

The Contingencies of History: Imagining the New Orleans That Might Have Been

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Contingency—that is, the incidental and unforeseeable nature of events, and the many ways things could have played out differently—undergirds history. Saints fans got a lesson of this in January, as did local followers of the Rolling Stones in March, and worldwide admirers of Notre Dame Cathedral in April.

Lots of other contingent scenarios come to mind, with far more serious consequences. Imagine, for example, how different New Orleans would be today if Hurricane Katrina had nudged westward or eastward by a few hundred miles.

Likewise, consider how different the world might be if any given explorer of the Age of Discovery had veered off course and claimed different lands. Or if an assassin's bullet had struck, or missed, a powerful leader. Or if weather conditions had changed the outcome of a climactic battle.

Three such contingent moments come to mind in Louisiana's earliest years. It's a healthy exercise to ponder how our course of history might thence have transpired, I believe, because it reminds us that history is not "meant to be." Rather, it reflects human decisions made within a wide range of options, each subject to the caprice of circumstances.

In 1682, Robert LaSalle sailed down the Mississippi and claimed the entire river valley for France, naming it Louisiana. "A port or two [here] would make us masters of the whole of this continent," he enthused to his superiors in France. They permitted him to establish just such a port, and in 1684, La Salle's expedition sailed across the Atlantic and into the Gulf of Mexico to colonize the lower Mississippi.

But where, exactly, was it?

Had LaSalle found the river's mouth, he presumably would have selected an appropriate site upstream for a fort and colonial

outpost. He had dropped hints earlier that he favored the riverbanks below Baton Rouge, perhaps at the Bayougoula Indian camp near Bayou Manchac. Who knows exactly where this settlement would have been or what it would have been called, but it's reasonable to think of it as the forerunner of the city that New Orleans would come to be.

Only it never happened. The marshy labyrinth around the birds-foot delta of the Mississippi obscured the river's main channel, and currents swept LaSalle's ships westward until they wrecked in present-day Matagorda Bay in



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Texas. Survivors established a tiny fort, but conditions deteriorated: mutinous crew members murdered La Salle in 1687, and they themselves were all dead by 1688.

But for one navigational error, French colonization in Louisiana would have gotten under way many years earlier than it actually did. And “New Orleans” might have been founded, in a different place and under a different name, in 1684 instead of 1718.

His misadventures notwithstanding, La Salle’s Louisiana forays made the Spanish nervous. They believed this entire region was theirs, thanks to Hernando De Soto’s explorations of 1539-1543. Having caught wind that La Salle and possibly other Frenchmen had been probing around “their” colony, Spanish authorities in Mexico dispatched 11 expeditions between 1686 and 1693 to reestablish themselves on the lower Mississippi.

Two of these expeditions, led by Juan Jordán de Reina and Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora, apparently found the mouth of the river—no small feat, given La Salle’s experience.

But, once again, history became contingent on the banalities of the moment. Reina reported in February 1686 that he saw “a number of tiny islands formed of mudflats through which poured a large river, [which] I called Palizada river because of the many stranded trees at its mouth; the water flows very swiftly.”

Sigüenza y Góngora had a similar experience, seeing tangled vegetation and sensing his passage was blocked. Both turned around and went home. The term “Río de la Palizada” subsequently appeared on maps of the Gulf.

What exactly was this “palisade,” this feature that looked like a wall of posts? Tree trunks? Vegetative debris? A log jam? One historian speculated that it may have been a peculiarity of deltas known as “mud lumps,” linear extrusions of clay pushed to the surface by the pressure of compacting sediments.

Whatever it was, that *palizada* changed history—or rather, prevented a particular course of history from proceeding. Had the Spaniards found their way around that impediment, wrote historian Richebourg Gaillard McWilliams, “they might have held not only the lower valley but much of the southern area of North America east of the river for the next seventy years or even longer.”

Our region might have come under Spanish rather than French colonization, presumably as an extension of Mexico and connecting with Spanish Florida. Instead, the course of history was altered by a strewn pile of muddy logs or lumps.

The reprieve gave time for the French to make good on La Salle’s claim before the Spanish or the English took it from them. In 1697, Navy Minister Louis Phélypeaux de Pontchartrain directed Pierre Le Moyne, sieur d’Iberville, to seek “the mouth [of the Mississippi River,] select a good site that can be defended with a few men, and block entry to the river by other nations.”

Accompanying Iberville was his younger brother Jean Baptiste Le Moyne, sieur de Bienville, a headstrong and ambitious young man if ever there was one.

Iberville’s expedition arrived at the Gulf Coast in February 1699 and proceeded to explore the marshes of what is now eastern St. Bernard and Plaquemines parishes, probing for the mouth of the Mississippi. “When drawing near to the rocks to take shelter,” Iberville wrote, probably meaning mud-covered logs, “I became aware that there was a river.... I found fresh water with a very strong current.”

Unlike its predecessors, Iberville’s expedition was able to enter the Mississippi and proceed upriver past the future sites of New Orleans and Baton Rouge.

After exploring the region and establishing Fort Maurepas in what is now Ocean Springs, Mississippi, Iberville departed and left 19-year-old Bienville in charge. That set the stage for another moment of contingency.

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One day in the summer of 1699—Aug. 3 by one account, Sept. 15 by another—Bienville and crew were reconnoitering the lower Mississippi when they spotted on the horizon a shocking sight: an English frigate, the *Carolina Galley*, fully rigged and sailing upriver on a mission of British colonization.

Accounts vary of exactly what happened next, but all agree that the lordly teenager confronted the English captain Louis Bond, insisted this was French territory, and dropped his brother's name, Iberville having already achieved fame in French Canada for his military exploits against the English.

It worked. Bond bought Bienville's bluff. The *Carolina Galley* turned around and sailed back to Charleston, and the place where the incident occurred has been called English Turn (*le Detour aux Anglois*) ever since.

Consider what could have happened. Bond could have ignored Bienville. He could have blasted him out of the water. Or, more likely, Bienville and Bond could have missed each other that day and proceeded with their respective colonization efforts, laying the groundwork for a future confrontation.

In any of these scenarios, French Louisiana could have become an English colony—if it hadn't previously become a Spanish colony in 1696, contingent on the *palizada*, lest it started as a French colony in 1684, contingent on La Salle's navigation.

We'd have a whole different history here, and while there probably would have been a great city founded in the vicinity, it wouldn't be called New Orleans, there'd be no Saints, and you wouldn't be reading this article.

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