

PREPARING FOR 2018

A look back at New Orleans' prior anniversary commemorations

Increasingly in the public discourse we hear allusions to the upcoming 300th anniversary of the founding of New Orleans. What has been largely absent from the public conversation is a vision of how—and where, and exactly when—to commemorate this moment. When the handling of such a major milestone lies wide open, it helps to look back to see how prior generations observed earlier anniversaries.

Little is known how, if at all, New Orleanians observed their city's 50th, 100th, and 150th birthdays. Indeed, the very notion of marking a metropolitan birthday would have been rather novel in those times; Americans for the most part lived in new communities in a new world and were generally more inclined to look forward than back. Few historical societies existed to remind them of their collective past, and most scholarship on early colonial times had yet to be written.

Worse yet, all three anniversaries fell during tumultuous transitional periods. The semi-centennial (1768) occurred as the Spanish dons arrived to administer the former French colony, a tense time in which an ostentatious salute to the founders would have

been viewed as plainly provocative. The centennial (1818) fell during the halcyon days of Americanization, when all things colonial were deemed passé and déclassé by outspoken Anglophone arrivistes; if any city anniversary were to be celebrated at all, it was the 1815 U.S. military victory over the English in the Battle of New Orleans, which came to dominate ceremonial festivity for decades. Next came the sesquicentennial in 1868, when federal troops occupied Louisiana following the defeat of the Confederacy, amid the political and racial turmoil of the Reconstruction era—another inopportune time to hail the distant past.

By the turn of the century, however, circumstances had become more conducive to the contemplation of history. Postbellum modernization and the closing of the frontier had brought about a nationwide wave of nostalgia—this was the era of Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show and "Lost Cause" sentimentality among white Southerners—as well as a budding intellectual curiosity about the industrializing nation's hazy colonial origins. As fiction writers fed the growing national appetite for what became known as the "local color" literary movement, narrative historians in Louisiana such as Charles Gayarré, George Washington Cable, Grace King, Alcée Fortier, and John Kendall produced a series of popular histories on the city and region which informed generations and remain influential to this day. Importantly, historical associations such as the Louisiana Historical Society, founded in 1836, imparted impetus and gravitas to the ceremonialization of history, and they counted among their ranks some of the most prominent names in local society. New Orleans by 1918 had also developed a sophisticated tourism economy replete with luxury hotels and historical tour

In the 1910s a decorative archway spelled out "Welcome—Winter Capital of America" across Canal Street in New Orleans' Central Business District.



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guides, and its marketers recognized that a foundation fete coordinated with Carnival would capitalize on their branding of New Orleans as a carefree “Winter Capital of America,” or as the St. Charles Hotel’s circa-1910s advertising campaign put it, “The City Care Forgot.”

Planning commenced in 1916 as Mayor Martin Behrman formed an executive committee chaired by T. P. Thompson of the Louisiana Historical Society. Early the next year the committee and its nearly two dozen subcommittees unveiled an agenda for the bicentennial. It would involve three nations—France, Canada and the U.S.—as well as the cities of Chicago and St. Louis, ostensibly because of their association with the early French colonial Illinois Country, but also because local authorities fretted about their rivals’ ever-growing control of Mississippi Valley trade—a status New Orleans once held—and sought to portray parity among the cities.

The committee’s plans were ambitious. Members would ask their counterparts in wartime France to build a replica of Bienville’s ship, the *Neptune*, get it past German U-boats and across the Atlantic (presumably disassembled), and dock it at Jackson Square. An elaborate ceremony at the plaza, complete with naval and military salutes, would follow, after which diplomats and dignitaries would deliver rousing speeches to an audience of reenactors in costume and citizens in finery. The entire ensemble would then parade two miles to City Park to lay the cornerstone for a statue of Bienville. That night would see a grand regency costume ball at the Old French Opera House, which would be decked out in historical tableaux of the discovery and settlement era. What would follow the next day was a ceremonial mass and Te Deum at St. Louis Cathedral, itself slated for a major restoration in time for the event. Finally, on the culminating day, the “Duke of Orleans” would receive the keys to the city, “Bienville” would give a speech, and a second procession would parade down Canal Street—followed by an evening banquet at the Cabildo and a brilliant closing ceremony. When would this all take place? Maintaining (rather dubiously) that Bienville had first landed the *Neptune* on the ninth of February, the Committee scheduled the three-day event for Saturday February 9 through Monday February 11—which just happened to be Mardi Gras weekend. The banquets and parades were all carefully timed to tie Rex, the King of Carnival, into the regal reenactments. With such an early Carnival that year, what better way to ensure that lots of tourists would turn out to “forget their cares” in the “Winter Capital of America”? Other subcommittees worked diligently on music, decorations, the involvement of public schools, the design of a commemorative medal by famed artist Ellsworth Woodward, and innumerable other details. Beloved historian Grace King, meanwhile, teamed with Andre Lafargue, chairman of the city’s Foreign Relations Subcommittee, in procuring an exact replica of the Joan of Arc statue at the Cathedral in Reims (which had “escaped serious damage by the German artillery,” assured a *Picayune* reporter), for installation in New Orleans.

It was all for naught. Plans proved overly ambitious for the mere eleven months allotted by the committee, as well as for French officials, who had a war on their hands, to schedule a lengthy and risky trans-Atlantic voyage. So the February extravaganza was postponed to late April, but no particularly auspicious date could be determined, and by then the event had become detached from Mardi Gras and the winter tourism season. Suggestions arose to reschedule it again to July 14 to take advantage of Bastille Day. But more solemn voices pointed out that any celebration would be unseemly at a time when the sons of both nations—the U.S. formally joined the war in April

1917—were dying by the tens of thousands. Thus for the fourth time in two centuries, events of the present derailed a commemoration of the past.

Oddly, the principal component of the bicentennial that was executed as planned occurred not in New Orleans but in Paris. Despite the Great War—indeed, perhaps because of it—French authorities in the autumn of 1917 held a small but elegant observance for visiting New Orleans dignitaries in the Richelieu Amphitheater at Sorbonne University. It occurred on October 24, allegedly to mark when Bienville received the royal commission to establish the city, on the same day that a similar smaller event took place in New Orleans’ City Hall, now Gallier Hall. The entourage then toured a series of landmarks and museums in Paris and visited the namesake city of Orleans and its Joan of Arc statue. More importantly from the French perspective, the Americans were shown a munitions factory, materiel being readied for the front, and the smoldering ruins of Noyon, Chauny, and Verdun. How curious that a delegation of New Orleanians, celebrating the founding of their city, would do so by crossing the Atlantic in a troop convoy guarded against submarine attack, and touring the mother country practically within earshot of the Western Front, at one point even witnessing a squadron of combat “aeroplanes” summoned into action. The itinerary illustrates that French officials had their eye more on Washington than on New Orleans, and sought to use the festive occasion as an opportunity to reaffirm Franco-American unity and express gratitude for the recent American entry into the conflict. Exigencies of the moment, in other words, had once again crashed New Orleans’ party.

Nevertheless, the Paris ceremony yielded significant academic contributions by both American and French scholars, including papers on the actual foundation and on Bienville, based on freshly tapped primary documents. Among the resulting works was *Histoire de la fondation de la Nouvelle-Orléans*, a commemorative monograph by Baron Marc de Villiers du Terrage elegantly printed and distributed specifically for the event.

The bicentennial in New Orleans, meanwhile, lost momentum. After the early February extravaganza was cancelled (along with Mardi Gras), and neither the late April nor July 14 replacements gained traction, the anniversary was instead observed in an exceedingly modest evening program organized by the Louisiana Historical Society and held at the Cabildo on December 20, 1918.

Only a handful of tangible and lasting effects came out of the entire two-year, two-continent, wartime episode. One was new academic knowledge of the early colonial era, particularly Villiers’ *Histoire*, which was later published in the Louisiana Historical Society’s quarterly and remains cited to this day, including in this article. A second was Ellsworth Woodward’s medallion, featuring Bienville surveying the landscape in 1718 on the obverse side and the modern cityscape on the reverse, a few specimens of which remain in local archives. The most visible surviving outcome may still be seen flying at City Hall and on houses: the official flag of the city of New Orleans. A striking white banner edged with red and blue and emblazoned with three gold fleurs de lis, the design was selected from 379 proposals submitted to the Flag Subcommittee, one of the few organizations within Mayor Martin Behrman’s executive committee that was able to execute fully its function.

Editor’s Note: This essay will be continued in the Winter 2013 edition of *Louisiana Cultural Vistas*.

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