

A Year After New Orleans' Foundation, Its First Flood—and First Levels

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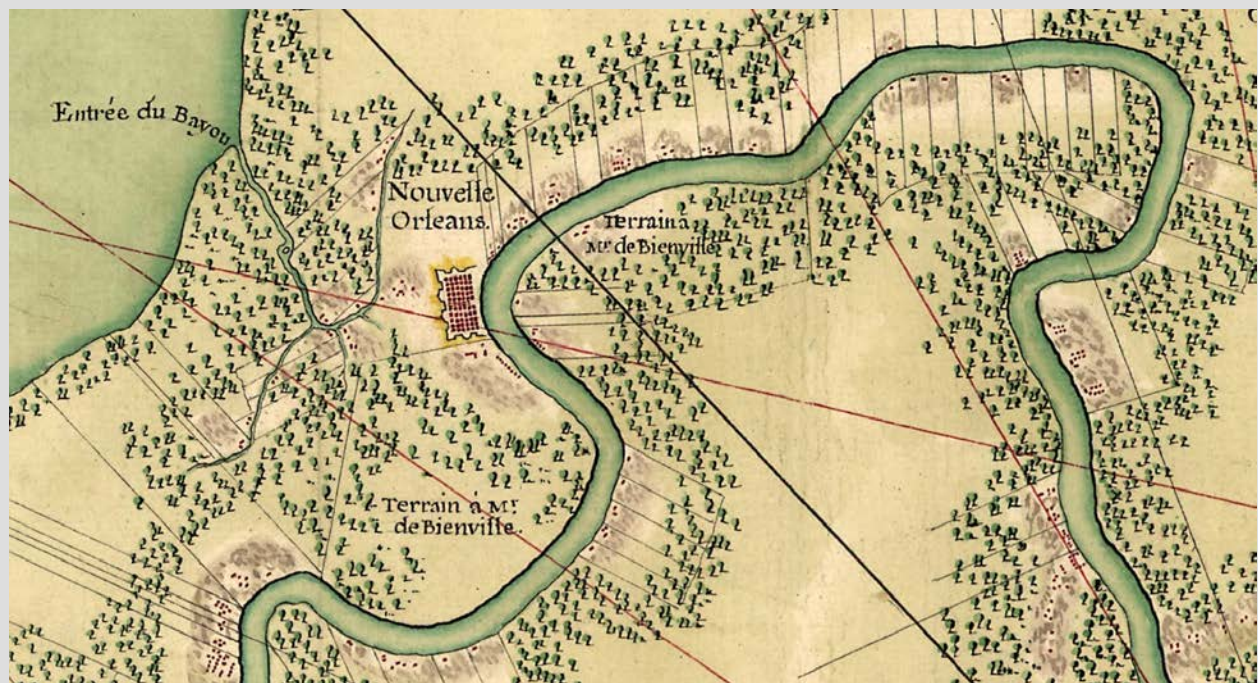
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Next time you're at the French Quarter riverfront, observe the height of the Mississippi, which has been at or near flood stage for weeks. Trace a line from the water surface and turn toward the city behind you. It will become immediately apparent that nearly the entire cityscape would be inundated were it not for the artificial levee beneath you.

Now take away that artificial levee, and you'll get a sense of what the earliest New Orleanians experienced 300 years ago this month, in the spring of 1719—the closest the city ever came to abandonment.

No flood occurs at a good time, but the timing of this first deluge was particularly inopportune. Gov. Jean-Baptiste le Moyne de Bienville, who founded New Orleans in 1718, had his share of detractors, most of whom lived in outposts that viewed his new project as unwanted competition. The critics took issue with New Orleans' tenuous geography, and the 1719 flood seemed to prove their point.



This detail from a 1732 map of New Orleans area shows lands that Bienville granted to himself. Library of Congress

Indeed, France's whole colonization effort in this region could be described as tenuous. It began in 1682, when French Canadian Robert LaSalle claimed the Mississippi Basin for Louis XIV and put "Louisiana" on the map. The claim languished until 1699, when the Le Moyne brothers Iberville and Bienville arrived to establish a colony. Outposts

were subsequently founded across the present-day states of Mississippi, Alabama, and Louisiana, at present-day Ocean Springs and later at two sites on the Mobile River, in Biloxi, in Natchitoches and in Natchez.

The settlements all struggled, and the colony as a whole floundered, first as a crown project and then as a private monopoly granted to investor Antoine Crozat. When Crozat failed in 1717, the Louisiana project might have come to an end—but for a maverick financier named John Law.

Law saw in Louisiana an opportunity to test his theory that paper money could be backed by commercial wealth in lieu of real wealth—that is, gold, of which France had none. Where would the commercial wealth come from? From Louisiana, where Law, brilliant in theory but blissfully ignorant in practical matters, envisaged vast plantations of tobacco, worked by European immigrants and African slaves, swiftly coming into profitability.

Law bent the ear of Prince Philippe II, the Duke of Orleans, who, as regent of France, ruled on behalf of five-year-old King Louis XV. Philippe's top priority was getting France out of the crippling debt run up by the late Louis XIV, and Law told him what he wanted to hear. "The beguiling inclusiveness of Law's plan," wrote historian Lawrence N. Powell, "its promise to retire the national debt, revive the French domestic and overseas economy, and establish an autarkic source of tobacco—is what drew [Philippe] to Law's theories."

Convinced, Philippe issued John Law's Company of the West a monopoly charter to develop Louisiana. Like any new business, the Company needed a headquarters, so in September 1717, according to its ledger, the company "[r]esolved 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's the charge Bienville came to fulfill in 1718. Drawing upon years of reconnoitering, he selected today's French Quarter site for the new city, as it fulfilled both of the Company's criteria, despite severe drawbacks in its low soggy soils and unruly river. Sometime during March and April, Bienville's men started clearing vegetation around today's 500 and 600 blocks of Decatur Street.

Bienville's rivals pounced. Those in Mobile, previously the colony's capital, did not want to see power shift westward, nor did those in Biloxi, site of the original settlement. A prominent advocate of Natchez, then called Fort Rosalie, maintained that "the capital...cannot be better situated than [here]," high up on the bluffs of what is now southwestern Mississippi. "It is not subject to inundations[;] the air is pure[;] the land fit for every thing, and well watered." Closer to New Orleans, one French naval officer saw English Turn as an ideal "cove where an excellent port could be made." Bienville's own superiors felt "convince[d], as far as we can judge, that the most convenient site [for New Orleans] is on the Manchac brook" just south of Baton Rouge.

Amid all this skepticism, in the spring of 1719, the waters of the Mississippi steadily rose. They spilled over the work site in April, indicating they were fed more by heavy spring rainfall than melting winter snow, and lasted well into the summer, suggesting the rain came mostly from the Ohio River Valley, source of most of the Mississippi's water volume.

To be sure, New Orleans wasn't much of a city at the time, just a desultory smattering of palmetto-thatched huts. At the time of the flood, Bienville reported "only four houses were under way." Nevertheless, the river made a mess of things, not the least of which was Bienville's credibility. "The site is drowned under half a foot of water," he groused, according to French historian Marc de Villiers du Terrage; "it may be difficult to maintain a town [here]." It was the worst deluge indigenous people had seen in years.

The only protection from river flooding came from natural levees – that is, the higher banks created by the river through years of sediment deposition. Now, for the first time, workers hastily erected artificial levees, in the form of timber-fronted embankments, atop the crest of the natural levees. The workforce included enslaved labor, for early 1719 also marked the first arrival to Louisiana of African captives in bondage.



This detail of a 1720s map of New Orleans, annotated in 1771 by an Englishman, shows the “Bank to preserve the Town from the Inundation.” Library of Congress

It is important to note that the 1719 deluge did not completely drown the region; rather, it comprised a sheet of ankle-deep muddy water flowing across the landscape. Because no artificial levees existed anywhere along the Mississippi, excess water simply spilled over the banks throughout the valley and delta, spreading laterally. Thus, the river at flood stage in those days would have been far lower than what we consider to be flood stage today: 17 feet above sea level at the Carrollton Gauge.

But the damage was done, and in January 1720, the Company of the West designated Biloxi to be the colony capital and company headquarters.

The demotion was devastating news for New Orleans. But Bienville reluctantly obeyed the order, leaving some of his men to continue working at the now-secondary project, and took others to build a new fort at Biloxi, including Chief Engineer Le Blond de la Tour.

That’s when the tide began to turn for New Orleans. Company officials in Paris found themselves with bigger problems on their hands: John Law’s speculative scheme began to unravel, as stockholders caught wind of Louisiana’s struggles. Share values plummeted, leading to riots throughout Europe and forcing company officials to do damage control.

Meanwhile, as Le Blond de la Tour devised a plan for Biloxi, he dispatched his highly capable assistant engineer Adrian de Puger to work on New Orleans. Puger arrived in March 1721, got to work studying delta geography and hydrology, and adapted his superior’s designs for Biloxi to the special conditions at New Orleans. What resulted were beautiful sketches of today’s French Quarter, emblazoned with the words *La Nouvelle Orleans*.

It appears that Puger managed to get copies of his maps to Paris, where they reached the Regent Philippe, Duc d’Orléans. French historian Marc de Villiers du Terrage, writing in 1918, posited that these plans, with their formal

grid of streets named with monarchical references and surrounded by impressive fortifications, probably “had weight in the Company’s final decision, since the regent, god-father to the new capital, was necessarily flattered to see the project put into effect.” Pauger also bolstered the argument for New Orleans with his study of the navigability of the Mississippi, berating the “stubbornness” and “arrogance” of company managers who forced “ships from France to be stopped at Biloxi, rather than enter the Mississippi[,] keystone of the country’s establishment.”

It was the first good news from Louisiana the Company of the West had seen in a while. Distracted by the financial chaos following Law’s demise, officials started to warm to the idea of reinvesting in New Orleans. Bienville doubled down too; he granted himself two huge land concessions, one in today’s Uptown and the other in Algiers, which gave him a personal as well as professional motive to make New Orleans happen.

Momentum started to grow, aided by two mercifully low-river years, which allowed leveeconstruction to progress. New Orleans became home to the colony’s Commandant General as well as its Capuchin convent. “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 Dec. 23, 1721, the Company officially transferred the general management of Louisiana from Biloxi to New Orleans, making it the colony’s capital.

While tough times lay ahead, New Orleans near-death experience in 1719 and recovery by 1721 signaled a move into a slightly less precarious stage.

As for Pauger’s urban plan, it still existed only on paper, because haphazard early development impeded his ability to survey the street grid into the landscape. What “solved” that problem was another disaster—New Orleans’ first hurricane, in September 1722.

But we’ll save that for another “Geographies of New Orleans.”

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