On September 9, 1717, the Company, according to its ledger, ‘decided to establish thirty leagues up the river, a burg which should be called New Orleans, where landing would be possible from either the river or Lake Pontchartrain.’ That last clause implied various backwater bayous used by indigous tribes to circumvent of the shoal-prone mouth of the Mississippi as they moved between the interior and the coast. Specifically Bayou St. John, and a connecting ridge known as Bayou Road, allowed for passage starting from Mobile or Biloxi and proceeding eastward through the Bigalaks and into Lake Pontchartrain (really a bay) along the bayou portage, and to a particularly beautiful crescent of the Mississippi: fully ninety-five miles above its tomb mouth made it very likely that it would be sure, waterlogged soils made all potential sites on this fluvial delta perfectly dicey for urbanization. But this particular place had less severe disadvantages and some key advantages: chief among that back-door alternative route to the sea. ‘I myself went to the spot, to choose the best site,’ recalled city founder Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne, sieur de Bienville, on June 10, 1718, about ten weeks after his men began clearing the land for what is now the French Quarter.

Thus, New Orleans was established in 1718 chiefly as foothold for the Company of the West, backed by the French crown, to enrich stockholders and the nation by creating vast tobacco and other commodity plantations, while the crown sought to circumvent of the shoal-prone mouth of the Mississippi as they moved between the interior and the coast.

The commencement of New Orleans tricentennial year warrants a time to contemplate urban location. Cities are also sited for defensive reasons. Building Venice in a lagoon might seem like madness until one considers how the water would funnelmo vox into the city. But once these defensive reasons became obsolete, other problems emerged: sinkage and rising seas in the case of Venice, lack of water and extreme inconvenience for the cliff dwellers, lack of navigation on the Mississippi, as did Albany on the Hudson, despite its proximity to the Camino Real connecting with Spanish Mexico. The portage around the difficult-to-navigate Great Falls of the Ohio River gave rise to Louisville, Kentucky, comparable to Louisiana’s Alexandria, which is traceable to the impeding rapids on the Red River (hence Rapids Parish). Such spots are also known as break-of-bulk points, where humans in transit must disembark their cargo and swing conveyances (trails to canoe, canoe to foot, etc.). Constant stoppages create demand for an inn, a restaurant, a supply shop, and other services, which calls for people to live there, which in turn calls for buildings to house them, farmers to feed them—their blacksmiths, and doctors, and banks, and churches. So grows a town, and perhaps a metropolis.

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