

Tulane-Corps Conference
Comparing Rivers: The Mississippi and the Niger
Comments for Col. Peter Rowan
7 November 2002

Good morning and greetings to all. I'd like to welcome everyone to our fair city and to the New Orleans District, which encompasses 30,000 square miles of south Louisiana.

Before I begin, I'd like to thank those Corps employees from the district office who have worked for years with Tulane in bringing these symposiums to the public. This is our fifth one and Ed Lyon, Joan Exnicios and Rick Bush have played a major role and worked closely with Tulane in continuing and improving on each of these presentations. Thank you all.

I'll begin my brief remarks this morning by highlighting three common threads that bind Tulane University and the Corps of Engineers together. The first is that we've been neighbors for about 90 years. And partnering this symposium together now since 1997 is proof that we're GOOD neighbors as well!

Second, Tulane and the Corps share a common ancestor...Civil War brigadier general, congressman and United States Senator, Mr. Randall L. Gibson, for whom this conference is named. In 1879, Senator Gibson helped establish the Mississippi River Commission, an advisory body that reports to the Corps' Chief of Engineers on the Mississippi River & Tributaries Project. Three years later, in 1881, he worked closely with Paul Tulane to establish this university.

The third, last and most important thread of commonality is what now binds us to Nigeria...and that is the Mississippi River. This natural wonder has influenced our landscape, culture and history since its acquisition with the signing of the Louisiana Purchase 200 years ago.

The Corps' involvement dates back that far when engineers surveyed the newly acquired city to study its defenses. The Corps' early work in the area was of a military nature, but soon expanded to include navigation and flood control, the district's primary mission ever since.

The Corps possesses unequalled experience and expertise in flood control and navigation methods. We've built levees, floodwalls, reservoirs and spillways that have prevented billions of dollars in flood damages. Our channel improvement program to fix, enlarge and deepen the Mississippi's channel allows the port complex from the Gulf of Mexico to Baton Rouge to be number one in the nation in tonnage and number one in the world in grain exports.

We've developed best practices that could apply to Nigeria's future efforts on the Niger, such as beneficial use of dredged material and freshwater diversions to restore land loss. Here in Louisiana, we are taking measure to combat coastal erosion. It is a coordinated program between the federal agencies, state government, local entities, academia and the private sector. Our experience in freshwater diversion and dredging could be instrumental to the Nigerian government in harnessing the Niger River and reining in its coastal land loss problems.

We've learned that it takes a comprehensive approach and a national purview to manage a river as mighty as the Mississippi and the Niger; local control does not work. However, day-to-day operations rely on partnerships between the Corps districts that line the river and each state's local levee boards.

The development of the Mississippi as a bountiful resource is surely one of the great projects in the history of America. The lessons learned and the knowledge we now possess from our daily encounters with the forces of the Mississippi is highly pertinent and timely for river and regional development planning abroad.

One of the major elements of this two-day conference is the focus on economic development to include agriculture, industry and petroleum. There is also an emphasis on planning for the future and our planning experiences on river and water resources development from a regional perspective. You will find the conference balances economic development with a concern for the environment and the cultural heritage and resources of the region. These topics can be relevant to the planning and development of the Niger.

Today's symposium provides us with the opportunity to share our problems, solutions, knowledge and expertise. We have a roster of distinguished speakers from all over the country with us. I am truly pleased to welcome our guests and look forward to forging new working relationships.