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Louisiana Toponymic Generics Delimit Culture Areas

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Louisiana culture areas have been delimited by ethnic and social affiliation (Bertrand), folk housing (Kniffen), surnames (Meigs), religion (Paterson), survey systems (Hall), and mother tongue (Allen). Two major areas emerge – Anglo-American and French.

Place names are another significant element of the cultural landscape and since their toponymic generics (or terms) are based on language, a study of terms can reveal the story of human occupancy. In this paper on Lousiana, terms have been examined as they were first used, as they evolved, and as they disappeared or became part of the present landscape. In this way, culture areas in the state can be reconstructed and delimited.

For the period 1700–1900, generic terms are recorded from historic maps. For 1900–1968, terms are recorded from large-scale topographic sheets. From a total of 158 terms inventoried, 14 are randomly selected for reconstructing culture areas. For the terms presented, each map shows areal distribution for the periods 1700–1800, 1801–1850, and 1851–1900 superimposed upon a frequency distribution for 1900–1968. Interpretation of generic-term connotation is determined from map symbolization, historical records, philological studies, and interviews. The terms are discussed in alphabetical order.

An Encounter With Meredith F. Burrill

With guidance from Fred B. Kniffen, I selected as a doctoral thesis topic "Generic Terms in Louisiana Place Names; an index to the cultural landscape." The objective was to use toponymic generics through time and space as diagnostic indicators of culture areas. One of the first articles I uncovered was Meredith F. Burrill's "Toponymic Generics I, II." Fred Kniffen arranged an introduction to Meredith Burrill and I was invited to Washington. In the Board on Geographic Names Library I read and filled cards with notes. At night, in the basement of the Burrill home, we examined his manuscript maps of North American Toponymic terms. The distribution of more than 750 terms were carefully mapped and connotations recorded. He introduced me to concepts such as mental set, topocomplex, and *bedeutungsfeld.* Meredith Burrill was a polite and gentle

tutor but he pushed me to the wall time and time again, forcing immediate answers, and following my answers with questions even more penetrating. I was deluged by new ideas and concepts. When Dr. Burrill escorted me to my plane I was exhausted. For about a month, I was very quiet and read and reread Burrill articles and recommended references. One morning I knew I was ready to complete my task; almost two years later, the study was completed. Transference of knowledge from one generation to the next is one of the unique things about man and culture. My three-day encounter with and inquisition by Pete Burrill is one of the peaks in my professional career. Additionally, I made a friend for life.

Anse (Map 1)

In standard French, *anse* means 'handle,' 'cove,' or 'little bay.' In colonial Louisiana, these meanings were used and new connotations added as new landscape features were encountered. Along the Mississippi, *anse* seems to signify bends in the river as well as the point-of-land partially enclosed by the stream. On the Homanno (1717?) map, the place name *Ance perce* appeared. Here *anse* seemed to refer to the bend or the point-of-land. In 1806, Lafon recorded the name *Petit Ance* signifying a small coastal bay. Darby (1816) recorded the same place name, *Petit Anse,* applied to the salt dome known presently as Avery Island. As Acadians moved into the southwest prairies, *anse* acquired the connotation which endures: prairies broken into smaller prairies by strips of timber skirting streams. Fortier (1894), in writing about the Acadian dialect, recorded: "*L'anse* is the prairie advancing in the wood like a small bay."

Branch (Map 2)

In England, branch signifies "a tributary of a creek or river, related to it as the branch of a tree to a trunk" (*Oxford English Dictionary,* hereafter cited as OED. *Dictionary of American English on Historical Principles,* hereafter cited as DAE). Branch was first applied in America in the English sense (DAE), but need also arose to define a small stream, whether tributary to a larger stream or not. Branch was extended to signify any small stream and is considered an Americanism (DAE, Kurath). The term was first recorded in Louisiana between 1801 and 1850 in upland areas where significant groups of Anglo-American immigrants from the east settled. All occurrences denote rapid streams.

The twentieth-century distribution is in dramatic contrast to earlier periods. Large-scale topographic sheets show the term has eight landscape connotations, the principal (53 percent of the total) being a partially intermittent rapid stream.

Almost certainly introduced by Anglo-American immigrants, branch remains in areas considered dominantly Anglo-American. Some folks insist upon the original English usage – a small stream of moderate velocity and tributary to creeks (q.v.).

Brûlé (Map 3)

In standard French, the term *brûlé* means to burn or burnt, and in Louisiana since colonial days it has designated land cleared by burning. *Brûlé* first appeared on the D'Anville map referring to *les Cannes Brûlées* (great clear fields) above New Orleans. After this initial introduction, *brûlé* was next recorded (1801–1850) in the eastern prairies. Acadians settled here during the late 1700's. Darby observed that the *Plaquemine Brûlé* was a prairie partially enclosed by trees. Between 1851 and 1900, the distribution of *brûlé* increased sharply in areas settled earlier by French-speaking farmers.

Lockett observed in the Bayou Lafourche area: "In addition to the continuous tract of

open land, there are to the east and west of the Lafourche, detached bodies, cleared and settled, called *brûlées.*" In the twentieth century, *brûlé* continues as a generic occurring along the flanks of Bayou Lafourche and along the Mississippi. Bilingual residents reveal that while the basic meaning has not changed, it has been extended to designate the community or settlement of people.

Chênière (Map 4)

In standard French, *chênière* signifies an oak-grove. In Louisiana French, the meaning is extended to include ridges in swamp and coastal marsh that are characterized by the contrast between the vegetation (mainly live oak) on the ridges and in surrounding lower areas.

Chênière was first recorded between 1801 and 1850 in the same areas where found today. Map symbolization denoted coastal relief features and a swamp area. From 1851 to 1900, *chênière* increased in number and acquired a new and unexpected connotation – a full, rapid stream. The term occurs only in Anglo-American Louisiana. Historic maps show streams named *North Chênière au Tondre* and *South Chênière au Tondre* flowing into the swamp known as *Chênière au Tondre.* Russell observed that the *chênières* in southwest Louisiana are old beach ridges stranded in marsh, and that the *chênières* east of the Atchafalaya are any type of high ground, but especially relict natural levees.

Interviews in Anglo-American Louisiana attempted to determine if *chênière* serves as a generic in place names and is used in the vernacular. The cypress brake name *Chênière Brake* appears to function as a vernacular generic, as the area is referred to as the Shinny. In coastal Louisiana, *chênière* definitely is a generic term and is a part of the vocabulary of the people, regardless of ethnic origin. In North Louisiana, it is questionable if the term is a toponymic generic term even though it occurs in place names and to some extent in the vernacular.

Chute (Map 5)

In French, *chute* means "the action of tumbling or falling, a waterfall." When signifying a fall or rapid in a river, or a narrow or precipitous channel or passage, *chute* is considered an Americanism (DAE).

The earliest recorded use in Louisiana was on the D'Anville map where the term was applied in the strict French connotation to the rapids on Red River. The place name, *l'Ecor à la Chute,* signified the action of tumbling, of falling, a waterfall. Darby used *chute* to refer to the narrow channels around the rafts in the Red River. From 1700 to 1850 all occurences were running-water features.

Between 1851 and 1900, *chute* acquired new meanings: a full, sluggish stream, and a standing waterbody. Either the meaning was extended or the nature of the feature was altered. Lockett observed that "the hills are limited by Lake Bisteneau on the north, and by Coushatta Chute to the south." In these same years *chute* first signified a narrow channel between an island and the nearest riverbank. In the twentieth century, *chute* occurs primarily along the Mississippi and acquired six additional connotations. It is unlikely that the meaning is being extended so rapidly, so the physical characteristics of the *chutes* must be changing.

Coteau (Map 6)

In standard French, *coteau* means the slope of a little hill as well as a small hill itself; it derives from *côte* signifying hill, shore, or coast. When *coteau* and *côte* were introduced into Louisiana, they were recognized as two terms with similar connotations. The

meaning of *coteau* was extended to signify a ridge, a height of land, and is recorded as an Americanism (DAE; *Dictionary of Americanisms on Historical Principles,* hereafter cited as DAHP). *Coteau* first appeared as a Louisiana generic on the Morse and Breese map in the name *Grand Coteau,* a low ridge in the prairie.

During 1851–1900, *coteau* increased in frequency. All occurrences were relief features, but *coteaux* west of the Atchfalaya are low ridges above the prairie, while in the east they are low hills surrounded by swamp. Between 1901 and 1968, *coteau* maintained almost the same distribution. The term was, however, applied to a new landscape feature: low ridges which appear to be isolated fragments of natural levees along abandoned channels.

Coulée (Map 7)

In standard and Louisiana French, *coulée* signifies a "small stream that may become dry in summer" (Read). *Coulée* first appeared as a generic on the Lafon map – once in Anglo-American Louisiana and once in French Louisiana. It was applied to two different landscape features, a Ouachita tributary and a prairie watercourse. In 1851 to 1900, *coulée* increased in number, occurred in new areas, and was applied to full, sluggish streams. Lockett noted: "The prairies are not perfectly level, but gently rolling and intersected by many natural drains, called *coulées*" (1873). He also observed: "The *Coulée des Grues* is a bayou that runs across the prairie." During 1901–1968, *coulée* increased in frequency and areal distribution and also acquired eight landscape connotations.

Investigations reveal conflict between map and vernacular usage. In Lafourche Parish, maps symbolize full, sluggish streams, but interviews record different vernacular usages: a *coulée* can be (1) a very small, shallow canal or stream that may dry up in summer; and (2) a low place in the swamp that has water part of the year and is a good place to catch crawfish.

In the southwest prairies map symbolization and vernacular usage also differ. Here *coulée* was first applied to seasonal streams – the dominant vernacular usage, while maps depict full streams, channels, and canals. Informants report: *Coulées* have been dredged, made into ditches and canals, filled in, and dammed. *Coulée* is a good example of a generic considerably altered in form and meaning.

Creek (Map 8)

In England, creek has been a generic since the 1500's. It means "a narrow inlet in the coastline, or a river tidal estuary" (OED, DAE). When the English reached the area later called Virginia, they explored streams; and although many were long tributaries and not tidal for most of their length, the term creek was applied. Later, the principal connotation of this Americanism was an inland stream intermediate in size, gradient, and flow.

Creek first appeared in the late 1700's across the Mississippi from the Natchez bluffs to denote a full, sluggish stream. Anglo-Americans moving across the river had no better generic to describe the streams they encountered. During 1801–1850, creek reflected the mass influx of Anglo-Americans into upland Louisiana following the Louisiana Purchase. Eighty-eight percent of the creeks named connoted full, relatively rapid streams; Darby noted their tributary status. The distribution in 1851–1900 still obtains today, but the number of recorded usages of creek increased from 169 to 851.

On twentieth-century topographic sheets occurrences double to 1745 and eight new connotations emerge, the principal being a full, relatively rapid stream. The generic term creek, through its areal distribution, defines the territory of Anglo-American Louisiana better than does any other term.

Cut-off (Map 9)

The origin of the term cut-off is recorded by the OED as obscure and uncertain, but the DAE observes that cut-off originated as a topographic term within the United States. It records nine landscape connotations, all are in use in Louisiana.

Le Page Du Pratz recorded the formation of a cut-off channel and lake: "*La pointe coupée* is a long circuit which the *fleuve* made and through which it is shortening itself by cutting this point-of-land." Cut-off was first recorded on the Darby map and applied to small, tidal inlets. These features could have been channels cut through islands either by storms or by man. Lockett utilized the term cut-off variously: "cut-off roads and cross-roads," "cut-off channels" and "cut-off lakes."

Cut-off in English was not recorded until 1801–1850, but was not applied in its principal area of occurrence until 1851–1900. The 1901–1968 distribution of cut-off demonstrates that it is primarily associated with rivers, principally the Mississippi from False River (a cut-off lake) northward. Topographic sheets indicate cut-off is a generic with 11 landscape connotations, the dominant ones being running-water features. In many cases cut-off endured though the form of the feature was altered. The term was probably introduced into Louisiana by Anglo-Americans. The French used the term *raccourci* to signify cut-off channels and lakes.

Écore (Map 10)

In standard French, *écore* means an inland river escarpment or bluff. The earliest use of *écore* in Louisiana was by Penicaut noted in the Baton Rouge area: ". . . we found very high banks . . . called in this region *écores* . . .". *Écore* is first applied as a generic on the Delisle map along the Mississippi. From 1700 to 1850 *écore* increased its distribution slightly and in all cases signified a steep river bank or a sharp rise in the level of the land. It is synonymous with the English term bluff.

After 1900 *écore* surives as a generic in only one place name: *Grand Écore* in Natchitoches Parish. Lockett described this area: "I proceeded to *Grand Écore*, which, as its name implies, is a high bluff . . .". *Écore* was employed in names to signify river bluffs until about 1850 when it was replaced by bluff as areas were subsequently occupied by Anglo-Americans.

Glade (Map 11)

In England, where the word evolved, glade signifies "a clear, open space or passage in a wood or forest, whether natural or produced by the cutting down of trees" (OED). In North America the term was extended to mean "a marshy tract of low ground, sometimes inundated, overgrown with grass" (DAE). Glade was first recorded in Louisiana between 1851 and 1900, a late appearance since the areas in which it occurred received Anglo-American settlers as early as 1800. On the basis of map depictions, it appears to be a wetland term.

Between 1901 and 1968, glades appear to be both wetland areas and running water features. Some field interviews describe glades as being small and wet grass areas in the middle of swamps, while others state that glades may be dry enough for hay baling. Map examination reveals that glades occur primarily in old Mississippi meander scars.

Landing (Map 12)

Landing has been in use in England since the fifteenth century to mean "a place for disembarking passengers or unloading goods; a landing-place" (OED). Between 1801 and 1850 landing was first recorded in Louisiana as places for loading or unloading

passengers and goods. Since water was the chief method of transportation then, it seems peculiar that landing was restricted entirely to the Atchafalaya Basin.

From 1851 to 1900, however, landing occurred in greater numbers along the Mississippi but, peculiarly, not along the Atchafalaya. In the twentieth century, landing increased in application (267 occurrences). Interviews reveal that a "good" landing should be on the bluff side of a stream where the water is deep, and where the banks can be cut for easy river access. Landings still in use are of three types. The first are primarily for recreational fishing; these features are most often named. The second type are landings used principally for commercial fishing. They are point landings as opposed to bluff landings and are seldom given names. The third are ferry and industrial landings on the Mississippi.

Marais (Map 13)

In standard French, *marais* signifies marsh, swamp, or pond. When introduced into Louisiana, it had connotations well suited for describing the landscape features encountered. In the eighteenth century, six occurrences of *marais* appeared. The first application was on the D'Anville map, a swamp area. On the Le Page Du Pratz map, *marais* is coastal marsh. During 1801–1850, *marais* was applied to coastal marsh, freshwater marsh, and prairie ponds, connotations which continue to the present. In prairie country, Lockett observed: "The surface is generally undulating, the drains are shallow *coulées* heading in broad flat *marais* – shallow marshy ponds."

Marais are abundant on the prairies of southwest Louisiana, but most are not named. These ponds are shallow, lack inlets and outlets, and are of irregular form. It is thought these features are remnants of Ice Age river channels (Kniffen).

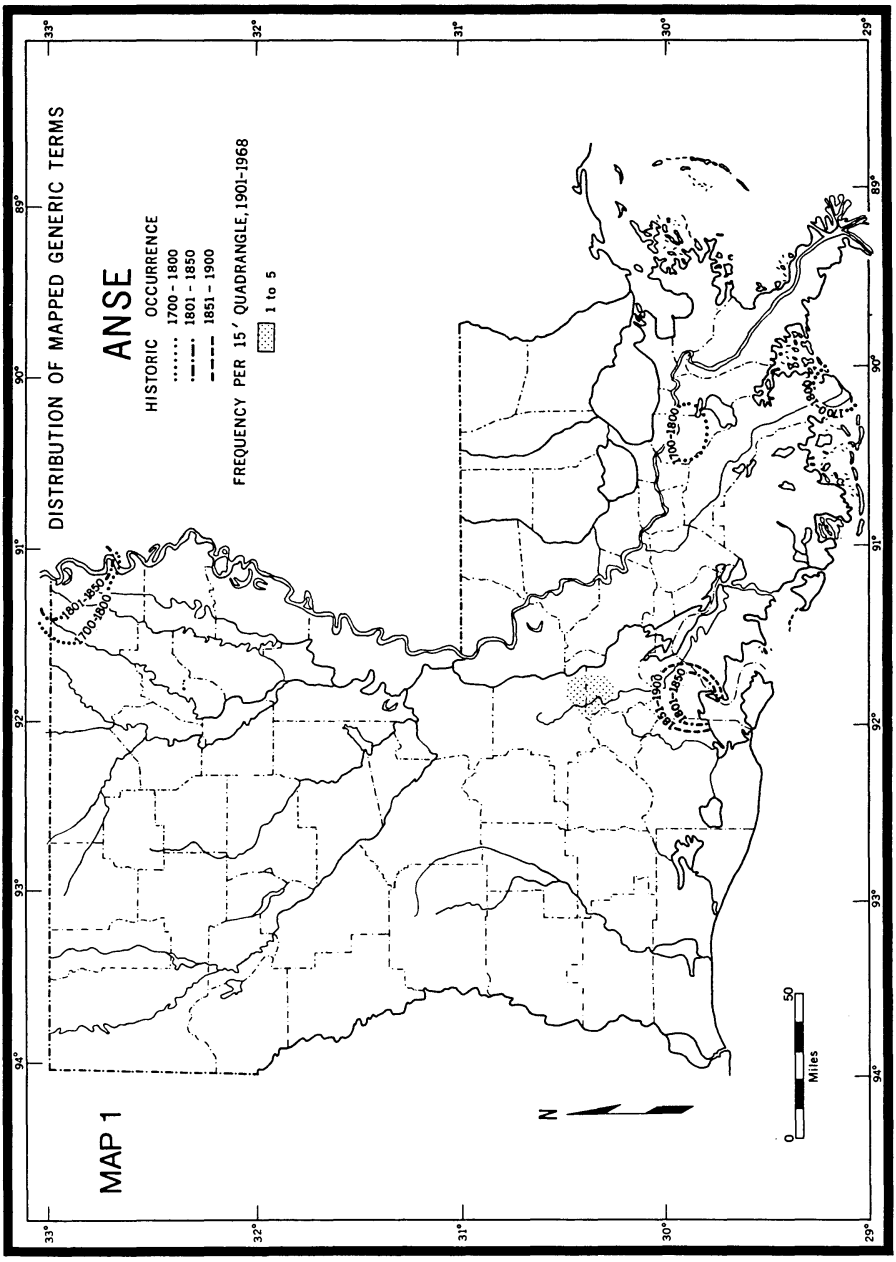
Marais has no extended meaning in the New World. The connotation best known in Louisiana, an irregular-shaped prairie pond, is in France the meaning least used.

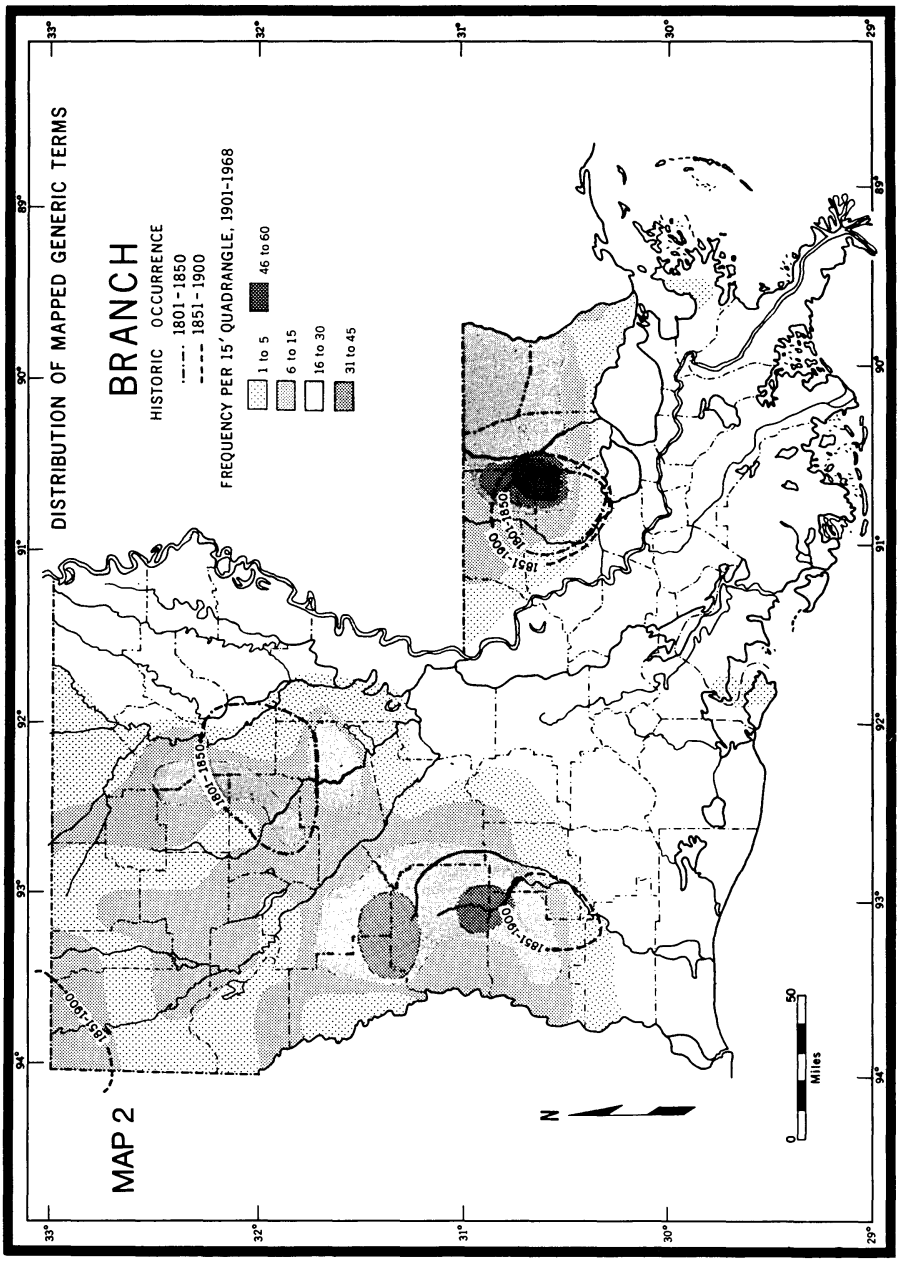
Portage (Map 14)

In standard French, *portage* means "to carry . . . 'some article.' " In North America, it signifies "the carrying or transporting of canoes, goods, etc., overland from one stretch of navigable water to another, usually around rapids, falls, etc." (DAE). It also signifies the route or passageway itself. Both connotations are Americanisms (DAE) and apply in Louisiana as in other areas.

Portage has been extended to denote small waterways along a route that serve the same function as a land *portage*. *Portage* was first reported by Penicaut: "We came to the '*Portage de la Croix*' . . ." This place name was shown on the D'Anville map as a land route.

La Harpe's reference to *portage* indicated it was applied to both land and water routes. He observed: "Half of this *portage* is *pays tremblant*. At the end of this *portage* there is a little *riviere* that flows into a bay." Here *portage* seems to be in a state of transition of meaning. La Harpe also stated: "it was thirty-five leagues to the *portage* of *Manchac* which flows into Lake Maurepas." It is clear that *portage* and *Manchac* describe the same feature – a water route.


DISTRIBUTION OF MAPPED GENERIC TERMS
ANSE
HISTORIC OCCURRENCE
1700 - 1800
1801 - 1850
1851 - 1900
FREQUENCY PER 15' QUADRANGLE, 1901-1968
1 to 5
1700-1800
1801-1850
1851-1900
MAP 1
N
0
50
Miles
33°
32°
31°
30°
29°
94°
93°
92°
91°
90°
89°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BRANCH
HISTORIC OCCURRENCE
1801-1850
1851-1900
FREQUENCY PER 15' QUADRANGLE, 1901-1968
1 to 5
6 to 15
16 to 30
31 to 45
46 to 60
MAP 2
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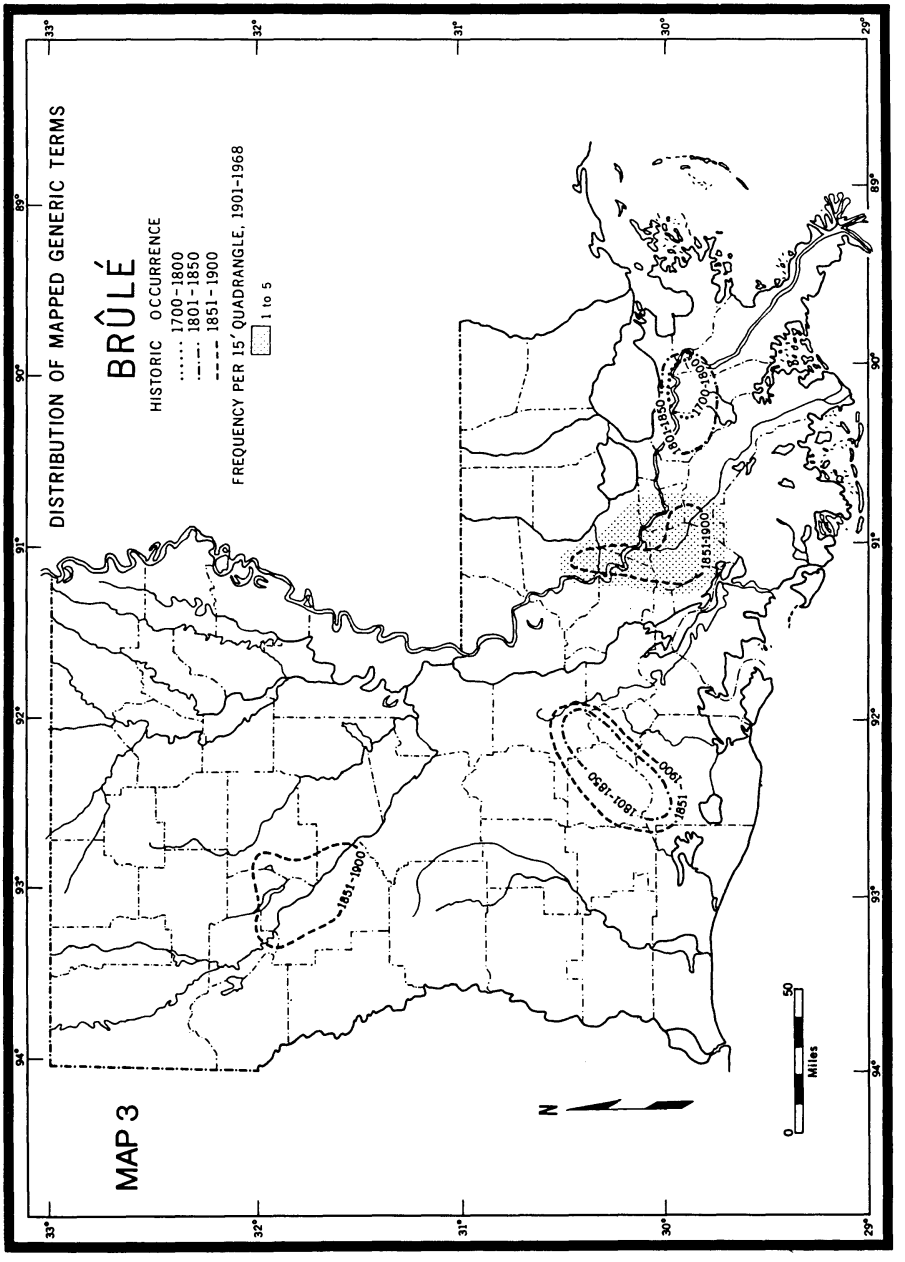
0
50
Miles


DISTRIBUTION OF MAPPED GENERIC TERMS
BRÛLÉ
HISTORIC OCCURRENCE
1700-1800
1801-1850
1851-1900
FREQUENCY PER 15' QUADRANGLE, 1901-1968
1 to 5
MAP 3
N
0
50
Miles
1700-1800
1801-1850
1851-1900
1851-1900
1801-1850
1851-1900
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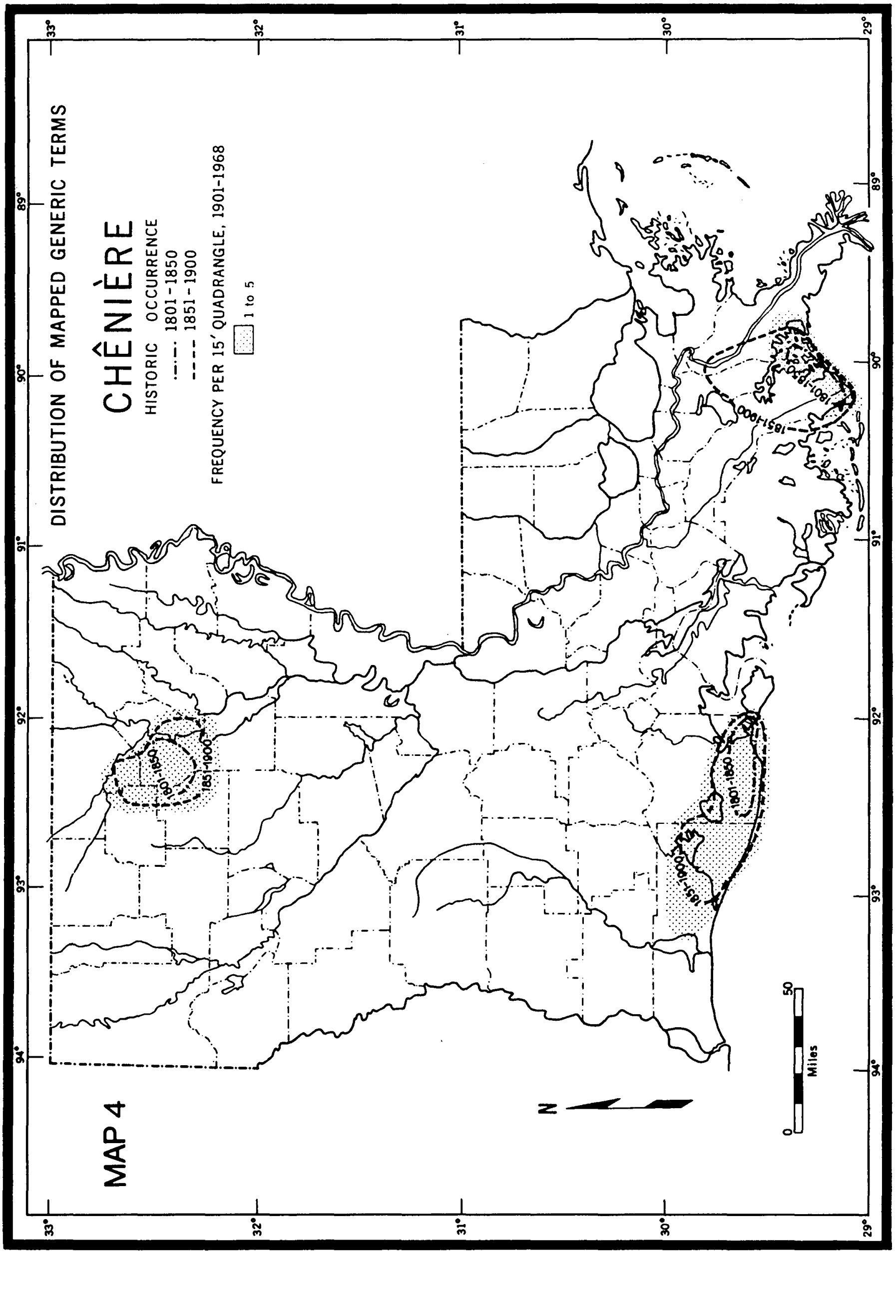
MAP 4
DISTRIBUTION OF MAPPED GENERIC TERMS
CHÊNIÈRE
HISTORIC OCCURRENCE
1801-1850
1851-1900
FREQUENCY PER 15′ QUADRANGLE, 1901-1968
1 to 5
1801-1850
1851-1900
N
0
50
Miles
33°
32°
31°
30°
29°
89°
90°
91°
92°
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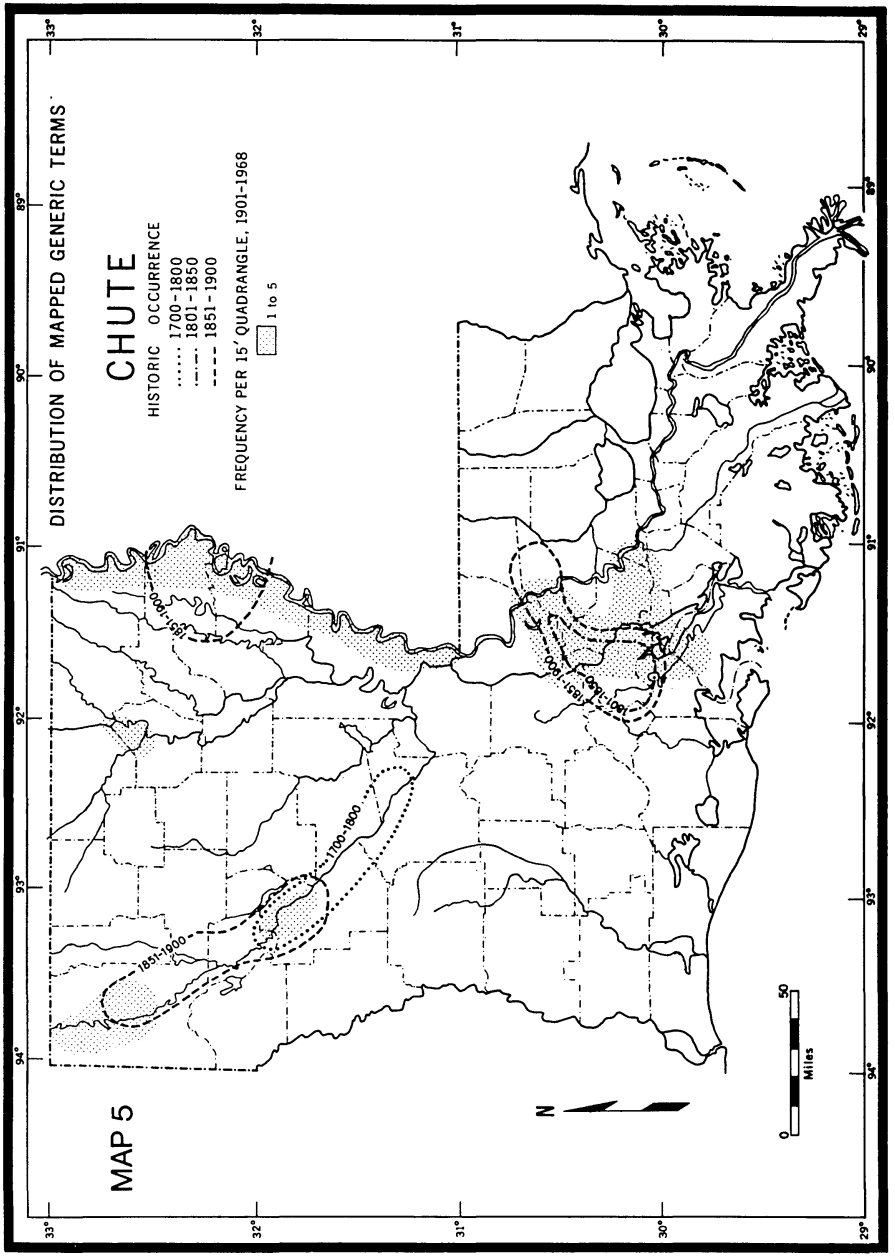
94°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CHUTE
HISTORIC OCCURRENCE
1700-1800
1801-1850
1851-1900
FREQUENCY PER 15' QUADRANGLE, 1901-1968
1 to 5
1700-1800
1801-1850
1851-1900
MAP 5
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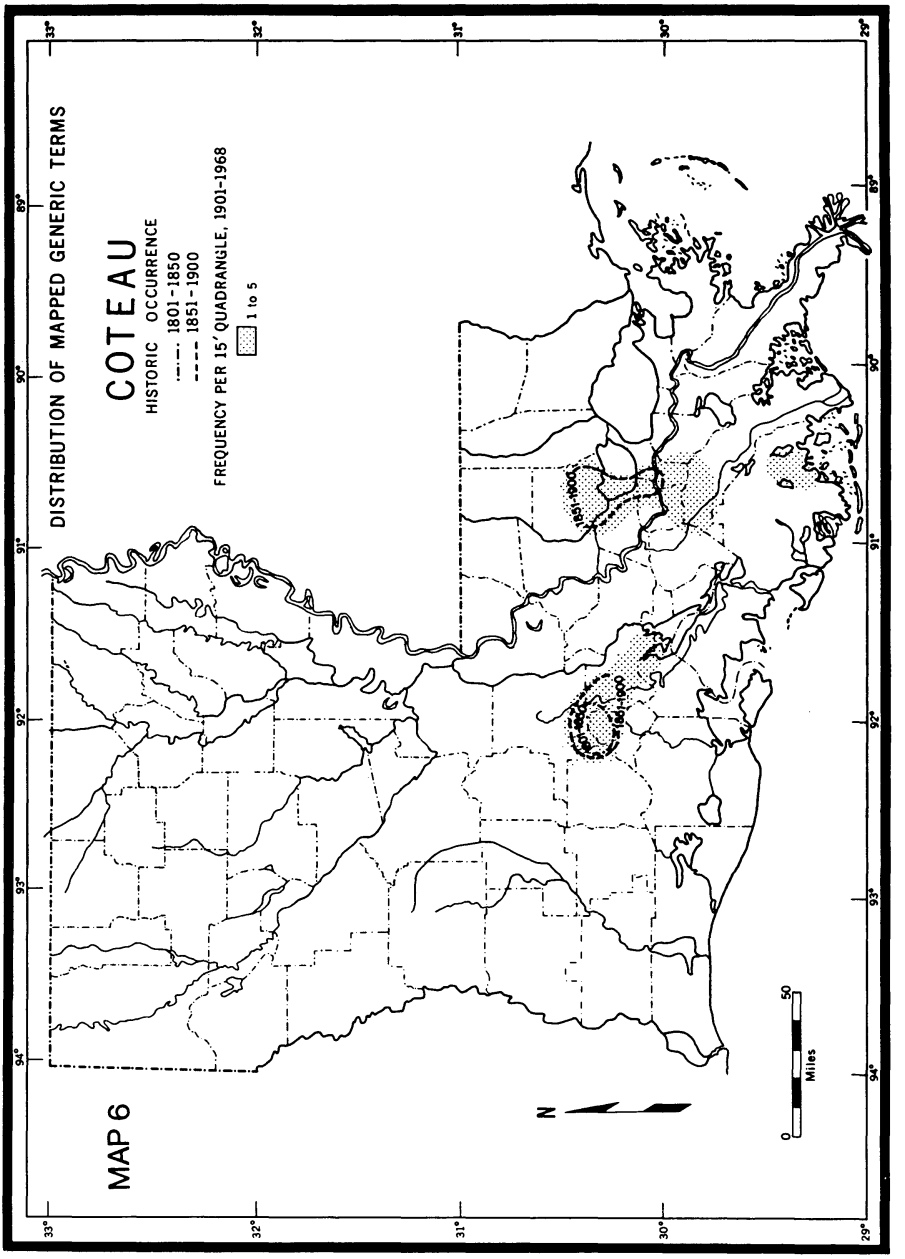
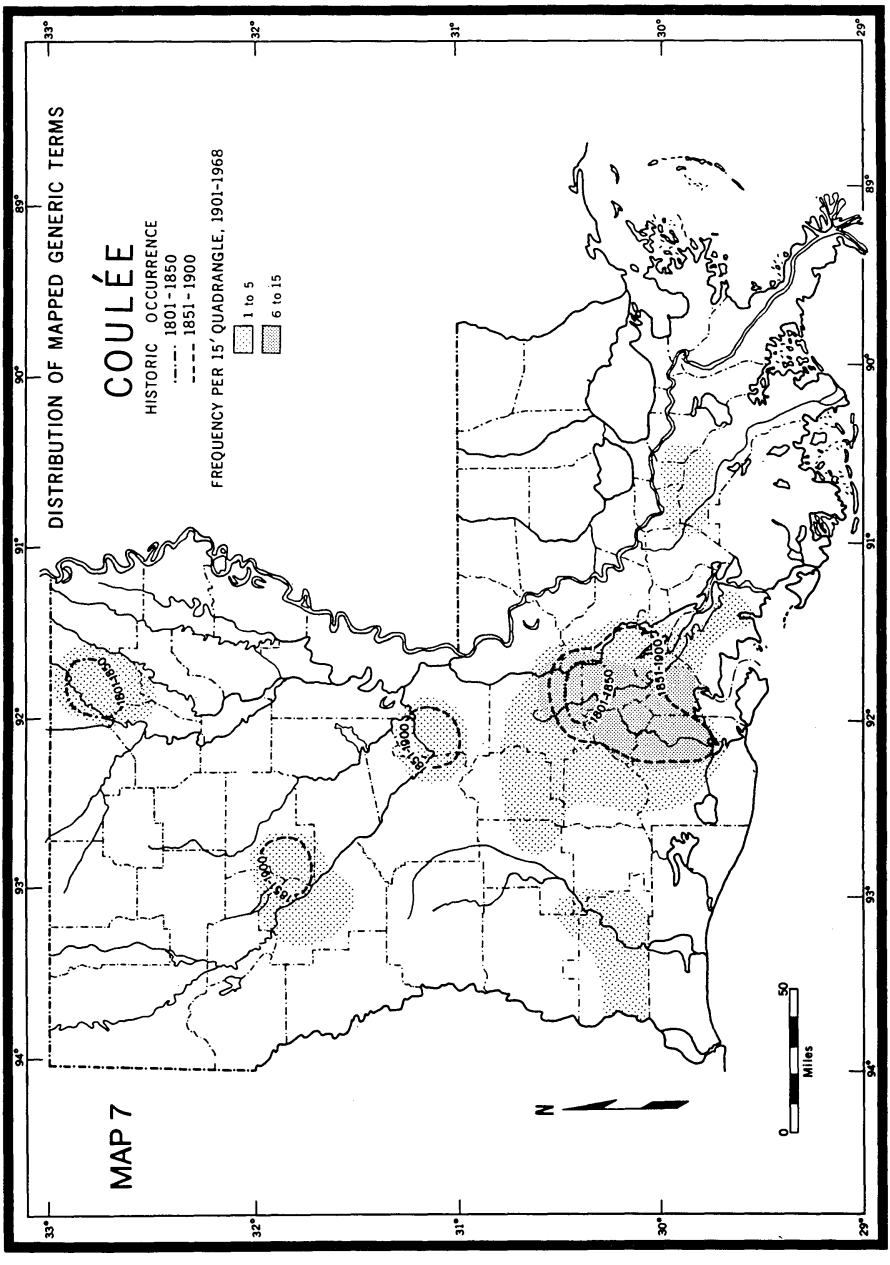
50
Miles


DISTRIBUTION OF MAPPED GENERIC TERMS
COTEAU
HISTORIC OCCURRENCE
1801-1850
1851-1900
FREQUENCY PER 15' QUADRANGLE, 1901-1968
1 to 5
MAP 6
N
0
50
Miles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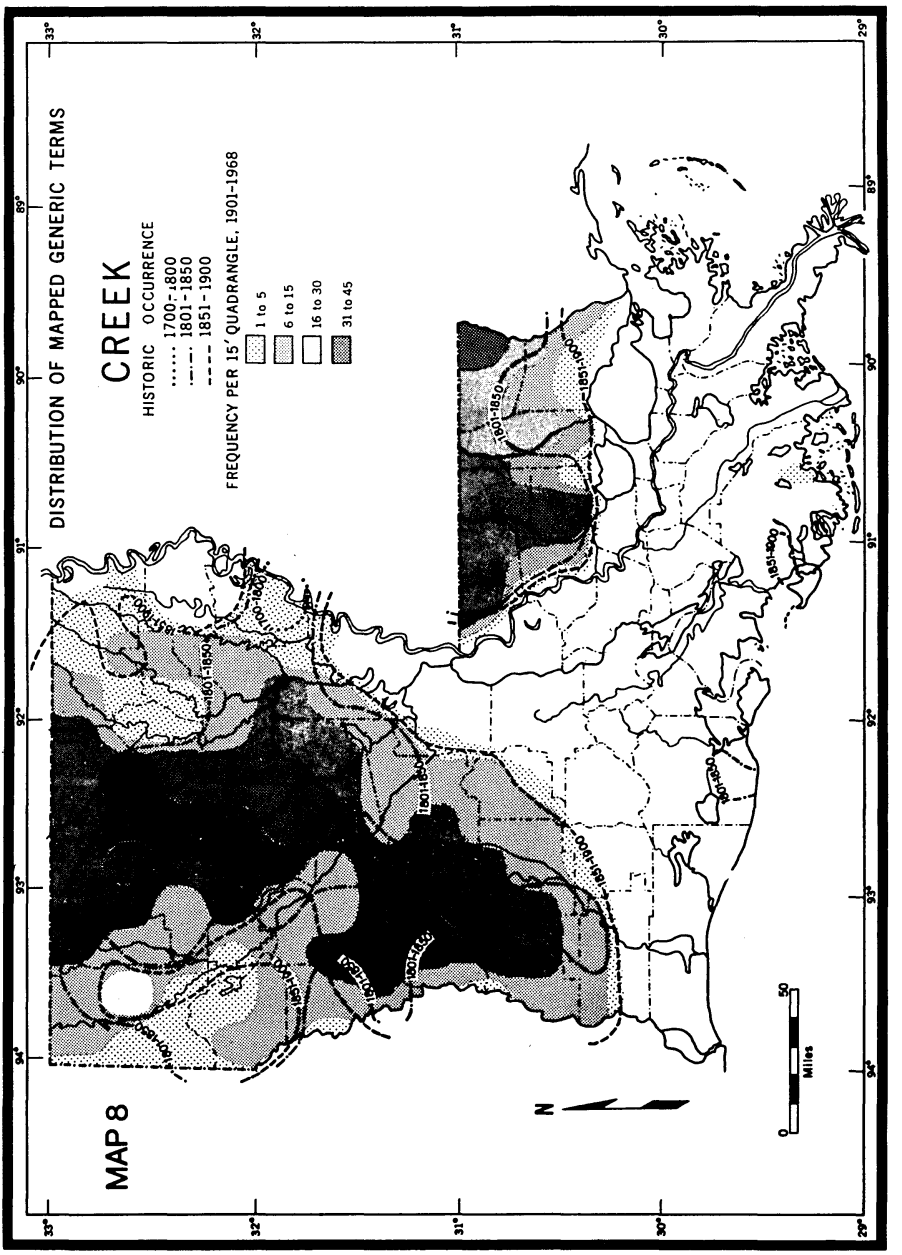
HISTORIC OCCURRENCE
1801-1850
1851-1900
FREQUENCY PER 15' QUADRANGLE, 1901-1968
1 to 5
6 to 15
1801-1850
1851-1900
1801-1850
1851-1900
MAP 7
N
0
50
Miles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1700-1800
1801-1850
1851-1900
FREQUENCY PER 15' QUADRANGLE, 1901-1968
1 to 5
6 to 15
16 to 30
31 to 45
MAP 8
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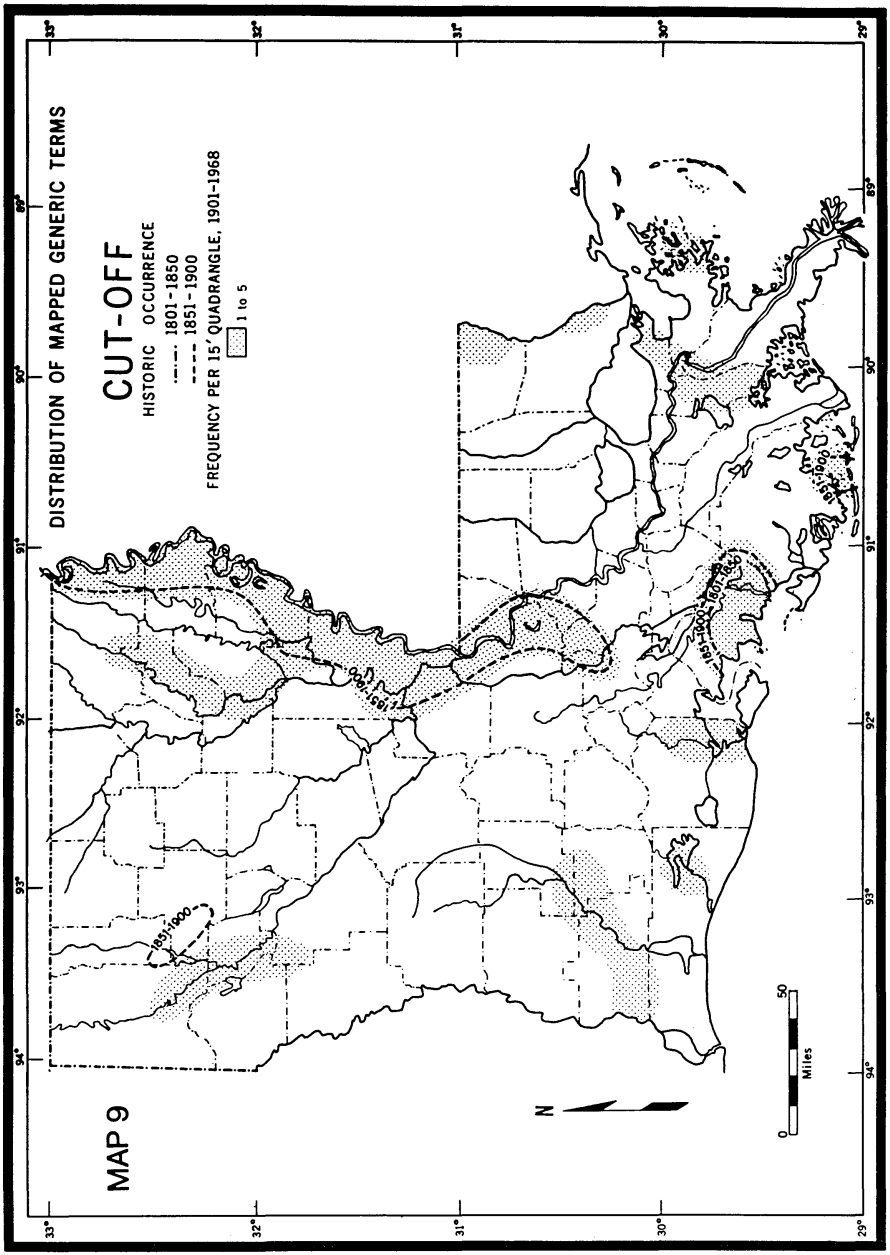
Miles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CUT-OFF
HISTORIC OCCURRENCE
1801-1850
1851-1900
FREQUENCY PER 15' QUADRANGLE, 1901-1968
1 to 5
MAP 9
N
0
50
Miles
1851-1900
1851-1900
1851-1900
1851-1900
1851-1900
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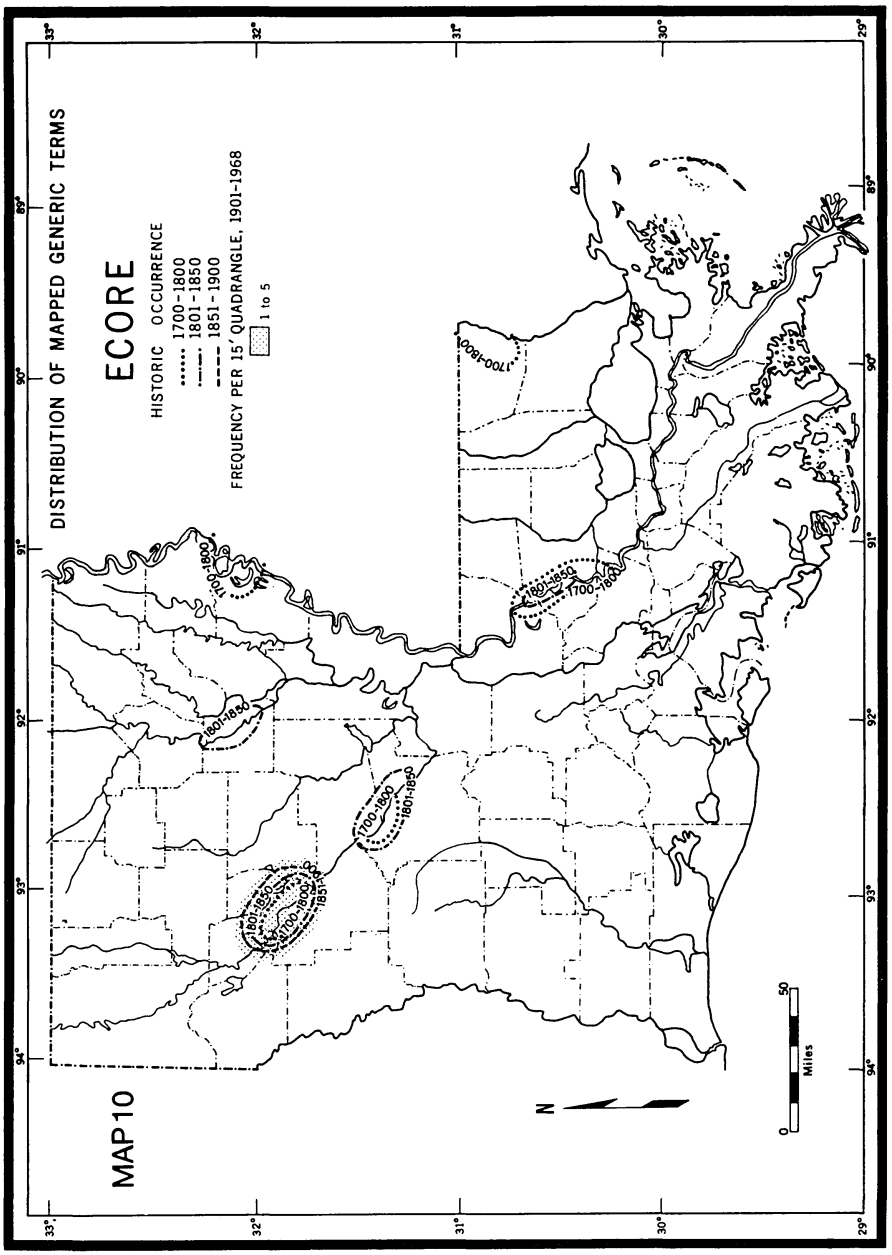
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1700-1800
1801-1850
1851-1900
FREQUENCY PER 15' QUADRANGLE, 1901-1968
1 to 5
MAP10
N
0
50
Miles
1700-1800
1801-1850
1700-1800
1801-1850
1700-1800
1801-1850
1700-1800
1801-1850
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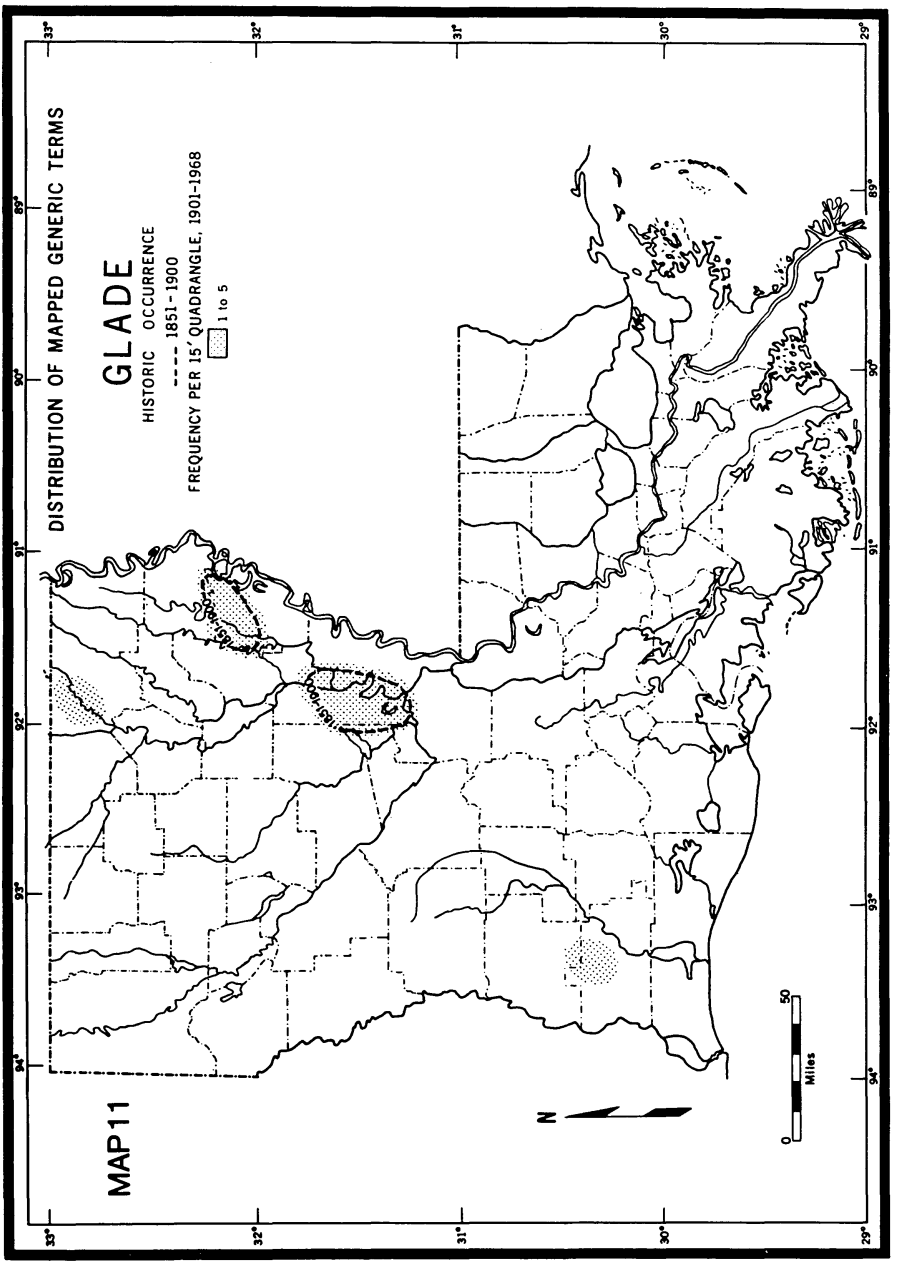
DISTRIBUTION OF MAPPED GENERIC TERMS
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FREQUENCY PER 15' QUADRANGLE, 1901-1968
1 to 5
MAP11
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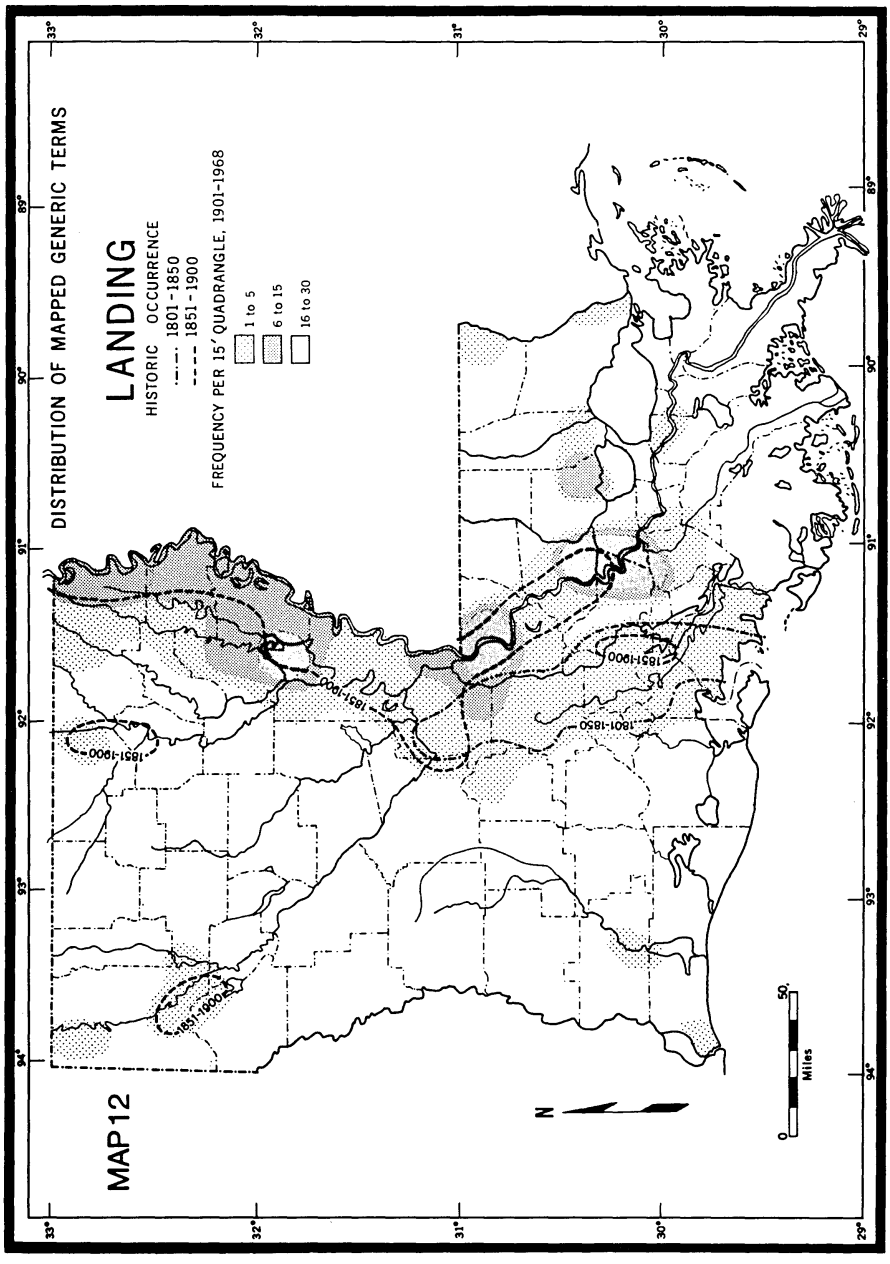
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1 to 5
6 to 15
16 to 30
1851-1900
1851-1900
1851-1900
1801-1850
MAP 12
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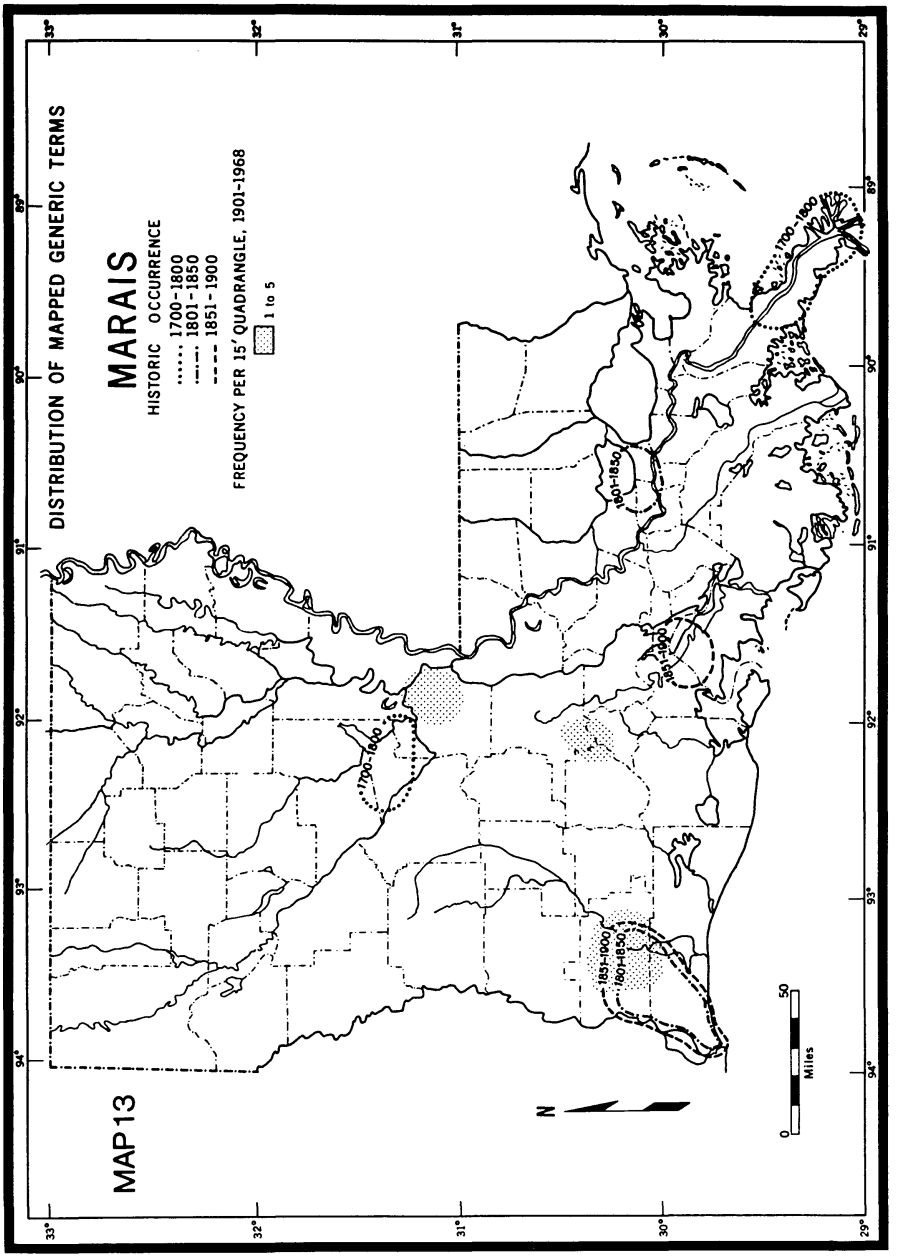
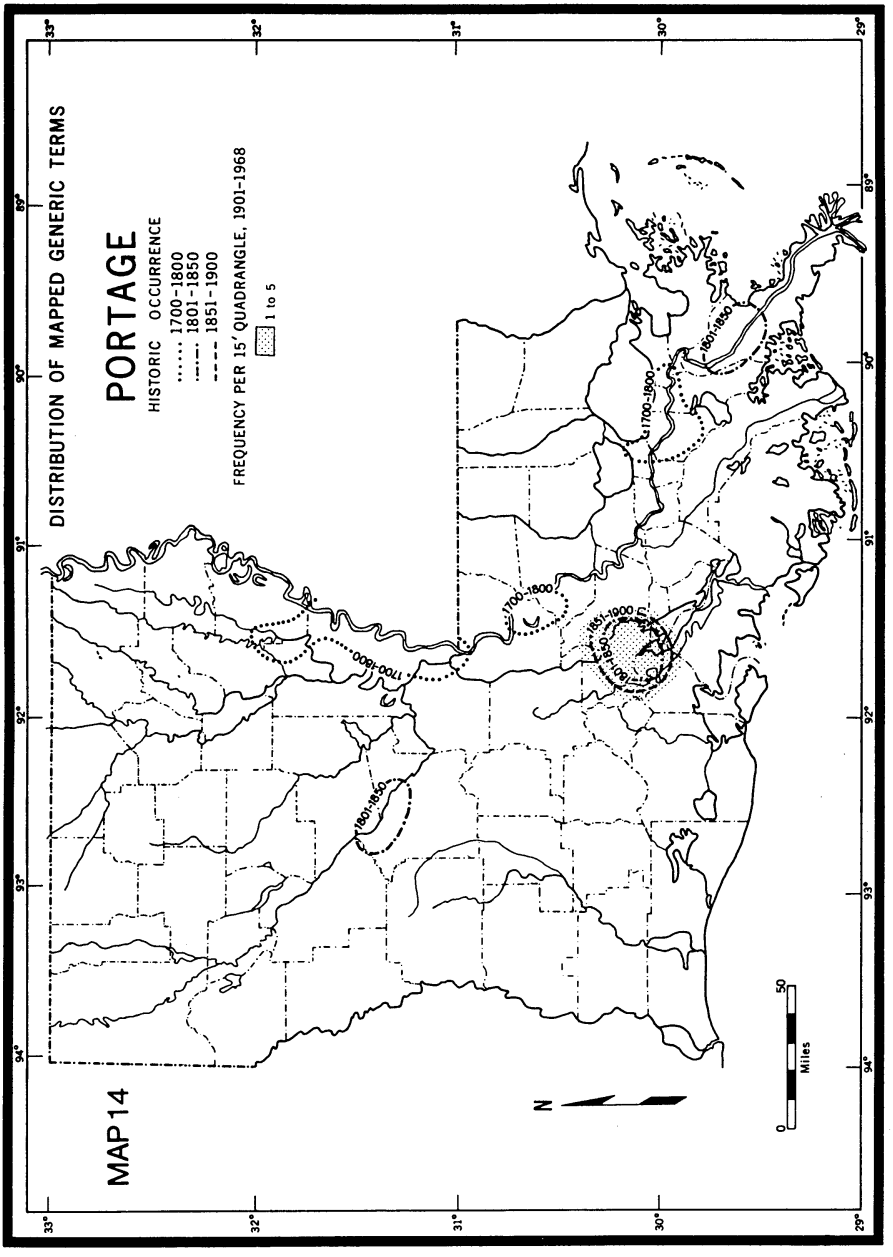
Miles


DISTRIBUTION OF MAPPED GENERIC TERMS
MARAIS
HISTORIC OCCURRENCE
1700-1800
1801-1850
1851-1900
FREQUENCY PER 15' QUADRANGLE, 1901-1968
1 to 5
MAP 13
1700-1800
1801-1850
1851-1900
1801-1850
1700-1800
1700-1800
N
0
50
Miles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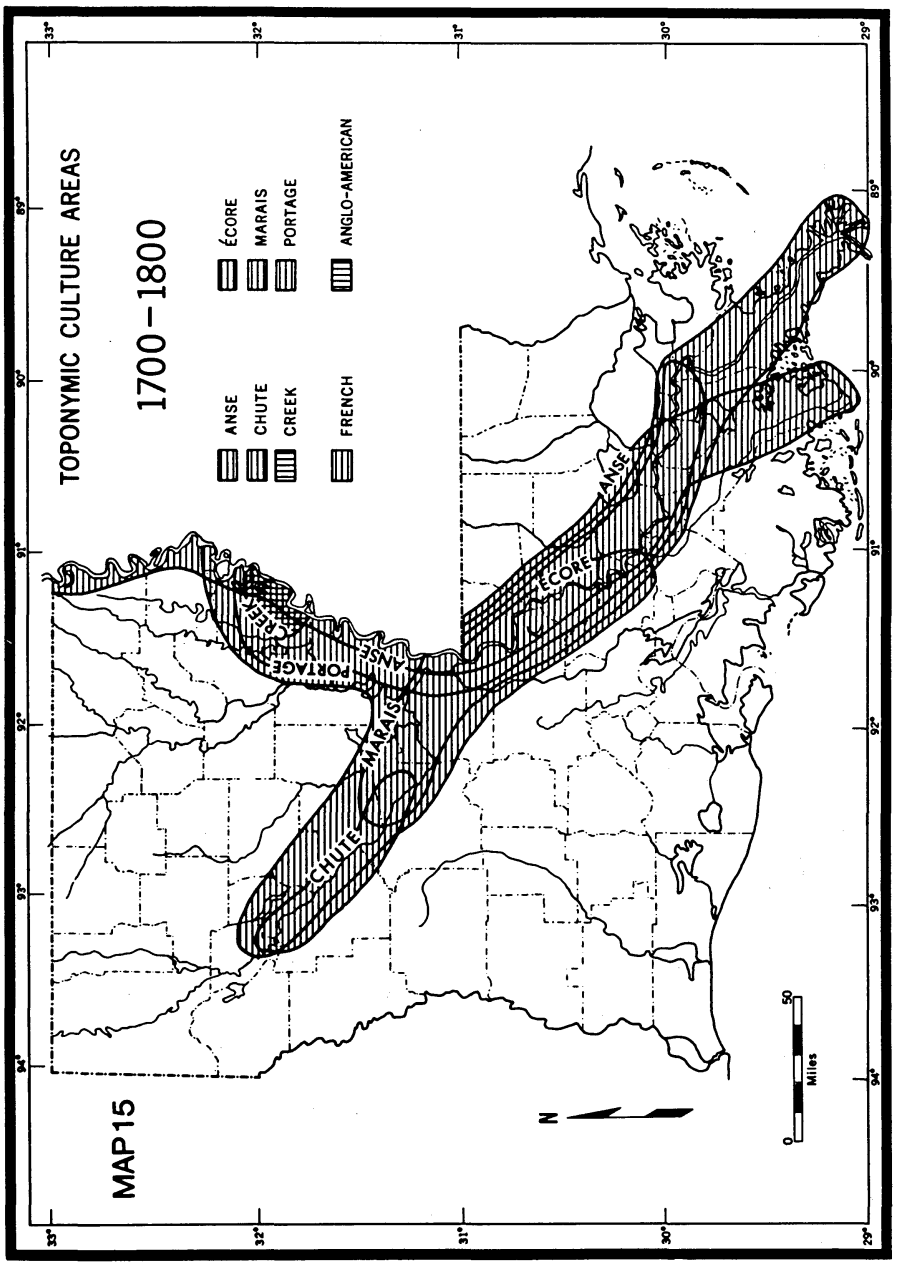
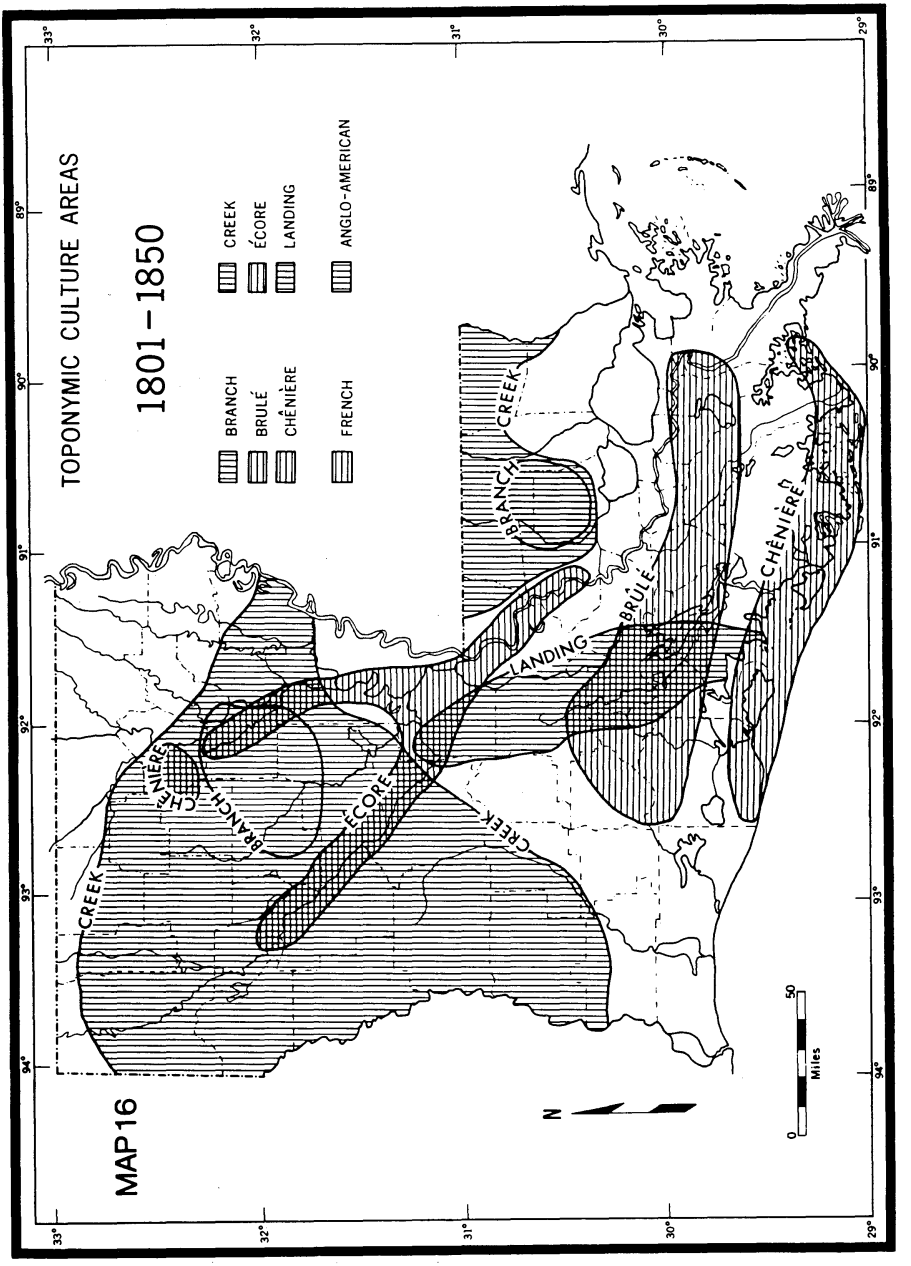
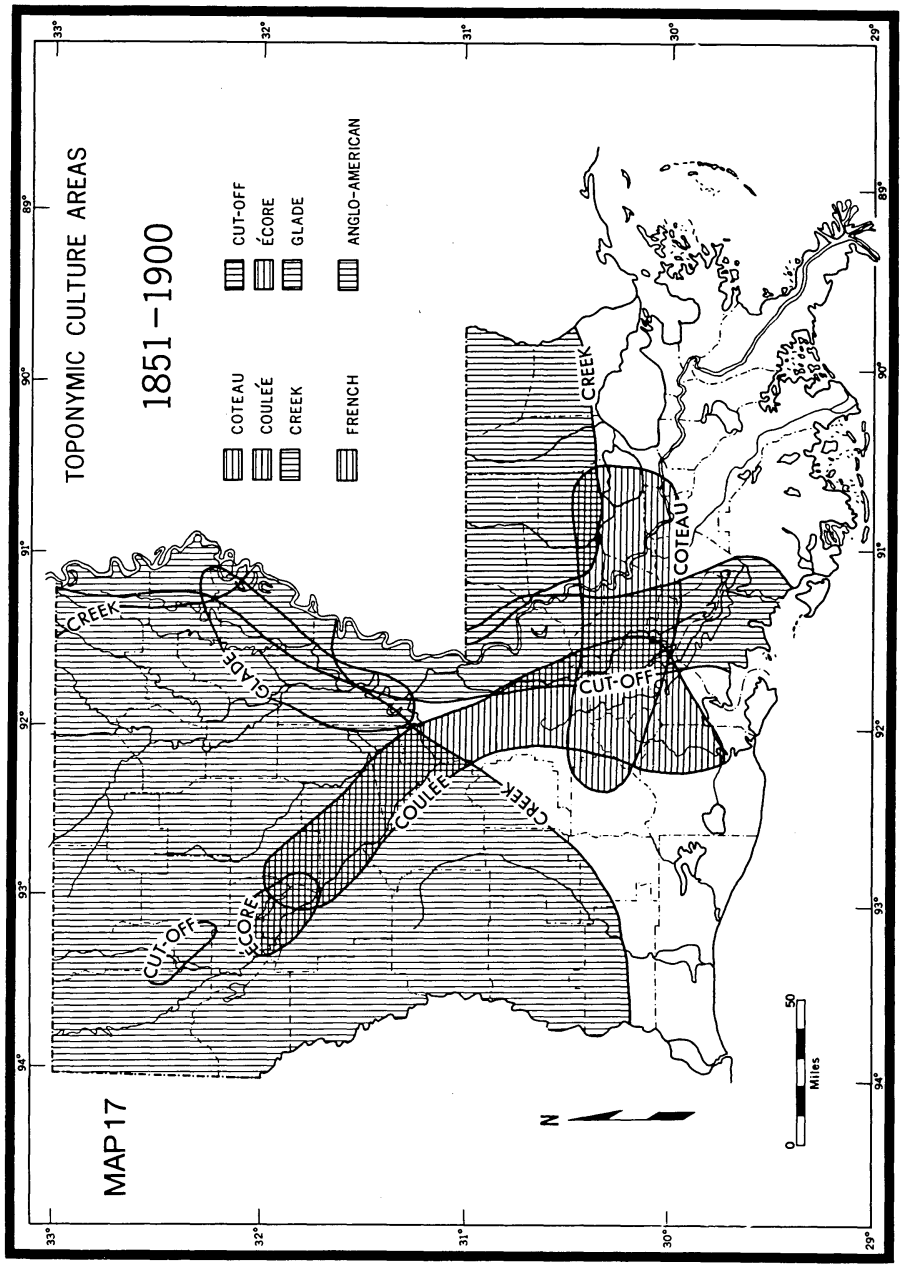
PORTAGE
HISTORIC OCCURRENCE
1700-1800
1801-1850
1851-1900
FREQUENCY PER 15' QUADRANGLE, 1901-1968
1 to 5
MAP 14
N
0
50
Miles


TOPONYMIC CULTURE AREAS
1700–1800
ANSE
CHUTE
CREEK
ÉCORE
MARAIS
PORTAGE
FRENCH
ANGLO-AMERICAN
MAP 15
N
0
50
Miles


TOPONYMIC CULTURE AREAS
1801–1850
BRANCH
BRULÉ
CHÊNIÈRE
FRENCH
CREEK
ÉCORE
LANDING
ANGLO-AMERICAN
MAP 16
N
0
50
Miles
CREEK
BRANCH CHENIÈRE
ÉCORE
CREEK
BRANCH CREEK
LANDING
BRÛLÉ
CHÊNIÈRE


TOPONYMIC CULTURE AREAS
1851–1900
COTEAU
COULÉE
CREEK
FRENCH
CUT-OFF
ÉCORE
GLADE
ANGLO-AMERICAN
MAP 17
N
0
50
Miles

Summary

When toponymic generics can be defined by linguistic and ethnic origins and can be plotted cartographically over stated time periods, it is possible to reconstruct culture areas. The series of 14 maps in this paper comprise a first step in this process. Based on data illustrated in the maps, three additional maps have been drawn to develop the thesis more graphically (Maps 15, 16, and 17). These show the distribution of all 14 generics cited in the paper, but for clarity each map carries only six terms. Additionally, each map has at least one French and one Anglo-American term. Further, each map indicates to which of the above two categories the terms belong. These three maps do not necessarily provide a precise determination of Anglo-American Lousiana and French-Lousiana culture areas, but the distribution of the areas correlates generally with the accepted definition of the areas.

Toponymic Culture Areas, 1700–1800 (Map 15). Louisiana was essentially French in character. *Creek,* an Anglo-American generic, appeared in a limited area just across the Mississippi River from Natchez. *Settlement* was restricted to areas along major streams.

Toponymic Culture Areas, 1801–1850 (Map 16). Louisiana received large numbers of Anglo-American immigrants. *Branch* and *creek* indicate they settled primarily in upland areas. French generics remained in use along streams in the northern part of the State and in south Louisiana. *Landing* indicated an influx of Anglo-Americans into the Atchafalaya Basin.

Toponymic Culture Areas, 1851–1900 (Map 17). The culture areas of Lousiana became essentially fixed as now known. The distribution of *creek, cut-off,* and *glade* represent Anglo-American Louisiana and the distribution of *coteau, coulée,* and *écore* represent French Louisiana. In certain areas, both groups were present.

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*For reasons of space, map references are abbreviated and include only author(s) and date when sources were drawn or published. Full details can be obtained from the author.