REGIME CHANGE *comes to the* URSULINES

BY Richard Campanella

REACTIONS IN NEW ORLEANS varied greatly to news that diplomacy during 1803 had not only finalized the long-pending transfer of Spanish Louisiana to France, but shockingly, resulted in France's sale of the colony to the United States.

Among the commercial class, merchants and shippers rejoiced at Americanization. Thomas Ashe, for example, recounted how colonial trade had required "purchasing the rights of monopoly from the King," such that "wealth circulated in a very partial manner"; now, in a free market of buyers and sellers, "toleration and competition [will] prevail." Professionals and skilled workers anticipated booming opportunities, while landholders foresaw rising real estate values (so long as they could retain title), and bureaucrats nervously awaited new bosses. Among the populace, Anglo-Americans exalted the new government, while Creoles ruminated, and Francophiles as well as monarchists grieved. Those of African descent, be they free or enslaved, could only ponder their fate, as might Indigenous people.

Particularly anxious were those in the religious community, namely the Roman Catholic orders. The tripartite transfer meant that New Orleans would finally relinquish all ties to a Catholic monarchy (Spain), for a return to a French nation that was now ostensibly republican, partly revolutionary, and violently anti-Catholic — followed by dominion by a republic that pointedly separated church and state.



Ursuline Convent circa 1940. *Image courtesy of the Louisiana State Museum, Works Progress Administration French Quarter Architectural Record, via the Louisiana Digital Library.*

The Ursuline Nuns, in town since 1727 and cloistered since 1752 in their convent at present-day 1110 Chartres Street, had been through regime change before. As Spain first prepared to take control of Louisiana, French colonials in 1763 expelled the Society of Jesus — the Jesuits, with whom the Ursulines had close associations — for their perceived threat to royalty. Once the Spanish took full control by 1769, the change of governance put in jeopardy the nuns' connection to their motherhouse in Rouen, France, source of most of their novices. Soon, the number of Spanish-speaking Ursulines increased in proportion to the older Francophone sisters, causing something of a rift and raising the possibility of moving the order to Havana.

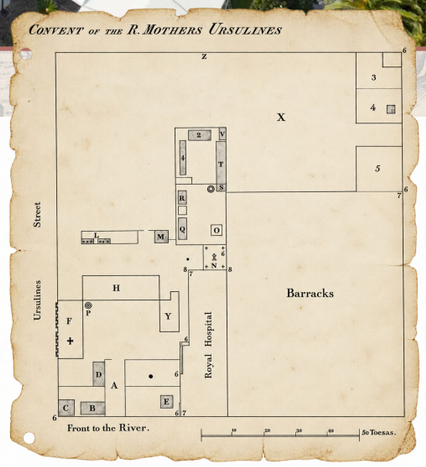
While Spanish authorities were personally genial to the nuns — Gov. Alejandro O'Reilly commended their educational work with girls, orphans, and destitute women — their official policies fell short of generosity. For one, they relieved the nuns of caring for soldiers at the military hospital adjacent to the convent, an important source of financial support. The governor also declined to include the nuns' holdings in an official government inventory, likely because he did not want to imply financial responsibility for what he viewed as the sisters' personal domicile. The exclusion meant that, while the new regime tacitly acknowledged the Ursulines' title to their compound, no new Spanish papers put it in writing, nor was any effort made to obtain old French documents confirming it.

And quite a compound it was, over 16 times larger than the present property. It spanned from today's Royal Street to Decatur and from Ursulines down to Barracks, though the nuns shared a portion of that "superblock" with the military hospital and barracks. Even the interceding arteries were part of the private compound, precluding public passage.

The tenuous title became an issue in the 1790s when Spanish officials sought to expand their military uses into spaces held by the Ursulines. Being unable to prove ownership and reluctant to defy powerful men, the nuns acquiesced to the encroachment. A 1793 map sketched by Gilberto Guillemard, for example, shows various order-related land uses throughout the four-block area (school rooms and yards, lodging, kitchens, storehouses,



The four squares visible here beyond the Old Ursuline Convent once formed a superblock controlled by the order. *Photo by Jason Campanella.*



Plan of Ursuline Convent, 1821. Joseph Pillié, City Surveyor. *Courtesy of the State of Louisiana, Office of State Lands.*

workshops, and a nun's burial ground), but also spaces now ceded to Spanish military personnel. Other city maps from the Spanish era show the four squares either as one superblock, or in various configurations of religious and military uses, each walled off from the other. It was an awkward and ambiguous arrangement, especially for neighbors who had to circumvent the street segments of today's 1100-1200 Chartres and 500-600 Gov. Nicholls in their daily movements. Closed-off arteries were just as dreaded in the 1700s as they are in today's French Quarter.

Given the encroachment, one might think the Ursulines would have welcomed rumors circulating in 1802 that Spain had agreed to retrocede Louisiana to France. After all, it was the French who brought in the first Ursulines in 1727 and granted them the land. In fact, the opposite was the case: the mother country had changed radically following the 1789 revolution, and the new regime viewed religion through the lens of power. "The prospect of living under the French government that had so recently persecuted priests and religious was so offensive," wrote historian Sister Jane Frances Heaney in her study of the local order, "that some of the Ursulines [urged to] sell their property and leave New Orleans." Some sisters departed for Havana, as did some Spanish priests, though it soon became clear the incoming French administrators had no hostile intentions.

Alas, within months, news arrived that Napoleon had sold Louisiana to the United States, bringing yet another round of political uncertainty to the nuns' shrinking domain. Being secular and anti-monarchical in its political philosophy and predominantly Protestant in its citizenry, the new regime seemed like it would be antagonistic to the sensibilities of a Catholic province named for a king. According to Heaney, one newspaper in Paris reported that the U.S. would ban incoming novices and eventually expropriate the Ursuline Convent as government property.

In fact, the new American territorial Gov. William C. C. Claiborne exuded cordiality in his relations with the Ursulines, while President Thomas Jefferson responded personally to the nuns' polite inquiry about their future. "The constitution and government of the United States are a sure guarantee to you that [your property] will be preserved to you," wrote Jefferson, "and that your institution will be permitted to govern itself…. I salute you, holy sisters, with friendship and respect."

But as to exactly what constituted that property, the nuns had that colonial-era title problem on their hands, not to mention all those encroaching military buildings on what remained of their four-block expanse. They also had ever more neighbors, because unlike previous regime changes, Americanization triggered dramatic growth. The city's circa-1803 population had doubled by 1810 and more than tripled by 1820, to more than 27,000, the majority of whom lived in the cramped French Quarter. It became increasingly impractical for a cloistered nunnery with a girls' boarding school to occupy so much land in so congested an urban setting.

To be continued *in the next edition of* Preservation in Print, *where we will see how the Ursulines lost their superblock.*

streetscapes is written by Richard Campanella, a geographer with the Tulane School of Architecture and Built Environment and author of *Draining New Orleans*, *Bienville's Dilemma*, *Bourbon Street: A History* and other books. Campanella may be reached through richcampanella.com, rcampane@tulane.edu, or @nolacampanella on X.

Background map courtesy of the Library of Congress.