a dry goods merchant from Amsterdam, arrived with his twelve year old son to set up his business in New Orleans, it was to that “combination of dive, bawdy house and hideout” called The Balize at the mouth of the Mississippi where he sent the boy to apprentice as a pilot. The boy, David Levi Kokernot, a couple decades later could himself be guilty of some drunken debauchery and disastrously poor seamanship as well.

Was the Balize in fact a hellhole? Why was it situated at that spot and not another? What was life upon it like in 1817 for the rough gang of pilots and, more importantly, for their young apprentice? Did that experience shape the young Kokernot, and perhaps as a result, even the lives of his descendants? .

History of pilot service at Balize omitted here.

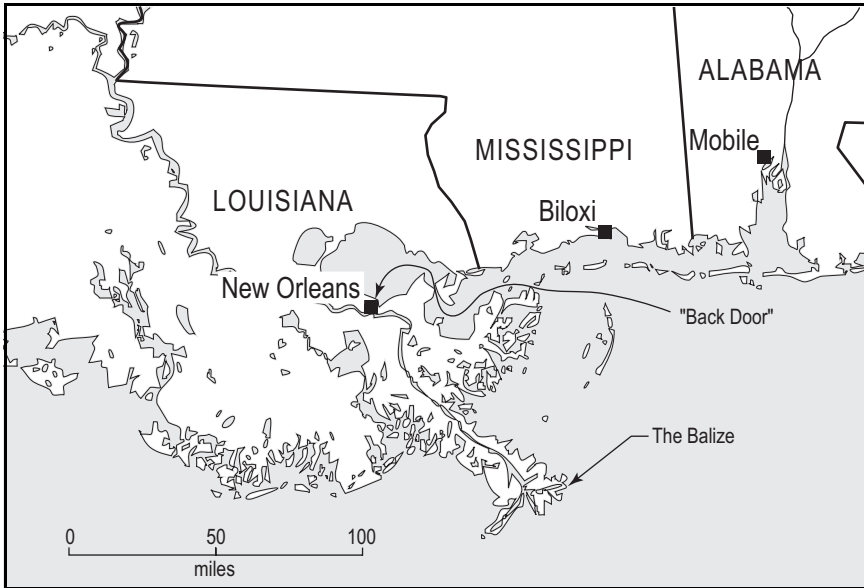


FIGURE 1. *The Balize* was located one hundred eleven miles below New Orleans. By the 1790s small vessels could also navigate the “Back Door” to the basin in New Orleans.

Kokernot at the Balize

Twelve year old David Levi Kokernot arrived on this scene in 1817. David and his father, Levi, had only that year immigrated from Amsterdam. His mother, Elizabeth, and brother, Louis, remained behind, presumably tending the family business, retail dry goods, while Levi reestablished it in New Orleans. According to his *Reminiscences*, Kokernot was immediately apprenticed to a Mississippi River pilot, John Summers,[†] at the Balize. It’s fair to assume that David Kokernot was, or soon became, a deputy pilot, since “apprentice” was not a term locally used. He says nothing about his day to day life there but by his arrival in 1817 the French, Spanish, and Americans had over a century of experience at the Balize, and a rich accumulation of accounts by passersby and residents give us a good picture of both the duties of the pilots and the nature of the society there.

[†] Possibly this was actually William Somers, who was listed as “Balize Pilot” (one of only five) in the New Orleans City Directories of 1822, 1823, and 1824. Somers’s home, on Chartres at Conti, was only blocks from the Kokernot’s first home at 53 St. Ann and their later stores on Tchoupitoulas and on Levee, all near the river front. Kokernot wrote his *Reminiscences* fully a half century after these facts.

The manner in which pilots guided ships over the bar can be judged by this description by Pierre de Laussat from his journal of March 20, 1803:

The pilot perched atop the mast on a yardarm, where, crouched low with his neck stretched, eyes straining ahead, and a cigar in his mouth, he called out: “Veer to the wind...that’s it...steer...take soundings.” We saw some breakers. Two branches from a palm tree surfaced near us, and we passed over them. We heard the pilot’s voice announce, “We’ve crossed the bar.”

On the other hand the captain may have gotten a less conscientious pilot: “Pilots would dive overboard and swim to shore whenever the notion struck them, even though the ship might be nearing the most treacherous point on the river.”

Eventually the pilots learned that some cooperation suited them better than competition. Benjamin Latrobe passed through in 1819 and wrote:

Lately all the pilots, whose competition was greatly advantageous to the public, have united, & the consequence is, that working only for their own convenience, & having the monopoly among them of the business, the ships are exceedingly neglected, & both in coming in & going out are most unjustifiably delayed, the Association keeping as few boats as possible & employing *journeyman* pilots, generally English sailors who have deserted their vessels. These men are, of course, neither very skillful nor very sober. One of the pilots keeps a tavern & a billiard room, which, it is supposed, absorbs the principal part of the wages of their underlings.

On his return to Baltimore a few months later Latrobe again passed the Balize and noted “Got a dunce of a pilot, who ran us aground on the bar about 9 o’clock...” If this pilot was David Kokernot—then an apprentice, or deputy, of two years—it wouldn’t be the first grounding of his career, as we’ll see.

Their living situation was distressed, again as described by Latrobe in 1819:

The Balize (beacon) is properly a wooden block house....surmounted by a wooden tower not more than 50 feet above the water, in which at present a light is kept....This building gives the name to one of the most wretched villages in the country....The boarding Officer of the Customs inhabits one of the most miserable of them. His situation here is indeed pitiable. After a high wind his floor is often covered with several inches of water, & after the last hurricane there was 5 feet of water in his house....A more wretched village, for it is a sort of a village, cannot be conceived....The whole population consists of 90 men and 11 women, &

an internal feud breaks up this little society into parties who are at war with each other.

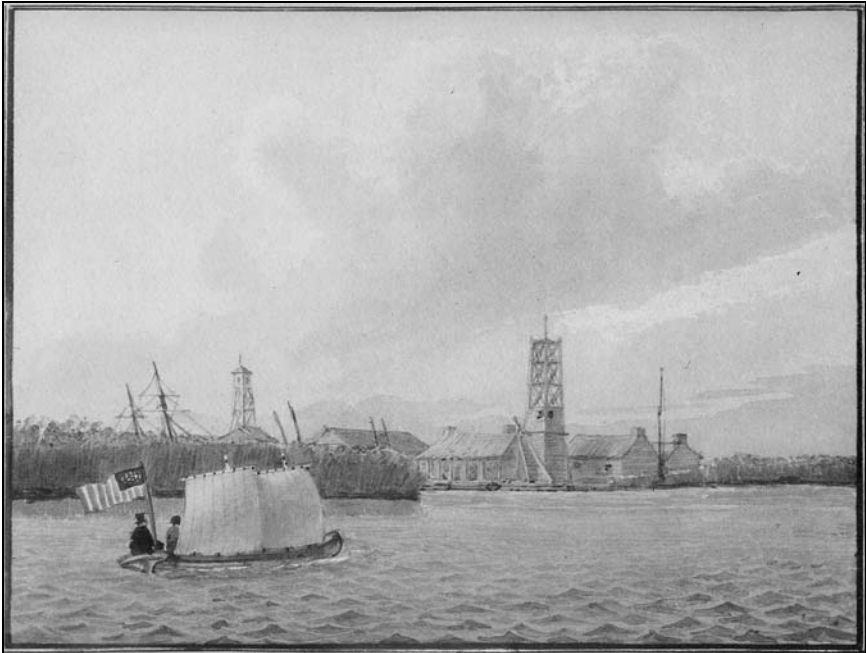


FIGURE 2. Latrobe's sketch of The Balize made when he passed through in 1819. The flag with vertical stripes is that of the Customs Service.

The society at the Balize was less than upstanding, agreed another:

The pilots' hangout at the Balize drew individuals of a character conservatively described as "mixed"—ignorant, venal, culpably indifferent...It was known as the wildest, rawest place in all Louisiana; and considering the accumulations of lower New Orleans sink-holes with which it competed for such a reputation, one cannot but marvel at the rich variety of human iniquity packed into so small a space.

No visitor failed to mention the mosquitoes. Here is Théodore Pavie, a French visitor as he returned home in 1830:

One must spend twenty-four hours in Balise without mosquito netting to understand all the horror...: devoured relentlessly by imperceptible insects that buzz in the ears, unable to close one's eyes for an instant, suffering from head to foot, to be no more than stings and pustules, and feel a million needles enter one's body. Cuban pirates take no greater pleasure than to stake a naked prisoner in full sun in the middle of the marshes; one half hour later, he no longer has a human form!

Pavie noted piloting failures on the next page:

At the entrance of the southwest passage, the top of a shipwrecked schooner sticks up; further along, one can see the broken booms of a brig, with reptiles that come to sleep on the end of the mast.

Nor did conditions seem to improve in succeeding decades. Jesse Milton Emerson visited the Balize around 1857 on a sail from New York to New Orleans and beyond. He confirmed the living conditions, adding that the pilots live “in huts perched high on piles driven in the mud, hopeful only for twenty shillings a foot pilotage on ships.” He described the pilots themselves as “a sort of aquatic men—with noses like fishes’, fins like alligators’, feet like ducks’—who never drown.”[†]

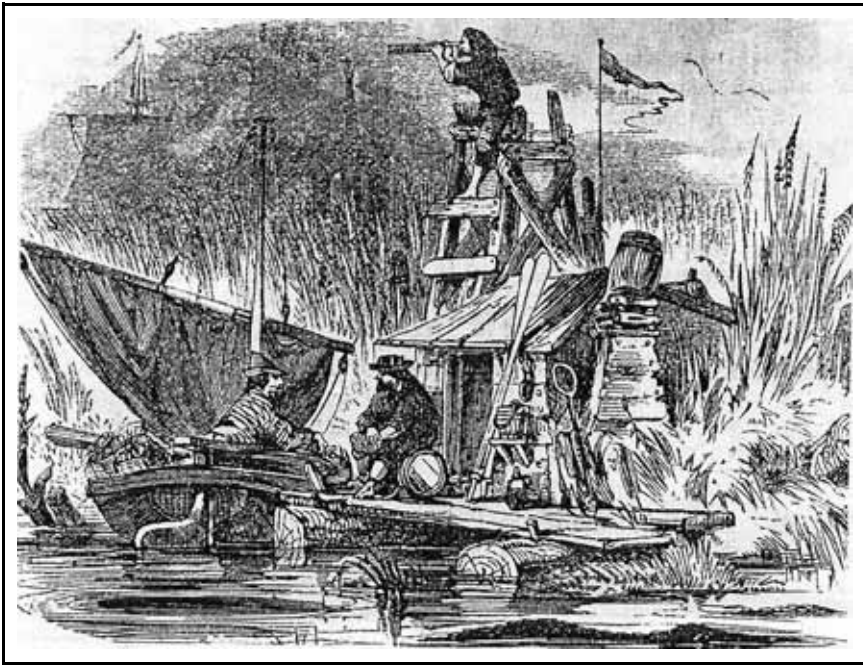


FIGURE 3. Emerson's description of his trip from New York to New Orleans included this unflattering sketch of a pilot's shanty at the Balize.

[†] Though their swampy environment, renamed Pilottown after one of many moves, is little changed, the housing and compensation have improved today. Two separate groups of pilots live there: Branch Pilots board ships underway at sea and guide them over the river bar to Pilottown where Crescent River Port Pilots take over piloting duties to New Orleans. With an effective union, pilots today earn \$350,000 per year.

David Kokernot remained at the Balize for five years, until 1822. We know that he maintained friendships with some of the residents there and that they weren't all "ignorant, venal, culpably indifferent." For in his *Reminiscences* he tells of a visit a decade later, in 1831, as he passed through in the schooner *Ceaser* with thirty passengers and crew. He relates that his "old friends" at the Balize tried hard to dissuade him from setting sail immediately because of a storm brewing.

But that story must await our acquaintanceship with the rest of his family and the arrival of his future wife.