

Rome Wasn't Built in a Day, and Neither Was New Orleans: A Tricentennial Timeline

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New Year's Day brought New Orleans into its 300th year since French colonials first cleared vegetation along what is now the French Quarter riverfront. But like most complex, improvised projects, New Orleans actually came together over many years, and each stage involved various levels of indecision, contingency, discord and serendipity. While most critical events occurred between 1717 and 1723, they can only be understood if we go back earlier. The following timeline aims to contextualize what we mean when we say New Orleans was founded "in" 1718.

Prior to colonization—Indigenous tribes, including the Houma, Bayougoula, Biloxi, Choctaw, Quinapisa, Acolapissa, Pascagoula and others, inhabit the Mississippi River deltaic plain and adjacent coastal regions, adapting to its seasonal conditions and utilizing its abundant resources.

1519-1543 Three Spanish expeditions explore the region, creating no settlements but increasing European knowledge of Gulf Coast and Mississippi River geography, while unwittingly introducing diseases which would later cause massive indigenous population declines. Spain moves on to other imperial priorities, but considers this region to be theirs.

Late 1500s-1600s French, Dutch, English and Spanish imperialists establish colonies along the East Coast of North America, but mostly steer clear of the Gulf Coast and lower Mississippi.

1682 With the French now well-established in Canada and the Caribbean, French Canadian Robert La Salle, seeking to understand how these colonies are connected, sails westward through the Great Lakes and down the Mississippi. Upon reaching the Gulf of Mexico, La Salle claims the entire watershed for France and names it for his king, Louis IV.

1684 Recognizing the strategic value of controlling the entrance of the Mississippi, La Salle returns to establish a French colony near the river's mouth. But his expedition gets lost, drifts westward and wrecks along the Texas coast. LaSalle's trusted lieutenant Henri Tonti later succeeds in re-finding the Mississippi, but fails to determine the fate of LaSalle—who in fact had long since been murdered by his own men. Louisiana languishes as a French territory for another



Detail of 1701 map depicting Robert LaSalle discoveries--and presumed demise. (Library of Congress)

fifteen years.

1680s-1690s Catching wind that France had laid claim to what Spain considered to be its territory, Spanish authorities in Mexico dispatch a number of expeditions to re-claim the lower Mississippi. Had any succeeded, we would likely have an entirely different history here today.

Late 1697 Hearing rumors of Spanish incursions into Louisiana, France dispatches Montreal's LeMoyne brothers, Iberville and Bienville, to make good on LaSalle's 1682 claim.

1699 Iberville, Bienville and their crew reconnoiter the lower Mississippi and pass the future New Orleans site in early March, aiming to establish an outpost. But flummoxed by the uncontrolled river and the low, swampy soils, Iberville selects present-day Ocean Springs, Mississippi, for the colony's first headquarters, Fort Maurepas.



Bienville in his later years (Library of Congress)

soils, Iberville selects present-day Ocean Springs, Mississippi, for the colony's first headquarters, Fort Maurepas.

August or September 1699 While Iberville visits the Bayougoula tribe and proceeds into Natchez territory, Bienville, exploring separately, encounters the English frigate *Carolina Galley*, bent on a mission of settlement. Though only nineteen years old, Bienville rebuffs the English captain, who departs peacefully. Had he not, we might have had an English colonial history here. The "English Turn" incident convinces the LeMoyne brothers that a French presence is needed directly upon the lower Mississippi River, as a defensive position.

1700 To that end, Bienville establishes Fort de Mississippi (Boulaye) near present-day Phoenix in Plaquemines Parish. But the simple blockhouse flounders amid soggy soils and high river stages. Bienville has much to learn about building in a delta.

1702 The headquarters of the Louisiana colony is moved from Fort Maurepas eastward to Mobile, situated 27 miles up the Mobile River from the present-day Alabama city. European population of the entire Louisiana colony totals around 140 subjects, strewn between Mobile

Bay and the Mississippi.

1703-1711 Louisiana's "dark ages," a time of inattention, disease, hunger, and failure. Few supply ships arrive from France; key figures Henri Tonti and Iberville die of yellow fever (1704 and 1706); Bienville is forced to abandon Fort de Mississippi for environmental reasons (1707); a settlement aiming to grow wheat along Bayou St. John fails in 1708; and Mobile has to be relocated to its present site in 1711, due to flooding.

1712 Disillusioned and preoccupied with other matters, France grants a commercial monopoly to financier Antoine Crozat for the development of Louisiana. Crozat hopes to discover gold and silver, raise tobacco, and trade with Spain, while the French Crown is content to unburden itself of Louisiana.

1714-1716 French commandant Saint-Denis establishes Natchitoches along the Red River in present-day central Louisiana; La Mothe Cadillac founds Fort Toulouse and Fort Tombecbe on key rivers in Alabama; and Bienville establishes Fort Rosalie at present-day Natchez. Although distant from the future New Orleans area, the three initiatives are the first good news to come out of Louisiana in years.

Over in France...

1714 Scottish investor and economist John Law arrives in Paris, fresh from risky but lucrative financial ventures elsewhere in Europe. Seeking opportunities to test his monetary theories and enrich himself, Law allies himself with noblemen in the French Crown, among them Philippe II, the Duke of Orleans and nephew of the aging King Louis XIV.

1715 King Louis XIV dies; Philippe becomes the Regent of France, acting on behalf of the deceased monarch's five-year-old great-grandson, Louis XV. Among other things, Philippe finds the kingdom deeply in debt, due largely to Louis XIV's overspending on palaces and wars. France is nearly broke, and its citizenry demands restitution.

1716 Intrigued by John Law's economic theories on monetary policy, Philippe authorizes Law to establish the Banque Générale as a centralized bank issuing its own paper currency backed by gold deposits, a novel idea at the time. The bank seems to succeed, though only because the paper bills are over-printed. But the apparent wealth delights Philippe and emboldens Law, a born gambler, to seek another lucrative project.



Left: John Law; right: speculators investing in the Company of the West (Library of Congress).

Meanwhile, back in Louisiana...

1717 After only five years, a frustrated Antoine Crozat relinquishes his 15-year commercial monopoly on Louisiana, having failed to find mineral riches, establish plantations or trade with Spanish Mexico. John Law is intrigued to learn of this exotic-sounding land called Louisiana, and connects it with his economic theories.

1717 John Law devises a fantastic scheme which would enrich all involved, based on his idea that paper money need not be backed with real wealth (gold, which was scarce); it could also be backed by commercial wealth—namely the riches that Louisiana could bear under private management. Financing of the company would come from the sale of stock; peopling of the colony would come from recruited or forced emigration of at least 6000 settlers; and labor would come from the hands of 3000 enslaved Africans raising tobacco on plantations. The ensuing profits would enrich shareholders throughout France, not to mention Law and Philippe, while equity in the company would help pay off the national debt.

August 13, 1717 Crozat formally relinquished Louisiana.

September 6, 1717 John Law and his newly created Company of the West formally receive a 25-year monopoly charter to develop Louisiana, with the enthusiastic support of Philippe.

September 9, 1717 The Company of the West, according to its ledger, “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.” The name of the envisioned city aimed to flatter the project’s royal sponsor, Philippe, the Duke of Orleans, without whom Law’s venture would have been impossible. The specified location implied an alternative to the shoal-prone mouth of the Mississippi, and most likely meant Bayou St. John and Bayou Road, through which access could be gained to a crescent of the river previously identified by Bienville as being favorable for settlement.

Autumn 1717 The directive to establish New Orleans makes its way across the Atlantic.

Winter 1718 Bienville, probably stationed at Mobile, is now in receipt of the directive, and begins preparing six vessels laden with supplies and a crew of 43 men for the voyage to his favored site.

Early Spring 1718 Sometime in late March or early April, Bienville’s expedition anchors off today’s upper French Quarter, and he and his crew step ashore. “M. de Bienville cut the first cane,” recalled colonist Jonathan Darby many years later, followed by “MM. Pradel and Dreux,” who ranked just below Bienville. Thirty workers, all convicts, proceeded to clear the “dense canebrake” near present-day North Peters Street around the Conti intersection. Behind those bankside reeds lay hardwood forests, which axmen cleared next. Six carpenters got to work building provisional shelters—“log cabins,” in Darby’s words. “We are working at present on the establishment of New Orleans thirty leagues above the entrance to the Mississippi,” wrote Bienville on June 12, and that’s about all the taciturn commandant recorded of his city’s earliest moments.

But hardly did this undated milestone moment assure New Orleans of a future. As early as April 14, 1718, even as Bienville toiled at New Orleans, his superiors in Paris instructed the company’s chief engineer to re-establish the colony’s headquarters—name and all—farther upriver, to the Bayou Manchac region just south of present-day Baton Rouge.

Such was the disarray and uncertainty of the whole Louisiana improvisation, and things would only get worse, with natural disasters, financial collapse, and bitter infighting over which outpost—Mobile? Biloxi? Manchac? Natchez? Natchitoches?—should become company headquarters and colonial capital.

More on that in my next installment on the foundation of New Orleans, coming this spring. Stay tuned.

Lagniappe: Rumor has it, courtesy Wikipedia and the occasional City Hall official, that the first clearing of vegetation to establish New Orleans occurred on May 7, 1718. I know of no archival document ascertaining this, and while it's possible that additional papers might one day come to light, existing evidence points to nothing more specific than late March or early April.

The desire to peg the foundation to a single date spawned some speculation during our last major anniversary, in 1968. Rather arbitrarily, the organizing committee for the 250th celebration cited April 16 the “true” date—a date that just happened to be the birthday of His Excellency Charles Lucet, French Ambassador to the United States and guest of honor at the city’s lavish anniversary banquet. And the date of that banquet? May 7, 1968. It’s possible that someone later came across a commemorative program for that evening and presumed that its date marked the city’s “true” birthday. If so, it’s a reminder that historiography can be just as messy as history.

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Top: Detail of Carte de la Louisiane, showing France’s understanding of the lower Mississippi region in 1718. Bottom: Detail from Plan of New Orleans, published 1759 depicting 1720 conditions. (Library of Congress).