Who Was That Bluffed Man?

1699 Encounter at English Turn Had High Stakes

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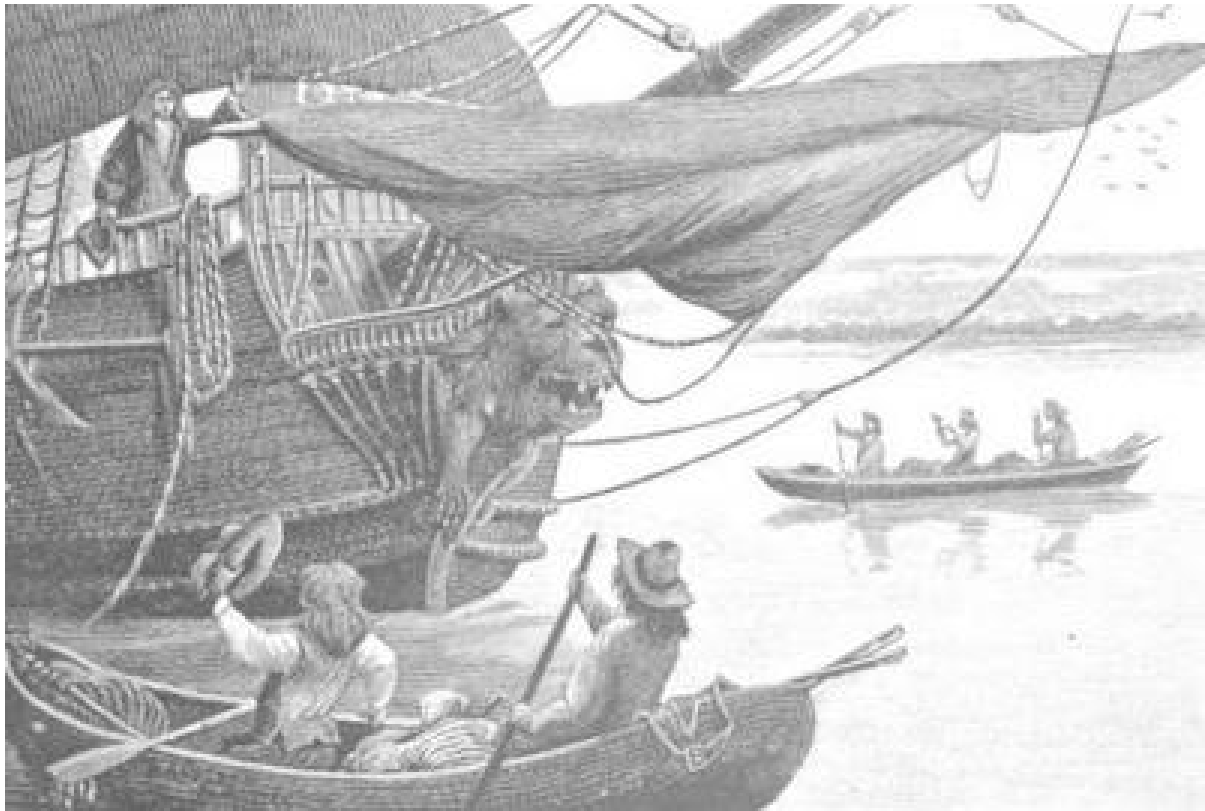


Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne Sieur de Bienville hails the captain of the Carolina Galley at English Turn just south of New Orleans in an illustration from James Baldwin's 1901 book 'Conquest of the Old Northwest.'

Every student of Louisiana history has heard the story: how 19-year-old Bienville, sailing the lower Mississippi in September 1699, confronted a well-armed vessel bent on establishing an English colony in French Louisiana.

Had the incident ended violently, the ship's ten guns could have blasted Bienville out of the water. Instead, the shrewd teenager pulled a *ruse de guerre*, bluffing the English captain into believing that nearby French forces were ready to defend their claim.

The captain retreated, giving rise to the name *le Detour aux Anglois*—English Turn—for the riverbend where the standdown occurred.

Many have since pondered how our history might have unfolded were it not for Bienville's clever con. All of which begs the question, who was that bluffed man, and what exactly was he up to?

According to what Bienville's older brother Iberville later recorded of the incident, he was "Captain Louis Banc" (sometimes spelled Banks or Barr), most likely an English sea captain named William Lewis Bond, whom the 36-year-old warrior Iberville had once captured on the Hudson Bay—a consequential encounter, as we shall see.

Bond had been sent to Louisiana by one Daniel Coxe, a physician born in London in 1640 who had acquired a patent (land grant) for the province of "Carolana."

"Carolana," to Britain, meant the entire southern tier of the present-day United States, starting from North and South Carolina and stretching to the Pacific, minus some Spanish outposts, but including France's claim on Louisiana.

Coxe knew his patent would be worthless without settlement. So "about the year 1698," wrote historian G. D. Scull in 1883, "Dr. Coxe made energetic attempts, by exploration and otherwise, to revive the dormant title to this territory(,) especially the Mississippi Valley."

He did so by funding a series of forays into "Carolana," including two ships up the "Meschacebe" (as Coxe spelled Mississippi), "well armed and provisioned, not merely for the voyage, but also for building a fortification and settling a colony."

Just a few years earlier, the Spanish had done the same, dispatching expeditions from Mexico to assert their claim to the Mississippi Valley, traceable to Hernando de Soto's 1540s expedition, and defying Robert La Salle's claim for France made in 1682.

Coxe's schemes could be interpreted as the English keeping up with the Spanish and French. But according to Charles Nathan Elliott, the opposite was also the case. "Bienville's presence on the Mississippi River, the French presence (in Louisiana), and Spanish presence at Pensacola," wrote Elliott in his 1997 thesis, "were all due to Dr. Coxe reviving the colonial aspirations and fears created by La Salle's…claim…for France."

When viewed in this light, our region comes into focus as a crossroads of three rival empires, each running roughshod over Native peoples and places. Two would come face-to-face on the Mississippi that day in 1699.

It was Captain Bond who commanded one of those two Coxe-funded vessels coming upriver. By Iberville's account, it was a "corvette of ten guns," meaning a small warship with a single deck of weaponry. By other accounts it was a larger and swifter frigate, or a two-mast brigantine. The vessel bore the name *Carolina Galley*, in reference to Coxe's patent, and the fact that it was propelled by oars as well as sails.

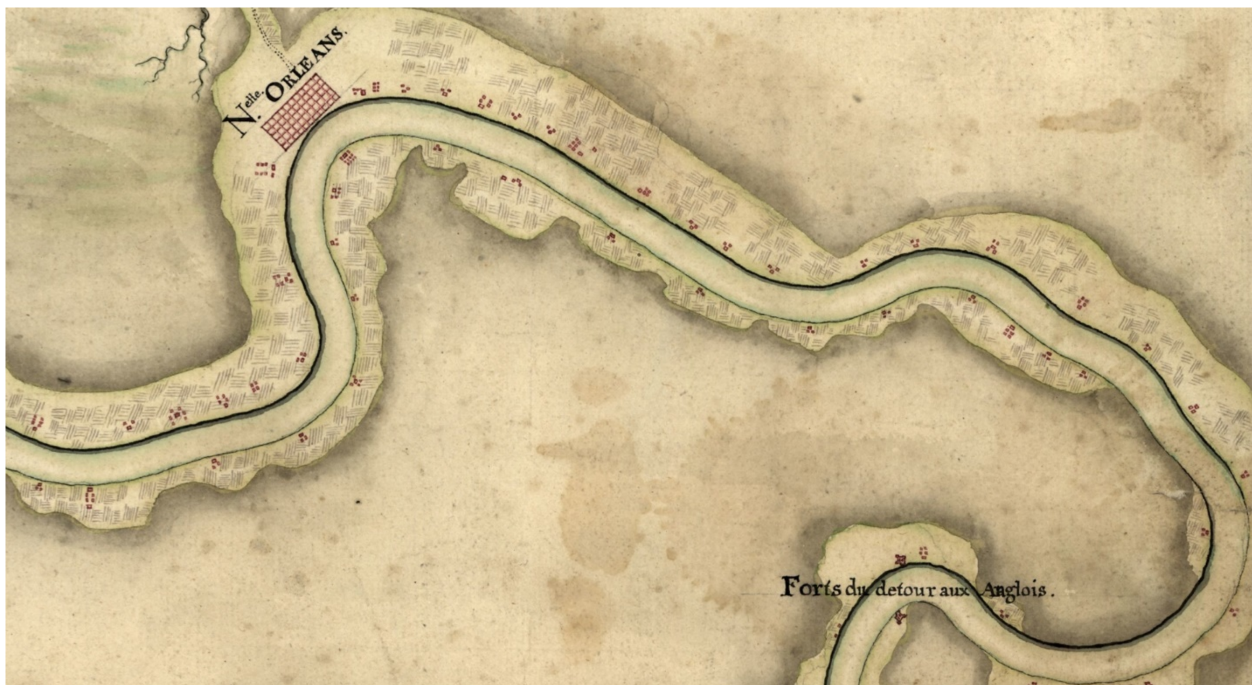
Along with the second vessel, possibly commanded by one Mr. Metcalf, Bond's galley carried "thirty French or English gentlemen volunteers," wrote Scull citing Coxe's records, "besides sailors and other men of lower rank."

It may seem odd that Frenchmen were volunteering aboard an English ship. But these were not the sort of compatriots favored by the French Crown. They were Huguenots, French Calvinists, who had endured brutal persecution in France. Survivors were either forced to convert to Catholicism or flee, which many did during the 1690s. Some had arrived at Charles Town (Charleston), and thanks to Coxe, some of them were now heading into Louisiana—or rather, "Carolana."

Which brings us to that great bend of the Mississippi, where, "25 leagues upstream," Iberville wrote, "my brother, De Bienville, with five men in two bark canoes, had come across the corvette at anchor, awaiting favorable winds to go farther upstream."

Bienville sent two of his men to tell Bond "to immediately leave the country," being a possession of the French king, "and that, if he did not leave, he would force him to." In fact, Bienville had no more "force" than five men in two canoes. What made his threat credible was the fact that Bond had personally recognized Bienville, "whom he knew from having seen him with me (Iberville) at Hudson Bay."

Before Bond bought the bluff, he questioned Bienville about English activity upriver, to which the Frenchman played coy, sowing doubt they were even on the Mississippi.



Detail of 1749 map showing English Turn as Detour aux Angloix, downriver from New Orleans, 50 years after Bienville's bluff

Bond went on to justify his legitimacy by recounting his expedition to the lordly teenager. Having heard a rumor that Iberville's expedition had been forced to return to France, Bond told Bienville, he departed London with three ships in October 1698, bound for Louisiana via Charleston. One

ship returned, while the other two, armed with "twenty-six twelve-pounder (guns), set out again from Carolina in May 1699," wrote Iberville of what his brother had heard from Bond, "looking for the Mississippi." After getting lost in the Bay of St. Louis in present-day Mississippi, Bond set sail again, finding the mouth of the river on August 29, and running into Bienville on September 15.

According to Iberville's recount, Bond threatened "to come back and settle this river with ships having bottoms better constructed for the purpose," after which he proposed the English and French might split the territory, one on each bank, being "as much theirs as ours."

Imagine the east and west banks as two separate empires, with different languages and cultures.

Another chronicler, Jean-Baptiste Bernard de La Harpe, recounted the other stakeholders in the drama. A "greatly distrusted" French Protestant engineer aboard the *Carolina Galley*, he wrote, "secretly gave M. de Bienville a petition addressed to the king," offering to bring 400 Huguenot families to French Louisiana, if "his Majesty" would grant them religious freedom.

"The petition was forwarded to M. de Pontchartrain," wrote La Harpe, "who answered that the king had not expelled heretics from his kingdom in order to found a republic of them."

Bienville exchanged words with Bond not once but thrice, perhaps over hours—a tense diplomatic exchange carried out on the waters of the Mississippi, with the future of millions at stake. Afterwards, Bond raised anchor and made his way back to Charleston, where Huguenot refugees would become productive colonists. "Louisiana's loss," surmised Bienville biographer Philomena Houck in 1998, "was Carolina's gain."

Bond never returned to Louisiana, but his 1699 foray motivated Iberville to prepare against future incursions. The fort he built in 1700, in what is now Phoenix in Plaquemines Parish, was later washed away. The exigency behind it, however, later motivated Bienville to select a riverfront perch for New Orleans in 1718, and build two additional forts at English Turn.

In 1722, the octogenarian Daniel Coxe pieced together a treatise of his vicarious exploits, drawing from various journals and reports.

Titled "A Description of the English Province of Carolana, by the Spaniards Call'd Florida and by the French, La Louisiane," Coxe wrote that in 1698, he had "equipp'd and fitted out Two ships, (with) Twenty great Guns, Sixteen Patereroes (swivel guns), Small Arms, Ammunition (and) Provisions," manned with "Sailors and Common Men, (plus) Thirty English and French Volunteers, some Noblemen, and all Gentlemen."

These were the English colonists and Huguenot refugees mentioned earlier.

"One of the Vessels," he continued, "discover'd the Mouths of the great and famous Mefchacebe (Mississippi), enter'd and ascended it above One Hundred Miles."

That puts a ship near present-day New Orleans.

Coxe then wrote that one ship "had perfected a Settlement therein, if the Captain of the other Ship had done his Duty and not deserted them."

Coxe seems to be saying that because one of his captains had retreated, presumably Bond, colonists on the other ship were denied the chance to establish an English settlement in Louisiana.

Yet those colonists, Coxe wrote, nevertheless "took Possession of this Country in the King's Name, and left, in several Places, the Arms of Great-Britain affix'd on Boards and Trees."

It's a mystery exactly where those British coats of arms were nailed to riverside trees. But if Coxe's retelling is accurate, the English may have come very close to settling Louisiana before the French, which would have steered Louisiana history down a very different channel—but for Bienville's bluff.

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Detail of 1814 Plan of the English Turn, courtesy THNOC