

# Our Job is to Show Them Why: Environmental Justice and Energy History at Whitney Plantation

 *Interview with Ashley Rogers by Aislinn Pentecost-Farren*

This article is an interview with Ashley Rogers, executive director of Whitney Plantation. Whitney Plantation is the only plantation museum in Louisiana with an exclusive focus on the story of slavery. The museum is located on 200 acres of a former sugar, indigo, and rice plantation that operated from 1752–1975. Whitney Plantation is now a non-profit museum that preserves over a dozen historic structures, many of which are listed on the National Register of Historic Places as the Whitney Plantation Historic District.<sup>1</sup>

I asked Rogers to give an interview for this issue of *Parks Stewardship Forum* because Whitney Plantation is a multi-phase energy story, with compelling climate and environmental justice themes. The early economy of the United States used human energy, in tandem with energy from animals, water, and wood.<sup>2</sup> A significant portion of that human energy was in enslaved labor, as at Whitney.<sup>3</sup> Oil companies came to the area soon after emancipation, when the area was still mostly sugar plantations worked by sharecroppers who descended from the enslaved. The area is now a petrochemical corridor that generates a disproportionate amount of the United States' greenhouse gas emissions, a second energy legacy built on environmental deregulation that relies on local legacies of racism. Whitney Plantation is a place where we can see the connections between histories of enslavement and the causes of the climate crisis.

Slowly, parks and historic sites are starting to address climate change with visitors. When they do this, it is usually by pointing out climate's contemporary effects on park resources or by sharing how the organization is reducing its climate impact. Park and history institutions usually leave out the historical origins of climate change, and how racism and classism have contributed to the issue. Meanwhile, environmental justice advocacy groups are well-versed in communicating to the public how the legacies of racism and enslavement are major factors in the land use choices that have caused the climate crisis, as well as local contemporary threats to human life. The park and heritage fields can learn from environmental justice about the meaning of history and its power as a tool in the present, as Rogers conveys.

Whitney Plantation is a rare example of a museum that considers site-specific history, climate change, and environmental justice all part of its mission. In this interview, Rogers articulates the connections between the landscape's energy and enslavement histories, the impacts and origins of climate change, the local community today, and the museum's interpretation and programming.

## **Pentecost-Farren:**

I'm curious how Whitney Plantation tells the story of both metabolic energy—in the labor of enslaved people—and of fossil fuel energy as two foundations of the American economy. Through the environmental justice work Whit-

ney Plantation has been engaging in, you're showing how those two forms of energy are connected. When Whitney Plantation was established, what kinds of energy did it use, and what was it using this energy for?



Home for enslaved people at Whitney Plantation, with statues by sculptor Woodrow Nash. ELSA HAHNE, COURTESY OF WHITNEY PLANTATION MUSEUM

**Rogers:**

Whitney Plantation is one of the older plantations in this stretch of the [Mississippi] River. They had almost 70 years of nearly exclusively human and animal power—enslaved people clear-cutting forests and burning trees as fuel. They grew indigo for 50 or 60 years, which uses some heating in the processing, through burning wood. Everything that they did would have been done by hand, by human labor.

Whitney Plantation converted to sugarcane sometime around the turn of the 19th century, and was using fossil fuels by the 1820s. The [sugar] mill had a steam engine from England by 1825. From that point on, they used a combination of fossil fuels, animal power, human labor, and continued to burn wood as well.

**Pentecost-Farren:**

Can you tell me about the landscape before Whitney Plantation was created, and how the landscape changed?

**Rogers:**

There was a cypress swamp near the plantation, and the

other type of landscape that originally existed here was prairie grass, which has a history of Indigenous use.

Currently, the cypress swamp is six miles back from the river. Back then it would have been closer to the plantation. I have a project I hope we'll get off the ground this year to reforest two acres. I'm using the term "reforesting" loosely, because I actually don't know if it would have been forest or prairie exactly where the museum is now.

**Pentecost-Farren:**

Was most of the human labor and energy put into that landscape transformation and agriculture enslaved, or were there other workers?

**Rogers:**

No, it was mostly slave labor. By the time the plantation was established in 1752, it was well past the era of indentured servants here. There were indentured servants in these colonies, but they're much earlier. Not to say there weren't any in the 1750s, just that by that point they're getting more enslaved laborers in the colonies. So that's who's there.

By the time that the founder of the plantation bought the land, he already owned approximately twenty people. Ninety percent of everything that was done by humans on that land was enslaved people.

**Pentecost-Farren:**

From what I understand, today the area around Whitney is known as Cancer Alley. What is that?

**Rogers:**

Cancer Alley is a nickname that activists gave the region in the 1980s. Now there's people calling it Death Alley, because the point is that it's not just cancer. There's all kinds of other things that go wrong, and all kinds of things that don't kill you that are still problematic, like higher rates of childhood asthma. Officially it's called Louisiana's petrochemical corridor. Twenty-five percent of the nation's petrochemical production happens in the 160-mile stretch of the Mississippi River between Baton Rouge and New Orleans. It is a disproportionate amount, to have all of that concentrated in one small region.

But that's not the full story. That's a huge stretch of the river, and there are big sections of it where there is no petrochemical production. A lot of the petrochemical production, even within that stretch, is concentrated in Black neighborhoods. Saint John the Baptist Parish, which was, last I checked, a majority black parish, has been at points in the last 10 years considered the most polluted county in the nation. It is a very, very, very polluted area.

There are other parishes within that stretch of Cancer Alley that don't bear as much of the toxic burden. Baton Rouge is an interesting case, because Baton Rouge has two different parishes, east and west. One is more Black, one is more White. One has more toxic chemicals, one has fewer toxic chemicals. So there's clear connections in the region between where the petrochemicals are happening and where there are minority populations.

**Pentecost-Farren:**

There is a strong connection between Cancer Alley and climate change. Louisiana has one of the top five highest emissions of energy-related CO<sup>2</sup> in the United States.<sup>4</sup> The Deep South Center for Environmental Justice reports that the majority of Louisiana's greenhouse gas emissions come from Cancer Alley, around 90 million metric tons annually from 2016 to 2021.<sup>5</sup> The facilities are predominantly in census tracts with minority and poverty populations higher than Louisiana averages.<sup>6</sup> In 2021 the UN [United Nations] reported that the combined emissions of carbon dioxide equivalent

emissions per year in a single parish in Cancer Alley could exceed those of 113 countries.<sup>7</sup>

Any other connections between the climate crisis and Cancer Alley you've observed?

**Rogers:**

The thing that's crazy about Cancer Alley is that a lot of it is very beautiful. It doesn't really align with what you think of as being a place that's polluted. The danger of it is that it's kind of invisible. It took me maybe two years of being out here every day before I realized that some of the clouds weren't clouds. They look like clouds. If you're not paying attention and you don't see that the cloud actually comes down on the horizon at a point, you just think it's a nice, breezy day, you know? It is really strange.

There are times it's not invisible. A friend of mine will be like, "Oh my god, I drove out on I-10, what was that huge flame?" That's the Norco refinery. Sometimes it smells like soy sauce out by Whitney. I don't know what that is, but it's coming from something. It took me a while to understand I lived in a place where you can't drink the tap water. It actually doesn't matter if the parish says that it's safe because you don't trust the parish, the parish is all in bed with industry. But you kind of get used to it. It's frog-in-the-pot-type stuff. There's still people out there fishing and not imagining what's in the waterways. The tension between the invisibility and the danger is something that is really interesting to me.

Almost all the activism is led by people who live here, I don't want to make it seem like people who live there don't know what's going on. But there's definitely a strong contingent of people for whom it's beneficial for them to have blinders on about it, because there's not a lot of economic opportunity. For a lot of people, the plants are the way that they or their father, their mother, was able to buy a house.

**Pentecost-Farren:**

Well, speaking of layers, is there a reason a petrochemical corridor developed in a place where thousands of people were enslaved for their energy?

**Rogers:**

There's about 15 reasons for it. One reason is that the Mississippi River is here. But the Mississippi River is huge. So then you need to ask, why is the entire Mississippi River not dotted with these plants? There has to be another reason.

Another reason is this was already where we put all of our industry. Since colonization this has been the industrial corridor. It makes sense to keep using the land for the same thing, an extractive industry. The extraction is something different, but it is all based on stuff that's literally coming out of the dirt in Louisiana.

Louisiana has always been pro-business, and the business has always been based on extracting labor and resources from the people here. So the business environment of Louisiana is predicated on a large population of powerless people. Whether those people were enslaved, or disenfranchised second-class citizens because of Jim Crow, or just plain old poor folks, which is a lot of the White people in Louisiana. This is a desperately poor state, and has been for some time, but it is also a state that generates tremendous revenue for multinational companies. For example, this year in Louisiana our governor passed tax breaks on oil companies and then gave us the highest sales tax rate in the nation of 10.25 percent. Louisiana as a state could compete on an international level with some of the places that are struck by what we call "resource curses," the idea that places with the greatest resources have the worst outcomes for their population.

That's why I'm not compelled by the argument that it's just because of the river. It's also because this is the culture of Louisiana. The people in power traditionally in Louisiana have been the wealthiest people, who are tied with business, and they make government work for them.

It's also basic efficiency like, I'm a plantation owner who owns 2,000 acres. And on the other hand, here's Standard Oil that needs to buy 1,000 acres to build a refinery. If they buy from me, they don't have to make negotiations with 150 different landowners, they can talk to one guy. All of this land was plantations, long lots with river access which petrochemical companies need, and what plantations also needed.

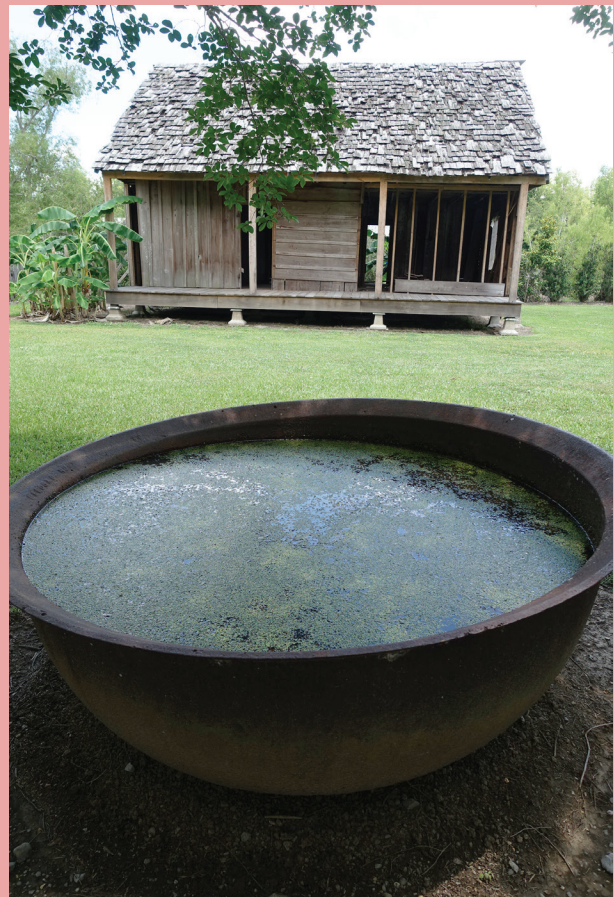
So it's about land use, it's about politics, it's about racism, it's about climate, too.

**Pentecost-Farren:**

Can you talk a little bit about the discovery of oil in the area of Whitney Plantation? Was it used on plantations?

**Rogers:**

Not oil. The plantations were using coal for steam engines, but they never really used oil for industrial



Iron cauldron at Whitney Plantation for boiling cane juice to make sugar.  
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machinery besides running farm vehicles on gasoline. The sugar refinery at Whitney burned down before oil was discovered here, so they probably were using coal.

But oil was discovered two hours west of Whitney at the Evangeline Oil Field in 1901. We have the same oil that Texas does. It's one geologic formation across the Gulf [of Mexico]. We're sitting on these massive salt domes, and anywhere you have salt domes, you have oil.

A rush for oil happened in 1901 right after [the discovery of the] Spindletop [oil field] in Texas, very analogous. It took eight years after that for Standard Oil to get here. They built their refinery in Baton Rouge in 1909 at almost the exact same moment that they were broken up by the government. Then some of the former Standard Oil subsidiary companies opened refineries too. The oil was for industrial uses, and that's where the plantations became customers, because they had all equipment that needed lubrication.



Home for enslavers at Whitney Plantation. ELSA HAHNE, COURTESY OF WHITNEY PLANTATION MUSEUM

You can't do anything with raw oil. You have to do a bunch of stuff to the oil to make it into everything else. So wherever oil is discovered, it's going to spawn a bunch of other industries. And that's what happened here. Everything that they're making is a derivative from oil.

**Pentecost-Farren:**

Turning to Whitney Plantation the museum, what are the kind of main priorities for visitor experiences at Whitney and what people take away from their visit?

**Rogers:**

The main point is to understand something about the system of American slavery. That is already so much work that we have very little opportunity on our regular core tour to do anything else, because our country is so wildly undereducated about the subject of slavery. Our tour has to be not only about Whitney plantation, but also about American slavery, the institution. We have to give people a lot of background information, using Whitney as a tool to describe what happened globally and nationally.

**Pentecost-Farren:**

You and I have discussed how historic sites are and are not talking about the climate crisis. Can you tell me about what Whitney has and hasn't been able to do, considering how much you're already trying to convey to your visitors. Can you talk about what kind of interpretation you have about climate, meaning exhibitions, tours, signage, programs, but also website text, press releases, any kind of communications?

**Rogers:**

We end up talking about climate change through special programming. We have some signage on the grounds, interpreting the proposed Greenfield grain elevator nearby and its connections to climate change. But the grain elevator has pulled out, we won that fight, so we need to adjust those signs.

We have signs that talk about storms. It's funny, the further we get from Hurricane Ida, the more nobody knows it happened. The storm was so obvious when

we wrote those panels that we didn't include the basic statement that the storm hit us and destroyed buildings. Some people think that there's holes in buildings because we're bad at our jobs. We have to say there are holes in buildings because we were hit by a hurricane, and it's very hard to recover.

When Ida hit we lost three buildings, and we had damage to 20, and it caused over a million dollars in damages. We have not recovered, and we are less insured now than we were then, because everybody is. We were just hit by another hurricane last year. It was much more mild, but did cause about \$30,000 in damages and we didn't get anything for that. The bar is pretty high for us to actually get a claim these days.

We have a long-term temporary exhibit right now called *ExtrActivism*. Jazmin Miller is a filmmaker, and she created the exhibit with a journalist named Anya Groner, about Jazmin's family's land. It's based on a

documentary that she made of the same name that talks about the intersections between culture and people's connection to the land, and land use for oil extraction and petrochemicals.<sup>8</sup>

In 2022, we had a two-day symposium called Climate and Race about environmental history, environmental justice, and climate change.<sup>9</sup> The keynote speaker talked about the history of climate change, a broad overview of climate change legislation and the political side. We had speakers on environmental history, plantations using archaeology to fight industry, the history of the river parishes and their connection to Cancer Alley. We had local activists talk about their fights for environmental justice.

The symposium showed me that we have a following of people who are interested in how we can connect past and present. It was very well attended, and people stayed all day. I think the fact is that climate change and environmental justice matters a lot to people

Panelists for Climate and Race Symposium at Whitney Plantation, featuring (L to R) Ashley Rogers, executive director of Whitney Plantation; Joy Banner and Jo Banner, co-founders of the Descendants Project; and Bobby Taylor, founder of Concerned Citizens of St. John The Baptist Parish. FREEDOM PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF WHITNEY PLANTATION



in Louisiana, maybe more than other regions. We're experiencing it.

Aside from these programs, at this point climate change and cultural heritage is the main thing that people are asking me to talk about. I'm doing another talk about it next week.

**Pentecost-Farren:**

What do they mean by climate change and cultural heritage exactly? What do they want you to talk about at the intersection of those topics?

**Rogers:**

That it is a concern that exists. It's crazy, this goes to show you there are not enough people having these conversations that I keep getting asked to come and talk about climate change, and everybody's like, "Wow. This is such an important topic." Meanwhile, we keep getting climate disasters that ruin heritage organizations. It just happened again: all these museums were destroyed in

the [January 2025] fires in LA [Los Angeles, California]. That's going to keep happening, and what are you going to do, keep asking me to come and convince people climate change is real? It feels very weird.

I'm happy to do it because it's something that I care about. But there needs to be some kind consortium of heritage organizations who do things like lobby our representatives. There's not enough resources available to heritage organizations for climate disaster, we're all just kind of on our own.

It feels like over the next 10 to 20 years, there's going to be a series of small- and large-scale disasters that result in the destruction of some of the most important heritage sites in this nation. And they're just going to keep asking me to come and talk about it.

**Pentecost-Farren:**

You marked your site with the damage that happened from a hurricane just a few years ago. And now you're

Audience members at Climate and Race Symposium at Whitney Plantation. FREEDOM PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF WHITNEY PLANTATION



realizing, because of a kind of climate-disaster amnesia that people have, you need to redo those signs. Are there ways that you're also connecting this visitor education to the environmental justice context of your location?

**Rogers:**

Yes, but it's hard to do for the public. A lot of it is through advocacy stuff that I do as part of my mandate as the director.

We were fighting the expansion of the industry into St. John [The Baptist] Parish. We defeated that in August [2024], after three years of fighting it as a consulting party for the [US] Army Corps [of Engineers' under the National Historic Preservation Act] Section 106 permitting process. It was a lot of advocacy work, showing up at the courthouse, doing media interviews, speaking to the parish council and the Zoning Commission. Our effort was successful because we had so many different people participating in it. People care about Whitney, but if it had just been us saying don't put this industry on our fence line because our visitors don't want to look at it, that would not have come across very well. So we used our name recognition and our platform to draw attention to the community. The community had their own organization, The Descendants Project, that buried them in lawsuits. These things work together. Whitney had an official stance against that project so I was doing that work as a representative of Whitney.

**ENDNOTES**

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10. Carman, Jennifer P., Danning Lu, Matthew Ballew, Joshua Low, Marija Verner, Seth A. Rosenthal, Kristin Barendregt-Ludwig, et al. 2025. "Americans' Support for Climate Justice." *Environmental Science & Policy* vol. 163 (January 1): 103976. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envsci.2024.103976>

When I've done programming, I will talk about that advocacy, and the *ExtrActivism* exhibit talks about environmental justice. So it's something we discuss, but again, it's difficult to make that part of the kind of core tour. It has to be ancillary.

**Pentecost-Farren:**

This leads me to my last interview question. The Yale Center for Climate Communication just published an article about their research finding that only 34% of Americans have heard of climate justice, but 53% of Americans support it after reading a description and learning what it is.<sup>10</sup> This reminded me of what you said in a previous conversation, something like, "If they don't understand why talking about climate change at Whitney is important, our job is to show them why." Can you elaborate on that as an interpretation philosophy at Whitney?

**Rogers:**

I say that all the time. That is a really inspirational statistic, huh? It can sometimes feel like education isn't really justice work, because the outcome isn't right in front of you. You can have a program and introduce people to these ideas, or put up an exhibit. You might never know its impacts, but something those people learned might influence any number of things, it might change their perspective on things. It's just hard to measure, but I know that happens at Whitney. 🌱