



# National Transportation Safety Board

## Marine Accident Brief

### Allision of Towing Vessel *Bayou Lady* With Bayou Blue Bridge

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<b>Accident no.</b>	DCA14LM004
<b>Vessel</b>	Uninspected towing vessel <i>Bayou Lady</i>
<b>Accident type</b>	Allision
<b>Location</b>	Houma, Louisiana 29°34.5' N, 90°36.2' W
<b>Date, time</b>	December 7, 2013 0630 central standard time (coordinated universal time – 6 hours)
<b>Injuries</b>	None
<b>Damage</b>	Est. \$715,000 (bridge)
<b>Environmental damage</b>	None
<b>Weather</b>	Wind north 13.8 knots, overcast sky, light rain, light fog, temperature 42°F
<b>Waterway information</b>	Gulf Intracoastal Waterway, mile marker 49.5

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The uninspected towing vessel (UTV) *Bayou Lady* was pushing a flotilla of six empty hopper barges destined for a scrap yard in Morgan City, Louisiana, when the forward portside barge struck the southern fixed section of the pontoon Bayou Blue Bridge near Houma, Louisiana, about 0630 on December 7, 2013. Repairs to the bridge are estimated at more than \$715,000. The *Bayou Lady* was undamaged; the lead barge sustained minor damage which was deemed inconsequential due to its destination for scrap. No injuries or pollution resulted from the accident.

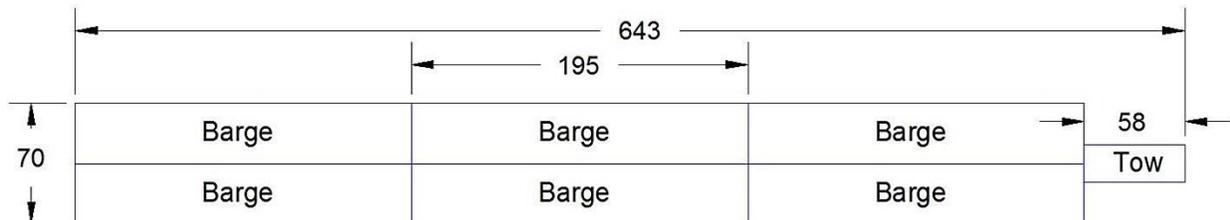


Towing vessel *Bayou Lady*. (Photo by United States Coast Guard)

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The previous evening, December 6, the *Bayou Lady* and the barges were laid up along the bank near mile marker 48 of the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway to wait for the wind to die down before continuing westward to pass through the Bayou Blue Bridge. Early the next morning, the captain of the *Bayou Lady* determined that conditions were satisfactory and resumed the transit with north winds at 14 mph and visibility fair with a slight haze.

The six hopper barges were ahead of the *Bayou Lady* that morning in a 3x2 configuration: two side by side and three end to end. Each barge was 195 feet long and 35 feet wide; with the towing vessel length of 58 feet, the overall tow configuration was 643 feet in length and 70 feet wide.



**Flotilla of six barges, top, pushed by the *Bayou Lady* at the time of the accident and dimensions (in feet) of *Bayou Lady* tow and barge configuration, bottom. (Photo by Coast Guard)**

The pontoon bridge tender stated he received a radio call from the *Bayou Lady* about 0625 requesting a bridge opening, and the bridge was fully open by 0627 with the tug and barges lined up for the transit. Winds from the north at 14 knots would have been perpendicular to the tow and pushing the flotilla towards the south side of the waterway.

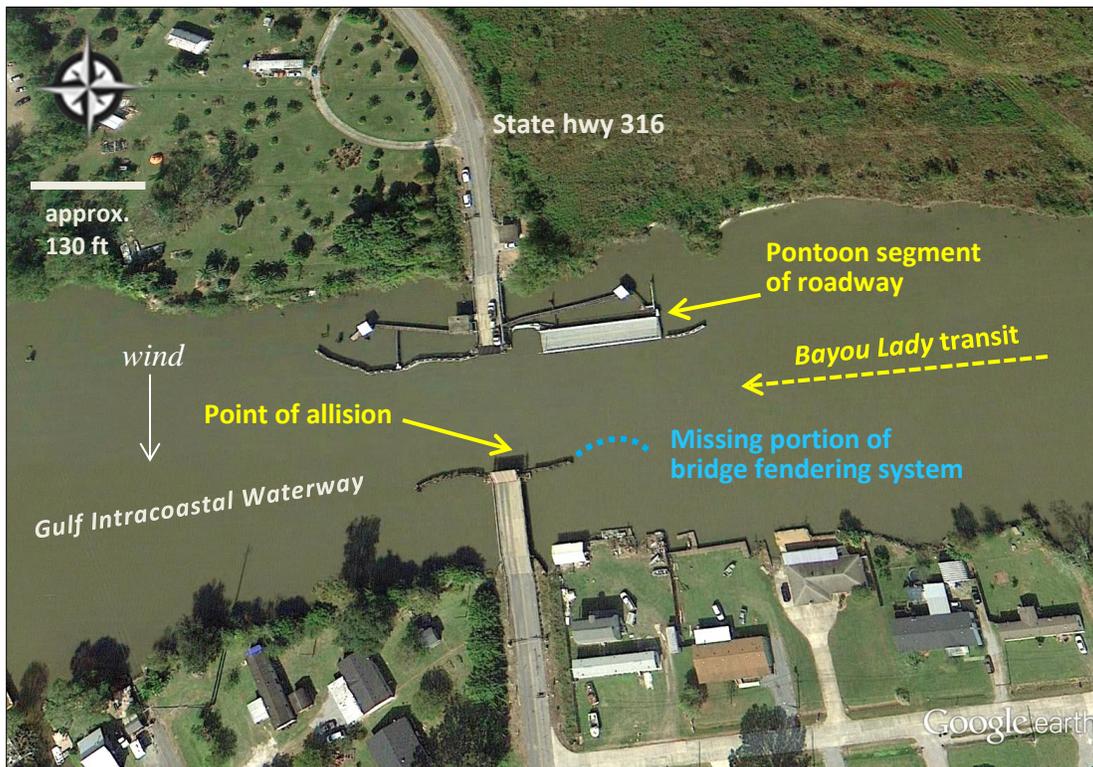
The *Bayou Lady*'s captain stated he attempted to adjust his course a little to the right as he maneuvered the tow through the bridge opening at about 4.5 knots, but he felt the rudder was not responding. He immediately used astern propulsion on the starboard engine to help turn the head of the lead barges to starboard, believing this would reduce the impact to the south side of the bridge.

Immediately following the allision, the captain sent the deckhand below to inspect the steering gear pumps and associated equipment for problems that may have caused the rudder to be unresponsive. When the deckhand reported no problems with the machinery, the captain

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manipulated the engines ahead and astern several times in an attempt to remove any lodged debris beneath the vessel. Both the captain and deckhand stated in interviews that during this process they saw a log about 6 feet long by 6 inches in diameter pop up astern, after which the vessel regained steering functionality.

The Bayou Blue Bridge, on state highway 316 about 7 miles east of Houma, Louisiana, provides north/south traffic access over the Intracoastal Waterway, which travels east and west. The 131-foot-long pontoon section is secured on the north side parallel to the waterway to allow marine traffic to transit past the bridge. For highway traffic, the bridge swings out to a position that is perpendicular to the stored location (see aerial view, below). Once in place, the pontoon lies under two steel aprons, on the north and south edges of the fixed road sections, which allow vehicular traffic to transition from the roadway to the bridge.



**Aerial view of Bayou Blue Bridge before the accident, in position to allow passage of marine traffic. Pontoon roadway is located to the right of state highway 316 on the north side of the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway. Dashed blue line opposite the pontoon indicates portion of the bridge fendering system missing since a previous accident. (Background by Google Earth)**

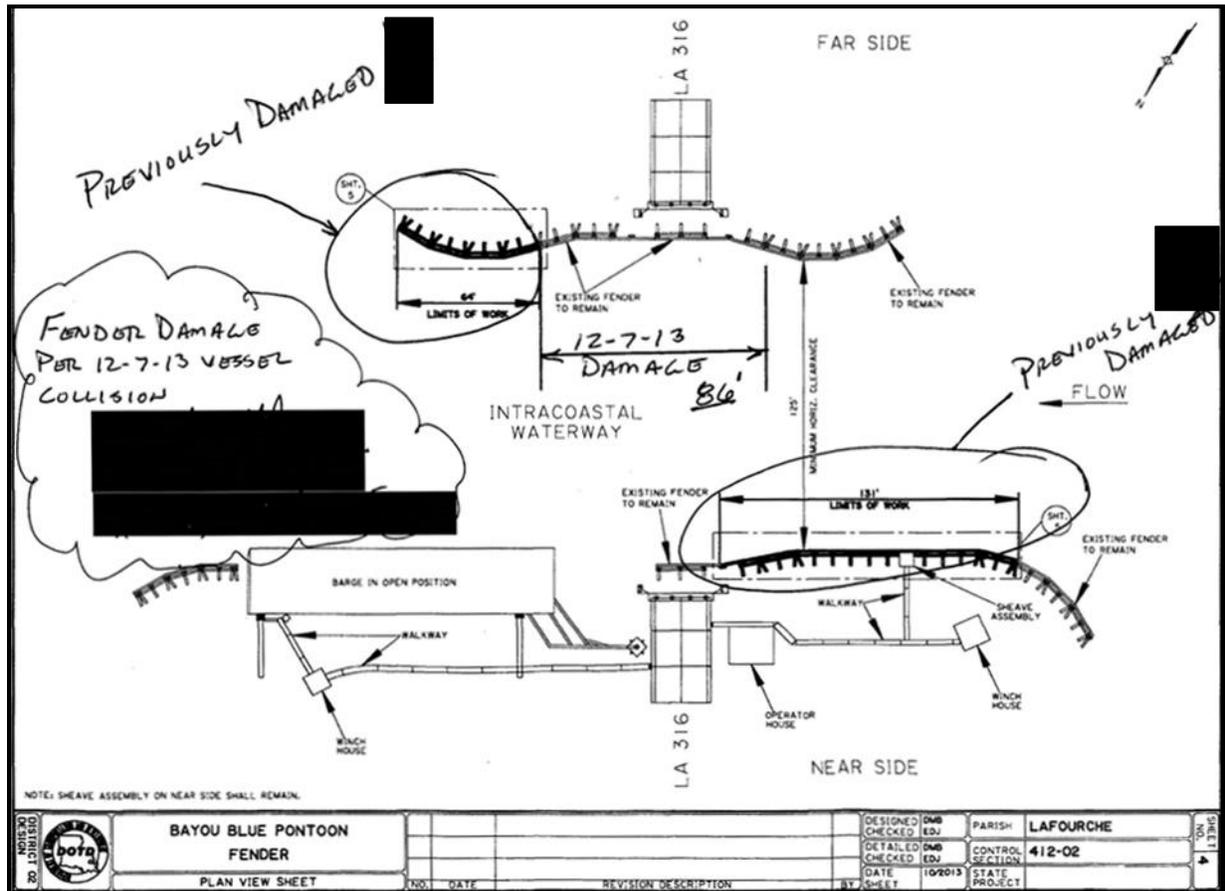
A wooden fendering system protects the fixed north and south sections of the bridge, bowing out into the waterway a few feet on either side, which reduces the navigable channel to about 126 feet wide. The *Bayou Lady*'s two-barge-wide configuration with a combined width of 70 feet would leave about 23 feet of clearance on either side of the barges while passing through the constricted area around the bridge.

The bridge tender stated that the bridge opened normally for the *Bayou Lady* transit. The on-scene investigation found that wood pilings and much of the "bumper" structure on either side of the vehicle ramps were damaged, apparently due to previous strikes. Comparison with a drawing of the bridge and fendering system as designed indicated that a good portion of the structure had been knocked down before this accident and had not been replaced. Coast Guard records also showed the bridge had been struck on several occasions in the past, including a

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significant impact in 2010 that resulted in suspension of bridge operations while major repairs were undertaken.

A portion of the bridge fendering system had previously been damaged and was missing at the time of the accident, indicated in the aerial image above by the curved blue line directly opposite the pontoon. This portion of the fendering system—had it been in place—was designed to lessen or absorb the impact of an allision instead of the steel ramp and bridge structure receiving the majority of the strike.



Overhead plan view of Bayou Blue Bridge with Coast Guard record of areas damaged in the *Bayou Lady* allision and in previous incidents (image redacted). (Provided by Coast Guard)

In interviews conducted by the Coast Guard, local towing captains familiar with transiting the waterway and the Bayou Blue Bridge area said they would not have attempted passage with the *Bayou Lady*'s barge configuration in the 14-knot wind that existed that morning. The bridge tender gave a similar statement; although not a towboat operator, he had witnessed many transits and felt conditions were likely too windy for a transit with six empty hopper barges. When empty, the barges had less draft and, therefore, more sail area that could be affected by the wind.

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Bayou Blue Bridge after the accident, from north side of bridge ramp looking south at displaced ramp and wire lift tower lying on its side.

### Probable Cause

The National Transportation Safety Board determines that the probable cause of the allision of the *Bayou Lady* tow with Bayou Blue Bridge was the decision of the captain to transit the bridge opening in windy conditions and the reported temporary loss of steering control after the rudder was fouled by submerged debris.

### Vessel Particulars

Vessel	<i>Bayou Lady</i>
<b>Owner, operator</b>	Total Marine Logistics LLC, American Commercial Lines LLC
<b>Port of registry</b>	New Orleans, LA
<b>Flag</b>	United States
<b>Type</b>	Towing vessel (push boat)
<b>Builder, date</b>	Houma Barge Shipbuilding, 1961
<b>Official number (US)</b>	287108
<b>Construction</b>	Steel
<b>Length</b>	58.3 ft (17.8 m)
<b>Depth</b>	8.8 ft (2.7 m)
<b>Beam/width</b>	22 ft (6.7 m)
<b>Tonnage</b>	96 gross tons
<b>Engine(s)</b>	Twin screw, 1,200 hp (895 kW)
<b>Persons on board</b>	4

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For more details about this accident, visit [www.nts.gov/investigations/dms.html](http://www.nts.gov/investigations/dms.html) and search for NTSB accident ID DCA14LM004.

**Adopted: December 29, 2014**

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The NTSB has authority to investigate and establish the probable cause of any major marine casualty or any marine casualty involving both public and nonpublic vessels under 49 *United States Code* 1131. This report is based on factual information either gathered by NTSB investigators or provided by the Coast Guard from its informal investigation of the accident.

The NTSB does not assign fault or blame for a marine casualty; rather, as specified by NTSB regulation, “[NTSB] investigations are fact-finding proceedings with no formal issues and no adverse parties . . . and are not conducted for the purpose of determining the rights or liabilities of any person.” 49 *Code of Federal Regulations*, Section 831.4.

Assignment of fault or legal liability is not relevant to the NTSB’s statutory mission to improve transportation safety by conducting investigations and issuing safety recommendations. In addition, statutory language prohibits the admission into evidence or use of any part of an NTSB report related to an accident in a civil action for damages resulting from a matter mentioned in the report. 49 *United States Code*, Section 1154(b).

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