

## A Tenuous Start

### ***New Orleans Is Celebrating Its 300<sup>th</sup> Birthday— But It Almost Didn't Make It to Its Fifth***

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The main tricentennial commemoration of the founding of New Orleans occurs this spring, and for good reason: historical evidence, scant as it is, indicates it was during March-April of 1718 that 38-year-old Commandant General Jean Baptiste Le Moyne, sieur de Bienville, first set his men to clear vegetation at today's French Quarter riverfront.

The idea to establish this city, however, came a year earlier, and it was not until five years later that the nascent outpost gained traction. So tenuously incremental was the city's birthing that French historian Marc de Villiers du Terrage, writing in 1920, held that "the date for the foundation of New Orleans may be fixed at pleasure anywhere between the spring of 1717 and the month of June 1722."

By one first-person account, the city started with a ceremony. "Bienville cut the first cane," recalled colonist Jonathan Darby of that undated moment in 1718, after which thirty workers, all convicts, proceeded to clear the "dense canebrake" probably along present-day 500-600 Decatur Street, at a time when the river flowed closer inland. "We are working at present on the establishment of New Orleans



*Detail from Plan of New Orleans, depicting New Orleans in the 1720s; note Bayou Machac between the lakes at left-center. Courtesy Library of Congress.*

thirty leagues above the entrance to the Mississippi,” reported Bienville on June 12 to his superiors in the Company of the West.

A year earlier, the founder of that company, financier John Law, had devised an audacious plan to develop Louisiana into a vast colony of tobacco and other commodity plantations, mines, and raw materials. Law convinced his royal patron, Philippe II, the Duke of Orleans and Regent of France, that Louisiana’s potential for commercial wealth could be used to back the issuing of paper money, thus helping pay off France’s debts, while stock could be sold to raise financing for ships and materials. The labor, Law schemed, would come from the recruited or forced emigration of at least 6000 French citizens as well as 3000 enslaved West Africans. The land, it was assumed, would be seized from native peoples.

First the enterprise needed a headquarters. On September 9, 1717, according to its ledger, Law’s Company “resolved to establish, thirty leagues up the river, a burg which should be called La Nouvelle Orléans, where landing would be possible from either the river or Lake Pontchartrain.”

That directive made its way across the Atlantic and into Bienville’s hands, who by that time had 19 years of experience exploring the region and had helped found Biloxi, Mobile, and Natchez. He knew exactly where he wanted to locate New Orleans: on an elevated crescent adjoined by the Bayou Road ridge to Bayou St. John and Lake Pontchartrain, thus providing critical alternative Gulf access during times when shoaling blocked the river’s mouth.

This locale would become Bienville’s baby—so much so that he granted himself vast concessions of land nearby, including present-day Uptown and parts of the West Bank, leading many to suspect that his commitment to this site was driven by personal enrichment. But in fact, Bienville made these self-grants *after* his site selection, and one can argue this self-interest might have further impelled him to make the best decision possible. Besides, other colonials advocating for other outposts also had their personal concessions in those areas. Altruists they were not: these men were trying to get rich.

Bienville encountered resistance from three fronts: from skeptical Company officials in Paris, who worriedly perused maps and saw nothing but swamp and marsh; from residents of existing Louisiana outposts, who did not want the competition; and most unhelpfully, from Mother Nature.

The most qualified contender to “steal” New Orleans was a site known as Bayou Manchac, on an East Bank bend of the Mississippi south of Baton Rouge. There flowed a distributary through the lakes of Maurepas and Pontchartrain, which fulfilled the directive that New Orleans be located “where landing would be possible from either the river or Lake Pontchartrain.”

Indeed, Company officials may have had Manchac in mind when they wrote those instructions. Unaware of the work already underway at the French Quarter site, the Company on April 14, 1718 instructed Chief Engineer Paul de Perrier “to find the most convenient place for trading with Mobile, whether by sea or by Lake Pontchartrain...in the least danger from inundation...and as near as possible to the best agricultural lands. These various considerations convince us, as far as we can judge, that the most convenient site is on the Manchac brook; the town limits should stretch from the river-banks to the edge of the brook.”

This would have moved New Orleans, name and all, to what is now the East Baton Rouge/Iberville parish line, five miles south of Louisiana State University’s main campus. Consider the irony: this month’s

tricentennial commemoration of New Orleans will also include the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the directive to relocate New Orleans to Baton Rouge.

Fate would intervene, as Perrier would die in Havana en route to Louisiana. Had he not, it's quite possible Bienville would have been forced to move New Orleans. Instead, he progressed on the French Quarter site, only to hear more calls to relocate in 1720.

That year, the explorer Jean Baptiste Bernard de la Harpe described Bayou Manchac as the "best place to establish the principal bastion in Louisiana" and derided Bienville's site as "flooded, impractical, unhealthy, [and] unfit," fearing that its advocates "were not informed of [its] true geographical situation." Drouot de Valdeterre also endorsed the need for "changing and transporting New Orleans to the Manchac Plain, on the little river between the [Mississippi] and Lake Maurepas." Wrote another colonist named Beauvais, "The capital city must be at Manchac, where the high lands begin."

Another contender to get New Orleans was Natchez (Fort Rosalie) in present-day Mississippi, which Bienville established in 1716 atop high bluffs affording excellent flood protection. Natchez's tenacious promoter was Marc Antoine Hubert, a high-ranking official previously stationed in New Orleans. Hubert acquired land near Bayou St. John and once promoted that area to host the capital, but switched his allegiance to Natchez when he received land grants along St. Catherine's Creek and moved there in 1720.

Fellow Natchez planter and Hubert friend Le Page du Pratz recounted how Natchez was "pitched upon for the metropolis of this colony" and that "the capital... cannot be better situated than in this place." Writing many years later, Mississippi historian J. F. H. Claiborne lamented the "great misfortune that [Hubert's argument] did not prevail. The proudest city of the new world would now have stood on the ancient village of the Natchez."

Residents in Mobile and Biloxi, meanwhile, advocated for a coastal capital. Still others suggested English Turn, where ships slowed as they negotiated the hairpin meander, making it an ideal defensive position and port. One colonial by the name of François Le Maire, according to the historian Villiers du Terrage, hoped "that New Orleans may be created on Lake Pontchartrain," perhaps at the mouth of Bayou St. John, as one 1721 map erroneously indicated. Lying only inches above sea level, this site would have been a disaster.

Not that Bienville's site fared much better. In the spring of 1719, high river water inundated his progress at New Orleans, weakening his argument as much as it delighted his enemies. Bienville acknowledged the disaster and suggested building levees and a canal, while Hubert, champion of Natchez and nemesis of



*Bluffs at Natchez, Mississippi. Photo by author.*

Bienville, seized the moment by transferring Company goods to “where the land lies higher and the heat is less severe.”

News of the flood and other factors persuaded the Company to suspend work temporarily at New Orleans. The Superior Council, opposing both Bienville’s and Hubert’s favored sites, compromised by relocating the company headquarters from storm-damaged Dauphin Island near Mobile back to Old Biloxi (today’s Ocean Springs) in November 1719, and, two months later, across the bay to New Biloxi (today’s City of Biloxi).

Bienville reluctantly obeyed, leaving some workers at New Orleans and leading others to start building Biloxi. Le Blond de la Tour, a pro-Biloxi adversary of Bienville who assumed the position of chief engineer after Perrier’s death, designed in January 1721 a sketch for New Biloxi, comprising a rectangular grid surrounding a Place d’Armes within a star-shaped fort. Almost as an afterthought, La Tour dispatched his underling, assistant engineer Adrien de Pauger, to sketch out a similar plan for the now-demoted New Orleans site.

Skilled and fiercely determined, Adrien de Pauger adapted his boss’s plan for the Biloxi peninsula to the geography of the Mississippi’s natural levee. He boldly moved the entire grid from where Bienville had envisioned it should be, positioning it on higher ground closer to the river, and greatly increased the number of blocks within the surrounding ramparts.

Pauger’s plan was just a paper map, but what a magnificent plan it was, emblazoned with the words *La Nouvelle Orléans*. Cleverly, Pauger, perhaps in collusion with Bienville, rolled up a copy of his work and had it shipped to Paris.

This proved to be a critical moment, because it coincided with a time of great turmoil in France. Rumors had been circulating among stockholders that all was not well in Louisiana: financing was weak, travel was grueling, migrants were hard to recruit, disease was rampant, and the plantations were proving terribly difficult to establish. Some stockholders quietly divested, followed by more, and more—until late 1720, when hundreds dumped their shares. The “Mississippi Bubble” burst, and riots raged across European cities.

News of Law’s downfall reached New Orleans in May 1721, by which time the Company of the West was undergoing a frantic restructuring. After a two-year period during which the Crown supervised the Louisiana colony, the enterprise reemerged as the Company of the Indies and resumed its hobbled Louisiana project.

During that interim period, amid all the distraction, Pauger’s map made it to Paris and into the hands of Philippe II, the Duke of Orleans. French historian Villiers du Terrage posited that that impressive map, with the Regent’s name on it, “had weight in the Company’s final decision, since [Philippe], god-father to the new capital, was necessarily flattered to see the project put into effect.”

Indeed, the imposing street network and fortifications must have impressed the Parisians, who for three years had heard only bad news about New Orleans. Now, amid all the bad news in Paris, New Orleans was the only piece of good news.

Adrien de Pauger also contributed to the plausibility of New Orleans as capital through his study of the navigability of the lower Mississippi River. The Council of Regency, meanwhile, decided to found a

Capuchin convent in New Orleans, while the Company designated New Orleans home to the colony's Commandant General. Bienville's baby, we might say, was learning to walk. "The year 1721 had been generally favourable to New Orleans," wrote Villiers du Terrage. "From a military post, a sales-counter, and a camping-ground for travellers, it had become, in November, a small town, and the number of its irreconcilable enemies began to decrease."

On December 23, 1721, the Company of the Indies officially transferred the capital from Biloxi to New Orleans. Word of the decision reached Biloxi on May 26, 1722, and suddenly New Orleans had nothing but friends and allies.

Bienville, needless to say, was elated. "His Royal Highness having thought it advisable to make the principal establishment of the colony at New Orleans on the Mississippi River," he beamed, "we have accordingly transported here all the goods that were at Biloxi.... It appears to me that a better decision could not have been made."

As if to wipe the slate clean, a hurricane struck New Orleans in September 1722, destroying dozens of makeshift structures but also enabling Pauger to commence laying out his grid. Down to the inch in most cases, these are our modern French Quarter streets. Recalled one observer a few years later, "New-Orleans...in 1722...began to assume the appearance of a city, and to increase in population."

More hardship lay ahead. But through a combination of skill and pluck, as well as happenstance and luck—the latter two leading historian Lawrence N. Powell to dub New Orleans "the accidental city"—Bienville managed to push past years of uncertainty and lay the groundwork for our being here today.

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Which begs the question, did Bienville make the right decision? Or would we be better off in Manchac, Mobile, or Natchez?

I contend that Bienville acted wisely in locating New Orleans here, because he knew that, in his era, what made a city great was not its site, but its situation. "Site" refers to the city's actual physical footing, which is alterable through engineering. "Situation" means its regional context and how it interconnects with the rest of the world—which, at the time, was largely unalterable.

Even if the site was lousy, the strategic situation near the mouth of North America's greatest river allowed French colonials to exploit and defend the Mississippi Valley effectively from a single point.

Had New Orleans been located farther upriver, such as the higher interior locales of Bayou Manchac or Natchez, the city would have been too inconvenient for coastal traffic and unable to answer enemy incursions up the river. In other words: good sites, but bad situations.

Had he located it farther east, such as at Mobile or Biloxi, he would have relinquished the critical Mississippi River advantage and still suffered hurricane threats. Ditto for locations to the west: bad sites, bad situations.

Had he located the city at English Turn or the Lake Pontchartrain shore, the site would have been that much more vulnerable and precarious.

The site he finally selected, today's French Quarter, while hardly ideal for urbanization, represented the best *available* site within a fantastic geographical situation.

Bienville's wisdom was revealed a century later, when New Orleans emerged as one of the most important cities on the continent. It was also shown during various deluges from the 1700s to 2005, when the French Quarter consistently evaded serious flooding.

Why, then, are we here today? Because Bienville's decision made sense given the exigencies of early-18<sup>th</sup> century colonialism, at a time when humans traveled long distances by water, and when this particular site offered the best waterborne access to what proved to be the richest valley on Earth.

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*The French Quarter in March 2017; drone photo by Lorenzo Serafini Boni.*