

Pauger's Savvy Move

How an Assistant Engineer Prevailed Upon Two Bosses to Reposition New Orleans on Higher Ground

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Students of New Orleans know the story of how engineer Le Blond de la Tour and his able assistant Adrien de Pauger designed and laid out the street grid for the original city of New Orleans. What many may not realize is that their work did not represent the city's first surveyed line, nor was their plat—today's French Quarter—originally supposed to front the river directly. It took some field reconnoitering and on-the-fly reconsidering before the envisioned grid got shifted into the position it holds today.

Bienville's men started clearing vegetation for New Orleans in late March and early April 1718. That effort had been preceded by over half a dozen prior projects, dating back to 1699 and scattered across hundreds of miles, to establish toeholds in France's vast Louisiana claim. Among them was an attempt by Bienville and his older brother Iberville to establish Fort Louis de Louisiana on the Mobile River in 1702. Flooding, however, forced its relocation to a point downriver in 1711. There, officer Jacques Barbizon de Pailloux designed a bastion according to the principles of military engineer Sébastien Vauban, and laid out a rectilinear urban grid, traces of which remain in downtown Mobile, Alabama today.

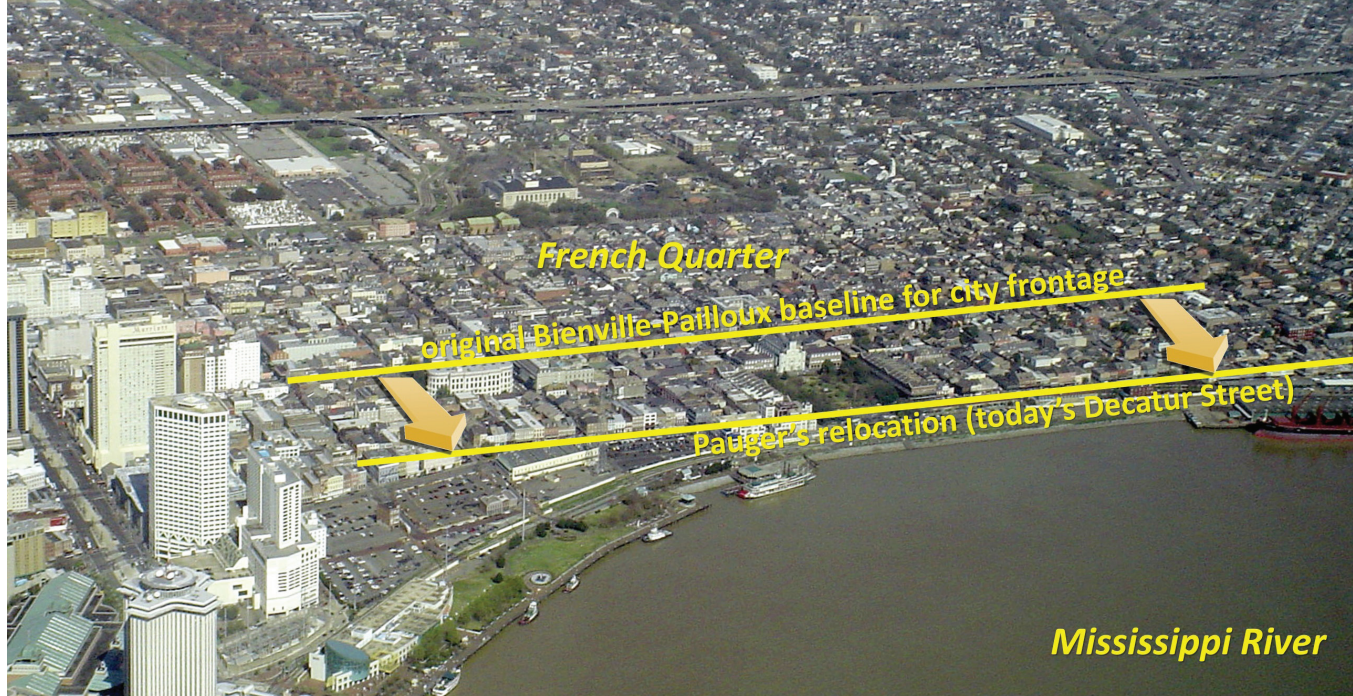
Unlike in Mobile, urbanization in New Orleans began without the initial surveying of a street grid. But nor was it completely indiscriminate. Aiming to bring some initial order to the cleared forest, Bienville, probably with the collaboration of Mobile planner Pailloux, laid out a perfectly straight baseline running behind the crest of the natural levee about 700 feet from the river. Today this invisible line would run between, and parallel to, Charters and Royal streets, tracing through the rear wall of present-day St. Louis Cathedral. Bienville and his surveyor angled the baseline by 37 degrees, roughly southwest to northeast, so that it fronted the sharp meander of the river like a board balanced atop a bent knee. The angled

baseline thus faced approaching river traffic, as if Bienville expected a fully articulated urban grid and defensive fortification to be forthcoming. That rotation angle would later drive the orientation of the entire city and set it famously awry of the cardinal directions. Bienville correctly foresaw the curvaceous river as being far more pertinent to the geography of his city than the distant stars and poles underlying the points of the compass.

This rudimentary urban planning, however, did not prevent early development from occurring rather haphazardly. A number of factors explain why. For one, skepticism abounded as to whether Bienville's flood-prone site would ever survive. It did not help that John Law's land-development company—the financial impetus behind the New Orleans project—imploded in 1720, instigating riots in Europe and wreaking havoc on Louisiana's already-shaky reputation. What next affronted New Orleanians was the company's recent decision to designate New Biloxi as headquarters and colony capital rather than their outpost. Chief Engineer Louis-Pierre Le Blond de la Tour proceeded to design plans for the new coastal capital, rendering a star-shaped fort design surrounding a symmetrical grid with a *place d'armes* and a church.

La Tour soon fell ill and, with orders from Paris, dispatched his assistant Adrien de Pauger to plan New Orleans. Described by anthropologist Shannon Lee Dawdy as a "proud [and] proper...one part idealist engineer and one part hot-tempered rogue," Pauger did not see eye-to-eye with his boss, to which La Tour responded with feelings of envy and competition. According to historian Lawrence Powell, Pauger seems to have gotten along better with Bienville, who also locked horns with La Tour. Sharing a common adversary and collaborating on a common problem (Pauger, like Bienville, granted himself nearby land concessions and thus

Above: Le Blond de La Tour's January 12, 1723 map, *Partie du Plan de la Nouvelle Orleans*, showing misaligned houses as well as the original baseline — the dashed red line labelled "Alignement Suiuant le projet de Mr. de Bienville des premieres maisons." French National Archives, courtesy Library of Congress.



Left: Pauger wisely moved Bienville's baseline, which was supposed to serve as the city's frontage, 700 feet closer to the river, to today's Decatur Street. Aerial photo and graphic by Richard Campanella.

stood to benefit personally if the project succeeded), the two men would play key roles in creating New Orleans.

Pauger arrived at New Orleans on March 21, 1721, carrying La Tour's Biloxi plans in his baggage. He proceeded to explore the terrain, inspect its topography and soils, and observe its relationship to the Mississippi. The front of the new plat, it was presumed, would be aligned with the pre-existing Bienville-Pailloux baseline. But over the next few weeks, as Pauger adopted La Tour's plan for New Biloxi to the New Orleans site, Pauger sensed the alignment to the old Bienville-Pailloux line would be ill-advised. He decided to move it 700 feet closer to the river, to today's Decatur Street. Pauger explained "the changes I have been obliged to make because of the situation of the terrain, which being higher on the river bank, I have brought the town site...closer to it, so as to profit from the proximity of the landing place as well as to have more air from the breezes that come from it"

In doing so, Pauger had apparently prevailed upon two superiors, his boss and rival La Tour, and La Tour's boss and rival, Bienville. Perhaps the alliance between Pauger and Bienville paved the way for the underling's professional judgment to win the day. Or perhaps all three recognized that it would be in everyone's best interests to shift the plat riverward.

Indeed it was: it gave the city two extra feet of topographic elevation, enough to evade high water rising from the lowlands in the rear — the type that flooded the city in 1816, in 1849, in 1871, and in 2005. As for riverfront space, there was still plenty for shipping activity even after the move, and there would be yet more when, decades later, the river fortuitously deposited alluvium along the levee to create a valuable batture. Today, these are the lands riverside of Tchoupitoulas and North Peters roughly from Conti to Felicity streets.

But Pauger had a problem on his hands before he could execute his prudent plan. Since 1718, residents had erected houses and planted gardens hither and yon, many of which obstructed his envisioned streets. "Pauger...has just shown me a plan of his own invention," wrote Father Pierre Charlevoix at the time, "but it will not be so easy to put into execution, as it has been to draw [on] paper." Indeed, Pauger nearly got into fisticuffs with neighbors who resisted his call to clear the way, and went so far as to produce a map illustrating the conflicts. (It is this map that shows the Bienville-Pailloux baseline, which it labeled *Alignement Suiuant le projet de Mr. de Bienville des premieres maisons*: "alignment following Mr. Bienville's plan for the first houses.")

Nature resolved the conflict. According to documents found by famed architectural historian and preservationist Sam Wilson, Pauger wrote that, at 9 a.m. on September 11, 1722, "a great wind" swept the settlement, "followed an hour later by the most terrible tempest and hurricane that could ever be seen...." "With this impetuous wind came such torrents of rain," wrote another eye-witness, "that you could not step out a moment without risk of being drowned[;] it rooted up the largest trees, and the birds, unable to keep up, fell in the streets."

New Orleans' first hurricane destroyed or damaged 34 houses, the entire flotilla of five ships, flatboats and pirogues, plus cargo and cannons. Yet, in accordance with the axiom than one man's disaster is another's opportunity, the tempest cleared the way for new urban order. Wrote La Tour, "all these buildings were temporary and old, not a single one was in the alignment of the new town, and they were to have been pulled down. Little harm would have been done...."

The final map that was actually surveyed into the landscape, titled *Plan de la Ville de la Nouvelle Orleans*, beautifully depicted a nine-by-six grid of perfectly

square blocks immediately recognizable as today's French Quarter. Angled to match the Bienville-Pailloux baseline and brought forward as Pauger had previously decided, the orthogonal grid neatly exploited the higher, better-drained natural levee while positioning corner bastions to confront approaching enemy vessels. In the principal cell Pauger created a *place d'armes*, to be fronted by edifices of church and state in perfect symmetry. Pauger also split the blocks evenly behind the church with an additional street (Orleans) — a feature that, taken together with the positioning of the church and place, resembled La Tour's plan for Biloxi and suggests a mentor-protégé influence despite the animus. Surrounding the grid was the *de rigueur* Vauban-style fortification, its bastions (never quite fully built) commanding clear firing lines in all directions.

The naming of the streets possibly alludes to the complex relationship among Pauger, La Tour, and Bienville. Evidence come from the self-flattering *Rue de Bienville*, and the likelihood that *Rue St. Pierre* and *Rue St. Anne* discreetly inscribed La Tour (whose first name was Pierre) and his wife Marie-Anne Le Sueur into the map. Adrien de Pauger attempted to do the same with *Rue St. Adrien*, but he seems to have been trumped — perhaps by an indignant La Tour — because that name was soon changed to *Rue de l'Arsenal*, now Ursulines. Other names (*Dauphine* and *Burgundy*) were added shortly thereafter and a few have since been relocated or coined anew. With the exception of *Rue Quay* (today's Decatur), all original street names paid homage to the monarchy in general or to key Crown figures or their relatives, lineages, titles, or patron saints. Most remain in place today, changed only by anglicization.

And thanks to Pauger's savvy move, they all sit two feet higher in elevation than originally planned.

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