Lagniappe: A Louisiana French-Inspired Display Typeface

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis celebrates the history and culture of my hometown, Lafayette, Louisiana. Lagniappe is a typeface inspired by letterforms found in Lafayette newspapers from the late 1800s-early 1900s, a time marked by the stigmatization of French and the discrimination of francophone people in Louisiana. After doing broad historical research on the area and specifically learning about the history of the French language and culture in Lafayette, I utilized public digital archives to search for unique examples of typography from historical newspapers. During this exploration, I was drawn to one typeface found throughout decades of clippings of the Lafayette Gazette. The main goal was to preserve the unique characteristics of the letterforms while adapting them for contemporary usage. I experimented with a variety of letterforms and refined them into a consistent system. French accents were added to the character set so that the typeface could be used in both English and French. Finally, BirdFont was used to make Lagniappe functional. The typeface was documented using both English and Louisiana French text. Lagniappe symbolizes the resilience and evolution of the French language, contributes to the revival of the language in this area, and preserves Louisiana's cultural and linguistic heritage.

I was initially interested in the visuals of street signage around Lafayette, particularly old signs, hand-painted signs, unique letterforms, etc. Over the course of several days in December 2023, I took photographs of signage around Lafayette. I found examples of many different kinds of letterforms. I was unsure of what to make with the photographs that I took, so I decided to do historical research in search of something more.

With a specific focus on major events affecting the evolution of the French language in Lafayette, I collected research on a FigJam board. Key information is highlighted below.
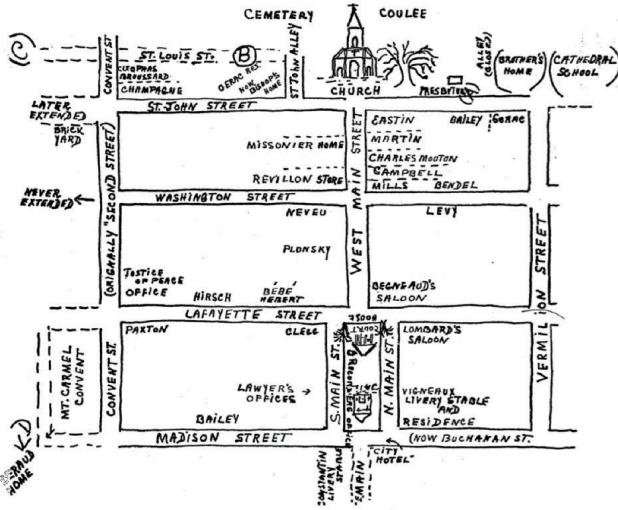
1880 Map of Vermillionville

1699-1713	-The First French Settlements in Louisiana.
1710	-British captured Port Royal (capital of Acadia). Acadians refused to sign an oath of allegiance to Britain. Many also participated in French military operations.
	-Britain and the Nova Scotia Council ordered all Acadians to be expelled to eliminate any future military threat. Thousands died during this deportation.
	-Many exiled Acadians were moved to Louisiana and settled in the Lafayette area. Early settlers received Spanish land grants.
1824	-Village of Vermilionville established.
1884	-Vermilionville renamed for General Lafayette, a French aristocrat who had fought with the Continental Army during the American Revolutionary War.
	-Population increased exponentially due to increasing immigration.

"I Will Not Speak French in School" by Seaux-N-Seau Soileau

1921	-The new Louisiana constitution reversed the previous language rights and banned the teaching of French in all public schools.
	-The constitution established English as the official language of Louisiana...French became a sign of "cultural illegitimacy."
	-Parents viewed the practice of teaching their children English as the intrusion of a foreign culture, and many refused to send their children to school. Eventually they were forced to.
	-When the government required all schools to teach in English, new teachers, who could not speak French, were hired. Children could not understand their teachers and were subjected to corporal punishment for speaking French on school grounds.

"[I] grew up speaking French, but if you spoke in school they hit your fingers with a ruler," reads the transcript of Melancon's words. "Second offense put you on knees with rice or corn, thirty minutes or hour; next time sent to professor [principal?] with a big paddle; next time you were kicked out of school."

-The punishment system seems to have been responsible for much of the decay that Louisiana French experienced in the 20th century since.

Sign outside of Myrtle Place Elementary School

1968 -The Council for the Development of French in Louisiana (CODOFIL) was established to promote the preservation of French language and culture in Louisiana.

-This is the council that began establishing French Immersion programs, like the one I was in.

2011 -As of 2011, there were an estimated 150,000 to 200,000 people in Louisiana who speak French. By comparison, there were an estimated one million native French-speakers in Louisiana in about 1968.

2023 -The Advocate roughly estimated that there were 120,000 French speakers in Louisiana, including about 20,000 Cajun French.

"The real future of French in Louisiana came from young people who are actively involved in the promotion and speaking of French."

-I wanted to make the typeface about this French revival.

Using the Lafayette Public Library archives, the LDL (Louisiana Digital Library), and Newspapers.com, I searched for newspapers containing interesting letterforms. The only French newspaper that I was able to find in the archives was printed in Vermillionville in 1845. Every other newspaper was written entirely in English.

I was mainly drawn to display typefaces found in old advertisements. After collecting images of many different kinds of letterforms, I made some quick sketches on grid paper. This is when I found a typeface to take inspiration from. I looked through countless newspaper clippings to create as complete of a character set for this typeface as possible.

L'IMPARTIAL.

VOL. 4.   VERMILLIONVILLE, 18 OCTOBRE, 1845.   No. 32.

Clip from L'Impartial, October 18th, 1845, Louisiana Digital Library

-The only newspaper from the archives in French was printed prior to Vermillionville changing to Lafayette.

Waverley

LOOK HERE!

ADEIKLMPR

PARKERSON & MOUTON

Let me be your tailor

H. K. Ruger

Bill got the point quickly

MRS. JOHN...

Grocery Store

LAFAYETTE CLOTHINE HOUSE

ACDEHILM BOQRSTUG

ABC

GROCERIES

ALL KINDS OF LUMBER

LUMBER

ACADIA'S

DO YOU KNOW THAT
B. FALK
Has the Best Assorted Store in Town?
A Visit There Will Convince You of this Fact.

UP!

$1.00 FOR THIS PAPER ONE YEAR.

WE CAN

LIQUORS.

HEATERS

MILLINERY
PARLOR
A FULL ASSORTMENT OF FINE GOODS IN THE
LATEST STYLES.
A. J MOSS.   A. EMILE MOUTON.
MOSS & MOUTON
LUMBER
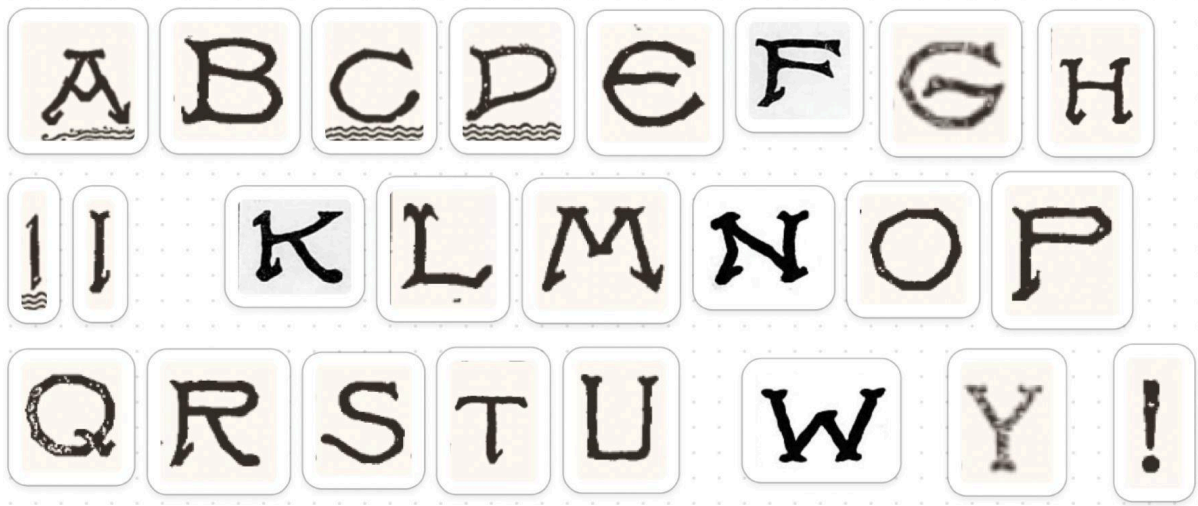
I was able to locate every letter except for J, V, X, and Z. I quickly realized that nearly every serif is completely different. I began sketching out the letters with different combinations of shapes and serifs and decided what I liked and did not like.
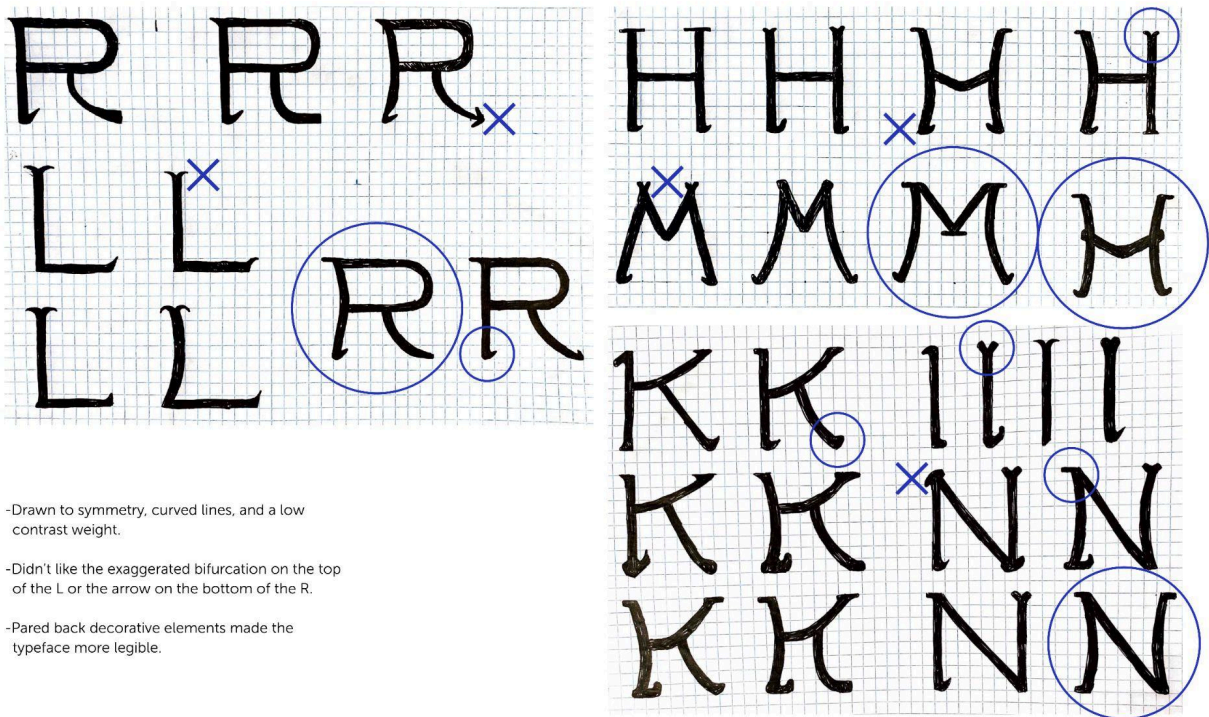
-Drawn to symmetry, curved lines, and a low contrast weight.

-Didn't like the exaggerated bifurcation on the top of the L or the arrow on the bottom of the R.

-Pared back decorative elements made the typeface more legible.

The goal was to make the typeface feel smoother, more consistent, and more simplified while still keeping some of the parts that make it unique. I was drawn to symmetry, curved lines, and the low contrast weight of the original typeface. I also decided that making the serifs smaller would create a more legible typeface.

After scanning my sketches into InDesign, I worked on making the first digital version of the typeface. I drew all 26 letters along with all French accents. I received feedback, made some adjustments, and this led to version two.

ABCDEFGH
IJKLMNOPQ
RSTUVWXYZ

Version One

-First digital version of the typeface.

-First attempt at making characters more consistent and creating French accents.

AIGU É   GRAVE È À Ù   TREMA Ë Ï Ü

CIRCONFLEXE Ê Â Î Ô Û   CEDILLE Ç

A B C D E F G H
I J K L M N O P Q
R S T U V W X Y Z

AIGU   GRAVE   TREMA

É   È À Ù   Ë Ï Ü

CIRCONFLEXE

Ê Â Î Ô Û   CEDILLE

Ç

Version Two

-Made small adjustments to nearly every character based off of feedback.

-Made French accents smaller.

-Drastically changed serif on bottom of F, Y, etc.

-Completely redrew the X.

-Closed the counters of the R and P.

-Widened the A, and narrowed the B, J, and S.

LAGNIAPPE   HAMBURGEVONS

ICI ON PARLE   ÉTOUFFÉE
FRANÇAIS

SPHINX OF BLACK QUARTZ
JUDGE MY VOW

After version two was created, all letters were traced in BirdFont. I typeset Lagniappe with several words and phrases to locate discrepancies. I also spent a lot of time on spacing. Some minor revisions were made to letters J and S, and four punctuation marks were added to the character set.

Version Three

-The current version of the typeface.

-Made minor revisions to J and S. Added characters with French accents.

-Traced all characters in BirdFont and worked on spacing.

At this point, I settled on the name, "Lagniappe." It is a Cajun French term that means "a little something extra." I documented the typeface at several sizes and with different types of information. I also created a type specimen in which I created advertisements for real businesses and events currently in Lafayette, and I took heavy inspiration from the designs in the old newspapers.

LAGNIAPPE

(LAN-yap): A little something special
or a little something extra

LAGNIAPPE, 22 PT, LEADING 24

VENEZ À CE HONKY TONK DE RENOMMÉE MONDIALE POUR
DES CONCERTS LE SOIR OÙ DES VOYAGEURS DU MONDE, DES
FAMILLES, DES ARTISTES ET DES POLITICIENS SE CÔTOIENT,
DANSENT, BOIVENT QUELQUES VERRES, ET PASSENT UNE
SOIRÉE ENSEMBLE À LAFAYETTE.

LAGNIAPPE, 56 PT

ICI ON PARLE FRANÇAIS.

LAGNIAPPE, 144 PT

COCODRIL