

Settling the Landscape

*Resolved to establish,
thirty leagues up the river,
a town which should be called New Orleans,
where landing would be possible
from either the river
or Lake Pontchartrain*

—Company of the West ledger, September 1717

Bienville's Dilemma
A Historical Geography of New Orleans
by Richard Campanella

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“Forest Primeval” Reconsidered

Indigenous occupation of the Gulf Coast region

That the pre-colonial Gulf Coast represented a pristine wilderness, populated by only a few scattered Indian tribes living in “harmony” with nature and implicitly “awaiting” the dawn of history, is a popular misconception. Native peoples in fact numbered many, altered their environment, and traveled and traded extensively. Modern-day New Orleans would be a very different place, and probably in a different place, had they not.

A Spanish expedition in 1519 recorded fully forty Indian settlements within the first few miles of what was probably the Mobile River. At the river’s mouth, wrote one member, was “an extensive town” where “natives treated our men in a friendly manner.”⁵⁰ Journals from Hernando de Soto’s expedition (1539-1543) are replete with both peaceful and violent encounters with natives. Evidence that indigenous peoples cleared forests, burned fields, transported species, and raised crops prevails throughout historical accounts. A member of the La Salle expedition in 1682 described “fine corn fields and ... beautiful prairies” in the otherwise densely forested region near present-day Natchez, Mississippi.⁵¹ Pierre Le Moyne, sieur d’Iberville, upon first laying eyes on the future New Orleans site in 1699, described the area as “thickly covered with cane [which] burn ready,” and spotted an Indian tending to a prairie fire nearby.⁵² The grasses that grew following burning were ideal food for American Bison, an important resource for the natives; Iberville’s crew “saw three buffaloes lying down on the bank”⁵³ near what is now Jackson Square, plus a herd of over 200 farther upriver. Near present-day White Castle Iberville found the extensive Bayogoula Indian encampment, which he described as comprising “107 huts and 2 temples, [with] possibly about 200 to 250 men and few women and children”⁵⁴ who tended “some cocks and hens”—domesticated chickens, a species not native to the New World. Another Frenchman observed “fields where they cultivate their millet, [which] they break up ... with buffalo bones.”⁵⁵ Above Baton Rouge, Iberville visited an Indian village of 140 huts “on the slope of a hill [covered with] corn fields...”⁵⁶

The first-person accounts of a abundant Indian life in pre-colonial Louisiana align with recent scholarship that increases traditional estimates of indigenous populations in pre-Columbian America. There is substantial evidence, wrote geographer William M. Denevan in his 1992 article *The Pristine Myth: The Landscape of the Americas in 1492*, that “the Native American landscape of the early sixteenth century was a humanized landscape almost everywhere. Populations were large[,] forest composition had been modified, grasslands had been created, wildlife disrupted, and erosion was severe in places.”⁵⁷ Indians, like anyone else, explored their environment to the capacity of their technology. Those in Louisiana, as elsewhere, altered their landscape

by setting fire to forests and prairies, tilting ecological cycles to their advantage for the cultivation of staples and the manipulation of fauna and flora habitat. They interacted and traded far and wide, intentionally or accidentally diffusing species and sometimes affecting the biological diversity and ecology of entire landscapes. Among those species were chickens, native to Asia, brought by the Spanish, and diffused up the Mississippi River via Indian trade routes. Wild pigs, smallpox, sugar cane, *Aedes aegypti* and the yellow fever virus, plus hundreds of other species deemed by humans to be either benign (sugar cane, myrtle, cotton) or malignant (nutria, kudzu, water hyacinth), would follow the trajectory of the Bayougoulas' chickens and help alter both the history and geography of Louisiana.

The presence of American bison (often recorded as "buffalo" or "wild cattle" in journals) in Louisiana also casts doubt on the "pristine myth." De Soto's expedition trekked thousands of miles throughout the Southeast in the 1540s and never mentioned bison.⁵⁸ Yet 160 years later, Iberville and his men reportedly sighted and observed how natives utilized their hides for shelter, hair for clothing, meat for food, and bones for plowing. Bison abounded in Louisiana well into the colonial era. Jesuit Father du Roisson reported in 1727 that hunters "begin to find wild cattle [around Baton Rouge]; these animals roam in herds over the prairies, or along the rivers; last year a Canadian brought down to [N]ew Orleans four hundred and eighty tongues of cattle... killed during the winter."⁵⁹ Between De Soto's era and that of the French, bison seem to have massively expanded their range. Why?

Geographer Erhard Rostlund argued that the once-high Indian populations of early sixteenth-century North America kept bison herds in check on western plains (through hunting pressure), while precluding potential bison habitat in the southeast (through extensive land cultivation).⁶⁰ But after the European arrival, Old World diseases, primarily smallpox, decimated native populations by the thousands, even millions—"possibly the greatest demographic disaster ever."⁶¹ Denevan puts the North American Indian's population decline at 74 percent (from 3.8 million down to one million) between 1492 and 1800. "When disease swept Indians from the land," wrote Charles Mann in his book 1491, the "entire ecological *ancien régime* collapsed."⁶² Bison were among the affected biotas' beneficiaries. The human die-off both diminished hunting pressure on bison in the west and liberated their grazing habitat for their use in the southeast. Bison range, the theory goes, subsequently expanded southwardly toward the Gulf and Atlantic coasts. Iberville in 1699 viewed the animals at the fringe of their range, where they affected the local ecology and landscape.

Iberville also bore witness in 1699 to the terrible die-off suffered by indigenous peoples in the post-contact New World, reporting that "the smallpox... had killed one-fourth of the people" in a settlement near present-day Baton Rouge.⁶³ Former French officer Chevalier Guy de Soniat du Fossat, writing in 1791 of his memories of Louisiana in the 1750s, stated that the Indian "villages and... population have decreased about two-thirds in number since the advent of the Europeans, who introduced and brought among them diseases, desires, dissensions and all other abuses of civilization, heretofore unknown to them."⁶⁴ Soniat's eyewitness estimate from 1791 roughly concurs with Denevan's scholarly assessment from 1992.

The natives' demise, too, affected the landscape: fewer Indians meant fewer encampments, fewer forest clearings, fewer fires, fewer croplands, less hunting pressure, less use of natural resources, and more resources for other species. "[T]he Indian landscape of 1492," wrote Denevan, "had largely vanished by the mid-eighteenth century, not through a European superimposition, but because of the demise of the native population." Ironically, "the landscape of 1750 was more 'pristine' (less humanized) than that of 1492."⁶⁵

Thus, the pre-colonial Gulf Coast and Louisiana deltaic plain comprised not the "forest primeval" romanticized in literature and popular history, but rather a landscape already transformed by sequential indigenous occupations more extensive and influential than commonly thought. The first Europeans did not "commence" history and document a benchmark landscape from which all subsequent transformations derived; they merely encountered a landscape continually under transformation—vastly by physical forces over millennia, and considerably by indigenous human forces over centuries.

The most significant contribution of pre-colonial indigenous people to the New Orleans we know today came not from these historical environmental manipulations, but from the sharing of critical geographical knowledge with early French explorers. Through extensive travel and trading, natives mastered the region's complex labyrinth of swamps, marshes, rivers, bayous, ridge systems, and bays. They revealed to the newcomers myriad portages, shortcuts, "back doors," safe routes, resources, and foods, which would inform the Frenchmen's siting and settlement decisions.

"*The Indians made maps of the whole country for me,*" reflected Iberville in 1639.⁶⁶ Without native geographical informants, Iberville and his brother Bienville, who founded New Orleans nineteen years later based principally on indigenous knowledge, would have "discovered" much less geography, and perceived it in a far less insightful manner.

Contact 1519-1699

Initial Spanish and French forays into the lower Mississippi region

Earliest documented evidence of European exploration of the central Gulf Coast comes from Spanish explorer Alonso Álvarez de Pineda's 1519 expedition in search of a western passage. Pineda ascended "a river which was found to be very large and very deep, at the mouth of which [was] an extensive town."⁶⁷ He named the waterway *Río del Espíritu Santo*, presumed for centuries to be the Mississippi but now interpreted as probably the Mobile River.

Nine years later, Pánfilo de Narváez led an ill-fated imperialistic expedition from Cuba to Florida and westward along the coast. The expedition “came upon... a very large river [and] entered a bay... in which there were many islands. And there we came together, and from the sea we drank fresh water,”⁶⁸ probably the Mississippi estuary. Longshore currents then swept the expedition westward and wrecked it near present-day Galveston. There, Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca led survivors on an epic 2,000-mile overland odyssey to the Pacific coastal town of San Miguel de Culiacán, Mexico, in 1536. His riveting account of sixteenth-century North America remains in publication to this day.

Cabeza de Vaca's report renewed Spanish interest in the North American interior, hitherto perceived as a mysterious and unpromising land. In May 1539, Hernando De Soto and 600 soldiers landed near present-day Tampa and proceeded to explore 4,000 miles through the future American South. They encountered the Mississippi River near present-day Memphis in 1541, becoming the first Europeans to sight the inland channel and gain “an adequate conception of the magnitude and importance of the Mississippi.”⁶⁹ The arduous journey killed hundreds of soldiers (including De Soto himself, who was interred in the river) and probably thousands of natives, infected by newly introduced European viruses. Luis de Moscoso led the survivors down the Mississippi and possibly past the future site of New Orleans in July 1543, but again there is question: a 1544 map depicts a *Río del Espíritu Santo* that resembles the Mississippi in size and importance but not in shape and form, suggesting Moscoso took the Atchafalaya to the sea. If so, then no European left documented evidence of passing future New Orleans in the sixteenth century.

Moscoso's escape ended imperial Spain's initial probing of the lower Mississippi River. The Spaniards sought not settlement and colonization but riches; finding none, they left no permanent mark. The French in seventeenth-century North America also sought riches, but, invested as they were in New France, pursued a means—trade routes and empire—toward that end. Explorations of the Great Lakes region and upper Mississippi by Marquette and Joliet (1673) helped demystify the western frontier and refute the notion of a nearby Pacific Ocean, but no French explorer had yet confirmed the connection between the upper Mississippi and the Gulf of Mexico.

An ambitious young Norman named René-Robert Cavelier, sieur de La Salle set out to do just that. A resident of New France since 1666, La Salle petitioned “to end a war to discover the western part of New France,” to which King Louis XIV in 1678 “willingly [consented], because there is nothing we have more at heart than the discovery of this country...”⁷⁰ Thus authorized, La Salle formed an expedition, and, with surprising ease, sailed down the Mississippi in the winter of 1682 and neared the deltaic plain in late March. There, the expedition traversed country “so bordered with canes and so low... that we could not hunt,” subsisting instead on “potatoes and crocodiles.”⁷¹

In early April, La Salle, in his own words, “went ashore on the borders of a marsh formed by the inundation of the river” to confirm reports of a village that “the whole of this marsh, covered with canes, must be crossed to reach...”⁷² The men soon came upon a recently destroyed Tangiboa [Tangibaho] village, which historian Marc

de Villiers du Terrage surmised “must have lain very near the present site of New Orleans.”⁷³ If so, these may be the first recorded descriptions of the future city’s landscape.

After the expedition continued downriver, Father Membré described the historic moment that transpired as the party approached the Mississippi’s birdfoot delta and smelled the salty waters of the Gulf of Mexico:

[W]e arrived, on the sixth of April, at a point where the river divides into three channels [which] are beautiful and deep. The water is brackish; after advancing two leagues it became perfectly salt, and, advancing on, we discovered the open sea, so that on the ninth of April, with all possible solemnity, we performed the ceremony of planting the cross and raising the arms of France, [taking] possession of that river, of all rivers that enter it and of all the country watered by them.⁷⁴

The Mississippi Basin, in La Salle’s mind, now belonged to France; he named it after King Louis XIV, and *Louisiana* entered the vocabulary.

La Salle promptly returned to France and recommended to the Sun King the establishment of a fortification sixty leagues above the mouth of the Mississippi, for its excellent position, “favourable disposition of the savages,” fertile land, mild climate, military advantages, and opportunity to “harass the Spaniards in those regions from whence they derive all their wealth.” The fortification would also serve as a base for preaching the Gospel, conquering the silver-rich provinces of Mexico, storing supplies, harboring and building ships, and exploiting the vast resources of newly claimed Louisiana. A league at that time measuring between 2.5 and three miles, La Salle’s envisioned city probably entailed a site around Bayou Manchac. A “port or two” there, proclaimed La Salle “would make us masters of the whole of this continent.”⁷⁵

La Salle set out in 1684 to found his city on the great river. What happened over the next three years is the subject of controversy among historians, though La Salle’s tragic fate is not. The expedition missed the mouth of the Mississippi and landed at Matagorda Bay in present-day Texas; La Salle was murdered in March 1687 by mutinous crew, who subsequently died of disease or in Indian battles.⁷⁶

La Salle’s lieutenant, Henri de Tonti, mystified by La Salle’s disappearance, returned to Louisiana in 1685 to search for his friend and comrade. At one point he left a letter for La Salle in a tree hole near the 32 claim site, and another letter, dated April 20, with the Quinipissa (Quynnyssa) Indians at their upriver encampment. Hope faded, and he returned to France. There Tonti kept alive the vision of settling Louisiana throughout the 1690s, warning the French about the English threat to the Mississippi River from the north and the Spanish interests from Mexico and Florida. His message arrived at a bad time, as France’s attention was consumed by the War of the League of Augsburg. La Salle’s claim languished even as it vexed the Spanish, who caught wind of it in Mexico City and subsequently deployed eleven Gulf Coast expeditions during 1686-93 to “re-discover” the Mississippi. All failed, though some came close.

Not until 1697 did French government officials return to Louisiana matters. What motivated them was not large-scale colonization akin to their successes in

French Canada and the West Indies; France at this time “had neither the material nor the moral resources” to make such a commitment. Rather, they decided to act on the Louisiana claim “primarily . . . to prevent a foreign foothold at the mouth of the Mississippi.”⁷⁷ Minister of Marine Louis Phélypeaux, Comte de Pontchartrain thus directed thirty-six-year-old French Canadian warrior Pierre Le Moyne, sieur d’Iberville to see “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.”⁷⁸

The official charge for the founding of Louisiana had been issued.



Foundation of Louisiana, 1699

End of the exploratory phase, beginning of the settlement phase

Iberville, his younger brother Jean Baptiste Le Moyne, sieur de Bienville,⁷⁹ and their men arrived to the present-day Mississippi Gulf Coast in February 1699 and proceeded westward into the low-lying marshes of what is now St. Bernard and Plaquemines parishes. “When drawing near to the rocks to take shelter,” Iberville wrote, “I became aware that there was a river. I passed between two of the rocks in 12 feet of water, the seas quite heavy. When I got close to the rocks, I found fresh water with a very strong current.” The rocks were an illusion—they were probably mud lumps—but the freshwater current was real. “We regarded this beautiful river with admiration,” wrote Pénicaut the carpenter:

The water is of a light color, very good to drink, and very light. The country, on its banks, appeared to be everywhere covered with splendid trees of every description, such as oak, ash, elm, and many others . . . upon which was a number of wild turkeys roosted . . . few and large [with a] nett weight [of] about thirty pounds!⁸⁰

Iberville wondered if this great river was the same that La Salle sailed seventeen years earlier. He proceeded up the delta (see map, “Iberville’s Exploration of the Gulf Coast and Lower Mississippi River”). “All this land is a country of reeds and brambles and very tall grass,” he wrote on March 3, 1699—which happened to be Mardi Gras. Six leagues farther was “a bend” the river “makes to the west . . . to which we have given the name Mardy Gras.” With those words, Iberville introduced the ancient pagan and Catholic pre-Lenten feast into the colonial society he was about to found. Mardi Gras remains today the single most famous and distinctive cultural trait of Louisiana, and *Bayou Mardi Gras* ranks as the region’s oldest French toponym (second only to *Louisiana* itself).

It was here also that Iberville spelled out what was probably by now quite apparent to him and his men: this entire landscape was a floodplain. “I climbed to the top of a nut tree as big as my body, but saw nothing other than canes and bushes. The land becomes inundated to a depth of 4 feet during high water. I made the decision to go upstream.

Iberville proceeded upriver in search of the legendary Bayougoula Indian encampment and later passed the bluffs of Baton Rouge. The expedition then returned downriver to Pointe à la Pêche, eastward through that distributary into two connected tidal lagoons they named lakes Maurepas and Pontchartrain, and back to the Gulf of Mexico. Meanwhile, younger brother Bienville made a remarkable discovery while visiting with the Mougoulaquia Indians. It was the sad letter left by Henri de Tontou for his lost friend La Salle, dated April 20, 1685 and deposited at the village of the Quinipissa (Quynypissa) Indians (see *Contact*, 157-1699). By the time Bienville and Iberville read Tontou's words, La Salle had been dead for a dozen years. “This letter,” wrote Iberville confidently, “removes all doubt that [the river I explored] is the *l'Arroyssyp*.”

With that resounding confirmation, the early European exploratory phase of the Louisiana deltaic landscape (1519-1699) drew to a close and the settlement phase began. Concerned about the navigability of the mouth of the Mississippi River, Iberville favored the Gulf Coast for a settlement site and directed his men to build the first outpost, named Fort Maurepas, on the brink of Biloxi Bay in present-day Ocean Springs, Mississippi. Eighty-one men under the command of M. de Sauvolle, enumerated in the initial census in December, became the region's first French residents.⁸³ Iberville himself returned to France in May to report his success to the king: Louisiana was founded.

“Mud to One's Knees, Water to One's Waist”

The delta landscape in 1699

[N]othing more than two narrow strips of land, about a musket shot in width, having the sea on both sides of the river, which... frequently overflows....

So described one crew member the turbulent, watery world of the Mississippi Delta as Iberville's expedition sailed upriver in 1699. On the banks were

cane-brake... so tall and thick [and] impossible to pass through... beyond [which] are impenetrable marsh.... [A]s you ascended, the banks appear more and more submerged, the land being scarcely visible. We saw a great quantity of wild game, such as ducks, geese, snipe, teal, bustards, and other birds.

We also saw a Mexican wolf, and a species of rat which carried its young in a sack under its belly.

Along the verdant banks of present-day St. Bernard Parish, Iberville noted that “the trees and the ground are getting higher and are subject to 8-10 inch overflow. I have not yet noticed any walnut tree or fruit tree whatsoever.” Blooming vines entangled mature live oaks and blackberry patches, forming a jungle-like scene. The crew spotted three alligators, “one of which was a monster” and killed a buffalo.⁸⁵

It is almost certain that Iberville first viewed the future site of downtown New Orleans on the calm Saturday of March 7, 1699, when he reported a sequence of wide river meanders “over a distance of 2 leagues” which corresponds to the bends the Mississippi makes through the modern-day metropolis. There, Iberville and his crew met a group of Annocchy Indians, with whom they traded tools and trinkets for buffalo meat, bear meat, and information on how to find the Bayogoula Indian campsite. American bison grazed on the natural levees of future New Orleans; that morning, the crew “saw three buffaloes lying down on the bank,” which promptly disappeared into the “thick forest and cane-brakes.”⁸⁶ The men spent that night somewhere along the present-day uptown riverfront where, Iberville described elements of the cultural, physical, and biological landscape relevant to him at that moment—at the dusk of the region’s prehistory and the dawn of its recorded history:

[T]here are ten huts thatched with palmetto near [by] is a small redoubt as high as a man, made of canes in the form of an oval 25 yards wide and 55 long, having a few mats inside.... All the ground here becomes inundated a foot deep as far back as half a league in the woods where I went. Both banks of the river, almost the entire distance above the sea, are so thickly covered with canes of every size, that one cannot walk through them. It is impenetrable country, which would be easy to clear. Most of the canes are dry; when set on fire they burn readily and, when burning, make as loud a report as a pistol shot. [They] have roots three and four feet in the ground, which look like a puppet.⁸⁷

(The canes or reeds that Iberville and other earlier explorers repeatedly describe are a grass species, *Arundinaria gigantea*, which is the only cariboo native to North America. Once found throughout Southern riverine and riparian environments, “canebrakes” now constitute an endangered ecosystem covering less than 2 percent of their former range.⁸⁸)

Iberville’s geographical descriptions at this point become confusing. He recorded only 4.5 leagues of upriver travel against contrary winds and currents the next day, March 8, placing him anywhere from present-day Carrollton to Harahan to Norco. (The utter lack of prominent landmarks in this deltaic plain handicaps both the explorer and the reader of his journals.)

On March 9, Iberville recorded a significant realization:

Two leagues from the place where we stopped for the night, the Indian... pointed out to me the place through which the Indians make their portage

to this river from the back of the bay where the ships are anchored. They drag their canoes over a rather good road, at which we found several pieces of baggage owned by men that were going there or were returning. He indicated to me that the distance from the one place to the other was slight.... From here to the sea it may be 50 leagues.⁸⁹

Iberville learned from his Indian guides the existence of an alternative route to the Gulf of Mexico, by means of a tidal lagoon (Lake Pontchartrain) and a “rather good road” (an unnamed topographical ridge) rather than the sinuous Mississippi. Where exactly was that portage? It is difficult to say for certain. Based on the description one possibility is the Bayou St. John/Bayou Road portage in New Orleans proper. But Iberville’s recorded distances seem to indicate a location farther upriver. Perhaps it was the juncture made by Bayou Metairie/Metairie Road with Bayou St. John, but these features do not match the description. More likely it was a minor bayou and topographic ridge in St. Charles Parish, such as the Tigonillou/Bayou Trepagnier portage near the present-day Bonnet Carré Spillway.

Similar confusion arises from Iberville’s records on his second voyage to Louisiana, early the next year. “I set out [from coastal Mississippi] with my brother De Bienville,” he wrote on January 15, 1700, “to go to the portage from Lake Pontchartrain to the Mississippi, to see whether the barques could get in there.” The landscape he subsequently described could be in the same St. Charles Parish vicinity Iberville visited the year before; it could also be in present-day Orleans Parish, along the southern shore of Lake Pontchartrain, where Iberville encountered an inlet:

I got to the mouth of the stream that leads to the portage. This stream is at the far end of the lake, toward the south; it is 20 yards wide, 10 feet deep, and 1 league long....

If this is in fact in present-day Orleans Parish, Iberville is positioned along present-day Robert E. Lee Boulevard between Wisner and St. Bernard Avenue, describing the mouth of Bayou St. John.

I went to the portage, which I found to be 1 league long, and half the distance being full of water and mud up to the knees, the other half fairly good, part of it being a country of canes and fine woods, suitable to live in. I had three canoes carried over the portage.

After sailing up the crooked, log-strewn bayou, Iberville disembarked on a slightly elevated ridge, which could be the Bayou Road/Esplanade Ridge connecting Bayou St. John with the Mississippi River. Despite the elevation, the land hardly offered any better passage. Wrote Iberville’s chaplain Paul du Ru on the trip, “From the head of [Bayou St. John?], we must cross through woods but on a path where there is water up to one’s waist and mud to one’s knees.... there was one occasion when I sank into it up to my waist.”⁹⁰ Iberville and his men trudged across the ridge to the banks of the Mississippi—possibly to the site of the modern-day French Quarter, previously an Indian village:

I went and looked at the spot where the Quinipissas once had a village, 1½ leagues above the postage; here I found that the land did not become inundated, or did so very little. Trees have grown back in the fields as big as 2 feet around.... Today I had a small field cleared in which I had some sugar cane planted that I brought from St. Domingue.... The south side of the lake is bordered by a prairie half a league to one league wide, after which one comes to the tall trees. *This looks like a fine country to live in.*⁹¹

That was not the consensus.



“Bad Country, Bad People,” 1699-1717

Troubled times in early Louisiana

Bienville's Louisiana explorations of 1699 spawned a nascent colonial French society scattered thinly along the Gulf Coast. Following the establishment of Fort Maurepas, outposts arose on the lower Mississippi River: near present-day Phoenix, Louisiana in 1700 and at two sites near Mobile Bay in 1702 and 1711 (the latter of which is now modern Mobile). A small band of Mobile settlers cleared land at Bayou St. John in 1708, marking the first European development in present-day New Orleans. Scarcity, hunger, disease, natural disaster, official inattention, and a desperate lack of settlers (only around 300 lived throughout the entire colony in 1708) made life in early Louisiana a dreaded hardship.

Frustrated and pessimistic, the Crown in 1712 ceded a monopoly for the commercial development of Louisiana to a prominent financier named Antoine Crozat. Privatizing Louisiana released the government from the hassle of management, while opening up the possibility that commercialization might actually prove lucrative. But lack of mineral riches, scarcity of settlers for agriculture, and limited commercial interaction with Spain, coupled with mismanagement, feuding, and Indian tensions, doomed the speculative venture. “Bad country, bad people,” is how Gov. Antoine de La Mothe Cadillac assessed the Louisiana colony in 1713.⁹² When Crozat retroceded his monopoly in 1717, Louisiana's prospects seemed dim. Yet a number of important events occurred during the Crozat years.

First, in 1714, Louis Juchereau de Saint-Denis founded Natchitoches in present-day central Louisiana, establishing a French presence in the Red River region and trade connections with the Spanish to the south and west. Second, Antoine Cadillac established Fort Toulouse and Fort Tombecbé on key rivers in Alabama, to guard against English incursions from the north and east. Third, in 1716, Bienville founded a garrison—Fort Rosalie, near Natchez, Mississippi—creating a commanding riverside pres-

ence with fine soils nearby and an opportunity to monitor the potentially hostile Natchez Indians. These new French outposts formed clutches helping control and develop the unwieldy and problematic Louisiana claim. It was also during the Crozat years that King Louis XIV died (1715) and left the throne to his five-year old great-grandson, Louis XV, for whom Philippe, Duc d'Orléans would act as Regent of France. Among the Duc d'Orléans' many business associates was a flamboyant maverick peddling a bold proposition. His name was John Law.

Born in Hamburg, in 1671, the gifted Law grew rich through high-risk financial speculations with European aristocracy. He settled with his millions in Paris in the early 1710s, aligning himself with French royalty. Impressed with his financial wizardry, the Duc d'Orléans authorized Law to establish the *Banque Générale* in 1716. When Crozat surrendered his Louisiana monopoly the next year, Law pounced. He proposed to the Duc d'Orléans a Louisiana land-development plan that would enrich all investors and the country. The scheming risk taker found the right patron.

Less than a month after Crozat formally relinquished Louisiana, John Law's new Company of the West received a twenty-five-year monopoly charter to develop commercially the Louisiana colony with a commitment to populate it with 6,000 settlers and 3,000 slaves during the next ten years. The company then launched an unprecedented marketing campaign across the continent to drum up investment in Louisiana stock and land, and to entice the lower classes to immigrate there. Though based on grossly exaggerated claims of commercial potential and doomed to fail, Law and his Company of the West thrust Louisiana into the forefront of European attention and, more importantly and more permanently, decided absolutely to found a city to be called *La Nouvelle Orléans*.

Foundation of New Orleans, 1717-1718

The when, where, and why of Bienville's colossal decision.

Resolved 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.⁹³

Those words, scribed in the register of John Law's Company of the West probably on September 9, 1717,⁹⁴ set in motion the foundation of the riverside city first envisioned by La Salle thirty-five years earlier. The name honored the Duc d'Orléans, Law's royal sponsor; the indicated site came from intelligence gathered from Indians over the previous eighteen years regarding a strategic "backdoor" route to the Mississippi River. Rather than sailing up 100 treacherous miles of the lower Mississippi

(the “river route”), amid fog and debris and against the current and sometimes the wind, voyagers might instead traverse the usually calm waters of the Mississippi Sound, through a waterway known as the Rigolets, into the protected waters of Lake Pontchartrain, and up a small rivulet called Bayou St. John. Travelers would then disembark and follow a two-mile Indian trail—today’s Bayou Road—along a slight upland now called the Esplanade Ridge, through the swamps to reach the banks of the Mississippi (see map, “Bayou St. John Portage, 1700s-2002”). To Bienville, this “lake route” circumvented the dangers of the river route and mitigated concerns (held primarily by his late brother Iberville, who had long favored coastal sites) about the feasibility of a riverside settlement.

Bienville fulfilled his charge during late March and early April 1718, when his men began clearing canals at a locale—today’s French Quarter—he first viewed in 1699.⁹⁵ “We are working at present on the establishment of New Orleans thirty leagues above the entrance to the Mississippi”⁹⁶ is about all Bienville wrote about New Orleans’ earliest moments, scribed ten weeks after the effort commenced. An Englishman named Jonathan Darby, who landed the following year, recorded more detail. Bienville had

arrived with six vessels, loaded with provisions and men. There were thirty workmen, all convicts; six carpenters and four Canadians... [t]he whole locality was a dense canebrake, with only a small pathway [Bayou Road] leading from the Mississippi to the Bayou [St. John] communicating via Lake Pontchartrain. [Residences were] made of standing boards and posts, with walls and chimneys of dirt and covered with cypress bark....⁹⁷

Siting an outpost on that particular riverside patch offered the French a strategic position along a least-cost, minimum-distance route connecting, on one hand, the Gulf of Mexico/Caribbean/Atlantic World from whence they came, and on the other, the vast North American interior which they sought to develop. In addition to the portage, the advantages of slightly upraised land, fine soils, a well-positioned perch for river defense, and deep water for the docking of ships added to the site’s appeal. The proximate cause motivating the foundation of New Orleans was the need for a convenient port and company office for the commercial development of Louisiana; the ultimate cause was the French imperial need to defend their Louisiana claim by fortifying its Mississippi River Basin gateway against the English and Spanish.

Establishing a settlement is one thing; ensuring its survival and prosperity is quite another. New Orleans faced numerous challenges and dilemmas, from both men and nature, in the years following its initial foundation.



Bienville's Dilemma

Questionable geography, questionable future: 1718-1722

Skepticism prevailed among partisans and observers regarding the wisdom of Bienville's site selection for New Orleans. Among the doubters was Father Pierre François Xavier de Charlevoix, the Jesuit traveler and author of *Histoire de la Nouvelle France*, who arrived to what he sardonically described as "this famous city of Nouvelle Orleans" in January 1722. Only a few weeks earlier, the Company of the Indies (successor to Laury's Company of the West) officially designated New Orleans as capital of Louisiana, though word had not yet reached the struggling outpost.

New Orleans, according to Father Charlevoix, bore little semblance to a capital city. Not yet planned, the city comprised "a hundred barracks, placed in no very good order[,] a large ware-house built of timber[,] two or three houses which would be no ornament to a village in France; [and] one half of a sorry ware-house, formerly set apart for divine services."⁹⁸ A recent census enumerated 283 white men and women (mostly French but some German and Swiss), 171 African slaves, and twenty-one Indian slaves living in New Orleans proper with another 791 people of all estates nearby.⁹⁹ "Imagine to yourself," Charlevoix wrote two weeks later,

two hundred persons... sent out to a build a city... who have settled on the banks of a great river, thinking upon nothing but upon putting themselves under cover from the injuries of the weather, and in the meantime waiting till a plan is laid out for them, and till they have built houses according to it.

That plan, under development by Adrien de Pauger and his superior, Chief Engineer Le Blond de la Tour, circulated locally and reached Charlevoix's hands. "Pauger... has just shown me a plan of this town invented; but it will not be so easy to put into execution, as it has been to draw [on] paper. Pauger's magnificent design for the capital—preserved in today's French Quarter—reflected the high expectations that flowed from John Law's grandiose vision for Louisiana, even in the wake of the scheme's collapse in 1720.

Charlevoix harbored an ambivalence shared by many regarding New Orleans. At one point, he expounded on the outpost's potential, which he based

on the banks of a navigable river, at the distance of thirty three leagues from the sea, from which a vessel may come up in twenty-four hours, on the fertility of its soil; on the richness and wholesomeness of the climate...; on the industry of the inhabitants; on its neighbourhood to Mexico, the Havana, the finest islands of America, and lastly, to the English colonies. Can there be any thing more requisite to render a city flourishing?¹⁰⁰

Sixteen days in New Orleans changed Charlevoix's mind. "The country

[around] New Orleans, has nothing very remarkable;" he wrote, "nor have I found the situation of this so very advantageous...." He then laid out the dubious advantages alleged by New Orleans' defenders:

The first is...a small river called *le Bayouc de Saint Jean*... which, at the end of two leagues, discharges itself into the lake Pontchartrain which has a communication with the sea, [for] trade between the capital Mobile and Biloxi, and with all the other posts we possess near the sea. The second is, that below the city the river makes a very great turning called *le detour aux Anglois* [English Turn], which is imagined would be of great advantage to prevent a surprise.¹⁰¹

Charvevoix dismissed both arguments, and was equally unimpressed with the marshy southward drive from the city, whose "depth continues to diminish all the way to the sea." "I have nothing to add," he wrote dismissively, "about the present state of New Orleans."¹⁰²

Charvevoix's conflicting feelings reflected a high-stakes debate that had raged across colonial Louisiana for years. Where should the capital of the colony—the Company's primary counter and port—be located? Suggestions ranged from as far east as Mobile and even Pensacola, to as far inland as Natchez and Natchitoches. The worst-kept secret to Bienville's site was Bayou Manchac, the Mississippi River's tributary south of Baton Rouge explored by Iberville two decades earlier. Manchac also boasted a shortcut to the Gulf Coast, and suffered few of the environmental problems of Bienville's site. Bienville himself, the eventual victor in the debate, expressed doubts years earlier in a February 1705 letter written to Minister Pontchartrain. "This last summer, I examined... all the lands in the vicinity of [the Mississippi] river. I did not find any at all that are not flooded in the spring." After calling for more agriculturists to settle the land, Bienville promised, "As soon as these settlers arrived at Lake Pontchartrain and at the Mississippi River they would be transported to the neighborhood of the Bayagoulas, a site located far a river from the site he would eventually select for New Orleans. *Those are the best lands in the world.*"¹⁰³

Bienville's stance evolved over the years to favor strongly the French Quarter site. That he received substantial land concessions in that area probably influenced this advocacy. Bienville succeeded finally when the Company, apparently convinced of the strategic superiority of a river site over a coastal position and impressed with Pauger's new city plan, designated New Orleans as capital of Louisiana on December 23, 1721. "His Royal Highness having thought it advisable to make the principal establishment of the colony at New Orleans on the Mississippi River," beamed a satisfied Bienville to the Council, "we have accordingly transported here all the goods that were at Biloxi," the previous capital. He then lavished praise on his superiors: "it appears to me that a better decision could not have been made in view of the good quality of the soil along the river [and the] considerable advantage for... the unloading of the vessels."¹⁰⁴

That historic—and fateful—decision derived largely from rational and carefully weighted geographical reasons of accessibility, defensibility, riverine position, arability, and natural resources, plus a lack of better alternatives. Here is Bienville in his

own words on the siting of New Orleans:

[T]he capital city... is advantageously situated in the center of the French plantations, near enough to receive [their] assistance... and reciprocally to furnish the settlers with the things they need... from its warehouses. Bayou St. John which is behind the city is of such great convenience because of the communication which it affords with Lake Pontchartrain and consequently with the sea, that it cannot be esteemed too highly.¹⁰⁵

What Bienville failed to mention was that personal gain (he owned vast land holdings here and thus stood to benefit if the settlement progressed), bureaucratic inertia, momentum, and pure luck also played roles in the decision.

Ever since, second-guessing Bienville's geographical wisdom in his handling of the siting dilemma has become a favorite topic of local publicity. Bienville himself never recorded open regret about his New Orleans decision, but occasionally betrays second thoughts in words that would resonate with later generations of New Orleanians:

The river has been very high for three months and has overflowed in several places above New Orleans. It has destroyed several levees so that more than half of the lands of the inhabitants are submerged....

This country is subject to such great vicissitude.... *Now there is too much drought, now too much rain. Besides the winds are too violent.*¹⁰⁶



When the surges of hurricanes Katrina and Rita submerged those lands in August-September 2005, observers worldwide pondered how a major city could have been founded on so precarious a site. Some saw no future for the metropolis, save for its relocation to higher ground. In essence, the circa-1700s debate of the French colonials about where to locate Louisiana's primary city raged again—under very different circumstances, but with similar factors at play.

Indeed, this is a challenging site for a major city. Yet Bienville acted wisely in selecting it in 1718, because he knew what makes a city great is not its site, but its situation. "Site" refers to the city's actual physical footing; "situation" means its regional context and how it connects with the world.

A strategic situation near the mouth of North America's greatest river allowed French colonials to exploit and protect their vast Louisiana claim effectively from a single point.

Had Bienville located New Orleans farther upriver (such as at Bayou Manchac or Natchez), the city would have been too inconvenient for coastal traffic and unable to answer enemy incursions. 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 flooding problems. Ditto for locations to the west: bad sites, bad situations.

Had he located the city farther downriver, the site would have been that much more vulnerable and precarious. The site he finally selected, today's French Quarter, represented the best available site within a fantastic geographical situation. French observer Francois Marie Perrin Du Lac captured succinctly in 1807 the horns of Bienville's dilemma:

[T]here is not for a great distance a finer, more elevated, or healthier position [for New Orleans]. If higher, it would be too distant from the sea; if lower, subject to inundations.¹⁰⁷

Bienville's wisdom became apparent around the time of Du Lac's visit, as New Orleans emerged as one of the most important cities in America. It was shown again after Hurricane Katrina when the French Quarter and other historical areas all evaded flooding.

Why, then, is a major American city located in this problematic site? Because it made perfect rational sense at the time of its founding—a time when man depended heavily on waterborne transportation, and when this particular site offered the best waterborne access to what proved to be the richest valley on earth.

German geographer Friedrich Ratzel contemplated New Orleans' site-versus-situation dilemma in his 1870s assessment of urban America. "New Orleans," he judged, "is just as poorly located as a city, or more precisely as a dwelling place, as it is excellently located as a commercial site." He then added: "Thus its most-mentioned advantage has made up for all disadvantages."¹⁰⁸

Eyewitness: New Orleans, circa 1730

A French woman and a Dutch man describe the early New Orleans cityscape

Primary historical documents about early New Orleans often record the activities of prominent men or the minutia of ship manifests, bills of sale, inventories, and the like. Eyewitness descriptions of the emerging cityscape and society, written by everyday residents, are valued exceptions. One came from a young woman in 1727; another from a young man during the late 1710s to 1730s.

The arrival of the Ursuline Nuns to New Orleans in 1727 marked a significant milestone in the installation of French culture into New Orleans vis-à-vis the Catholic faith, formal education, and the presence of women. Among the sisters was an articulate young postulant named Marie Madeleine Hachard de St. Stanislaus, who endeavored to dedicate her mission to her country's notoriously problematic Louisiana colony.

After a harrowing journey, Hachard and the nuns landed at New Orleans on

August 6-7, 1727, finding “ten persons on the wharf on account of the early hour” (5 a.m.). They were escorted to their provisional quarters, a two-story house owned by Bienville on the present-day 300 block of Chartres Street.¹⁰⁹ There, the cloistered postulant wrote a series of lucid communiqués to her father in Rouen, who, duly impressed with what a later historian would describe as his daughter’s “epistolary talent” and “wonderous experiences,”¹¹⁰ subsequently had them published.

“Our city called New Orleans, capital of all Louisiana,” she wrote, is situated on the bank of the Mississippi River, which is at this place wider than the Seine at Rouen. On our side of the river, there is a levée in good condition to prevent the overflow of the river[;] along [it] is a large ditch to receive the water that runs down the slope, with timbered palisades to confine it. On the other side of this river, there are wild woods with a few huts in which lodge the slaves of the Company of the Indies.

Her perspectives perhaps tinted by her relatively privileged circumstances, Hachard found a city that defied her low expectations.

Our city is very beautiful, well constructed and regularly built[,] as I saw it on the day of our arrival; for since that day we have always remained in our cloister. Before our arrival, we were given a very bad idea of [New Orleans]; but... people have labored [since then] for its improvement. The streets are very wide and straight; the principal one [now Decatur Street] is almost a league long. The houses are built with wood-front and mortar, whitewashed, wainscoted and latticed. The houses are covered with shingles which are thin boards in the shape of slate, [with] all the appearance and beauty of slate. It suffices to tell you that here is sung publicly a song, in which it is said that this city has as fine an appearance as the City of Paris; thus, this tells you all.¹¹¹

Hachard set New Orleans in the context of its regional geography: “I have been curious to inform myself about the state of the soil of this country.... You call this place sometimes Louisiana and at others Mississippi, but it ought to be Louisiana.”¹¹² She then explained to her father the story of La Salle and the claiming of Louisiana, reflecting the historical perspectives at that time. “[T]he name of Mississippi is that of the river,” she explained. Regarding toponyms, she had more to clarify:

It is a river to which M. de la Salle gave the name of Colbert, because M. Colbert was then minister of state. But this name of Colbert has not been left to it and they have continued to name it the Mississippi River. [Others] name it at present River St. Louis. It is the largest river in all America except the St. Lawrence. A great many rivers flow into the Mississippi. It is from seven to eight hundred leagues from its source to the Gulf of Mexico into which it empties.

A league being 2.5 to three miles, Hachard’s estimate is accurate: the Mississippi is about 2,340 miles from headwaters to mouth. “But it is not navigable,” she continued.

No vessels can ascend or descend on it except boats able to transport twelve

or thirteen persons. Moreover, this river being bounded by forests of high trees, the rapidity of the current caves and hollows the ground of its banks so that the trees fall in it [such that] the passage of the river is obstructed.

Hachard had by this time experienced a southern Louisiana summer. "We are here nearer to the sun than in Rome," she wrote, "without, however, having very great heat. Winter is rather mild. It lasts about three months, but it has only slight white frosts." She then described the region's biogeography:

We have been assured that Louisiana is four times larger than France. The lands are very fertile and yield several crops each year, not along the rivers where there are mostly forests of oaks and other trees of prodigious size and height, and rice canes which grow from fifteen to twenty feet high. But at a few leagues, there are prairies, fields, and plains [with] cotton-trees[,], sycamores, mulberry trees, chestnut trees, almond trees, walnut trees, fig trees, lemon trees, orange trees, pomogranate trees, and others which make the beauty of the fields. If the soil were cultivated, there would not be any better in the world. But, for that it would be necessary to have the white people [....] [Generally] the people here live in idleness and apply themselves to scarcely anything except hunting and fishing.¹¹³

The insinuation that agriculture around New Orleans in 1727 occurred mostly in prairies distant from the river is curious. Hachard might have been referring to cultivation around the Bayou St. John area, or along the Metairie and Gentilly ridges, which had been cultivated as early as 1708. Or she may simply have been misinformed. The precocious young woman concluded her treatise on Louisiana geography with this note:

You tell me, dear father, of your having bought two large maps of the state of Mississippi, and that you do not there find the city of New Orleans. Apparently, those maps must be very old; for this city, the capital of the country, would not have been omitted. I am sorry that it cost me a hundred and ten cents to buy maps on which you cannot find the place of our residence. I think they are going to make new maps in which will be marked our settlement.¹¹⁴

Apparently the father's subsequent map purchase still fell short of Hachard's high cartographic standards. Writing in April 1728, she said,

the map of Louisiana of which you inform me having made the purchase, in which the city of New Orleans is shown on the shore of a lake named Pontchartrain, at a distance of six leagues from the Mississippi River, is not correct; for our city is certainly not situated on a lake, but on the very banks of the Mississippi.¹¹⁵

On March 15, 1729, Marie Madeleine Hachard de St. Stanislaus, in the first such ceremony within the present-day United States, became Sister St. Stanislaus Hachard.¹¹⁶ The twenty-one-year-old nun served New Orleans for over thirty years, dying in the waning years of French Louisiana dominion. The Louisiana Historical Society, writ-

ing in 1902, described Sister Madeleine Hachard as “the pious and charming woman whose letters form one of the most important historical documents for the study of [New Orleans’] early history....”¹¹⁷



Beneath Sister Hachard’s Chartres Street cister passed one Le Page du Pratz, who witnessed New Orleans evolve from a mere clearing in the late 1710s to an established community of the 1730s. “At my first arrival in Louisiana,” he recollected in the 1730s New Orleans

existed only in name; for on my landing I understood M. de Biainville [Bianville], commandant general, was only gone to mark out the spot. He pitched upon this spot in preference to many others, more agreeable and commodious; but for that time this was a place proper enough; besides, it is not every man that can see so far as some others. As the principal settlement was then at Mobile, it was proper to have the capital fixed at a place from which there could be an easy communication with this post; and thus a better choice could not have been made....

He noted some advantages of New Orleans’ situation:

[T]he town being on the banks of the Mississippi, vessels thro’ of a thousand ton[s], may lay their sides close to the shore even at low water [and] need only lay a small bridge, with two of their yards, in order to load or unload, to roll barrels and bales, &c. without fatiguing the ship’s crew. This town is only a league from St. John’s creek [Bayou St. John] where passengers take water for Mobile....¹¹⁸

The ground on which New Orleans is situated, being an earth accumulated by the ooze... is of a good quality for agriculture.... This land being flat, and drowned by inundations for several ages cannot fail to be kept in moisture, there being... only a mole or bank to prevent the river from overflowing it; and would be even too moist, and incapable of cultivation, had not this mole been made, and ditches [dug] to facilitate the draining [of] the waters. By this means, [the region] promises to be cultivated with success.¹¹⁹

Yet Le Page (as he signed his name) did record some misgivings:

I should imagine, that if a town was at this day to be built in this province, a rising ground would be pitched upon, to avoid inundations; [and] the bottom should be sufficiently firm, for bearing great stone edifices. [But] without seeing stone, or the least pebble, in upwards of a hundred leagues extent... such a proposition is impossible....¹²⁰

Le Page then described the city proper, probably reflecting the years 1728-34, when he spent the most time there:

The place of arms [now Jackson Square] is in the middle of that part of the

town which faces the river; [there] stands the parish church, called St. Louis, where the Capuchins officiate, whose house is to the left of the church. To the right stand the prison, or jail, and the guard-house; both sides of the place of arms are taken up by two bodies or rows of barracks. This place stands all open to the river.

All the streets are laid out both in length and breadth by the line, and intersect and cross each other at right angles. The streets divide the town into fifty-five isles; eleven along the river lengthwise.... [E]ach of those isles is fifty square toises, and each again divided into twelve emplacements, or compartments, for lodging as many families. The Intendant's house stands behind the barracks on the left; and the magazine, or warehouse-general behind the barracks on the right, on viewing the town from the river side. The Governor's house stands in the middle of that part of the town, from which we go from the place of arms to the habitation of the Jesuits, which is near the town. The house of the Ursulin [sic] Nuns is quite at the end of the town, to the right, as is also the hospital of the sick, of which the nuns have the inspection. What I have just described faces the river.¹²¹

The greatest part of the houses is of brick; the rest are of timber and brick. [T]here are many habitations standing close together; each making a causeway [up a] path to secure his ground from inundations, which fail not to come every year with the spring....¹²²

Springtime river floods threatened human endeavors on water as well as land:

[A]t that time [of high water], if any ships happen to be in the harbour of New Orleans they speedily set sail; because the prodigious quantity of dead wood, or trees torn up by the roots, which the river brings down, would lodge before the ship, and break the stoutest cables.¹²³

Settlement not only spanned the forty or so river miles above and below New Orleans, but behind it toward the lake. In the following passages, we can discern Bayou St. John, the garrison later known as Spanish Fort, present-day Gentilly Boulevard, and the Rigolets and Chef Menteur passes:

A league behind the town, directly back from the river, we meet with a bayou or creek, which can bear large boats with masts.

From this creek to the town, a part of its banks is inhabited by planters; in like manner as are the long banks of another creek: the habitation of this last go under the name of Gentilly.

At the end of St. John's Creek, on the banks of the Lake [Ponchartrain], there is a redoubt [Spanish Fort], and a guard to defend it.

[T]raveling obliquely [from the lake], we meet the [Rigolet and Chef Menteur] Channels, which lead to Mobile....¹²⁴

Beyond the physical and urban geography of early New Orleans, Le Page me-

ticulously cataloged the flora, fauna, and most significantly, the indigenous peoples and cultures of the region. His *History of Louisiana* remains a classic of early American geographical literature. Much of what we know of the early New Orleans cityscape comes from his observations, and those of a cloistered young postulant he probably never met.

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