

HOUMA LAND LITIGATION.

Another Step in the Troubles Over
Some Old Indian Lands in
Louisiana.

After a quiet of several years the Houma land grant has again come to the front to occupy the attention of the United States courts. Probably no public lands in the country have given the United States more trouble than those of the Houma Indians. There have been more lawsuits over them, conspiracies, riots and disturbances than over any other part of the federal domain. The question has frequently figured in local politics and more than once has obtruded itself on congress. The Houma Indians occupied a considerable part of south Louisiana when the French landed there. There was a Houma village on the present site of New Orleans. The Indians were quiet and peaceable; they gave the whites no trouble. In consequence the whites had a great deal of trouble themselves. The Indians were gradually crowded out of all the fertile lands they owned, and took refuge in the swamps on both sides of the Anite river in Livingston and Ascension parishes.

In 1829 the tribe became totally extinct and the lands were thrown open by the government to settlement. It was found, however, that there were old French and Spanish claims to them—for the Spanish piled their claims three or four thick on every acre of land in southern Louisiana. An attempt was made to oust the squatters in Livingston parish, but they proved a rather lawless lot, and as everybody in that section was a squatter the matter was finally settled by perfecting their titles.

There was the same trouble in Ascension parish. The government opened the land to public settlement in 1839, and again in 1885. Quite a number of entries were made in the latter year, but when those who had entered the land attempted to take possession of their property they found it already occupied by squatters, both white and black, who had held it for several generations without the slightest title. This brought up the old Livingston trouble. The squatters refused to leave, and threatened to resent any attempt at dispossession. After much parleying a compromise was finally reached whereby the squatters agreed to pay a certain sum of money, either in lump or in installment, provided they were left in their possession.

But again in 1897 the United States land office threw these lands open to entry for the third time and many entries were made. The occupants of the lands, squatters and others, began a new mode of war. They declared that they were being pestered by land speculators, that the entries were fraudulent and not in good faith and intended to milk and fleece them; and they organized a committee known as the "Land Investigating Committee of Ascension parish" to investigate the matter and see who were the men instrumental in getting up these land entries. The committee devoted much time and attention to this matter and reported that the entry scheme was being worked from New Orleans, lands being fraudulently entered there, compelling the occupants of these lands to buy them from those who got titles through the United States land office.

The squatters and other occupants of the public lands in dispute, who constitute a large part of the population of the eastern half of Ascension, believe that by this criminal proceeding, and the conviction of the men making these entries, they have put an end to the troubles from which they have suffered so long and which have compelled them to organize again and again to keep their farms. They have made it too hot, they say, for the land speculators. But if congress or the United States land office could interfere and prevent further trouble and disputing of titles in the Houma land grant it would prevent a great deal of ill feeling, smooth down politics and prevent litigation over a question that has been before the courts for nearly 70 years.