

1721, Pivotal Year for Early New Orleans

One Engineer Helped Make the Difference

Richard Campanella

Geographer, Tulane School of Architecture

Contributing writer, "Geographies of New Orleans"

Published in the *Times-Picayune/New Orleans Advocate* under the headline "Should 2021 Be Celebrated as New Orleans' True Tricentennial?," Sunday March 28, 2021, page 1.

In 2018, New Orleans marked three centuries since Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne, Sieur de Bienville and his crew first began clearing vegetation at the present-day French Quarter riverfront. But the new city's third year, now coming up on its 300-year anniversary, was nearly as pivotal to the city's destiny as the year of its founding.

The year 1721 saw a steady stream of bad news turn into a trickle of good news, and were it not for that turnaround — and the engineer behind much of it — the whole New Orleans project may have died.

The project had begun in 1682, when Frenchman Robert La Salle claimed the Mississippi Valley in the name of King Louis XIV. Colonization began in earnest in 1699, when the Le Moyne brothers Iberville and Bienville arrived, reconnoitered, and in subsequent years, established outposts at present-day Ocean Springs and Biloxi, Mississippi; in Mobile, Alabama; farther upriver at Natchez, Mississippi and elsewhere. Each site has its travails, as did the few hundred colonists strewn out among them.

In the ensuing years, Louisiana became a litany of bad news. Few supply ships arrived from the mother country. Key leaders died of disease, including Iberville in 1706. In 1707, Bienville had to abandon his primitive, flood-prone blockhouse in what is now lower Plaquemines Parish. In 1709, an attempt to grow wheat along Bayou St. John failed. In 1711, Mobile got flooded out and relocated to its present site.

Exasperated, the French crown in 1712 outsourced Louisiana to the private sector by granting a commercial monopoly to financier Antoine Crozat. Five years later, Crozat also gave up. "My three principal projects," he wrote, "discovery of mines of gold and silver, the establishment and maintenance of workers for plantations of tobacco, [and] commerce with Spain, were dissipated." The Louisiana project was in trouble, and France itself was deeply in debt.

That's when a maverick entered the scene. Scottish financial wizard John Law, who had beguiled European royals with his theories on monetary policy, bent the ear of Philippe II, the Duke of Orleans, who since Louis XIV's death had acted as regent of France.



France had no gold — no "real wealth." What Law proposed was to enrich France through the use of paper money, a new concept at that time. It would not be backed by real wealth, but rather the promise of commercial wealth. What did Law see as promising commercial wealth? Louisiana — which, conveniently, Crozat had just relinquished. Law convinced Philippe II he could turn Louisiana into a lucrative tobacco colony, outcompete English tobacco grown in the Chesapeake region, get France out of debt, and enrich all stockholders.

In truth, Law, who knew nothing of subtropical agriculture, had wildly overestimated Louisiana's

Geographies of New Orleans

commercial viability. But Philippe II, desperate for recourse, fell under Law's spell, and granted a 25-year monopoly charter to Law's Company of the West.

In September 1717, according to its ledger, the company "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 company also aimed to populate Louisiana with 6,000 European settlers and 3,000 enslaved Africans. Both immigration and slavery were written into New Orleans' foundational charter.

Sometime in March or April 1718, six vessels under Bienville's command landed off present-day upper Decatur Street, and his 43 men began clearing vegetation. New Orleans had been founded, and John Law's bold scheme was underway.

Two years **later**, nearly every aspect of that scheme had gone awry.

For one, settlers proved difficult to recruit, and those who agreed to migrate — or were forced — perished in frightful numbers. Enslaved Africans, who first arrived in early 1719 if they survived the Middle Passage, fared worse.

For another, French colonists elsewhere saw New Orleans as unwelcome competition, and decried its flood-prone geography. Company officials in Paris seemed to concur, and dispatched their chief engineer with instructions to re-establish New Orleans at the Bayou Manchac region, south of present-day Baton Rouge. Had he not perished en route, that instruction may well have been executed.

Then, in April 1719, as if to prove its critics' case, New Orleans flooded as the Mississippi overtopped its banks. "The site is drowned under half a foot of water," lamented Bienville, admitting "it may be difficult to maintain a town" here.

Indeed, that "town" was little more than a smattering of provisional houses, and news of the flood drew further attention to its primitive state. Combined with reports of the difficulty of navigating the turbid and shoal-prone lower Mississippi, prospects dimmed for Bienville's New Orleans. Accordingly, in January 1720, company officials designated Biloxi, which could serve as a coastal transshipment port, as the new headquarters and colonial capital. Bienville reluctantly obeyed, leaving some workers to continue at now-demoted New Orleans while leading others, including Chief Engineer Le Blond de la Tour, to erect a fort at Biloxi.

The company had bigger problems on its hands back home. Stockholders had caught wind of Louisiana's struggles, and by spring, shares were plummeting in value. Investors raced to cash out, and riots erupted when banks ran out of coins. Bedlam prevailed within the company, distracting officials from their administrative duties. Around this time, and possibly as a result of the disruption, hundreds of newly arrived settlers and slaves got stranded at Biloxi without supplies, and many perished.

Louisiana had hit rock-bottom. One could say that 1720, like 2020, was not a good year.

Which brings us to 1721.

As the Company of the West underwent a financial restructuring, the French crown provided oversight of the colony, including Philippe II. This may have made military defensibility more of a priority, for which New Orleans' strategic riverine position was critical. Even though Biloxi was now the capital, New Orleans was still worth holding on to.

In the spring of 1721, La Tour, who was busy at Biloxi, dispatched his Assistant Engineer Adrian de Pauger to work on New Orleans. Pauger, who arrived here in March, would become the hero of 1721.

A proud man of many talents, Pauger promptly began assessing the site, its geography and the river's hydrology. He integrated his findings into a skillful adaptation of La Tour's design for Biloxi, to the special conditions at New Orleans.

Geographies of New Orleans

Over the next month, he produced the first sketches of today's French Quarter. Pauger sent his "the plan of the city projected at New Orleans" to Paris on April 14.

He sent another copy to La Tour, in which he explained his reasoning for an important geographical change. "Because of the situation of the terrain, which being higher on the river bank," Pauger wrote, "I have brought the town site...closer to it, so as to profit from the proximity of the landing place as well as to have more air from the breezes." In this move, Pauger shifted his proposed street grid 700 feet closer to the river than initially envisioned, wisely taking advantage of scarce high ground. We'd have a different downtown today had Pauger just accepted the status quo. Another iteration of his map, dated Aug. 9, shows more of our modern French Quarter, as well as its first street names, including *Rue de Chartres*, *Bienville*, and *St. Louis*. Pauger was proud of his sketches, and sent copies to Paris for his bosses' bosses to see.

He seems to have spent the next few months berating villagers whose houses were not in alignment with his orderly vision. He admonished one housewife, and nearly ended up in a duel with her husband, on account of their crooked garden. He ordered another offending house demolished, and when its enraged owner sought indemnification, Pauger, according to French historian Baron Marc de Villiers du Terrage, "regaled him with a volley of blows (and) had him put in prison, with irons on his feet."

Meanwhile, Pauger's beautiful maps came to the attention of company officials still struggling with the financial chaos. They also landed on the desk of Philippe II, who as regent had the final word on colonial affairs. According to Villiers du Terrage, writing in 1920, "the regent, god-father to the new capital, was necessarily flattered to see the project put into effect."

Pauger did more to make the case for New Orleans. His hydrological research indicated large ships could navigate the strong currents of the Mississippi and evade its sand bars. The outspoken engineer rebuked the "stubbornness" and "arrogance" of his superiors, who forced "ships from France to be stopped at Biloxi, rather than enter the Mississippi(,) keystone of the country's establishment."

Over the next few months, the Council of Regency established a Capuchin convent in New Orleans, and made New Orleans home to the Commandant General.

The tide had turned. "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, company officials transferred Louisiana's capital from Biloxi to New Orleans. The year that began bleakly had ended hopefully.

"His Royal Highness having thought it advisable to make the principal establishment of the colony at New Orleans on the Mississippi River," beamed Bienville in a later letter, "we have accordingly transported here all the goods that were at Biloxi. It appears to me that a better decision could not have been made."

More travails lay ahead, and upcoming years would see nearly as much setback as progress. But had it not been for Pauger's engineering prowess during the pivotal year of 1721, New Orleans may not have had a future.

Richard Campanella, a geographer with the Tulane School of Architecture, is the author of "The West Bank of Greater New Orleans," "Cityscapes of New Orleans," "Bourbon Street—A History," and other books. He may be reached at rcampane@tulane.edu, <http://richcampanella.com>, or @nolacampanella on Twitter.