A Brief History of Matagorda Bay

As Prepared for
Texas Regional Water Plan Region "K"

By Haskell Simon
From LCRWPG Water Plan
Chapter 2, pgs 2-21

June, 2005

The history of Matagorda Bay reflects the history and pre-history of Texas. Stephen F. Austin's first shipload of colonists set sail for Texas in a small schooner, the "Lively". As the story goes, these families were directed to land at the mouth of the Colorado, but by mistake they put ashore on the Brazos River, an error which resulted in the names of the rivers being traded. A second band of colonists arrived from New Orleans on the three masted schooner "Only Son", and did make port on the West Bank of Colorado near the present site of the town of Matagorda. However, Matagorda Bay had been noted 300 years earlier. [1.]

A Brief History of Matagorda Bay (Continued)

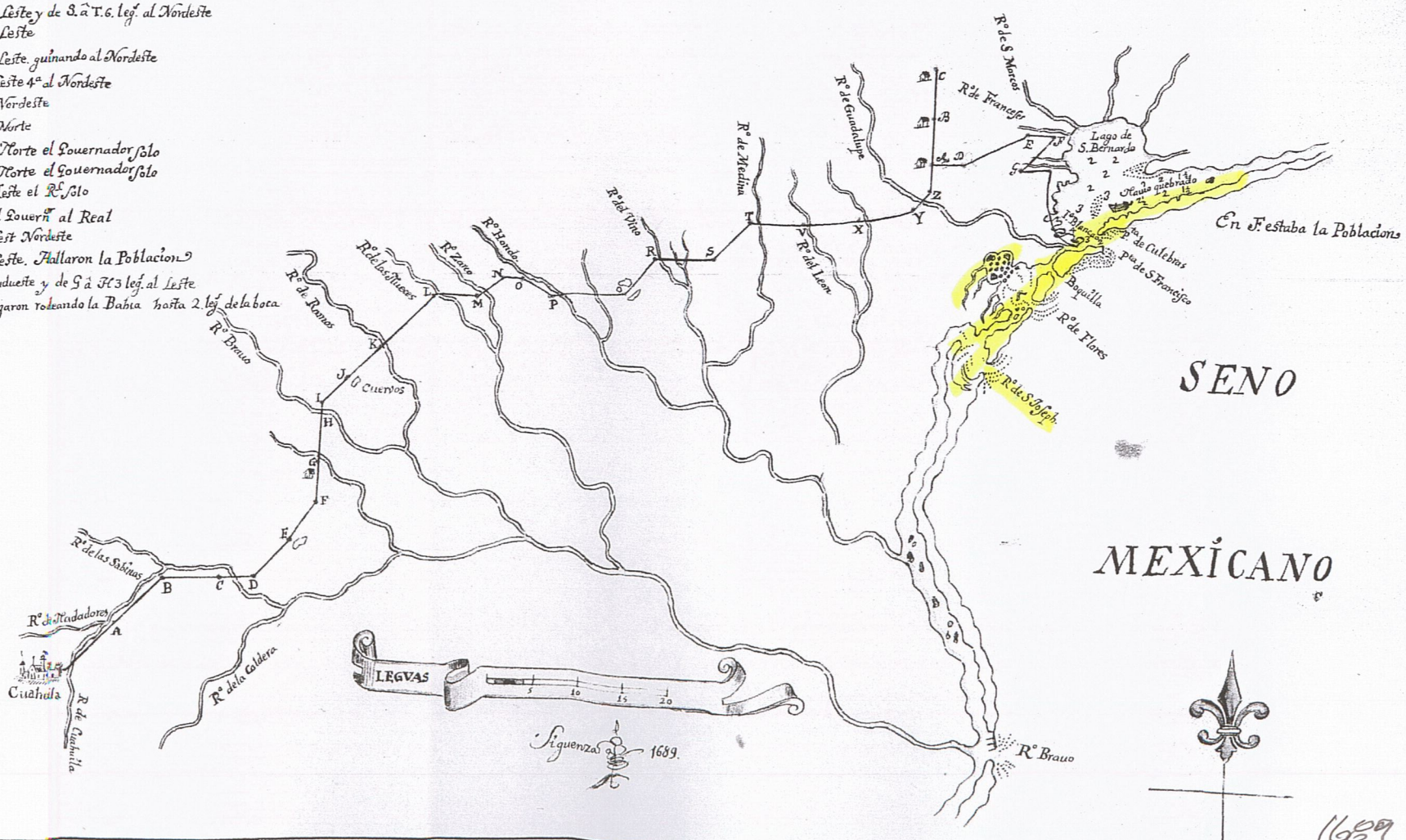
Alonzo Alvarez de Pineda apparently explored the Gulf of Mexico in the early 1500's. This resulted in perhaps the first map of the northern shore of the Gulf of Mexico including Texas, but without any detail.

The 1689 map began to show the estuaries and barrier islands although not necessarily in their accurate locations.

nuba
terra firme
bezagna
almeria
penedo
vera
guz
tamebux
1516

Camino que el año de 1689 hizo el Governador Alonso de Leon desde Cuahuila hasta hallar cerca del Lago de Sn.to Bernardo el lugar donde havian poblado los Franceses

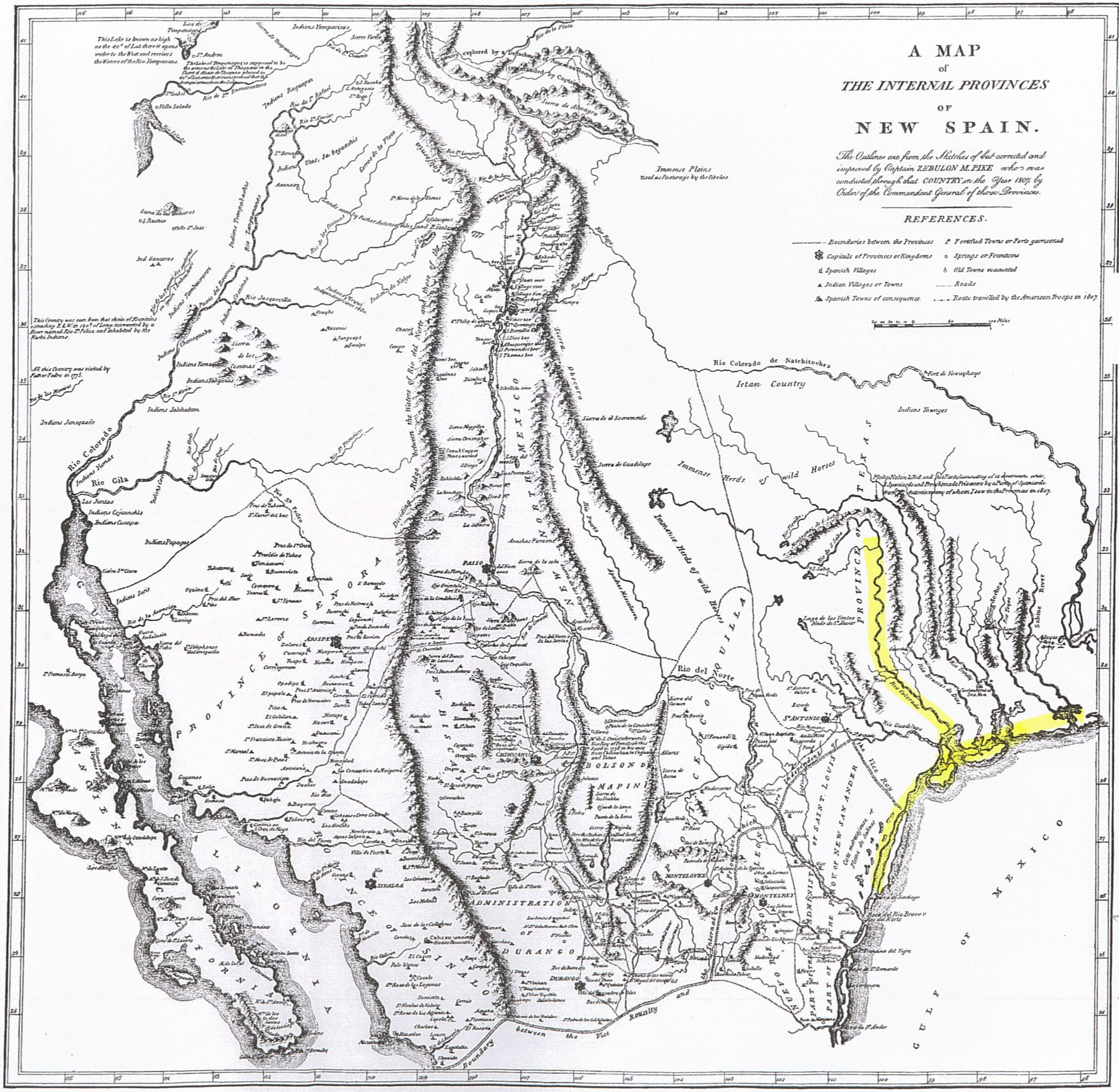
A 24 de Marzo salio el R.l y hasta A anduvo 8 leg. al Nordeste
A 25 de A. a. B 7. leg.s al Nordeste
A 26. de B. a. C 6. leg.s al Este
A 27 de C. a. D 3. leg.s al Este
A 28 de D. a. E. 6. leg.s al Nordeste
A 29 de E. a. F. 5. leg.s al Nordeste 4.a al Norte
A 30 de F. a. G. 4. leg.s al Norte
A 01 de G. a. H. 5. leg.s al Norte
A 2 de H. a. I. 1. leg. al Norte y de I. á J. 4 leg.s al Nordeste
A 3 de J. a. K 5. leg.s al Nordeste.
A 4 de K. a L. 8 leg.s al Nordeste
A 5 de L. a M. 5. leg.s al Este, pero rodeando fueron 7.
A 6 de M. a N 3. leg.s al Nordeste y de N á O 2. leg.s al Este
A 7 de O. a P 4 leg.s al Est-Sueste
A 8 de P. a Q 8. leg.s al Este guinando al Nordeste
A 9 de Q. a R. 5 leg.s al Nordeste 4.a al Norte
A 11 de R. a S 6. leg.s al Este y de S. á T. 6. leg.s al Nordeste
A 12 de T. a V. 5. leg.s al Este
A 13 de V. a X 6. leg.s al Este. guinando al Nordeste
A 14 de X. a Y. 6 leg.s al Este 4.a al Nordeste
A 15 de Y. a Z. 7 leg.s al Nordeste
A 16 de Z. a A. 3. leg.s al Norte
A 16 de A. a B 5. leg.s al Norte el Governador sólo
A 17 de B. a C. 5 leg.s al Norte el Governador sólo
A 16 de D. a D 3 leg.s al Este el R.l sólo
A 13 de C. a D Voluio el Governr al Real
A 21 de D. a E 6. leg.s al Est Nordeste
A 22 de E. a F 3. leg.s al Este. Hallaron la Poblacion
A 23. de F. a G. 5. leg.s al Sudueste y de G á H 3 leg.s al Este
A 24. de H. a I. 8 leg.s y llegaron rodeando la Bahia hasta 2 leg.s de la boca



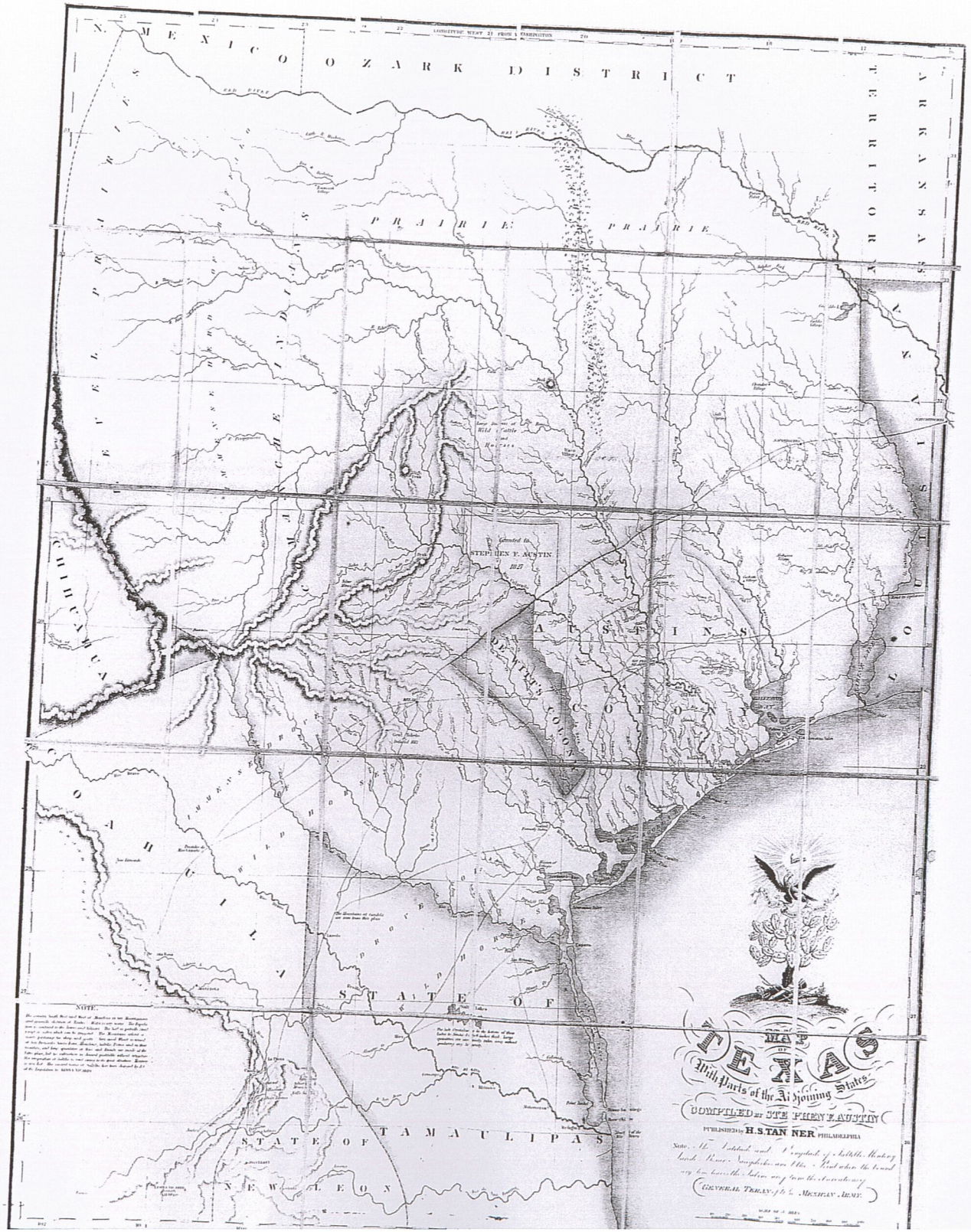
Various maps in the 18th century became more detailed regarding Texas rivers and coastal bays. In 1810, Army Lieutenant Zebulon Montgomery Pike (Pike's Peak) headed a mapping party that depicted a more accurate coastal map although it did not portray an accurate map of Galveston Bay, Matagorda Bay and Nueces Bay and the rivers that fed them.

By 1830, Stephen F. Austin had commissioned probably the most accurate map up to that time. It more clearly detailed Matagorda Bay and the barrier islands.

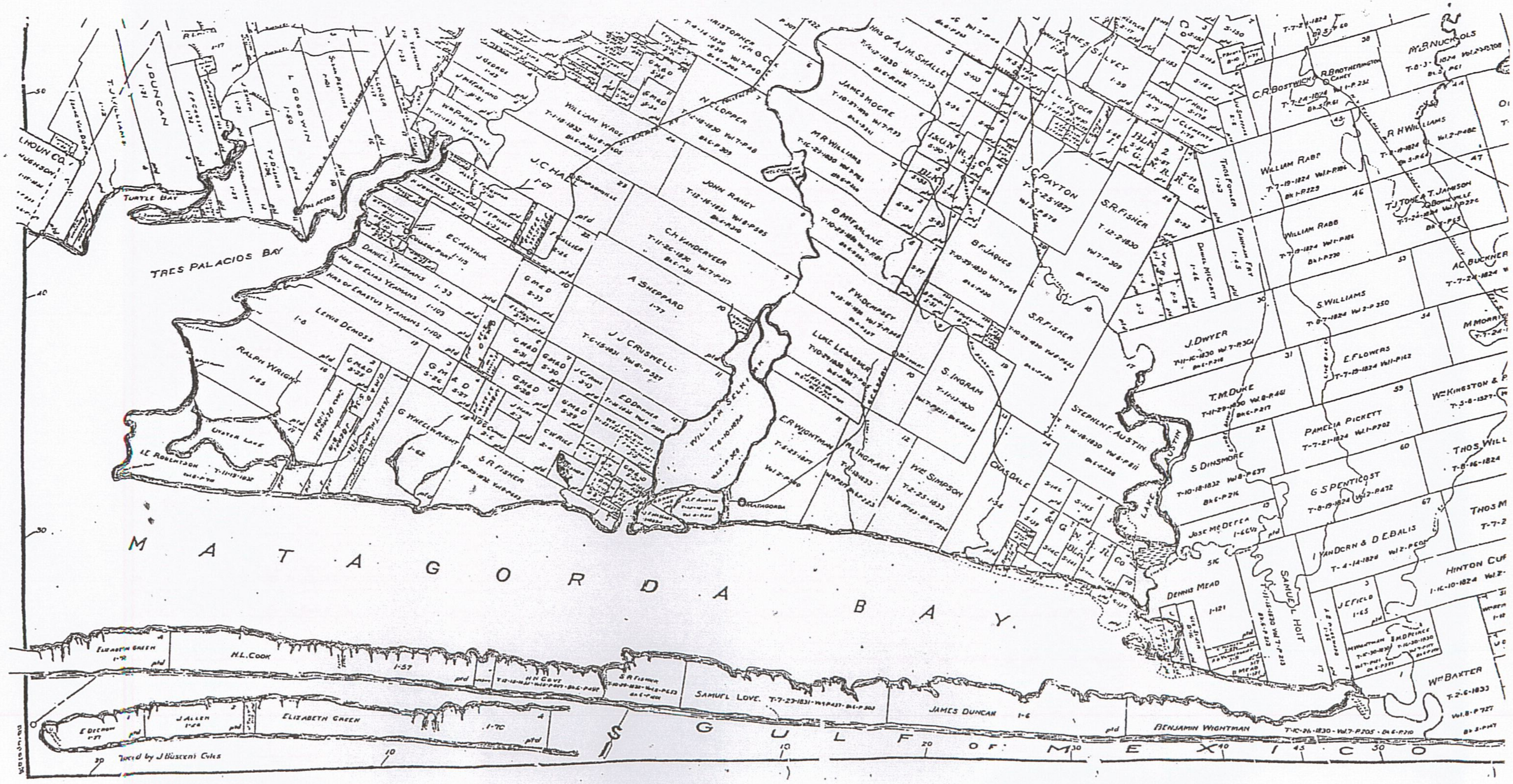
A subsequent map of the eastern portion of Matagorda Bay showing some of the abstracts established by various land grants and the absence of the land bridge between the headlands and Matagorda Peninsula.



PRES JEFFERSON
ZEBULON MONTGOMERY PIKE - US
PIKES PEAK 1805-6
1810


N. MEXICO
OZARK DISTRICT
PRAIRIE
PRAIRIE
ARKANSAS TERRITORY
LOUISIANA
Granted to
STEPHEN F. AUSTIN
1827
AUSTINS
COLONY
STATE OF
COAHUILA
STATE OF TAMAULIPAS
NEW LEON
NOTE.
MAP OF TEXAS
With Parts of the Adjoining States
COMPILED BY STEPHEN F. AUSTIN
PUBLISHED BY H. S. TANNER PHILADELPHIA

1830


MATAGORDA BAY
GULF OF MEXICO
TRES PALACIOS BAY
TURTLE BAY
MATAGORDA
LAKE AUSTIN
WILLIAM SELKIRK
J.C. PAYTON
S.R. FISHER
STEPHEN F. AUSTIN
SAMUEL HOIT
SAMUEL LOVE
JAMES DUNCAN
BENJAMIN WIGHTMAN
ELIZABETH GREEN
H.L. COOK
RALPH WRIGHT
LEWIS DEMOSS
A. SHEPPARD
J.J. CRISWELL
C.H. VANDERVEER
JOHN RANEY
WILLIAM WADE
J.C. HALL
L. GOODWIN
J. DUNCAN
T.J. WILLIAMS
S. INGRAM
WM. SIMPSON
E.R. WIGHTMAN
LUKE LESASSIER
F.W. DEMPSEY
B.F. JAQUES
D. McFARLANE
M.R. WILLIAMS
JAMES MOORE
J. DWYER
T.M. DUKE
S. DINSMORE
PAMELIA PICKETT
G.S. PENTICOST
E. FLOWERS
S. WILLIAMS
WILLIAM RABB
DENNIS MEAD
Traced by J. Hussein Cuks

Early Explorer Alonzo de Leon

Described the "Raft" in the

Colorado River in 1689.

The Raft Was a Vast Accumulation

Of Drift Logs, Snags, Whole Trees

And Brush, Forty Feet or More Thick

Growing at About Five Hundred Feet

In Length Per Year

By The Late 19th Century It

Extended Over Forty Miles

Into Wharton County

Raft on the Lower Colorado River below Bay City before 1920

Head of the raft between Bay City and Wharton, 1927

Several Attempts were Made to

Clear the Raft and Even to

Dredge a Channel Parallel to

The Colorado River to Facilitate

Navigation. All of the Efforts Failed

Until General George W. Goethus

Was Hired to Clear the River.

After Clearing a Path Along the East

Bank, a Flood in 1929 Flushed the

Huge Mass Down the River and

Into Matagorda Bay

A Delta Formation Was Initiated by

The Raft Material. It continued to

Expand Until it Encountered the

Matagorda Peninsula in 1935.

In 1936 The Reclamation and

Conservation District

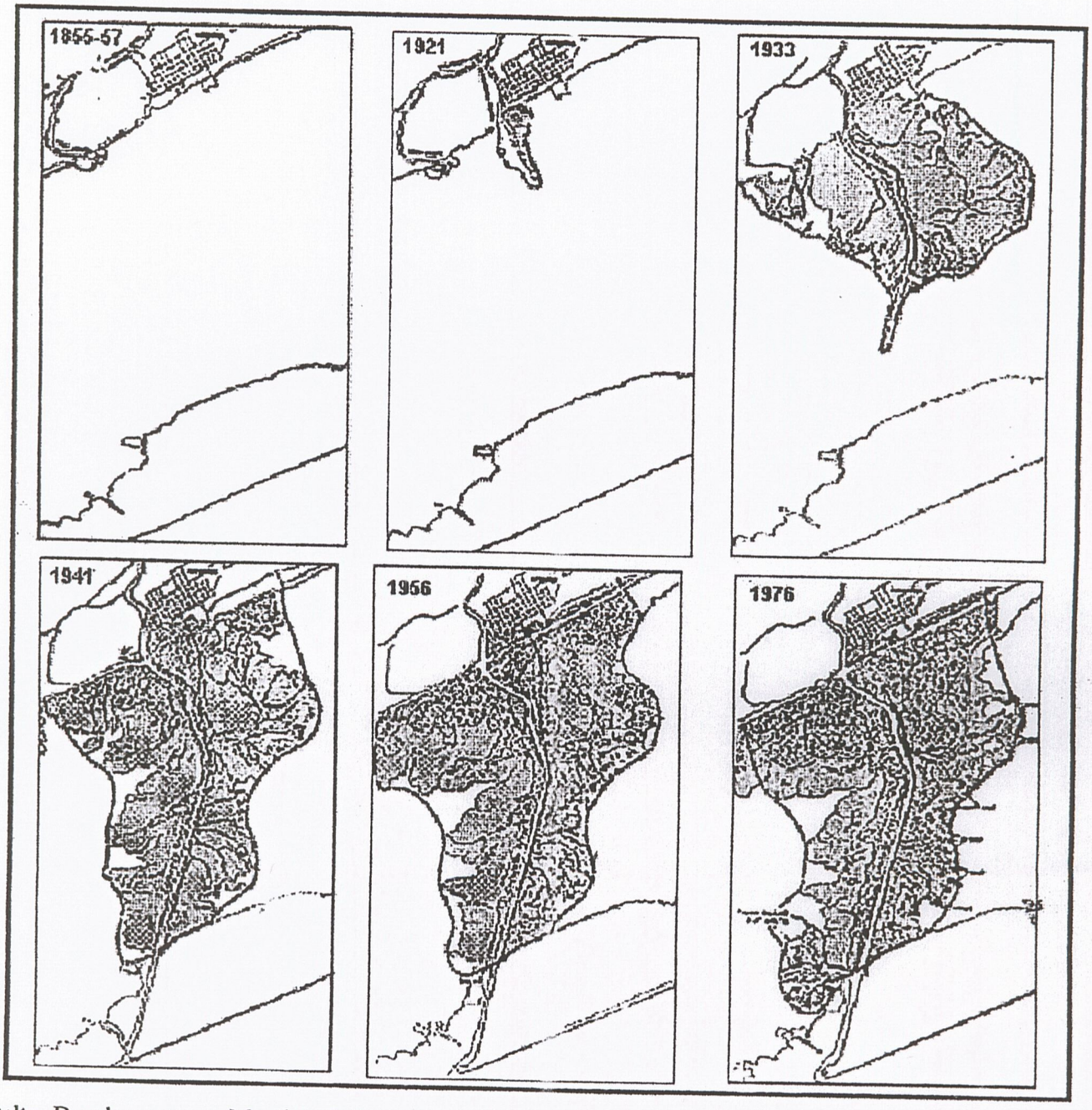
Dredged a Channel Through the

Peninsula Allowing the

Colorado River to Flow into

The Gulf of Mexico

Figure 2.12: Development of Colorado River Delta



Delta Development – Mouth of Colorado River Project Assessment Report Coastal Technology Corporation (Adapted from USGS, Tobin & Kargl)


MATAGORDA
TOWNSHIP
PROSPECTIVE
CHANNEL
TIGER ISLAND
PARK
BEACH PARK
SITE
AtII 4114 304 66
34
79-163

In 1992 The Jetty Project At The

Mouth of The Colorado River

Again Changed

The Flow to Direct the River

Discharge Into

West Matagorda Bay

And Closed Parker's Cut

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Culver Cut

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By
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June, 2005

A Brief History of Matagorda Bay
Matagorda County, Texas

The History of Matagorda Bay reflects the history and pre-history of Texas. It is well known that the initial colony of the Austin's included Matagorda County – actually the initial landing was to have been at the mouth of the Colorado, but mistakenly the first arrivals landed at the Brazos River in 1821. However, Matagorda Bay had been noted 300 years earlier. [1.]

The first map that indicated the Texas Gulf Coast was by Alonzo Alvarez de Pineda in 1513. The next explorer was probably Cabeza de Vaca in 1528 followed by Don Luis de Moscoso de Alverado in 1542. The ill fated LaSalle expedition in 1685 resulted in an active renewal of interest by the Spanish government. In a subsequent expedition by Alonzo de Leon in 1689, the first recorded description of the "Raft" in the Colorado River was described. [2.]

The raft was a vast accumulation of drift logs, snags, whole trees and brush in sections miles in length and 40 to 50 feet thick growing at a rate of about 500 feet per year. In the years after the establishment of Matagorda with the original "Austin 300", the raft continued to grow. [3.] The COE was enrolled to clear the raft to enable river navigation from Matagorda, the number two port in Texas, inland to central Texas. In 1853 the decision was made to bypass the raft by digging a canal parallel to the river. This did allow for riverboat traffic for about six years, but by 1860 the growing raft again prevented navigation. [4.] The intervention of the civil war prevented any additional work on the raft. While the periodic floods had always been a problem, the restoration of the raft, which grew to an estimated 40 miles in length and extended into Wharton County, greatly exacerbated flooding damage. [5.]

In 1923 Governor Pat Neff approved legislation that resulted in the retaining of General George W. Goethus, who built the Panama Canal. His plan was to clear a path along the East bank, removing key logs and allowing the force of the river to clear the raft. Not much was accomplished until a major flood came in 1929. In one massive flushing action the huge mass was washed into Matagorda Bay. [6.]

The delta formed by this enormous conglomeration of sediment and debris continued to grow in the Bay until it connected the mainland to Matagorda Peninsula, forming a five mile long land bridge, land locking the Seaport of Matagorda and dividing Matagorda Bay. [7]

In 1935 the Drainage District cut a channel across the Peninsula. This resulted in most of the natural flow of the river to go directly into the Gulf of Mexico. [8]

In 1990 the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACOE) agreed to the next major alteration affecting Matagorda Bay. In order to construct a jetty system at the mouth of the Colorado River in the Gulf of Mexico, a diversion channel was added to the overall design as recommended by the resource agencies. This would divert essentially 100% of the river flow into the East End of West Matagorda Bay. [9] The USACOE also closed the channel at Parker's Cut (Tiger Island Cut).

Recently, efforts were made to reopen Parker's Cut to accommodate recreational fishing. It was also claimed that reopening the cut might be beneficial to fisheries production. The resource agencies continued to oppose the reopening on similar grounds. Finally a compromise was reached that would open a channel into the Bay just North of the diversion dam. This would allow an alternate passageway into the Bay, but with minimal diversion of fresh water.

So, in less than 75 years major alterations have been made that dramatically and dynamically changed the characteristics of the Bay. From 100% river discharge to practically zero discharge. Then in only ten years, back to almost 100% discharge into West Matagorda Bay. The latest proposed alteration may also have some as yet undetermined impact.

1. *Bay City and Matagorda County – A History,* Page 8
2. *Ibid.* Page 4
3. *Corralling the Colorado,* Page 7
4. *Bay City and Matagorda County – A History,* Page 16
5. *Historic Matagorda County,* Page 135
6. *Bay City and Matagorda County – A History,* Page 165
7. *Ibid.* Page 166
8. *Historic Matagorda County,* Page 135
9. *Ibid.* Page 139

Note: Additional information was available *Flood to Faucet,* Interviews with Earl Eidelbach, LCRA Water Boss and *The Daily Tribune*

Map and Pictorial Sources

- Aerial Photo – USACOE, General Design Memorandum for the Colorado River
- Stephen F. Austin, 1830 – The San Jacinto Museum of History as shown in *Maps of Texas and the Southwest 1513 – 1900* by James C. Martin and Robert Sidney Martin, Page 52
- Nicolas de Fer 1705 – Collection of F. Carrington Weems Houston, Texas as shown in *Maps of Texas and the Southwest 1513 – 1900* by James C. Martin and Robert Sidney Martin, Page 49
- Delta Development - Mouth of Colorado River Project Assessment Report Coastal Technology Corporation

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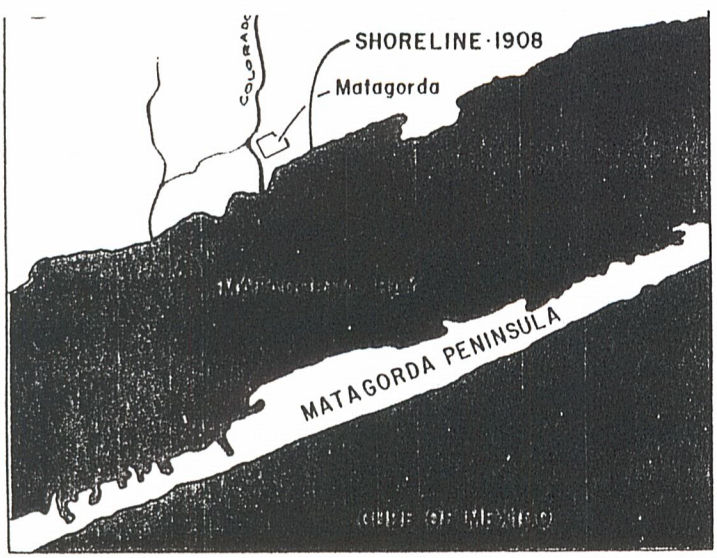

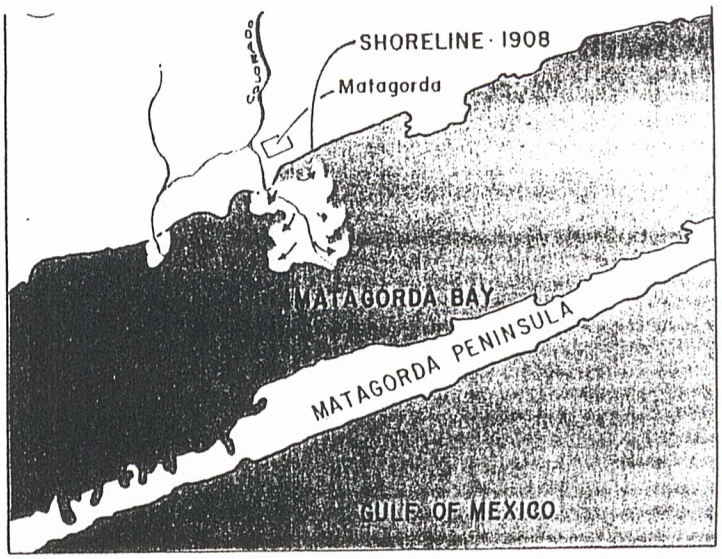

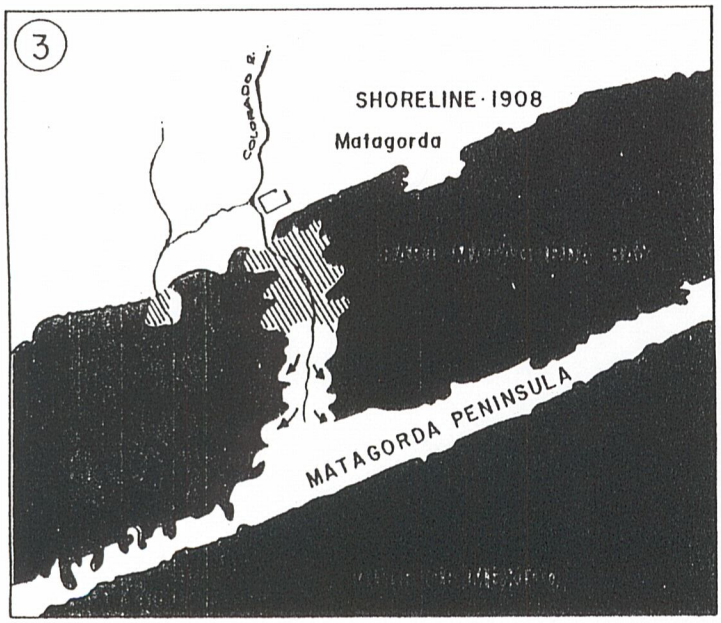

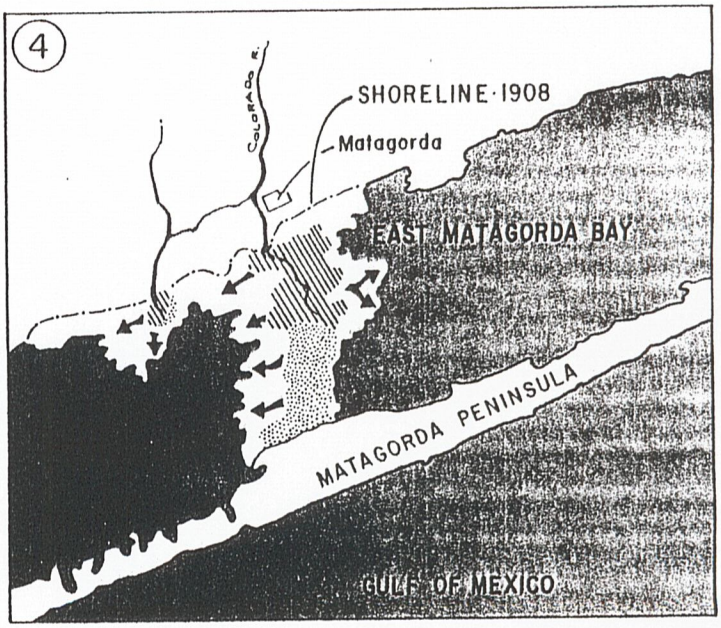

SEQUENTIAL CHANGES IN MATAGORDA DELTA SHOWING MAN'S EFFECTS ON NATURAL PROCESSES (AFTER McGOWEN AND BREWTON·1975)

1. COLORADO RIVER MOUTH (IN MATAGORDA BAY), IN 1929, BEFORE LOG JAM WAS REMOVED.
2. COLORADO DELTA·1930
3. COLORADO DELTA·1936
4. COLORADO DELTA·1941
5. SCHEMATIC PRESENTATION OF COLORADO RIVER MOUTH AS IT PRESENTLY EMPTIES INTO THE GULF OF MEXICO.

FIGURE 12