An Incremental Transition

260 years ago, France first ceded Louisiana to Spain, initiating a change of governance that would take seven messy years to complete

Richard Campanella
Geographer, Tulane School of Architecture rcampane@tulane.edu
Published in the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, October 9, 2022

When did France transfer Louisiana to Spain? Check various sources, and you'll find a number of specific years mentioned.

The year 1762 is the earliest. In January of that year, following a secret meeting in Fontainebleau to discuss ending the Seven Years' War, King Louis XV of France wrote a confidential letter to Gov. Kerlèrec of the Louisiana colony. Louis explained he had "ceded a part of the province of Louisiana to the King of England," meaning that French claims east of the Mississippi River, excluding New Orleans, would soon become British colonies.

This was big news, but no great surprise, as French combatants had been steadily losing ground to the British in the North American theater of the Seven Years' War, known as the French and Indian War. France's real prize, French Canada, had already been lost, and that did not bode well for Louisiana.

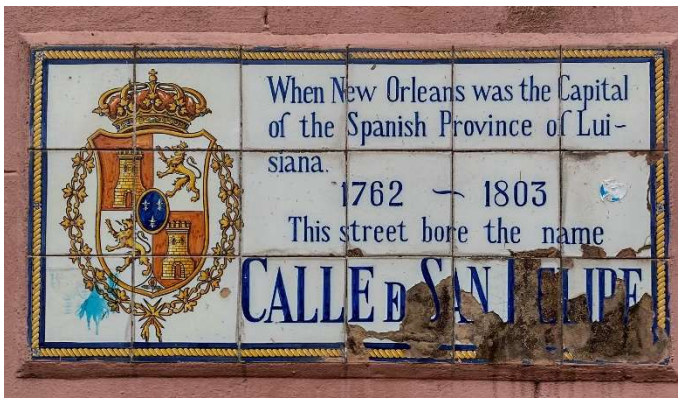
The next sentence in the letter to Kerlèrec made its fate clear. "I have decided," wrote Louis, "to give the other [part of the province] to my cousin the King of Spain." That meant all of Louisiana west of the Mississippi, plus New Orleans, which at the time was understood to be an island.

Preemptively ceding all that land to a Bourbon cousin in Spain was better than surrendering any more than necessary to the hated British. It also might serve, Louis hoped, to give King Carlos III of Spain an incentive to aid France in the final phases of the war.

At first Carlos was reluctant, as Spain had enough colonial problems on its hands. Taking on Louisiana would be costly and complicated. But Carlos realized the vast possession would make a useful *barrera* (barrier, or buffer zone) to keep the British away from Spain's true prize, Mexico.

On November 13, 1762, Carlos responded to his "very dear and dearly beloved cousin" accepting "the country known under the name of Louisiana as well as New Orleans and the island on which this city is situated." As for that letter to Kerlèrec, it appears it was never actually sent, although it survives in archival records.

Because of this secret agreement between the two regal cousins, many historical interpretations cite 1762 as the beginning of the Spanish colonial era. Among them are the famous tile plaques on French Quarter buildings, which were donated by Spain in 1962 to mark the bicentennial of Carlos' concurrence. The plaques hold "1762 to 1803" as the period "when New Orleans was the Capital of the Spanish Province of *Luisiana.*"



But no Spanish authorities physically assumed control of Louisiana in 1762, nor had any official word of the transfer been issued. French administrators continued to govern the mostly Francophone population as subjects of the French crown.

In February 1763, diplomats in Paris signed a treaty to end the Seven Years' War, including the French and Indian War. Among other things, the treaty relinquished most of France's claims in North America, transferring those lands east of the Mississippi to victorious Britain. Because of the formal peace treaty, many sources cite 1763 as the transfer date.

But the treaty did not allude to the prior year's secret arrangement between the cousin kings. As long as uncertainty persisted, so did French governance in Louisiana.

Things changed in 1764. In February, King Carlos appointed the Marqués de Grimaldi as Minister of State, and according to historian Jack D. L. Holmes, Grimaldi "began to develop interest in occupying Louisiana." It would be Grimaldi who would call the shots in the years ahead.

In April 1764, King Louis wrote another letter to the governor of Louisiana, now Jean-Jacques Blaise d'Abbadie, ordering him to prepare to transfer to Louisiana to Spain. This time, the missive was delivered.

Gov. d'Abbadie received the letter in September; the French Superior Council publicly announced the news in October; and according to historian Ned Sublette, "by means of the first broadside printed in New Orleans, Louisianians found out, to their great unhappiness, that they were to become Spanish subjects." These local events justify viewing 1764 as the year of the transfer.

Many French loyalists in the elite class saw the change as a threat, as they would probably have to make room for Spanish replacements. Some took action, getting the Superior Council to dispatch a delegation to Paris to plead for reconsideration. Its leader, Jean Milhet, managed to enlist a notable voice to help their cause—none other than Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne de Bienville, the founder of New Orleans and former governor of Louisiana.

But Bienville, now 86, had been largely forgotten by the generation now in power, and the pleas of Milhet's delegation fell on deaf ears. It was as if Louisiana had become orphaned, its mother country turning her back, and its stepmother not yet arrived.

Finally, in March 1766, Antonio de Ulloa landed at New Orleans to serve as Spain's first governor of Louisiana, his appointment having been issued by Grimaldi the prior April.

An accomplished scientist, Gov. Ulloa was not particularly disposed to rule with an iron fist. Besides, given the cousinly good will behind the transfer, the Spanish crown had instructed him not to ruffle local feathers with any sudden rebukes of French policies.

Ulloa's passive leadership, lacking ministerial and military backup, enabled the French Superior Council to continue to issue decrees, such that Louisiana had two de-facto governments, neither one fully in charge.

The ambiguity persisted throughout 1766 and 1767, even as Ulloa and his budding government began to assert some authority, such as raising the Spanish flag over Louisiana on January 20, 1767. But the fact that he also permitted the *fleur-de-lis* to fly over New Orleans only fueled further confusion, leaving "town's inhabitants…dumbstruck by Ulloa's hesitation to take full control," wrote historian Lawrence Powell, "but also visibly relieved."

Political ambiguity can signal a power vacuum, which in turn can invite intrigue. It can also trigger economic woes, and Ulloa's response to them, prefigured by imperial trade policies issued broadly from Madrid, brought more turmoil to the interregnum. The same French loyalists who had sent that failed delegation to France now worked to foment discontent amongst rural colonists. Some, namely a cohort of planters with landholdings in today's Uptown area, went further, secretly meeting to plot a coup d'état against Gov. Ulloa.

On October 28, 1768, French loyalists arrived by the hundreds at New Orleans to rebuke Ulloa. With few Spanish troops to control them, the angry marchers, many bearing arms, had all the look of a rebellion.

In the days ahead, the sympathetic French Superior Council fired off a resolution ejecting Ulloa. Off went the scientist-turned-governor, with family and staff, back to Cuba, never to return to New Orleans.

The Rebellion of 1768, as French partisans would later cast the episode, proved short-lived, as its leaders failed to gain the support of the French crown to which they paid homage. Indeed, they had defied the authority of two kings—their own Louis XV, and now Carlos III.

Not only had the 1768 rebellion fizzled, now it backfired, as Spanish authorities, enraged at the insubordination, took action. In April 1769, they appointed Gen. Alejandro O'Reilly and backed him with well-trained troops; the expedition left Cuba in July and took possession of Louisiana on August 18, 1769, this time with a deliberately elaborate ceremony in New Orleans.

Unlike Ulloa, Gen. O'Reilly exercised his power immediately, abolishing the Superior Council, requiring oaths of allegiance, and imposing new trade laws and policies on slavery. And while O'Reilly pardoned the hundreds of protestors who marched on New Orleans last autumn, he made a lesson out of their ringleaders. On October 25, 1769, O'Reilly had six conspirators executed at the lower fortification of the city, by today's Old U.S. Mint, and another six imprisoned in Cuba. Their families were stripped of all their land holdings, which would have a profound effect on the future of Uptown.

French partisans would later valorize the 1768 conspirators, naming Frenchmen Street in their honor and branding their executioner as "Bloody O'Reilly." Accordingly, Francophiles tended to view the year 1769 as the beginning of the Spanish colonial era—fully seven years after Spain's interpretation, as stated on those elegant corner tile plaques. To wit, the cast-iron bases of Canal Street's famous green lampposts hold "1769 to 1803" as the era of "Spanish domination."

Like so much of complicated history, the Spanish transition occurred in increments, each replete with ambiguity and contingency, and punctuated with inflection points. It started secretly in 1762; gained official momentum in 1763; went public in 1764; became administrative during 1765 into 1768, at which point it encountered resistance; and, after some bloodshed, finally engaged forcefully and wholly in 1769.

In the decades ahead, Spanish governance would prove enormously consequential to both New Orleans and Louisiana, even as it ended rather soon, in 1800—or is it 1802, or 1803? We'll save that debate for another time.

Richard Campanella, a geographer with the Tulane School of Architecture, is the author of "The West Bank of Greater New Orleans," "Bienville's Dilemma: A Historical Geography of New Orleans," and "Bourbon Street: A History." Campanella may be reached at http://richcampanella.com , rcampane@tulane.edu , or @nolacampanella on Twitter.