

In the Aftermath Comes Rebirth

New Orleans' First Recorded Hurricane Was a Monster, But It Cleared the Way for Better Urbanism

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The first gusts arrived on September 10, 1722, jostling ships docked along the riverfront and growing steadier overnight. Around 9 a.m. next morning, “a great wind” came, wrote Adrien de Pauger, “followed an hour later by the most terrible tempest and hurricane that could ever be seen.”

It was New Orleans' first hurricane, three hundred years ago this month, and while its track likely coursed eastward, close to Mobile, its size and intensity—at least a Category 3, by one modern estimate—affected the entire central Gulf Coast.

The surge in the Gulf of Mexico partly reversed the flow of the Mississippi, such that “the river rose more than six feet and the waves were so great that it is a miracle that [all the boats] were not dashed to pieces.”

The winds, wrote Pauger, who served as the colony's assistant engineer, “had overthrown at least two thirds of the houses [plus] the church, the presbytere, the hospital and a small barracks building...without being, thanks to the Lord, a single person killed.”

“With this impetuous wind came such torrents of rain, that you could not step out a moment without risk of being drowned,” wrote a colonist named Dumont melodramatically. “It rooted up the largest trees, and the birds, unable to keep up, fell in the streets. In one hour the wind had twice blown from every point of the compass.”

Not until 4 a.m. on September 13 did the winds finally abate, at which time “they set to work to repair the damage done,” including the destruction of 34 houses, five ships, various flatboats and pirogues, plus cargo and cannons.

Despite the havoc of that long day and the grueling cleanup, the hurricane of September 1722 created an opportunity for positive change—what disaster experts today might call “adaptive resilience”—evidence of which became palpable within just a couple for months.

To understand how a trauma like the September 1722 hurricane could have benefitted the city, we have to go back a few years, to the earliest conception of New Orleans.

In the summer of 1717, officials in Paris conceived of a headquarters for a highly speculative company which promised to transform Louisiana into a mercantilist colony supplying France with riches.

Officials resolved to establish a city to be named “New Orleans”—the name flattering Philippe, the Duke of Orleans—where, according to the company's ledger, “landing would be possible from either the river or Lake Pontchartrain.”

The charge would become the responsibility of Louisiana Gov. Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne, Sieur de Bienville, who knew all too well the paucity of viable sites for a city in this flood-prone delta.

The site that Bienville eventually selected—today’s French Quarter—had detractors in the other French outposts of Mobile, Biloxi, Natchez, and Natchitoches, none of which wanted to see the rise of a rival.

So skeptical were company officials of the site options, judging from maps they perused in Paris, that they recommended relocating the project to the Bayou Manchac distributary just downriver from today’s Baton Rouge. But the message never made it to the colony, and Bienville’s men in the spring of 1718 proceeded to clear vegetation at his favored site, starting probably along what are now the 400 to 600 blocks of Decatur Street .

One year into the project, high river inundated New Orleans, and even Bienville came away dispirited. “The site is drowned under half a foot of water,” he wrote; “it may be difficult to maintain a town [here].”

Company officials heeded the cue and in January 1719 designated Biloxi as the new capital, a decision further justified by concerns that ships could not negotiate the Mississippi’s strong currents and shoals, and should therefore transship at Biloxi to smaller, more maneuverable vessels.

Even bigger problems loomed in Paris, as rumors spread that the struggling Louisiana colony was not yielding the company’s promised riches, and that the men behind the scheme had effectively scammed investors. Stock values plunged; riots broke out in European cities; company officials scrambled to control the damage; and New Orleans dropped even lower in priorities.

As for the city itself, if it may be called that, it comprised little more than a smattering of primitive huts standing amid puddles and mud. One observer described “New Orleans, in 1720, [as] a very contemptible figure[,] about a hundred forty barracks, disposed with no great regularity, [with] a few inconsiderable houses, scattered up and down, without any order.”

Disorderly, flood-prone, demoted, nearly bankrupt: New Orleans verged on utter failure.

What helped turned the tide was the March 1721 arrival of Adrien de Pauger to try to improve New Orleans, while his boss, chief engineer Le Blond de La tour, went off to the more important job of laying out the new capital at Biloxi.

The diligent Pauger surveyed the terrain, studied the river’s hydrology, and got to work. From April through August, he sketched a series of plans for an orderly, fortified city—today’s French Quarter—and emblazoned them with the words *La Nouvelle Orleans*, along with street names honoring French royalty.

Pauger or Bienville had the maps shipped back to Paris, to showcase their progress while flattering their superiors with the honorific nomenclature. To company officials mired in a tense financial restructuring, the impressive maps were just about the only good news coming out of Louisiana.

Along with other factors, the maps seemed to have played a key role in changing the perception of New Orleans in both company and government circles. On December 23, 1721, officials in Paris decided to make New Orleans and not Biloxi the new capital of Louisiana, and New Orleans got a new lease on life.

As the news made its way across the ocean, Pauger found himself vexed by the disparity between his vision on paper and the reality on the ground, where crooked houses blocked his planned streets, and where insolent villagers rebuked his reprimands.

How to clear all this mess and start afresh, creating a city worthy of the designation of colonial capital?

Then came that September 1722 hurricane, and the destruction it caused was disastrous by any standards.

But what it also did, figuratively speaking, was “wipe the slate clean.”

That expression is used all too often in the wake of disasters, and it is usually mistaken. Most communities, particularly venerable cities, represent such enormous amounts of prior investment—and create such deep repositories of economic, social, and cultural value—that even major catastrophes usually fall short of “wiping the slate clean”—that is, completely detaching people from their place.

But in 1722, New Orleans was simply too incipient and improvisational to have engendered much place-based value. The material losses of the moment were more than offset by the convenient clearing of the prior mess. Pauger could now proceed unimpeded in laying out his meticulous city plan.

“All these buildings were temporary and old,” wrote Le Blond de La Tour of the destroyed houses, “not a single one was in the alignment of the new town, and they were to have been pulled down. Little harm would have been done, if only we had had shelters for everybody.”

Dumont described what happened subsequently. The two engineers and their workers “cleared a pretty long and wide strip [now Decatur Street] along the river, to put in execution the plan [De La Tour and Pauger] had projected. [They] traced on the ground the streets and quarters which were to form the new town, and...to each settler...gave a plot.”

Settlers had to fence their parcel and “leave all around a strip at least three feet wide, at the foot of which a ditch was to be dug, to serve as a drain for the river water in time of inundation.”

New and better houses were built by the score, this time in alignment with the streets; levees were raised and strengthened; drainage gutters were installed, and designs were made for a slipway to protect vessels in future storms.

Within two months, wrote historian Heloise H. Cruzat, “the streets of the old quarter had received the names they still bear.” Wrote Dumont, “New Orleans began to assume the appearance of a city.” Enslaved workers did much of the labor in the dramatic transformation.

It took five solid years to launch New Orleans, starting with that company resolution in 1717, a tenuous foundation in 1718, and three years of disappointment and strife.

But with the help of visionary engineers, good urban planning and a paradoxically helpful hurricane, New Orleanians were able to adapt, improve, and will themselves a future.

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