

Acadiana Sky



Discovering the Great Meteor of 1957 after Everyone Else Saw It First



Lafayette Science Museum

*(left) as the Lafayette Natural History Museum,
1969 – 2001*

*(right)
2001 – today*

The Curator of the Planetarium at the Lafayette Science Museum commonly heard senior visitors asking about a bright meteor they had seen in their youth. No one could quite remember the date—or even the decade—but it was back in the '50s or early '60s, and it had left a memory lasting a lifetime.

It must have been quite spectacular, since it had hit in New Orleans...or in the Mississippi River...or just outside Lafayette. Everyone thought it had hit near *them*. Unfortunately, with no real, concrete information, it seemed impossible to learn anything accurate about the event.

Then came a break at one of the planetarium's Tuesday Telescope Nights during the 1990s. A young woman described the incredible meteor her father frequently mentioned. She didn't know when it happened, either, but promised to ask him and let the Curator know if her father remembered. A few days later she did just that. Her father was a doctor who always associated the bright meteor with a particular patient he was treating at the time, and he still had his records from the 1950s! It had happened sometime in March, 1957.



The Lafayette Public Library had microfilms of the local newspaper dating back many decades. With the search narrowed to a month and year, it took only about 15 minutes to find it—the meteor had made headlines after being seen on the evening of March 15, 1957.

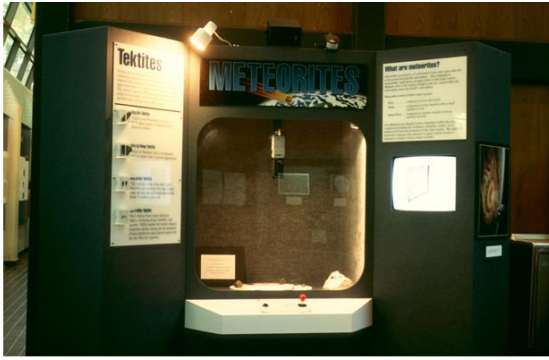


It had been *spectacular!* The fireball had been seen all over Louisiana and much of the southeastern United States, from parts of Texas and Oklahoma, and from as far away as Memphis. As usual, everybody thought it hit near them.

There were claims of impacts all over the southeast. Local people thought the Russians had attacked Baton Rouge to knock out the petroleum industry. Or New Orleans because of the port. There were reports of pieces splashing into Vermilion Bay at the coast south of Lafayette (although maybe it was just fish jumping), and there was a minor seismic event near there (although nobody ever showed that the time coincided with the meteor).



What a reaction! It's important, though, to put this into the context of 1957. The Korean War was over and the Vietnam War had not yet started, but there were lots of world tensions. Egypt and Israel were disengaging from a war the previous year. The civil rights movement was gaining momentum. Eisenhower was President and Khrushchev was rising to power in the Soviet Union. The United States had The Bomb. The Soviet Union had The Bomb. In fact, both were developing immense nuclear arsenals. Things were getting tense, and the possibility of a sudden all-out war or even the end of the world didn't seem crazy.



Lafayette Science Museum Meteorite Exhibits

original (left)

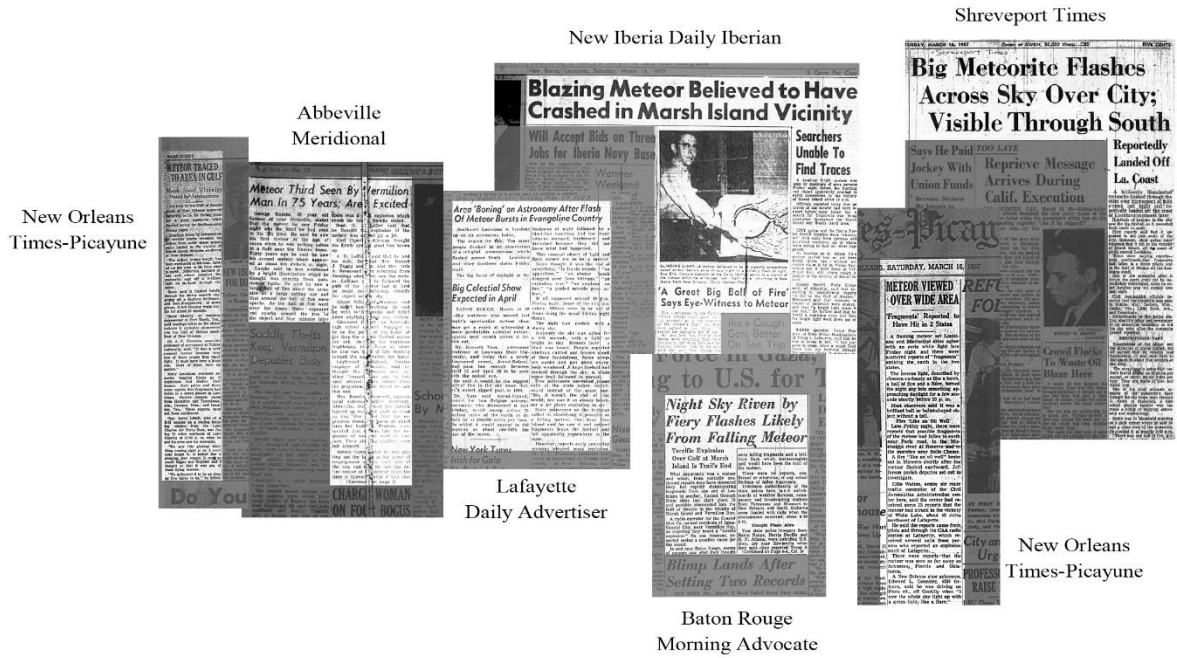
revised (below)



The Lafayette Science Museum developed a small meteorite exhibit in the late 1980s. When plans were made to improve and enlarge the exhibit in 2008, it seemed like an ideal opportunity to look more closely at the “Great Meteor of ’57,” and to include the information where visitors could see it.



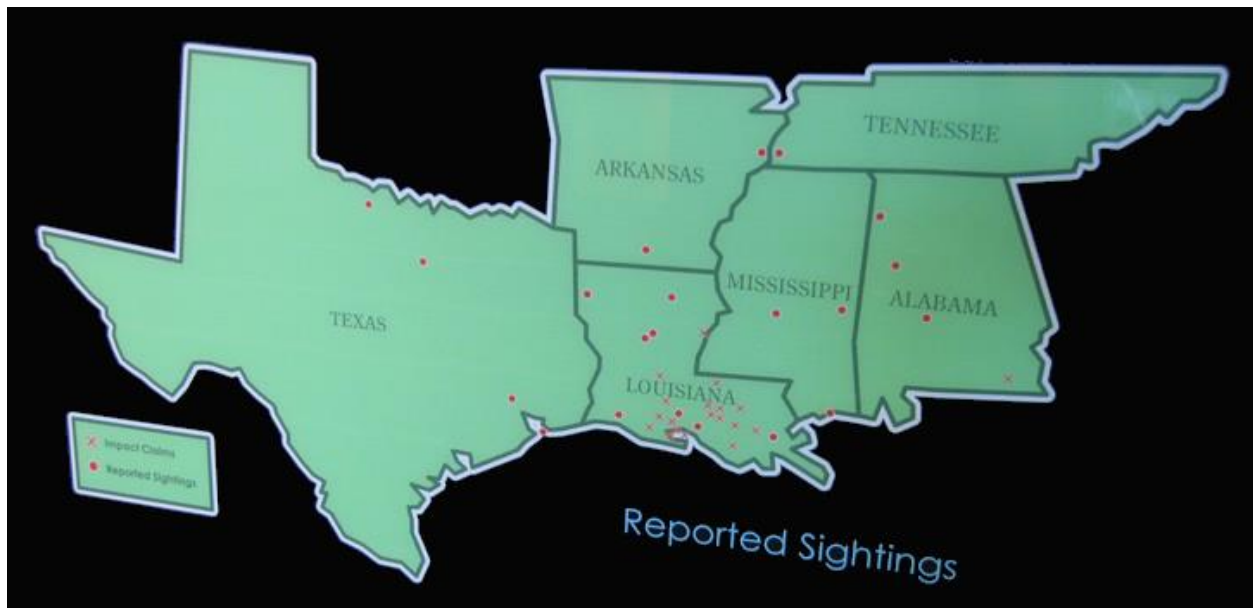
A friend had a picture of the resulting meteorite in Audubon Park in New Orleans—except it was a “meteorwrong,” just a hunk of slag from the New Orleans World’s Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exhibition in 1884.



Visits to libraries in neighboring towns revealed that many of them held newspapers with articles about the meteor, often giving local reports as well as the overall story.

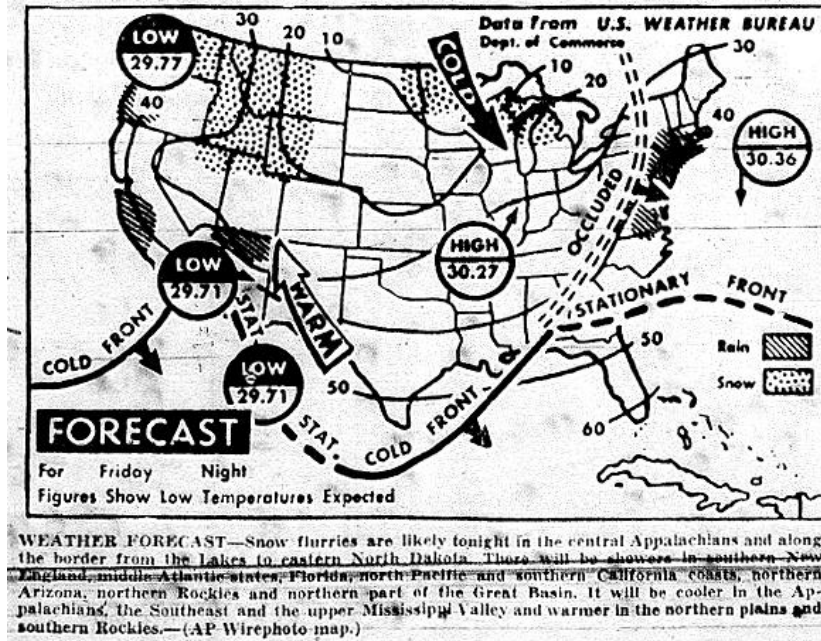


The newspaper articles referenced sightings from Mississippi and Alabama. Stops at libraries in those and other states during trips to planetarium conferences garnered local articles from those areas. There was plenty of information for a 4-foot by 6-foot panel in the new meteorite exhibit.



The information discovered allowed the Lafayette Science Museum to produce a map of the meteor sightings. The dots represent sightings and the “X” markings represent claims of impacts. Again, everyone thought it hit near them. On the other hand, there is also a report of a sighting from Galveston, Texas, that clearly places the meteor out over the Gulf of Mexico. If anything made it to the ground, it was probably a splashdown. Certainly, despite all the claims of fragments coming down, no meteorite from the event has ever been found.

Most of the claims of an impact are from Louisiana, where the meteor might truly have been getting low. In addition to people seeing it, they also heard it! The Museum has received reports of sonic booms after the sighting and “whup, whup” sounds similar to the sound a helicopter makes during the sighting. There are also reports of electrophonic sounds during the event. These are heard simultaneously with the sighting of a meteor, have no delay due to the speed of sound, and seem to be related to electromagnetic waves from the meteor’s entry being converted to audible sounds. But again, there’s no evidence for an actual impact in Louisiana.



Chattanooga Times-Free Press

No reports have been found from east of Alabama. Possibly that's because there were frontal systems draped across much of the southeast that night, and the sky was probably cloudy (based on a weather map for that time in a newspaper in Chattanooga).



The panel had not been up for even 2 hours when an older gentleman and his wife looked at it, and he exclaimed, "Hey, I remember that!" Over the years since the exhibit went up, the Museum staff has heard that reaction often.

If you live in the region where the Great Meteor of '57 was seen, there are probably articles about it in your hometown newspapers around March 15, 1957.

The Great Meteor of '57 was seen over 60 years ago, but people still speak vividly about seeing it! Did you see it? What about your parents or grandparents? Perhaps they told you stories about it. Even at this late date, the Lafayette Science Museum would like to hear about your experience, and you can help preserve this unique event by filling out the form at <https://lafayettesciencemuseum.org/great-meteor-of-1957/>.