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The Resilience of New Orleans: Assessing a History of Disasters 1718-1803

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The Resilience of New Orleans: Assessing a History of Disasters
1718-1803

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
in
Urban Studies

by

Celine Ugolini

Degree in Anglophone Language, Literature, and History Bordeaux 3, 2006
Master's Degree in Studies of the English-speaking World Bordeaux 3, 2008

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Abstract

New Orleans, Louisiana, was founded in 1718 on what is known today to be unstable land. In 1719, a flood devastated the budding city. Several other strong storms quickly followed and forced reconstruction. The French colonists who built New Orleans had no experience with Louisiana's climate or repetitive tropical storms and flooding. Damage from disasters occurred so frequently that the difficult work of reconstruction characterized the city's first few decades. The lack of population of the area generated the sending of criminals and other unwanted individuals from France, who ended up taking an active part in the construction and reconstruction process.

This research examines the reasons for founding the city where it still stands today, early challenges confronting New Orleanians, and their adaptation to an inhospitable environment, specifically underpopulation, disasters, and inexperience. This dissertation displays for the first time colonial materials on a large scale -- primary sources from various archives originally written in French and translated by the author.

Despite concerns that residents would leave their city to seek safer living conditions on higher land or move back to the home country (as some did), early New Orleanians displayed a resilience that can be compared to that found recently

in the aftermath of the 2005 Hurricane Katrina. Other settlements had a different fate and eventually disappeared whereas New Orleans always rebuilt itself after each disaster, showing a distinctive sense of its own survival.

Since the location of New Orleans became valuable for commercial purposes, early disasters provided the opportunity to rebuild a new town, more adapted to the needs of the colony. Once that town was built and the other local cities proved to be ineffective as capital of the colony, New Orleans appeared as a suitable choice and therefore colonists started investing more into the future of their city.

Key Words: New Orleans, Colonial History, Resilience, Disasters

Introduction

Disaster: “Anything that befalls of ruinous or distressing nature; a sudden or great misfortune, mishap, or misadventure; a calamity”¹

Disasters have befallen the city of New Orleans ever since its initial construction in 1718. The first flood took place as early as 1719. The first recorded hurricane dates back to September 11, 1722.² Both events completely destroyed the city; both events generated complete reconstruction. Numerous ensuing disasters had the same effect such as the particularly devastating 2005 Hurricane Katrina almost three centuries later. The recurrence of these disasters has raised in the past and still raises numerous questions, more or less unchanged over the centuries. Why has New Orleans been rebuilt so many times and after each disaster? Would it not be easier to let go or to relocate? Why has such resilience been displayed in a bowl-shaped, water-filled area? How have disasters forged the city?

¹ "disaster, n.". OED Online. September 2012. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/53561?rskey=gOy0QM&result=1> (accessed August 18, 2012).

² Writings by le Page du Pratz describe a hurricane, in March 1722 (curiously outside of the regular hurricane season which lasts from June 1 to November 30), as “the most furious ever felt in the province” suggesting several hurricanes took place at that time perhaps without being individually recorded. Antoine Simon Le Page du Pratz, *The History of Louisiana or of the Western Parts of Virginia and Carolina. Containing a Description of the Countries that lie on both Sides of the River Mississippi: With an Account of the Settlements, Inhabitants, Soil, Climate, and Products* (London: Printed for T. Becket and P.A. De Hondt, 1775), 56.

What this research will address is the question of disasters and resilience in early New Orleans. It will cover a part of New Orleans' history that has not been discussed previously: colonial era disasters. The documents used for that purpose have not been exploited in any published form. This contributes to the novelty of the study through its use of primary sources. In order to focus on the French colonial period, I have read and translated letters from many of the most prominent figures of the time that do not appear to have been translated to date considering the lack of literature on the topic of disasters in colonial New Orleans.

Documents examined include Adrien de Pauger's first maps of the projected city of *La Nouvelle Orléans*. Pauger was the assistant city engineer who eventually laid out the streets of the city after the official King's engineer Pierre Le Blond de La Tour disagreed with New Orleans' founder Jean Baptiste Le Moyne, Sieur de Bienville's decision for the location of the future city. Translated sources also include manuscripts from Bienville and other officials such as Governor Kerlerec and *Commissaire Ordonnateur*³ Salmon. Numerous letters detail the damage to the city after hurricanes, storms, disease, and fire. Others point to the precarious state of New Orleans, its dirt, lack of sewage, its abundance of vagabonds and other petty criminals. The vulnerability of the young city, according to the letters, also comes from the lack of protection; but the need to erect a palisade, or wooden

³ Chief of the police.

fence, was only put forward in 1760. Official letters also condemn the lack of a proper police force to promote law and order. The close study of these primary sources provide information not only on first settlements such as New Orleans, Biloxi, Mobile, and the colony of Louisiana, but also on the early issues the city of New Orleans faced, as well as the French and Spanish response to dealing with disasters. As it happened, the French tended to rebuild New Orleans, disaster after disaster, simply because it made more sense than not. Considering the precarious city they originally built, it was easy for them to rebuild over it: the early disasters gave them more of a reason to rebuild a stronger city, and provided the grounds to do so. Since the location of the city largely outweighed its inconvenience, rebuilding always took place. To the contrary, the Spaniards displayed a much more organized resilience and rebuilt a stronger city following the two Great Fires of the late eighteenth century. Very few major hurricanes occurred during the Spanish colonial period. This facilitated their adaptation to the local environment, which did not have to be as dramatic and sudden as that of the French faced with the first full destruction of the city just one year after its initial foundation.

A large part of the documents examined were written in French, and another part in Spanish. Many of the Spanish documents have been translated, unlike the French. There are very few articles or scholarly work making use of or reference to the French documents and therefore this study provides a contribution towards

detailing the early life, early issues and disasters in the city of New Orleans, and how its residents and city officials used disasters not as a way to abandon the city, but as in modern times, as a way to boost the city's future and improve its durability. Most of the available letters come from the Williams Research Center in New Orleans; others are found in the Tulane University Library and the Louisiana State Museum. For the Spanish period, the documents used come from the New Orleans Public Library and consist of Acts of the Cabildo, the Spanish council. The Cabildo building was the seat of the colonial government, also used as a courtroom, and for a brief period used as the Louisiana Supreme Court where such cases as *Plessy v. Ferguson*⁴ were held. The official government documents from the Cabildo were originally written in Spanish and translated by the WPA (Work Projects Administration, an agency created in the 1930s to perform public works projects). The English translations of the Spanish documents were used throughout this study. The primary French sources, along with the translated Spanish documents and secondary sources, will provide the ground information to assert what seems to be an evident fact: New Orleans has been a resilient city from its

⁴ *Plessy v. Ferguson* is a Supreme Court decision dated 1896 that implemented the doctrine "separate but equal" in public facilities in the United States, thus promoting racial segregation. It became a landmark ruling, especially in the South, where a large population of African Americans was concentrated. The ruling was eventually overturned in 1954 in *Brown v. Board of Education*.

very foundation. Resiliency proved to be a main contributor to the strength of the city to date.

Even though New Orleans' disasters have been studied, most of these studies address twentieth century events. Much of the existing research deals with recent hurricanes, storms, and floods, which limits the scope of research by putting an emphasis on contemporary events and not mentioning the long tradition of resilience that characterizes the city. Today, most scholarly work addresses Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath. The primacy of the present and the struggles for the city to recover have therefore overshadowed previous disasters that this research aims at putting an emphasis on. Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath brought to the surface issues of resilience, poverty, and racial discrimination, which have long been plaguing the history of the Crescent City.⁵ These issues that are still very contemporary have been for the past three hundred years a constant preoccupation with the local administrators, ever since the French occupants built the city of *La Nouvelle Orléans* in 1718.

This study examines the issues named above that New Orleans experienced during the first few decades of its existence, but focuses on early disasters and

⁵ New Orleans is located by a crescent shape bend of the Mississippi River.

resilience during the colonial period, from 1718 to 1803.⁶ It analyzes disasters, particularly storms, hurricanes, and fires, that led to both the weakness and the strength of the city. The dissertation will examine the recovery process after each major disaster during the colonial period, in addition to the damage encountered and its repercussions for the city.

New Orleans overcame the damage. Each time a disaster struck the city, New Orleanians rebuilt their municipality. Other local cities encountered a different fate, such as *La Balise*, a settlement that I will introduce within the dissertation because of its comparative aspect. Many storms devastated *La Balise* to the point where its residents finally decided not to rebuild their city, unlike New Orleans, and it eventually disappeared. In contrast to what happened at *La Balise* and despite concerns that residents would leave New Orleans to seek safer living conditions and higher land or move back to their home country, early New Orleanians displayed remarkable resilience. This was the case from the time of the city's foundation when faced with its first flood in 1719, and first hurricane in 1722. It continued with more recent events such as the hurricanes Katrina, Gustav, and Isaac. The ability of the city to recover has become a distinctive feature of New Orleans that singles it out in the urban history of the United States. Other

⁶ Although the focus of the study is on colonial New Orleans (1718-1803), comparative examples outside of this timeframe, especially throughout the nineteenth century, will be used.

cities such as St. Louis, San Francisco, or Chicago also encountered disasters in the forms of tornadoes, earthquakes, or fires, but none have dealt with this phenomenon so repetitively as New Orleans.

Using previously unpublished and untranslated into English archival materials, this research also examines the early challenges New Orleanians faced and their necessary adaptation to an inhospitable environment. It discusses how the French originally built the city of *La Nouvelle Orléans* and how it evolved from a fragile settlement to a stronger city overcoming hurricanes, fires, and disease, throughout the first one hundred years of its history. Scholars such as Peirce Lewis, Richard Campanella, or Lawrence N. Powell have previously written on the history of New Orleans. Their research predominantly use secondary sources for their accounts, or references to primary sources through other secondary sources. My research proposes to use a large portion of primary sources for analysis.

This research will investigate how the French managed to build the city of New Orleans going back to its very foundation, in 1718, from a human and logistic point of view. Accounting for their strategic decisions, in an effort to populate the colony of *Louisiane*, early French colonists had no choice but to build a major post at a judicious location. Considering the numerous options for building a city in the province and the different possible sites, all displaying different situations within the larger regional context, one may wonder why this particular location was

chosen, how, and if the final choice for the location of New Orleans was a successful resolution. As geographer Richard Campanella notes, “site refers to [a] city’s actual physical footing; [while] situation means its regional context and how it connects with the world.”⁷

In simple terms, this means that the situation of New Orleans, by the mouth of the Mississippi River allowing for transportation to the northern end of the colony is ideal, but that its site, at a low ground level and prone to flooding, is debatable. The concept of situation was discussed very early on. In 1724, Adrien de Pauger, Assistant City Engineer, was already writing praiseful letters to France about the strategic situation of the newly built city. Pauger asserted that he would be prepared to give anything he owned for the opportunity to exploit a similar favorable situation and make it a successful port.⁸

Early officials were aware of the importance of New Orleans’ situation when they built the city. They also had knowledge that the flood prone and low sea level area would probably encounter numerous issues over time. Despite the concerns

⁷ Richard Campanella, *Bienville’s Dilemma: A Historical Geography of New Orleans* (University of Louisiana at Lafayette, 2008), 113 and Peirce Lewis, *New Orleans: the Making of an Urban Landscape*, 2nd ed. (Center for American Places, 2003), 113. According to Peirce Lewis and Richard Campanella the concepts of site versus situation eventually led to the foundation of the city where it still stands today. Geography became a deciding factor in how the city evolved and it contributed to the building of its unique culture.

⁸ Adrien de Pauger to the directors of the Company of the Indies, New Orleans, May 29, 1724, 2-3, Reel 12, Williams Research Center at the Historic New Orleans Collection (thereafter WRC), New Orleans, LA.

over the precariousness of the site on which the city was built, work quickly began in 1718 at the present location of the New Orleans French Quarter. The area dedicated to the construction of New Orleans benefited from a natural levee.⁹

Prior to choosing the site for New Orleans, French settlers built a post at Biloxi, then one at Mobile, which both ended up being unsuccessful. At these locations, the French could not fully exploit advantages from the Mississippi River (the situation was not as favorable as in New Orleans, the towns were further from the river and its mouth) and they were exposed to much of the same disadvantages (due to a similar site, prone to flooding and storms). Had New Orleans been built further upriver, the site would have been better in terms of higher grounds (as the grounds near Natchez) and not been as prone to flooding, but the situation would have been too far from the River's mouth to fully take advantage of transportation and commerce. Had the city been built further downriver, the situation could have been as good but the site would have been even more vulnerable and prone to damage from storms as at *La Balise*, which eventually disappeared.

⁹ As Campanella points out on page 113 of *Bienville's Dilemma*, despite the feeble site, there is no better location for the city of New Orleans than where it presently stands. Had the city been built elsewhere in the vicinity it would not have had such an advantageous situation, and would have encountered similar site issues.



Map of the Colony of Louisiana and the Course of the Mississippi River, Library of Congress
<http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/image-services/jp2.py?data=/home/www/data/gmd/gmd370/g3700/g3700/ct000666.jp2&res=2>

René-Robert Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle was the first Frenchman to realize the potential of the southern part of the colony of Louisiana when he discovered the mouth of the Mississippi going downriver from New France, today's Canada, in 1682. At the time of New Orleans' foundation, water transportation was crucial. This is the primary reason that led to the building of the city at its current location. Pierre Le Blond de La Tour, the King's Chief Engineer, envisaged building the city

further east, towards present day Biloxi. De La Tour was so confident in his assessment of the local sites, especially those of Biloxi and Mobile that he often tried to slow down the development of New Orleans to the profit of other towns. His ideas eventually led to disagreements with city founder Bienville, who ultimately chose the assistant engineer Pauger to design the city as opposed to de La Tour. The choice Bienville made at the time reflects his acknowledgement of the importance of situation. In fact, had he built the city at present day Biloxi, the river could not have been used (bad situation) and there still would have been flooding issues (bad site). Additionally, the proximity of New Orleans to Bayou St John and Lake Pontchartrain was also decisive. Geographer Peirce Lewis suggested that the place where Baton Rouge was later built could have been a good alternative choice in terms of site and offered proximity to the river, but, because it was too close to the separation between French, Spanish, and English territories, it would have created conflicts, and therefore not have been an overall good location.¹⁰ The city's location implied from the start that New Orleans would flood, and that therefore it would impact its development and its overall history. Yet, in spite of all the seemingly insurmountable disadvantages that New Orleans seems to have borne from very early on and even before its initial construction, Lewis is

¹⁰ Peirce F. Lewis, *New Orleans: The Making of an Urban Landscape*, 2nd ed. (University of Virginia Press, 2003), 7. Lewis further explains that it would also not have offered the same possibility to exploit boat traffic coming from the sea.

correct in his paradoxical assessment of New Orleans as “the impossible but inevitable city”¹¹ -- a description that seems to fit New Orleans to date. A city that has struggled but that through its crucial character managed to display resilience. One may reflect upon this important, though elusive statement: impossible because of the struggles linked with the city’s site, as illustrated with French explorer Cavalier de La Salle’s struggles in trying to find the mouth of the Mississippi River from the Gulf of Mexico starting in 1684. He could never find it and subsequently died in his pursuit.¹² Inevitable, because commerce could not be established without a Southern outlet towards the Gulf of Mexico, which allowed for maritime road linking New France with the colonies of New Spain.

Additionally, according to Lewis, geography, and specifically the heat and climate resulting from the geographical location of the city, not only influenced the disaster-prone character of New Orleans, but also the city’s culture. Lewis points out to the regular *siestas* that New Orleanians usually took in the hot summer afternoons. This also contributed to the slow pace of activities in the city. Moreover, one could also argue that later on, the way habitations were built in the French Quarter could be a result of climate conditions. The narrow streets and

¹¹ Lewis, *New Orleans*, 19.

¹² Peter H. Wood, “La Salle: Discovery of a Lost Explorer,” *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 89, No. 2 (Apr. 1984): 323.

balconies enabled pedestrians to remain in the shade while walking along the streets.

In addition to the critical issue of site versus situation, early New Orleans also faced several major problems, which the colonists had to resolve in order to complete their venture successfully. I will discuss two additional issues that the early French settlers experienced and that clearly relate to disaster and resilience: underpopulation and inexperience in a foreign land. Because of the lack of population and the inexperience of early settlers, the issue of disasters became larger than had the other two problems not been present. Inexperience implied that the colony was more vulnerable to its environment, and therefore, more vulnerable to disasters. The lack of population contributed to a lack of workforce to build the town, rapidly rebuild after each disaster, and inexperience led colonists to build edifices similar to those in their home country, and therefore not adapted to the ground of southern Louisiana, rendering them more fragile to disasters.

One of the main problems of the colony was underpopulation. When the French decided to settle a colony in Louisiana and later to build the major city of New Orleans, they had to find a way to populate the area in order to protect it. A populated area is much more difficult to conquer than vacant land and considering the proximity of their English neighbors and the latter's desire to expand their territory, French leaders had to find a way to bring people to Louisiana.

French colonists decided to bring in prisoners, criminals, prostitutes, and other disreputable characters. These were sent against their will for the first couple of years of the city's existence.¹³ Additionally, since the police received monetary benefits from these deportations, quite often there was no way to check the validity of claims against the said criminals. As a result, riots emerged between the police and falsely accused prospective Louisianians. In 1720, after much disturbance in the home country, the sending of convicts stopped, following a protest and ensuing escape of a few men and women at a prison site in France. By that time, African slaves had started to arrive in large numbers and therefore provided an alternative solution to populating the area and providing the necessary workforce both to build and to rebuild the city.

Another crucial issue was French inexperience. The French colonists had no understanding of Louisiana. They had no knowledge of its climate or how to handle the heat and humidity. Furthermore, they were not aware of the local edible plants and eventually found themselves starving. They were only able to survive after living with the local Indians who helped them. According to the Louisiana State Museum's website, "Native Americans made up the largest segment of Louisiana's population in the 1700s and shared food, medicines, material goods,

¹³ Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, "The Formation of Afro-Creole Culture," in *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanisation*, ed. Arnold R. Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 62. According to Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, deporting people to Louisiana was a convenient way to get rid of indesirables at home.

and building and recreational practices with colonists.”¹⁴ Besides, the first settlers did not have any knowledge of what construction types would be suitable for building houses and various edifices in the swampy Louisiana land, to give these structures a solid foundation.

Both underpopulation and inexperience factored greatly into the problem of disasters the early colonists faced. According to Louisiana State University geography professor Craig E. Colten “keeping the city dry, or separating the human-made environment from its natural endowment, has been the perpetual battle for New Orleans.”¹⁵ The first flood the nascent city of New Orleans encountered took place in 1719, just one year after the initial settlement began. Regardless of the obvious detrimental consequences this event had on the city, it also brought numerous measures to prevent such damage from occurring again. Bienville, as a result of the flood, saw the necessity of building man-made levees, in addition to the existing natural levees already present along the Mississippi River. According to architect Lloyd Vogt, “it was not, [however,] until 1790, when levee construction ensued in earnest, that the colonists began to get the flooding

¹⁴ “The Cabildo, Two Centuries of Louisiana History: Colonial Louisiana,” *Louisiana State Museum* (accessed September 11, 2013)
http://www.crt.state.la.us/museum/online_exhibits/Cabildo/3.aspx.

¹⁵ Craig E. Colten, *An Unnatural Metropolis: Wrestling New Orleans from Nature* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004), 2.

problem under control.”¹⁶ Additionally, settlers rebuilt the houses that were initially mere huts and tents in stronger materials to be more effectively storm resistant. New Orleans also encountered two major fires, which generated large-scale reconstruction and eventually led to the use of more fire resistant materials.

1. Resilience in Early New Orleans

Despite the numerous disasters the city and the colony as a whole had to face, one theme is typical of New Orleans: its recurring resilience. The concept of resilience can be assessed in various ways. “Resilience” defines how a place, a community, or an individual, handles a post-disaster situation and recuperates from it. In this regard, resilience appears after the result of a trauma. For example, the loss of a family member, particularly if that loss occurred following a disaster, can produce resilience. How a family or a community copes with the loss of a member in events such as that of the attacks on New York City on September 11, 2001 can also be an example of resilience.

If resilience within communities can be the result of overcoming trauma as well as the physical resistance of its residents, neighborhoods can be threatened, and can disappear, whereas physical resilience in cities is much more developed. In fact, most cities that have been affected by a major disaster in the past two

¹⁶ Lloyd Vogt, “The influence of culture: Architecture of the French Quarter,” *Louisiana Cultural Vistas* (Summer 2002): 64.

centuries have at least rebuilt in some form -- regardless of the amplitude of the disaster, regardless of the city.¹⁷

Other cities have displayed resilience after disasters, but rare, if any, are the ones who have done it as often as New Orleans. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, proportionately the worst natural the disaster the city ever encountered, New Orleanians rebuilt their city as they had always done. Maybe not fully as of yet nor as successfully as it could have, but New Orleans is still showing a strong pattern of resilience that characterizes it so distinctively.

Devastating disasters have taken place in numerous other cities all around the world. What this study addresses, however, is the recurrent theme that New Orleans encountered in its early years and how each disaster brought a new reconstruction. The study aims at demonstrating that each disaster also brought upon better preparedness and eventually contributed to the establishment of a stronger city, by the end of the colonial period. As the location of New Orleans became obvious for commercial prosperity, the early disasters also provided the opportunity to rebuild a new town, more adapted to the needs of the colony. Once that town was built and the other local cities proved to be ineffective as capital of

¹⁷ Lawrence J. Vale and Thomas J. Campanella, "The Cities Rise Again," in *The Resilient City: How Modern Cities Recover from Disaster*, ed. Lawrence J. Vale and Thomas J. Campanella (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005), 3.

the colony, New Orleans appeared as a suitable choice and therefore colonists started investing more into the future of their city.

As a comparative example of disaster-struck cities, London experienced a great fire in 1666. The fire is said to have destroyed “13,200 houses, 84 churches and 44 company halls,”¹⁸ leaving most Londoners homeless but without a large death toll. Similar to what happened in New Orleans during the great fires of 1788 and 1794, the wind enabled the flames to develop and spread very rapidly. By the time rescue intervened, most of the city had already been destroyed. London’s fire destroyed St Paul’s cathedral, as New Orleans’ fire of 1788 destroyed St Louis Cathedral. London was, at the time of the fire, such a large and congested city mostly made of wooden structures that made it very easy for the fire to spread. The narrowness of the streets was also a determining factor.¹⁹ There was no fire department to call in case of an emergency. In the aftermath, much of the old street plan was rebuilt. Some improvements, however, did take place. The city implemented wider streets, and stronger materials such as brick and stone replaced wooden constructions.²⁰

¹⁸ Bruce Robinson, “London’s Burning: The Great Fire,” (March 2011), http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/civil_war_revolution/great_fire_01.shtml (accessed September 1, 2013).

¹⁹ Robinson, “London’s Burning.”

²⁰ “How was London rebuilt?” *Museum of London*, <http://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/Explore-online/Pocket-histories/great-fire/page6.htm> (accessed September 1, 2013).

Closer to New Orleans, the city of Galveston, Texas, experienced a severe hurricane in 1900, the deadliest in US history. As in the aftermath of the great fires of New Orleans, hundreds of tents emerged to shelter the local residents whose homes had been destroyed. As a result of the disaster, new hurricane protection measures were introduced. The city built its first sea wall to protect houses from potential storms. Galveston appeared, however, too fragile to continue commercial development. In spite of reconstruction efforts, the hurricane facilitated the emergence of another nearby town: Houston. In fact, according to Carolyn Goldsby Kolb's dissertation, "the pivotal year for Houston was 1900 -- Galveston, the port on the Gulf of Mexico that might have been Houston's major competition as an urban center, was devastated by a hurricane; and, oil, which was the fuel that would feed the Houston economic boom, was discovered in vast quantities in the region."²¹ The discovery of oil enabled the rapid growth of Houston and attracted numerous individuals while Galveston lost its attractiveness and encountered a slow development, somewhat similar to the slow development originally experienced in New Orleans.

Additionally, one of the possible reasons behind the initial slow development of the city of New Orleans, compared to cities similar in size elsewhere in the country, was the fact that innovations could take quite some time

²¹ Carolyn Goldsby Kolb, "At the Confluence of Science and Power: Water Struggles of New Orleans in the Nineteenth Century" (PhD diss., University of New Orleans, 2006), 17.

to reach the city itself. New Orleans was, in the nineteenth century, one of the five largest US cities, but the only one out of these five not located on the east coast, which made it somewhat isolated from the other four.²² Despite the eventual population growth, developments in terms of sanitary facilities lagged behind that of other cities on the east coast. This geographical isolation parallels the singular culture, architecture, residents, and lifestyle of New Orleans. New Orleans was a sort of frontier town.

2. Collection of Historical Materials and Organization of the Dissertation

I have taken steps to ensure reliability, validity, and trustworthiness in my research. According to Martha Howell and Walter Prevenier in *From Reliable Sources*,²³ reliability, quite obviously, comes from using what is considered to be reliable sources. In historical research, this may come from government documents, considered the most accountable ones. According to John W. Creswell in *Research Design*,²⁴ trustworthiness comes from whether sources can be used with confidence, meaning the various interpretations of a fact from secondary sources may be considered to be accurate, according to what happened. Creswell

²² Kolb, "Water Struggles of New Orleans," 23.

²³ Martha C. Howell, and Walter Prevenier, *From Reliable Sources: An Introduction to Historical Methods* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 19.

²⁴ John W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 3rd ed. (Sage Publications, 2009), 196.

also defines validity as the process researchers use as to check their results using several types of measures such as triangulation,²⁵ to validate, or agree with in simple terms, the theme developed by the researcher. Here, as the study is a history of New Orleans' disasters during the colonial period, I have given more information and details about hurricanes and disasters using archival sources. Early disasters in New Orleans have received little attention compared to modern disasters and especially to Hurricane Katrina. Triangulation was not possible in this study due to the lack of secondary sources. In addition, interviews are no longer possible as no witnesses are still alive. I therefore sought to find agreement within primary sources.

This study is based on colonial New Orleans. It is a historical research addressing disasters during that time period. The study's main questions revolve around how early New Orleanians dealt with disasters, specifically hurricanes and fires, and how they displayed resilience. How did early New Orleanians describe the disasters they faced in their own words? How did they rebuild their city after each disaster?

The study will also discuss why the French built the city at its present site, and how they dealt with the numerous challenges they faced. The research mainly

²⁵ According to Creswell, "data will be collected through multiple sources to include interviews, observations and document analysis." Creswell, *Research Design*, 199.

consisted of archival materials.²⁶ These are primary sources, written in French, and favor the trustworthiness of the study.²⁷ This process enabled a more accurate use of contemporary statements from witnesses, the original phrases they used, to account for the events studied, for example, the term *grand coup de vent* – “great wind blow” – to describe hurricanes according to the very words of French colonials. Archival research therefore encouraged and increased authenticity, cultural sensitivity, and accuracy. Additionally, the use of several different archives in New Orleans allowed for comparison of the facts described among the available documents as to increase validity. The findings seem consistent across several sources and archives, which is meant to give the study a solid level of internal reliability.

Histories usually answer the question “what happened?” Here, this research also aims to ask “how” and “why.” These questions are associated with the reasons why the New Orleans location was chosen, and how the city displayed resilience over the years and overcame fragility because of necessity.

The dissertation is divided chronologically within each chapter. The first chapter defines the concept of resilience. It gives the ground information on what

²⁶ An indirect approach according to Russell Bernard and G.W. Ryan in their *Analyzing Qualitative Data*.

²⁷ All translations from original sources in French in the body of the dissertation (unless indicated otherwise) are my own, as a native speaker of French.

constitutes resilience in order to get a better understanding of how and why New Orleans is considered such a resilient city. The second chapter focuses on the West Atlantic situation. The chapter discusses the various colonial powers and developments, and the exploitation of a newly discovered continent: the Americas. It establishes the major players in colonialism, namely Portugal, Spain, Britain, and France, and sets the scene to discuss the development of the French possessions in North America, most specifically of Louisiana, which many countries long coveted despite its proneness to disasters. In addition, chapter two situates the historical context of the period and the possession of Louisiana from France to Spain and back to France, and explains the reasons behind these events. The chapter introduces the city of New Orleans as officially Spanish but indicates its deep rooted belonging to French customs and language and therefore the failure in the city ever to become a full fledged Spanish base. It also displays how the Spaniards were more successful than the French at improving the city's organized resilience, and at reconstructing a stronger city. This part covers the second French period as well up to the Louisiana Purchase of 1803 between France and the U.S. and the reasons behind the cession of the area to the new United States.

The third chapter serves the purpose of giving background information on the colony of Louisiana. It details the "discovery" of Louisiana by European settlers, the building of the colony, and the choice for the location of present day

New Orleans. It describes the original inhabitants of the area, Native Americans, and discusses their habits and their role in helping French colonists survive in their new inhospitable environment. This chapter introduces the main prominent figures in early Louisiana and New Orleans history and the role they each played in founding the colony and the city: René-Robert Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle; Pierre Le Moyne d'Iberville; Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne, Sieur de Bienville; and Adrien de Pauger.

This chapter also describes the harsh and unusual climate of Louisiana, which the new French settlers had no knowledge of. The extreme conditions, despite the richness of the land, led the French to some difficulties in terms of survival. What did Louisiana look like at the time of the first French settlements? The area was so large that the climate was very different in the north than in the south and that choosing a location to settle in became very important and strategic. Chapter three also discusses the birth of the new city, its initial plans, and the reasons behind the choice for the location of New Orleans. It examines previous ventures from the French colonists and their attempts to build a major town at other locations, namely at Biloxi Bay (*Fort Maurepas*), and at Mobile Bay (*Fort Louis*). These attempts all failed. There will be an assessment of the reasons behind these failures as they contributed to reinforcing the choice for New Orleans at its

present location. Possibilities for transportation and commerce in that area made the city's location a reasonable choice.

Chapter four addresses the connected issues of water and underpopulation. It balances the question of adaptation to the local site versus take over by the site itself. Have the colonists adapted or did the local conditions take over? It deliberates about the measures taken to populate the colony of Louisiana in order to protect it from potential attacks from neighboring English and Spanish colonies. Slavery and forced deportation are examined. The chapter also details the challenges the city's inhabitants faced, and the constant need to adapt to their environment. The city was built on land that was mostly swamp. Due to its uncommon geography and climate, some of its most noticeable characteristics were recurrent disasters. Finally, this chapter analyzes another part of the colony that, as New Orleans, suffered from hurricanes and storms: *La Balise*. It assesses what happened at that settlement and how unlike New Orleans, it was eventually destroyed and never rebuilt, and therefore not displaying the same resilience that New Orleans did. *La Balise* was not as strategic and "inevitable" as the city of New Orleans and was therefore eventually abandoned.

The fifth chapter specifically deals with disasters. It enumerates hurricanes that New Orleans experienced in the first century of its existence, how resilience characterized the city from its very foundation, and reflects upon these disasters. It

discusses the experiences of the local residents as they themselves described them and gives an insight on the situation of the time. This chapter continues on to analyze the two major fires that the city of New Orleans encountered during late eighteenth century, in 1788 and 1794. Here again, I used written testimonies from eye witnesses to describe the situation of the time and how it unfolded. Details of hurricanes and fires are predominant in this chapter. The squalid character of the city and its consequences are also considered. The frequency of diseases and their impact on the city are discussed.

Chapter six explores remedial measures for a disaster prone city in early New Orleans. It assesses resilience throughout colonial time and discusses the repair and maintenance of the levees, building and construction of the original city and how it evolved. This chapter presents New Orleans in the light not of a fragile disaster-struck city but of a city that overcame all obstacles with time, thanks to its resilience, because of its crucial geographical location. The numerous reconstructions encountered by the city ultimately led to the creation of a major port and commercial town, and allowed for the decisive role of New Orleans to slowly take over the fragile aspect of the original town. Here again, the necessity of the city over its fragility is highlighted. This part focuses on construction, initial and remedial, materials, and how the city was eventually able to turn each disaster it encountered into a positive outcome and rebuild a stronger city from it.

I have chosen to study the colonial period for several reasons. First, because it provided New Orleans with tremendous changes: in leadership, ways to handle challenges and disasters, and population. Second, choosing this time period enabled me to study the foundation of a new city and how its people adapted to a foreign environment. I chose to stop my analysis in 1803, when the United States took control over the territory. Third, because my native language is French and that the French led New Orleans (on and off) from 1718 to 1803. This gave me the tools to closely study untranslated documents written in French, and to propose my own translations, thus allowing my dissertation to offer an original contribution to the field.

Overall, the purpose of this study is to bring to light the struggles of a young city, which, in spite of all odds, revealed itself to be inevitable. The necessity for a city at the convergence of the Gulf of Mexico, the mouth of the Mississippi River, and with access to Lake Pontchartrain was colossal. It therefore provided the justification for working against the apparent fragility of the site (prone to flooding) in order to exploit the regional situation (with unparalleled access to water for commercial transportation). Cities are usually built in accordance with the demands of the time. Because water transportation was the only possible profitable development for commerce and transportation, building a city elsewhere would have simply meant to forsake profitable endeavors. French settlers chose

well for the location of their colonial city, and over time, this choice and the need for the city of New Orleans have been accentuated by the long-term resilience associated with each disaster.

Chronology

1492: Christopher Columbus' expedition for Spain takes him to the Bahamas Islands in an attempt to find a shorter route to the East Indies. Columbus "discovered" the New World.

1519: Spanish explorer Alonso Álvarez de Pineda writes an account of his discovery of large amounts of freshwater. It is unclear whether he describes the surroundings of the Mississippi River or the Alabama River at Mobile Bay.

1528: Landing of Cabeza de Vaca in today's Tampa Bay, Florida with 600 men. Only 4 of them would survive in the New World for over several months. Expedition for Spain.

1541: Spanish explorer Hernando de Soto crosses the Mississippi River. He and his men do not look for the mouth and see the river as an obstacle to their exploration.

1625: Foundation of New Amsterdam by the Dutch. Will be renamed New York under British dominion in 1667.

1669: French explorer René Robert Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle's first expedition enables him to "discover" the Ohio River.

1673: French Jesuit missionary Jacques Marquette and French Canadian explorer Louis Joliet start exploring the Mississippi River, downriver from Canada stopping five hundred miles from the river's mouth.

1682: La Salle and his men claim the area near the mouth of the Mississippi River for Louis XIV, King of France and name it "*Louisiane*."

1687: La Salle is assassinated by some of his men, who turned against him.

1699: Pierre Le Moyne, Sieur d'Iberville and his brother Jean Baptiste Le Moyne, Sieur de Bienville reach Louisiana. Iberville founds the first settlement in the Louisiana colony at *Fort Maurepas*, or Old Biloxi.

1701: Iberville founds a fort near the river *La Mobile* called *Fort Louis de La Mobile*.

1702: Iberville leaves Louisiana and leaves his younger brother Bienville in charge of the colony.

1706: Iberville dies from yellow fever in Havana.

1711: Bienville moves the settlement at Old Mobile to the present site of Mobile, Alabama.

1712: Antoine Crozat takes over the colony of Louisiana as a private proprietor.

1716: Bienville establishes *Fort Rosalie*, near the Natchez land.

1717: Bienville finds the site for the future city of New Orleans, by a bend in the Mississippi River.

John Law and his Company of the West take over the colony of Louisiana for France.

1718: Bienville founds *La Nouvelle Orléans*.

Arrival of historian and ethnographer Le Page du Pratz in Louisiana where he will live until 1734. He will also live amongst the Natchez Indians and learn their language.

1719: The first flood occurs in New Orleans and destroy the newly built city.

First slaves arrive in Louisiana.

1720: John Law is dismissed of his functions and returns to France.

Biloxi becomes the new capital of French Colonial Louisiana.

1721: Pauger starts laying the streets of New Orleans.

1722: The first recorded hurricane takes place in New Orleans (and neighboring areas) and wipes off the city.

The settlement of *La Balise* is founded.

1723: New Orleans becomes the capital of Louisiana (after Mobile and Biloxi).

1724: Implementation of the Code Noir by Bienville.

1726: Pauger dies from yellow fever. His last wish, probably granted, is to be buried inside St. Louis Cathedral, which he built.

1727: Arrival of the first Ursuline Nuns in Louisiana.

1729: The French massacre the Natchez Indians.

Cultivation of cotton on a small scale started in Louisiana.

1754: Start of the conflict between the colonies of France and Britain in North America.

1756: Official declaration of war in the French and Indian War (also known as Seven Years War in North America) between France and Britain.

1762: Secret agreement through which France ceded Louisiana to Spain via the Treaty of Fontainebleau.

1763: Following the Treaty of Paris, the secret cession of Louisiana to Spain becomes public knowledge, after being hidden for over a year.

1768: Riots break following the arrival of new Spanish officials forcing Governor Antonio de Ulloa to leave. The city is left without a government for several months.

1769: Irish-born Governor Alejandro O'Reilly forms the new council/government for Spain: the Cabildo.

Riots from the French against the newly formed Spanish government leads to the public execution of six French leaders on "Frenchmen" street, New Orleans.

1783: The Treaty of Paris, which officially ended the American War of Independence, acknowledges the United States of America as an independent country and gives the Floridas back to Spain.

1788: First Great Fire takes place. It destroys eighty percent of the city's populated areas. Spanish Governor Esteban Rodríguez Miró y Sabater promptly organizes relief.

1794: Second Great Fire takes place. Destroys fewer houses but more commercial buildings than the first fire. Its financial impact is greater. New building regulations follow.

1794: France abolishes slavery in its overseas colonies. Riots in the French colony of Saint Domingue break and France loses its control over the colony.

1800: Secret treaty of Ildefonso. Cession of Louisiana back to France, which remains secret for over two years.

1802: Restoration of slavery in French possessions by Napoleon Bonaparte.

1803: April: Napoleon secretly sells Louisiana to the United States of America. Signature of the Louisiana Purchase at the Cabildo building.

November: Cession of Louisiana to France, followed the next month by the official cession to the United States.

1804: Independence of Saint Domingue, renamed Haiti, as the world's first black led government.

Chapter I: Defining Resilience

Introduction

Resilience: “the capacity of [a] system to absorb change and disturbances, and still retain its basic structure and function-its identity.”²⁸

The purpose of this chapter is to define the concept of resilience, which in itself is an important component in defining the city of New Orleans. In this study I examine New Orleans’ resilience through the account of its numerous disasters and propose an explanation of what resilience is. The study aims at enabling the reader to grasp how New Orleans portrays a remarkable example of resilience throughout time.

New Orleans is famous for being a city that still stands, despite encountering numerous disasters. In this chapter I consider the city’s resilience in historical context by seeking answers to such questions as: What is resilience today? Did an equivalent exist in colonial times? Could today’s resilience be compared to the events in colonial Louisiana? Was resilience during colonial times spontaneous, or organized?

²⁸ Brian Walker and David Salt, *Resilience Thinking: Sustaining Ecosystems and People in a Changing World* (Kindle Locations 1383-1384). Kindle Edition.

1. Resilience and Mitigation

Director emeritus of the Natural Hazards Center at the University of Colorado at Boulder Dennis Mileti provides an operational definition of resilience: “Resiliency to disasters means a locale can withstand an extreme natural event with a tolerable level of losses. It takes mitigation actions consistent with achieving that level of protection.”²⁹ This chapter aims at examining the concept of resilience by reviewing some of the literature on the issue and introducing the connected concept of mitigation, essential to long lasting resilience. This chapter’s goal is to help understand the concept of resilience through time and how it is perceived and defined today as opposed to during colonial times. Early colonial New Orleans was not particularly resilient: it simply made more sense to rebuild than not because of the importance of the town.

Mitigation enables planning for disasters, which makes recovery faster and better adapted, and thus, in the long run, offers better resilience to disaster prone areas. Interest in resilience has grown in the past few decades, and as a result, related literature started dealing with the related concept of mitigation. According to the New Oxford American Dictionary, mitigation means “the action of reducing the severity, seriousness, or painfulness of something.”³⁰ Resilience itself is a

²⁹ Dennis Mileti, *Disasters by Design: A Reassessment of Natural Hazards in the United States* (Washington, D.C., Joseph Henry Press: 1999), 8.

³⁰ “mitigation, n.” New Oxford American Dictionary (accessed June 13, 2013).

concept that has been studied in many forms. Due to the recurrence in disasters of all sorts throughout the world, more and more writings can be found on the topic. In the United States resilience is quite often associated with mitigation, and has been so for at least the past forty years, when mitigation, as an official term, was first introduced in legislation following disasters.

According to specialists Kathleen Tierney and Michel Bruneau, “resilience reflects a concern for improving the capacity of physical and human systems to respond to and recover from extreme events; [while] (...) Disaster resistance emphasizes the importance of pre-disaster mitigation measures that enhance the performance of structures, infrastructure elements, and institutions in reducing losses from a disaster.”³¹ In other words, resilience is based on bouncing back, or recovering from disasters, while resistance uses pre-disaster planning to prevent or reduce damage. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word resilience was first introduced in 1626 and derives from the Latin *resilientia* meaning the “fact of avoiding” something.³² The word resilience is often associated with New Orleans in the literature and has been especially so since Hurricane Katrina hit the city in 2005. New Orleans history has seen twenty-seven major floods since the

³¹ Kathleen Tierney and Michel Bruneau, “Conceptualizing and Measuring Resilience: A Key to Disaster Loss Reduction,” *TR News*, May-June 2007 No. 250, 14.

³² "resilience, n.". OED Online. June 2013. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/163619?redirectedFrom=resilience> (accessed September 09, 2013).

birth of the city,³³ or more precisely, the year after, as the first flood occurred in 1719. This approximately equates to one “major river or hurricane-induced disaster”³⁴ every decade.

Today, more and more disasters occur throughout the world. Various factors have come to play a part in this phenomenon. The increase in population in the world due to advance in medicine and better sanitary conditions certainly, and ironically, have a part to play in this. According to Mary V. McCarthy and John J. Kiefer, “human beings are becoming more vulnerable to catastrophic disasters due to both an increase in population and the resultant need to find places to settle, which leads to the development of disaster-prone areas.”³⁵ More of the surface of the earth is also inhabited. This means that when a disaster occurs, it is more likely to happen where people are settled, and therefore, to have a more devastating impact. During colonial times, a large part of the area around New Orleans was uninhabited. Early urban areas counted very few residents and therefore there were very few buildings that could be damaged or destroyed by floods or hurricanes. In addition, according to the non-profit

³³ Kates, R. W., C. E. Colten, S. Laska, and S. P. Leatherman, “Reconstruction of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina: A Research Perspective,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 103, no. 40 (October 2006): 14653.

³⁴ Kates et al., “Reconstruction of New Orleans,” 14653.

³⁵ Mary V. McCarthy and John J. Kiefer, “A History of Hazard Mitigation in the United States,” in *Natural Hazard Mitigation*, ed. Alessandra Jerolleman and John J. Kiefer (Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press, 2012), 2.

coastal advocacy group *Restore and Retreat* “L[ouisian]A is losing 25 to 35 square miles of wetlands per year.”³⁶ This means that during colonial times, there was more land between the Gulf of Mexico and New Orleans to adsorb the some of the impacts of hurricanes and storms on the city. According to musicologist Ned Sublette, the city of New Orleans was not below sea level in colonial times,³⁷ which means that the floods encountered, despite the lack of levees and preventive measures, would not have had as damaging an impact as today, especially considering the 2005 Hurricane Katrina. This also raises the issue of planning. Could the colonists plan for floods considering the city was not below sea level? Or should they have used the recurrent storms to plan for future disasters?

The slow development of New Orleans in its early years enabled easier recovery following the first few disasters. According to the King’s Engineer Pierre Le Blond de La Tour, at the time of the 1722 first recorded hurricane, most buildings in New Orleans “were temporary and old, not a single one was in the alignment of the new town, and they were to have been pulled down.”³⁸ The

³⁶ “Coastal Erosion: Fact and Figures,” *Restore and Retreat*, http://www.restoreorretreat.org/la_erosion_facts.php

³⁷ Ned Sublette, *The World that Made New Orleans: From Spanish Silver to Congo Square* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books: 2008), 12.

³⁸ Baron Marc de Villiers trans. Warrington Dawson, “A History of the Foundation of New Orleans 1717-1722,” *The Louisiana Historical Quarterly* Vol. 3, No2, April 1920,

hurricane cleared the town to provide a new ground to make the necessary improvements possible and was therefore more of a good fortune than an actual disaster.

In modern times, the cost of rebuilding after a disaster is higher than it was during colonial times, not only because disasters are more likely to affect populated and urbanized areas, but also because today's infrastructures are more costly to rebuild than then. Nowadays, according to Kates et al., to bring a city back to its operational state following a disaster, "the time needed (...) appears to be a multiple of roughly 100 times the extent of the emergency period."³⁹

As for the frequency of disasters, it is difficult to determine whether they are more or less numerous nowadays due to technological advances. Disasters are certainly more visible due to the equipment that is used today to locate, track, and trace them. For example, hurricanes can now be predicted several days prior to reaching a said area, in order to issue warnings, and can be seen via satellite images to determine their exact location. Contrary to that, during colonial times, hurricanes could not be predicted or tracked, nor could one prepare for them. In

http://www.archive.org/stream/historyoffoundat00villrich/historyoffoundat00villrich_djvu.txt (accessed June 2009), 236.

³⁹ Kates et al., "Reconstruction of New Orleans," 14656, quoted in C. E. Colten, R. W. Kates, and S. B. Laska, "Community Resilience: Lessons from New Orleans and Hurricane Katrina," *Community and Regional Resilience Initiative* (September 2008), 4.

addition, numerous hurricanes hit areas that were uninhabited, or stayed at sea, which accounts for their going unnoticed. These remained uncounted for, since there was no way to determine they actually did exist. Today, those hurricanes remaining at sea are visible so it would naturally seem as though there are more hurricanes, simply because technology has enabled us to see them.

According to geography professor Ben Wisner, “migration to coastal cities has become commonplace in the post-colonial world [and] ... Much of this urban population lives in crowded areas, many residing in low-lying, flood-prone areas, in flimsy housing and with a lack of infrastructure. The millions who have caused these former colonial cities to swell into today's coastal mega-cities are part of the patterns of extractive, export-oriented economic activity established a century or more ago.”⁴⁰

2. Resilience to Disease

During colonial times, disasters also took the form of epidemics. This was particularly true as the newly arrived Europeans brought with them disease that had never been present in the New World. They brought anything from chicken pox to fever and the indigenous population was neither prepared nor immune to face that type of disasters. According to Tulane University history professor Lawrence N. Powell,

⁴⁰ Ben Wisner et al., *At Risk: Natural Hazards, People's Vulnerability and Disasters*, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 211.

Ever since Hernando de Soto's expedition in the 1540s, a rash of European and African-originated diseases, from measles to yellow fever—lethal by-products of that Columbian Exchange of germs, flora, and animal life between the Old World and the New— (...) decimat[ed] Indians in the Lower Mississippi Valley. Several nations (...) completely collapsed. The Choctaws, one of the larger nations, (...) [came] under renewed assault from their traditional Chickasaw enemies.⁴¹

Would resilience have even been possible in that type of situation? Probably not, or at least not immediately. New Orleans experienced several large epidemics of yellow fever that challenged its resilience from its foundation to 1905. The repetitiveness of the epidemics, just as the repetitiveness of the disasters, demonstrates a lack of mitigation and preparedness as well as a tendency to react to disasters as they emerge as opposed to planning for future events. If this holds true for hurricanes, it does too for disease. Most epidemics of yellow fever took place in the nineteenth century, after the city had become one of the most populated cities in the United States and, as such, the impact from the disease was very substantial. Although numerous epidemics broke out during colonial times, their impact was not as great as later due to the small size of New Orleans. As New Orleans grew, so did the impact of the disasters that hit the city. Many prominent figures died as a result of fever, such as Pauger, whose desire to return to France never materialized; he died in New Orleans, only a few years after laying its streets. Exact data about the impact of the fever during colonial times does not

⁴¹ Lawrence N. Powell, *The Accidental City: Improvising New Orleans* (Harvard University Press, 2012), 36.

exist. The disease, which originated in Africa, most likely reached the Americas through the slave trade. Since the first African slaves reached Louisiana in 1719, it took some time for the disease to fully develop and spread within the region. Yellow fever reached its peak in the nineteenth century. About ten percent of New Orleans' population died from the disease in the 1850's. 7,849 New Orleanians died in 1853 alone.⁴² According to history professor Henry M. McKiven Jr., "the *New Orleans Daily Picayune* (...) complained (...) [that] people (...) beg[an] leaving for healthier locations,"⁴³ thus reviving the colonial fear of desertion after disasters.

Epidemics could easily develop and were facilitated by the squalid condition of the city. The humidity added to the dirt and lack of sewage facilities contributed to the spread of diseases on a regular basis thus generating a high mortality rate. Waste was disposed of in the streets. A report on the sanitary conditions of New Orleans dated 1882 stated that: "the system of drainage is primitive and old. (...) After heavy rain storms, it is a common sight to see the rear of the district under water, which even extends as far front as Magazine Street. (...) The city, in fact, will never build out to the lake, and become the Southern Metropolis, so often

⁴² "Yellow Fever Deaths in New Orleans, 1817-1905," *Louisiana Division New Orleans Public Library*, accessed September 10, 2013, <http://nutrias.org/facts/feverdeaths.htm>.

⁴³ Henry M. McKiven Jr., "The Political Construction of a Natural Disaster: The Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1853," *Journal of American History*, 94 (Dec. 2007), 734-742.

prophesized, until this [an entirely new system of drainage] is done. The drainage into the lake is wrong in every way. The river and not the lake should receive the sewage of the city.”⁴⁴ The city’s water works were old, and made of wooden pipes. The water was distributed via the pipes through the city after having been extracted from the river then stored into a reservoir and reaching residents’ households providing them with unsanitary water. Most residents had their own personal cisterns. Yellow fever was difficult to contain as most germs were found in people’s personal cisterns from which the population drank. If the disease was in the cisterns but the water remained untreated, it would spread to the whole household.

A colossal epidemic of yellow fever broke out in New Orleans in the early twentieth century, as made public by the Board of Health on July 21, 1905.⁴⁵ “Though the danger of mosquitoes transmitting the disease had been established in 1900, five years later the city was still unprepared.”⁴⁶ Panic reached the city and thousands residents left. The disaster turned out to help residents and city officials

⁴⁴ Louisiana Board of Health, Reports of 1882, New Orleans, 1882 quoted in Martin Siegel, *New Orleans: A Chronological and Documentary History 1539-1970* (New York: Oceana Publications, 1975).

⁴⁵ John Duffy, “Pestilence in New Orleans,” in *The Past as Prelude: New Orleans 1718-1968*, ed. Hodding Carter (Firebird Press, 2009), 113.

⁴⁶ “Epidemic in New Orleans, 1905,” *The Great Fever*, 29 September 2006, accessed 10 September 2013, http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/fever/peoplevents/e_neworleans.html.

realize that the cisterns amplified the problem of the disease in the city and therefore that immediate action should be taken. The whole city started inspecting, cleaning, oiling and treating the cisterns. Those which were free of mosquitoes and clean were allowed to display a badge labeled “My Cisterns Are All Right: How Are Yours?”⁴⁷ According to history professor Jo Ann Carrigan “the 1905 epidemic created sufficient pressure to bring about the completion of New Orleans' drainage, sewerage, and water supply systems by 1909.”⁴⁸ From this major catastrophe the city managed to recover and to become stronger, just as it did following the numerous floods and hurricanes it encountered, and the 1905 outbreak was the last ever epidemic of yellow fever recorded in New Orleans and in the United States.

3. Resilience to Natural Disasters in New Orleans over Time

Resilience to a particular form of threat (and this is especially true for mitigation) can only happen should one know the nature of the threat. According to the Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo, in 1782, “the rapid current of the water (...) destroy[ed] the dykes which were not constructed with any knowledge or anticipated requirements and in consequence without solid foundations, evident facts for which the inhabitants experimented the ruin and total loss of all their

⁴⁷ Jo Ann Carrigan, “Mass Communication and Public Health: The 1905 Campaign against Yellow Fever in New Orleans,” *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (Winter 1988), 12.

⁴⁸ Jo Ann Carrigan, “Yellow Fever in New Orleans,” 19.

crops, product of their work.”⁴⁹ The ongoing mitigation problem of New Orleans partly came from the fact that every flood protection measure put in place was relative to the last storm. Levees were built and raised according to the highest level of water encountered during previous disasters, thus not acting upon protecting for future large events but coping with past relatively smaller frequent ones.⁵⁰

Without mitigation even resilience will eventually fail, which leads to the main related question: was mitigation possible during colonial times? This appears debatable. Native Indians must have faced natural disasters during the pre-colonial era but due to the lack of documentation on the topic it is very difficult to determine how they addressed the issue. Perhaps they had originally settled in what is today New Orleans and decided to abandon the area due to recurrent disasters. The proximity to water suggests that it would have been a suitable place to find food for settlement and several records, such as that of explorer Bernard de La Harpe, mention the presence of local indigenous people in the area,

Le 20 [October, 1706] on reçut la nouvelle qu'un Anglais, faisant la traite et qui avait été pris par les Tonicas, avait pour s'en venger assemblé les Chicachas, les Alibamons et autres nations alliées de la Caroline. Les Tonicas, ne se sentant point assez forts pour résister, avaient abandonné leurs villages et s'étaient réunis aux Houmas, qui les avaient reçus avec

⁴⁹ Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo, 1769-1803, *A Record of the Spanish Government in New Orleans* (New Orleans, November 8, 1782), 2.

⁵⁰ Kates et al., “Reconstruction of New Orleans,” 14654.

confiance. Dans le temps qu'ils se reposaient sur leur bonne foi, les Tonicas les avaient surpris et leur avaient tué plus de la moitié de leur nation ; ce qui en était réchappé était venu s'établir sur les bords du Bayou Saint-Jean, qui se jette dans le lac Pontchartrain , aux environs du lieu où l'on a bâti depuis la Nouvelle Orléans.

(On October 20, 1706, the news spreads that an English tradesman, that was captured by the Tonicas, had gathered the Chicachas, the Alibamons, and other [Indian] nations that were allied with Carolina to get revenge. The Tonicas did not feel strong enough to resist and abandoned their villages and gathered by the Houmas, that had welcomed them with confidence. While they rested on their good faith, the Tonicas surprised them and killed over half their nation. The survivors had come to settle along Bayou St. John, which flows into Lake Pontchartrain, near the location where was since built New Orleans.)⁵¹

4. Resilience to Natural Disasters in Other Parts of the Colonial World: the Example of the Philippines

In other parts of the world, such as the Philippines, it has been discovered that indigenous people before colonization largely relied on their environment and spiritual beliefs to determine future weather conditions as well as navigable routes to use for exploration. For example, according to the Asian Preparedness Center, without the help of a “compass or nautical devices, they made long voyages, steering their sailboats by the position of the stars at night and by the direction of

⁵¹ Bernard de La Harpe, *Journal Historique de l'Etablissement des Français à la Louisiane*, trans. Celine Ugolini (La Nouvelle Orléans: A.-L. Boimare, Libraire Editeur; Paris: Hector Bossange, Libraire, 1831), 100-101. La Harpe (1683-1765) was a French explorer who spent five years in the New World, from 1718 to 1723. He is most famous for being the first known Frenchman to set foot in what is today's state of Oklahoma.

the sea winds by day.”⁵² Indigenous people also believed that certain spirits brought certain types of disasters and that certain clues help to predict if a disaster was imminent. The Asian Preparedness Center notes that, “by judging from cloud formations and the color of the skies, sun, and moon, they would, from three days to a week in advance, predict storms, their severity, and the flooding that would follow.”⁵³

There is evidence that the forecast predictions of the indigenous people were accurate. Their predictions enabled mitigation, and therefore resilience. Did Native Indians in North America have the same type of protection system? This could have certainly helped them deal with the numerous disasters of Louisiana. In the Philippines, “historical accounts also show that the Igorots [people, one of the local people there,] moved out of an affected area in response to a disaster.”⁵⁴

Louisiana, as the Philippines, experienced a Spanish colonial period. It is interesting to see that numerous improvements linked with disaster management occurred in both places during Spanish rule. In the Philippines, the Spanish government decided to first keep a record of all the disasters that occurred. They

⁵² “The Philippine Disaster Management Story: Issues and Challenges,” *Asian Preparedness Center* (Pathumthani, Thailand: 2001), 3.

⁵³ “The Philippine Disaster Management Story: Issues and Challenges,” *Asian Preparedness Center* (Pathumthani, Thailand: 2001), 3.

⁵⁴ “The Philippine Disaster Management Story: Issues and Challenges,” *Asian Preparedness Center* (Pathumthani, Thailand: 2001), 4.

started this process in 1521. According to the Asian Preparedness Center, “their accounts of calamities and disaster events between 1521 and 1898 are considered one of the bases for the development of the present day early warning system for disaster management of typhoons, volcanic eruptions and earthquakes.”⁵⁵

Typhoons are the exact same meteorological phenomena as hurricanes, but take place in the western Pacific Ocean, and have therefore a different name. As in Spanish colonial New Orleans, Spanish colonial Manila and the Philippines had to adapt to these storms. Interestingly, yet quite logically, they used similar measures. House construction techniques improved and produced stronger buildings, usually made of stone and brick. As detailed by the Asian Preparedness Center, “churches were made of large bricks of stones that could withstand powerful storms and earthquakes. Spanish houses were made of stones on the first floor but mostly of wood on the second floor, which prevented the houses from crumbling during earthquakes while keeping them strong against powerful storms.”⁵⁶ This shows not only an example of early resilience, but also of mitigation. In New Orleans too, houses gradually went from being made of wood to brick, especially after the late eighteenth century fires that occurred during the Spanish period.

⁵⁵ “The Philippine Disaster Management Story: Issues and Challenges,” *Asian Preparedness Center* (Pathumthani, Thailand: 2001), 7.

⁵⁶ “The Philippine Disaster Management Story: Issues and Challenges,” *Asian Preparedness Center* (Pathumthani, Thailand: 2001), 8.

5. New Orleans: Dysfunctional Measures

If there is mitigation, the risks can be reduced as well as the cost associated with rebuilding. It is therefore especially important that mitigation be put in place as early as possible in disaster prone areas. In colonial New Orleans, mitigation was at first impossible due to the newness of the colonists' experiences since they could not have known how to mitigate or what to mitigate for. These measures could, however, have started taking place as the settlers became more familiar with their environment. This does not appear to have been the case. According to Powell, the flood that occurred in the spring of 1719 in New Orleans generated a deluge. Powell noted that it was "the worst overflow the local Indians could remember."⁵⁷

"The site is drowned under half a foot of water," Bienville wrote in April. The settlement would stay submerged for nearly six months. He hurriedly built some makeshift levees, the first in Louisiana history. It says something about his seat-of-the-pants rush to stake out the first major town on the river that he never thought of building dikes until disaster struck, despite obvious familiarity with the river's tendency to breach its banks. He also vowed to dig a canal connecting Bayou St. John and the river—for drainage. (...) The canal never got dug. But this was how things went in New Orleans before New Orleans officially became New Orleans, and long afterward, too: solutions to foreseeable problems usually surfaced as afterthoughts. The improvisational style was characteristic of many frontier communities. Early New Orleans raised it to an organizational principle.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Powell, *The Accidental City*, 49.

⁵⁸ Powell, *The Accidental City*, 49-50.

During colonial times, residents were responsible for building and maintaining their own levees.⁵⁹ This requirement did not foster organized levee construction nor did it promote regulations as to how levees should be built, thus favoring vulnerability and the lack of adequate mitigation.⁶⁰

6. Other Examples of Resilience

New Orleans' history undeniably displays resilience. The city has rebuilt numerous times, and each time taking advantage of the disasters encountered to overcome them and become stronger. If the repetitive aspect linked with New Orleans' disasters is remarkable, it seems that general urban resilience is a somewhat common phenomenon, especially in urban areas affected by a single disaster, and has been so, at least for the past two centuries.

⁵⁹ Baron de Carondelet, New Orleans, June 28, 1792, "Governor Carondelet's Levee Ordinance of 1792," from the certified copy in the archives of the Louisiana State Museum, New Orleans, donated by the late Miss Kate Minor.

⁶⁰ Lack of mitigation has also been an issue in recent times in New Orleans when hurricane Katrina's levees failure brought to light the lack of proper flood protection. In 1994, the first edition of Ben Wisner's book *At Risk* warned that "there ha[d] been near misses that highlight the potential damage. In 1969 hurricane Camille missed the major US city of New Orleans by about 100 km. Even so, 262 people died and losses [were considerable]. Given its coastal situation and its location between a large lake and the Mississippi River, a direct hit on New Orleans would cost hundreds of billions of dollars and probably take thousands of lives." Yet, by 2005, when Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans, the city was unprepared and its levees were dysfunctional. The ensuing reconstruction effort further confirms the resilient character of a city that, despite its lack of mitigation, still continues to be rebuilt to date, after each major disaster, perhaps demonstrating that the level of resilience exhibited is more of a spontaneous nature than organized.

According to Lawrence J. Vale and Thomas J. Campanella, “only forty-two cities worldwide were permanently abandoned following destruction between the years 1100 and 1800. (...) After 1800, such resilience became a nearly universal fact of urban settlement.”⁶¹ Vale and Campanella further explain that no matter how large the devastation, cities in the modern era have recovered and rebuilt. They illustrate their argument with the numerous cities destroyed during World War II and point to the example of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (Japan), razed by nuclear attacks, and Coventry (U.K.), destroyed via bombing. Vale and Campanella assert that even the rare cities that have completely disappeared throughout history and have been completely destroyed, still manage to exist in some form today. They take the example of Pompeii, which exists today as a remembrance and touristic site.⁶² Cities are “among humankind’s most durable artifacts.”⁶³

Additionally, Vale and Campanella suggest that rebuilding and resilience are two different things. If rebuilding occurs almost every time a disaster takes place, resilience can also be assessed in terms of human trauma. Have people relocated, have they been traumatized by the events that generated reconstruction of their

⁶¹ Vale and Campanella, “The Cities Rise Again,” 3.

⁶² Vale and Campanella, “The Cities Raise Again,” 4.

⁶³ Vale and Campanella, “The Cities Raise Again,” 5.

city? The trauma and the relocation of a city's inhabitants are also an indicator of its resilience. If governmental agencies sponsor reconstruction, resilience most often comes from people. Recovery is a difficult matter to evaluate. For some, recovery will be the face of a city and the reconstruction of its buildings, for others, it will come down to the return of its misplaced population.⁶⁴ In some cases, destruction and reconstruction simply seem inevitable. Vale and Campanella discuss the case of New York City. It seems their analysis of that city can be applied to the situation in New Orleans, where the city is "a place seemingly destined to be destroyed and rebuilt with striking regularity."⁶⁵

Urban planner Kevin Lynch, in his *Wasting Away*, takes the example of Antioch, Turkey, devastated on seventeen distinct accounts in a time period of just over one century by earthquakes, invasions, plague, but that did not disappear, although reduced to a very small village. According to Lynch, "a city is hard to kill, in part because of its strategic location, its concentrated, persisting stock of physical capital, and even more because of memories, motives, and skills of its inhabitants."⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Vale and Campanella, "The Cities Raise Again," 12.

⁶⁵ Vale and Campanella, "The Cities Raise Again," 16.

⁶⁶ Kevin Lynch, *Wasting Away: An Exploration of Waste: What It Is, How It Happens, Why We Fear It, How To Do It Well* (Random House, Inc., 1991) 109.

If cities are almost always rebuilt, one may legitimately wonder what makes New Orleans so distinctive. Among the reasons that may be evaluated is the regularity of the numerous natural disasters, a type of disaster that one can to some extent prepare for and plan for to better protect a city. In fact, in the case of New Orleans, levee construction has been and still is a crucial endeavor. Cities touched by unforeseeable disasters such as bombings, attacks, or other disasters usually only encounter such catastrophe once and therefore their reconstruction may appear less questionable. What makes New Orleans distinctive is the regularity at which disasters struck. As previously stated, New Orleans has encountered twenty-seven major floods so far,⁶⁷ or approximately one every decade. This regularity is also at the origin of recurring debates as to whether to relocate the city, or to take other measures. New Orleans was a necessary city in colonial times because of its strategic situation. Today, however, considering the rise of high-speed air and land transportation, the prevalence of the Mississippi for water transportation is not as significant. The necessity of the city is no longer linked with the commercial and development needs of the region, but with a more emotionally related resilience. New Orleanians are attached to their city. This phenomenon probably also played a part after residents had settled for several generations. A large part of New

⁶⁷ Kates, R. W., C. E. Colten, S. Laska, and S. P. Leatherman, "Reconstruction of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina: A Research Perspective," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 103, no. 40 (October 2006): 14653.

Orleanians is made of natives, or long-term residents. These inhabitants are for the most part no longer first generation immigrants. Their history is in New Orleans, and they wish to protect their heritage.

Conclusion

What is resilience today? The International Institute for Sustainable Development suggests resilience to be “a community’s capacity to cope with and recover from [hazards’] impacts.”⁶⁸ This definition adequately fits New Orleans’ reaction to hurricanes and storms. The city coped, the city recovered, each time. Did an equivalent exist in colonial times? Could today’s resilience be compared to the events in colonial Louisiana? Mitigation is a large part of today’s resilience. It is, however, still the main element that seems to be missing from the type of resilience associated with New Orleans. Despite the more effective measures and ways to cope with disasters that were put in place with time, without adequate management and implementation of mitigation, today’s resilience can somewhat still be compared to that in colonial times. Was resilience during colonial times spontaneous, or organized? It seems that the answer to this question would be that New Orleans displayed a more spontaneous resilience than organized, considering the dramatic lack of mitigation measures: it simply made more sense to rebuild.

⁶⁸ “Disaster Resilience,” International Institute for Sustainable Development, <http://www.iisd.org/ecp/es/resilience/> (accessed February 25, 2014).

Emergency management experts Dennis Wenger and Gavin Smith defined disaster recovery as “the differential process of restoring, rebuilding, and reshaping the physical, social, economic, and natural environment through pre-event planning and post-event actions.”⁶⁹ New Orleans’ main issue over time seems to come from the lack of preparedness and mitigation to face future disasters. I will now discuss the world history that preceded New Orleans’ colonial era, then move on to the disasters that the city encountered and how it dealt with recovery.

⁶⁹ Gavin P. Smith and Dennis Wenger, “Sustainable Disaster Recovery: Operationalizing an Existing Agenda,” in *Handbook of Disaster Research* (Spinger: New York, NY, 2007), 237.

Chapter II: The West Atlantic Situation:

Introduction

(to) Explore: “To search into or examine (a country, a place, etc.) by going through it; to go into or range over for the purpose of discovery.”⁷⁰

The purpose of chapter three is to discuss West Atlantic world exploration starting in the fifteenth century and leading up to the foundation of New Orleans as well as the history of Louisiana. It describes the exploration of several European powers and their claims. Several European leaders wanted to conquer the New World and particularly the area around the Mississippi River in order to develop trade possibilities with the newly discovered islands in the Caribbean. When the French claimed Louisiana, they quickly realized the potential of the area and the issues linked with its disaster prone sites, yet Louisiana remained the center of many aspirations. In other words, despite the risk for disasters, the advantages of the region far outweighed its downsides. The chapter specifically focuses on European explorations of the Americas and on the various European royal powers and throne successions to shed some light on the alliances and feuds that contributed to later wars in the New World as well as to certain strategic actions. It

⁷⁰ "explore, v.". OED Online. December 2012. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/66668?redirectedFrom=explore&> (accessed January 25, 2013).

sets the scene to discuss disasters in colonial Louisiana and the numerous countries the colony interacted with at the time.

In order to get a better understanding of the time period this analysis will focus on, it is important to examine what the Atlantic world looked like at the time of European expansion, as well as just before the colonization process started. The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw major changes in terms of territories, colonies, and land exploitation. The European race for colonies started in the late fifteenth century. Spain and Portugal pioneered this race and quickly developed large empires overseas. In an effort to develop new routes to the East Indies, the two powers decided to go westward, as opposed to the more common eastern route to reach these countries.

1. Spain

In the summer of 1492, Spanish explorations of the New World started when Christopher Columbus, after several unsuccessful attempts, convinced the Catholic Monarchs Isabella I Queen of Castile and her husband Ferdinand II King of Aragon that he could find a westward route to Asia. Columbus was a native of Genoa, Italy, who undertook a total of four explorations across the Atlantic Ocean, to what he thought were the East Indies. During his first trip, he mistakenly reached the Bahamas, and “discovered” the New World. Spain explored much of the Americas and claimed colonies in most parts of that area. Spanish colonists

obeyed a decree from the Vatican according to which they had to convert the local natives they would encounter to Catholicism. This “discovery” led to European permanent settlements on the American continent and to the spread of Christianity, widely present in Europe. Columbus’ brother founded the first permanent Spanish city in the New World, Santo Domingo, in present day Dominican Republic.⁷¹ Another Spanish explorer, Alonso Álvarez de Pineda, also examined the area and sailed through the Gulf of Mexico. During his voyage, he found such large quantities of fresh water that he believed a major river probably flowed nearby. He never found the river, and did not know it at the time, but that river was going to be the Mississippi.⁷²

A few decades after Columbus and Pineda, Spain sent another explorer, Alvar Nunez Cabeza de Vaca, on travels that generated the writings of his account in which he detailed the appearance, life, and customs of many local tribes and that numerous southwestern scholars still consider a masterpiece of anthropology. Cabeza de Vaca’s exploration took him from the wreck of his ship in what is now Tampa Bay, Florida, to the Pacific Ocean. What makes his story an exceptional piece of work is the length of his trip, over a period of several years, and the multiple roles he played throughout the area where he encountered local Indians.

⁷¹ Sublette, *The World That Made New Orleans*, 19.

⁷² Sublette, *The World That Made New Orleans*, 20.

He was enslaved in some areas, then freed, and considered a shaman with healing powers in others. Spain settled in several locations on the mainland of the newly found continent. The Spanish were known to have numerous mines, mostly gold and silver. When the French started exploring the area, it was also with the aim to take over Spanish precious metals. The news of the French exploration prompted the Spaniards to build a fort at Pensacola to protect their possession. Their tactic was successful. When the French reached Pensacola and realized the Spanish already occupied it, they continued their journey westward.⁷³

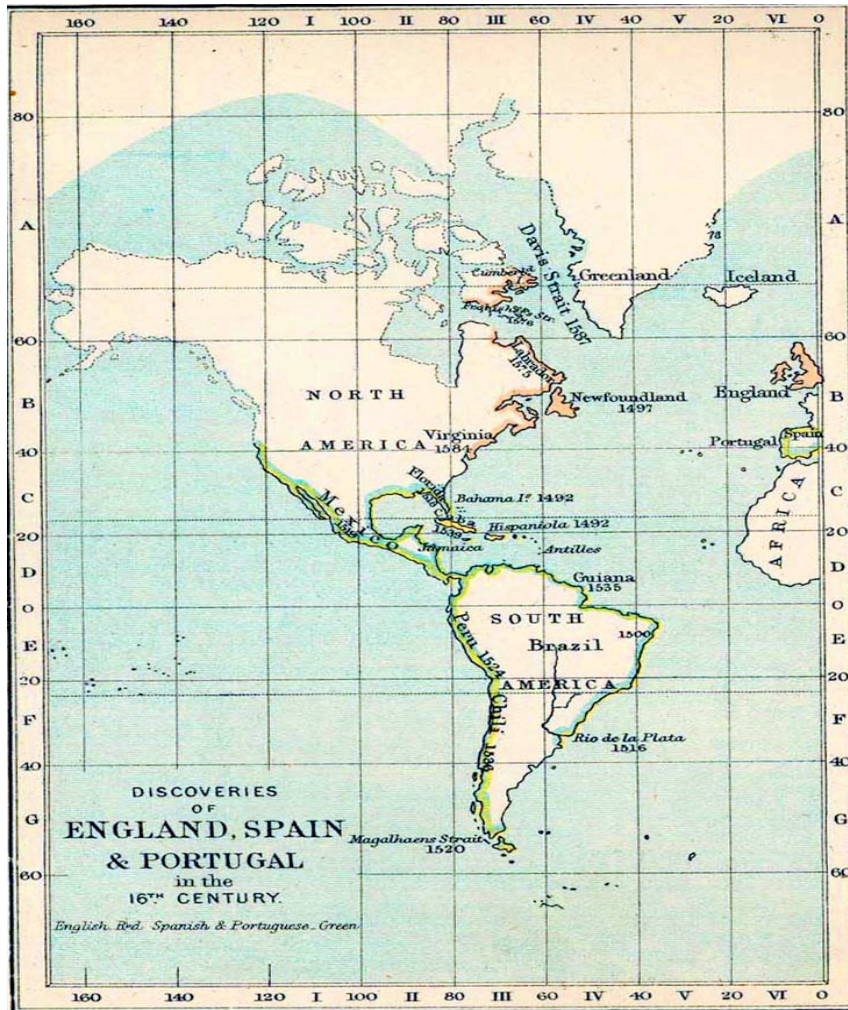
In 1609, the Netherlands and Spain, which had been at war for several decades, finally reached a truce. This event allowed them to further explore foreign territories in the New World instead of focusing on wars at home. As a result, in 1610, Spain founded the town of Santa Fe in the province of New Mexico. In 1625, the Dutch went on to build New Amsterdam, which would later become New York, under British dominion. England also had views on the French colony of Louisiana from very early on, as this design can be found in some of Bienville's writings.⁷⁴

⁷³ Sublette, *The World That Made New Orleans*, 37.

⁷⁴ See page 92.

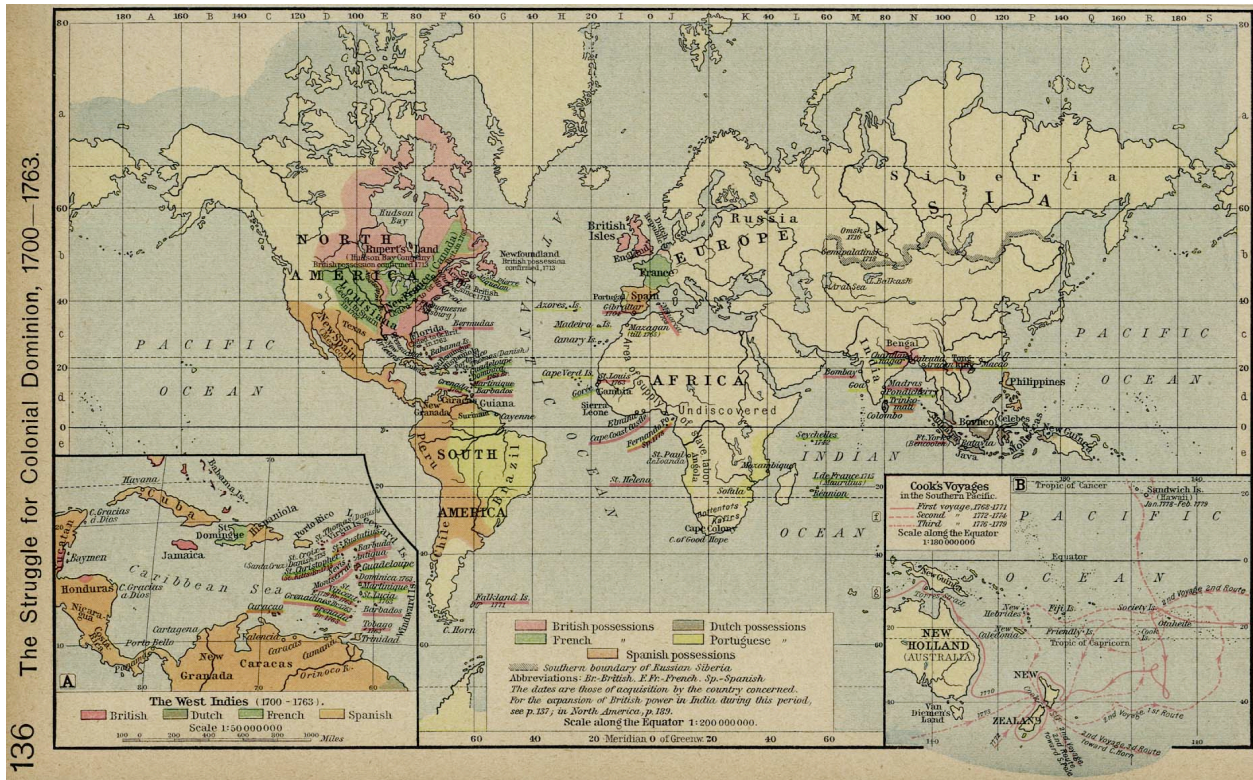
2. Portugal

As for other European ventures, Portuguese exploration took navigators to a few countries in sub-Saharan Africa, and to South America, most specifically to Brazil. In 1494, the Treaty of Tordesillas separated the world between Spanish and Portuguese exploration areas in which land east of Cuba would be for Portuguese exploration and west would be for Spanish so that the two powers did not attempt to colonize the same areas. New colonists, however, disregarded more and more this treaty with time, and notably with the intrusions of new powers in the North American colonization process. The discovery of precious metals, especially silver, motivated these European powers to further explore the newly discovered area. Below is a map of the American colonization dating from the sixteenth century displaying the predominance of Spain, Portugal and England. It displays the presence of Portugal and Spain in the whole of South America and Spain and England in most of North America:



Historical Map of the Discoveries of England, Spain, and Portugal in the 16th Century. University of Texas at Austin. From The Public Schools Historical Atlas edited by C. Colbeck, 1905.

With time, however, other powers joined the race towards colonizing the New World and the continent was divided among the Spanish, the English, the French, the Dutch, and the Portuguese:



History World Map: The Struggle for Colonial Dominion, 1700 – 1763. University of Texas at Austin. From Historical Atlas by William R. Shepherd, 1923.

3. England

In England, the beginning of the seventeenth century saw a crucial turn when in 1603, Elizabeth I died, and was replaced on the throne by James I. Elizabeth, daughter of King Henry VIII, had followed her father's path in trying to establish Protestantism for her country. King Henry broke from Rome the century prior, in 1548, in an attempt to create his own religion, the Church of England. This would enable him to divorce his infertile wife the Spanish Catherine of Aragon in order to marry the younger Ann Boleyn. During Elizabeth's reign,

arguments that her cousin, Mary Queen of Scots had a claim to the throne emerged. Mary was a Catholic and this generated much trouble within the country. She was eventually beheaded upon Elizabeth's order. After Elizabeth's death, however, James VI of Scotland, son of Mary, acceded to the throne as James I of England and restored Catholicism. James encouraged explorations to the New World and as a result, Jamestown was founded in 1607 in today's Virginia (named after the Virgin Queen Elizabeth I). Jamestown became the first permanent English settlement in today's United States.

4. France

On the French side, in 1678, explorer Louis Joliet, accompanied by missionary Jacques Marquette went down the Mississippi River. They, however, did not go all the way to the Gulf of Mexico, and stopped some five hundred miles from the river's mouth, which they therefore did not discover.⁷⁵ This was four years before René-Robert Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle's expedition down the river. La Salle was one of the most prominent explorers in the development of the colonies in the Americas. Born in 1643, he had originally planned to become a priest before deciding to follow his brother to Canada and start working in the fur trade there. Not long after, La Salle decided to undertake his own expeditions and started with the "discovery" of the Ohio River. In 1682, during another expedition,

⁷⁵ Sublette, *The World That Made New Orleans*, 31.

he found the mouth of the Mississippi going downriver and claimed the area he called “Louisiana” for the French King Louis XIV. The exploitation of the mouth of the river was a very important matter for the French who wanted to expand their territory and wealth in North America. As such, La Salle was later commanded to find the mouth of the river from the Gulf, in order to exploit the seaways to Europe for commercial purposes. This venture was never successful and La Salle never found it.⁷⁶ In 1698, Louis Phélypaux, Comte de Pontchartrain and Minister of the Marine received word that the English were planning to establish a town by the mouth of the Mississippi River. Pontchartrain therefore agreed to finance Pierre Le Moyne, Sieur d’Iberville’s trip down the Mississippi River from New France (today’s Canada) to try and establish a post before the English would get to the area.⁷⁷

As the end of the seventeenth century and the start of the eighteenth approached, another crucial issue emerged: the problem of the Spanish succession to the throne.

⁷⁶ “Robert Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle,” *Texas State Library and Archives Commission*, updated June 17, 2011, accessed September 13, 2012, <https://www.tsl.state.tx.us/treasures/giants/lasalle/lasalle-01.html>

⁷⁷ Sublette, *The World That Made New Orleans*, 36.

5. The Problem of the Spanish Succession

The War of Succession went on from 1702 to 1713. King Charles II of Spain died on 1 November 1700, without a successor. Consequently, two foreign powers related to the Spanish crown emerged as potential contestants for the crown: Philip of Anjou (grandson of the French Louis XIV), and Archduke Charles (second son of the Austrian emperor, Leopold I). Charles II had left a will in which he chose Philip of Anjou as his successor but other European powers did not wish for Spanish possessions in North America to become French and to see the country's power in Europe grow. England started a war against France in 1702. This war lasted until 1713 with the defeat of France. Subsequently, the two powers signed the Treaty of Utrecht according to which France relinquished the former English possessions of Newfoundland and all of the trading forts on Hudson Bay as well as Port Royal, thus contributing to the expansion of the British colonies on the North American continent. France was still left with a large share of the colonized land in North America and it is that part of the continent, most specifically Louisiana, which will be the focus of this research.⁷⁸

6. The Seven Years War

On the eve of the 1750s the French started worrying about the British presence in and around the area of New France. They therefore sent an expedition

⁷⁸ "The Spanish Succession," <http://www.spanishsuccession.nl/> (accessed 18 December, 2013).

to reinforce the French claim to the region and attempt to convince the local Indians to stop trade with the British. The French went all the way to Virginia where they were asked to leave by troops led by a very young George Washington. This generated a series of battles, which escalated to the point of starting a war. These events marked the beginning of what was called the French and Indian War (named as such by the British using their opponents' identity), also known as the Seven Years War. Battles took place between 1754 and 1760 in North America but the official declaration of war dates back to 1756. On November 13, 1762, France's weakened condition due to the war resulted in the Treaty of Fontainebleau. The treaty ceded Louisiana to Spain and its ruler Charles III. His cousin, the French King Louis XV ceded the area to compensate Spain for her loss of the Floridas⁷⁹ to the British during the Seven Years War. Spain had helped France defend her territories in today's Canada. Consequently, New Orleans became a Spanish colony. The treaty remained secret for two years during which the new Spanish subjects of Louisiana still believed they belonged to the French crown. Even at the time of signing the Treaty of Paris in 1763, which officially ended the Seven Years War and redesigned the look of the North American

⁷⁹ The area referred to as "the Floridas" consists of East Florida and West Florida. East Florida was roughly equivalent to today's state of Florida. West Florida would be parts of today's state of Florida, the coast line of the states of Alabama and Mississippi, and the north shore of Louisiana.

colonies, the agreement in which France compensated Spain for her loss by giving her Louisiana remained secret.

French possessions in North America were split between Spain who received Louisiana, and Britain who received everything else in New France but Saint Pierre et Miquelon, the islands near Canada, which are still part of France today. France received the islands of Guadeloupe and Martinique in the Caribbean from the British. These were the only areas the French felt would be worth having due to their sugar crop.⁸⁰

Upon finding out about their attachment to the Spanish crown, Louisiana inhabitants demonstrated their discontent by pleading for France to take the colony back under its control. This attempt was unsuccessful and as a result riots broke out in 1768, just two years after the arrival of the newly appointed Spanish governor, Antonio de Ulloa. These events forced him to seek refuge in Cuba, leaving the colony for months without a European government, and demonstrated New Orleanians' determination to remain under French rule. Spain regained control of the colony following the arrival of over four thousand soldiers. In 1769, several French leaders led riots against the Spanish government. The event resulted in the public execution of six rebels, ordered by Governor Alejandro O'Reilly. It is from

⁸⁰ "Treaty of Paris, 1763," *U.S. Department of State: Office of the Historian* (accessed 20 December 2013) <http://history.state.gov/milestones/1750-1775/treaty-of-paris>

these riots and executions of six Frenchmen, that the street name “Frenchmen,” in the Faubourg Marigny, comes.⁸¹

The Spaniards then set up a new Spanish council and called it “*Cabildo*.”⁸² When Spain took over the colony, the city of New Orleans was in such bad shape that, according to the last French Governor before the transfer, Charles Philippe Aubry, “*les Espagnols auront beaucoup de reparations a faire parce que tout tombe en ruines*” (the Spaniards will have to cope with a lot of repair as the whole city is in shambles).⁸³

7. Spanish Louisiana

From the mid-1760’s, new Spanish subjects reached New Orleans and blended in with the existing population, taking up their lifestyle, habits, language and customs, marrying the local French residents, and therefore, according to Aurélie Jousseume’s master’s thesis, also helping give “birth to a new ethnic group, the Creoles [... who had] hoped that France would once again become their

⁸¹ Michael T. Pasquier, “Insurrection of 1768,” in *KnowLA, Encyclopedia of Louisiana*, edited by David Johnson (accessed 20 December, 2013) Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities, 2010 <http://www.knowla.org/entry/762/>

⁸² Siegel, *New Orleans*, 4. The building today known as the Cabildo, which housed the Spanish government, dates back to 1795.

⁸³ Charles Philippe Aubry to the Ministre, April 24, 1765, Reel 54, WRC, trans. Celine Ugolini, New Orleans, LA.

mother country.”⁸⁴ When Spain gained possession of Louisiana, the colony had well-established French customs, habits and way of life, so that it left very little opportunity for the Spanish to leave their footprint within the colony. According to Johnson, “New Orleans remained a colonial French city. It never became Spanish in a cultural sense, and it would still be a colonial French city when the United States took over in 1803.”⁸⁵ It is also debatable whether or not after the Louisiana Purchase New Orleans immediately became an American city. In fact, many suggest that the French language and customs persisted at least until the Civil War. According to Lewis, “in 1861 [the] articles of secession [were] published both in French and English as were all Louisiana laws.”⁸⁶

The Spaniards never really made New Orleans a Spanish city and ended up acculturating themselves to French New Orleans. This was a natural outcome since the number of Spanish colonists was much less important than that of the French. Even though Spanish was the official language of the colony, in practice, only a very small fraction of the population used that language on a regular basis. Those speaking Spanish mainly occupied important governmental positions. A few of

⁸⁴ Aurélie Jousseume, “The Survival of French Identity in New Orleans through the 19th Century” (master’s thesis, Bordeaux 3, 2002), 33.

⁸⁵ Johnson, “Colonial New Orleans,” 45.

⁸⁶ Lewis, *New Orleans*, 3.

them even went as far as to “hispanicize” their lastnames in order for them to sound Spanish.⁸⁷

There was an attempt to educate the local population in the Spanish language hoping that more of the existing settlers would take the habits of the newly arrived inhabitants, rather than the other way around. But this turned out to be a failure. Shortly after the opening of the Spanish school in 1771, there were so few Spanish-speaking students and so many French-speaking ones that the school had to revise its policy and provide education in French.⁸⁸ As a matter of fact, French speakers were so numerous within the colony that for a few decades after the Americans took over, French and Foreign French⁸⁹ represented the vast majority of whites in Louisiana.

As for the Spanish language, a few place names in the area come from the Spanish language. Most Spanish inherited names are found in nearby Texas or Florida. Louisiana kept some Spanish features in its cuisine such as the Spanish-inspired jambalaya, which is said to derive from paella. Whereas Spain struggled to leave its footprint on Louisiana’s culture, it seems that France had much less

⁸⁷ Johnson, “Colonial New Orleans,” 48-49.

⁸⁸ Johnson, “Colonial New Orleans,” 49.

⁸⁹ Paul F. Lachance, “The Foreign French,” in *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanisation*, ed. Arnold R. Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 102. according to Paul F. Lachance, Foreign French are French speakers born outside of France.

trouble. Even though the French language is no longer spoken in the city, the French heritage is still very present throughout New Orleans. Many streets still bear the name of famous French figures, or French cities. Additionally, many French words remained in people's lastnames because of their ancestry. New Orleans' unofficial motto is also still in French: "*Laissez les bons temps rouler.*"

Conclusion

None of these countries had any kind of experience with disasters on a large scale when they reached the New World. If London had to handle issues of disease in 1665 with the Great Plague and fire the very next year, these were fairly isolated events that could not prepare for the repetitiveness that water damage would cause to the Gulf of Mexico area. Unaware of some of the difficulties that could arise, many proceeded to try and expand their territories in the New World. The narrative of this research will start at a time when the three main colonial powers, namely England, France, and Spain, found themselves in close proximity, and their territories intersected. Because of this close proximity, the three powers tried to keep their own colonies under control and free from their neighbors' invasions, as well as planning for expansion. As described on the map below, North America was divided in three. England claimed the northeast, and the very north, while Spain colonized the southwest and the southeastern extremity. France, however, found itself claiming Louisiana, an area located exactly in the middle of the other

two powers. Because of such strategic yet fragile location, protecting and populating Louisiana became essential. Being at the intersection of three powers meant that Louisiana, and especially its southern tip, where the future city of New Orleans would later be located, could easily be invaded. This also meant it bore a great location for trade and commercial development: the area had to be claimed, tamed, and developed. The area brought much interest from numerous colonial powers to claim the region for its resources and potential. European colonists, however, were not fully aware of its susceptibility to disasters. They ventured on the basis of the richness of the area and its ideal location for commerce and trade. Once Louisiana claimed, disasters and issues of survival became more apparent, but as the location prevailed, keeping the colony and the future city of New Orleans in working order seemed justified.



North America 1755 - 1760

Source:

<http://faculty.marianopolis.edu/c.belanger/quebechistory/encyclopedia/SevenYearsWar-FrenchandIndianWar-TheWaroftheConquest.htm>

The next chapter will discuss the area of Louisiana, and its original inhabitants. Then it will analyze the young city of New Orleans, its beginnings, its foundation and the men that contributed to it. It will also evaluate the other options that could have been used for the site of the colony's main town and why they

were not successful. Later chapters will move on to discuss and assess the resilience of New Orleans.

Chapter III: Fragile Beginnings

Introduction

This chapter evaluates the importance of the Louisiana colony and its necessary development for commercial purposes. It analyzes the motivation behind the foundation of a new city: *La Nouvelle Orléans*, which, regardless of its numerous downsides, was a viable venture. The location of the future city generated numerous debates. When the issue was settled, New Orleans developed as a major port, taking advantage of a strategic location and situation,⁹⁰ at the mouth of the Mississippi River. It was this very situation, enabling access and transportation all the way to the northern part of the French claim, that established the necessity of the city itself. The city's situation contributed to its constant resilience and efforts to rebuild after each disaster, no matter how numerous or frequent, in the history of this fragile settlement. Other settlements that did not offer such a strategic location but bore the same inconvenience did not encounter the same fate as New Orleans. *La Balise* was washed away little by little by repetitive hurricanes and was eventually not rebuilt. Biloxi and Mobile both lost

⁹⁰ "Situation" refers to the manner in which the city connects with larger entities (regional, mondial), whereas "site" defines the actual location where the city was built and its attributes.

their position as capital of the colony, were moved to other locations, and never grew economically, commercially, or population wise the way New Orleans did. These failed attempts demonstrated that the location of the Crescent City could not have been surpassed; no other town enjoyed as much success as New Orleans did.

In addition, this chapter will focus on the exploration of the new region and the prominent figures that led to the birth of this unique city, assess its environment, and discuss the original inhabitants of the area without whose knowledge of the land and its resources, survival of the colonists may have been compromised. For this purpose I will use writings by French explorer Bernard de La Harpe, that I have translated; English translations of writings by French ethnographer and historian Antoine-Simon Le Page du Pratz; and numerous primary sources that I have also translated, such as letters by Adrien de Pauger (and his early maps of New Orleans), Bienville, Montigny, Aubry, and other official figures.

On May 12, 1678, the area of Louisiana came to the attention of France. Louis XIV, King of France, gave written permission to René Robert Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle to explore the western part of what was then called “*Nouvelle France*.” In his letter, King Louis stresses the importance of “*la découverte de ce pays dans lequel il y a apparence que l’on pourra trouver un chemin pour pénétrer jusqu’au Mexique*” (uncovering this country where it seems possible to find a way

to penetrate into Mexico).⁹¹ Exploiting Louisiana was particularly crucial as the area was at the intersection of the three major colonial powers of the time. Yet, according to historian Anka Muhlstein, when “in the name of the most high, powerful, invincible, and victorious Prince, Louis the Great, by the grace of God Kind of France and Navarre, fourteenth of the name, [La Salle], this ninth day of April one thousand six hundred and eighty-two, [took], in the name of His Majesty and of his successors to the crown, possession of this country of Louisiana, its seas, harbors, ports, bays, adjacent straits, and all the nations, peoples, provinces, cities, towns, villages, mines, minerals, fisheries, streams, and rivers,”⁹² the reaction of the King was less than enthusiastic. A year had passed by the time the news reached the mother country, and Louis XIV asserted that he believed “Sieur de La Salle’s discovery [was] quite useless.”⁹³

In contrast, La Harpe asserted that:

La Louisiane est un pays si étendu et si rempli de toutes sortes d'arbres, qu'il est aisé de comprendre qu'on y peut tirer parti des bois propres à la construction des vaisseaux et au débit des îles de l'Amérique, et des brais et goudrons que nous tirons des étrangers.

(Louisiana is such a vast country filled with all sorts of trees, that it is easy

⁹¹ Louis XIV to Robert Cavelier de La Salle, May 12, 1678, 2, “Permission au Sieur de La Salle de découvrir la partie occidentale de la Nouvelle France,” trans. Celine Ugolini, Reel 1, WRC, New Orleans, LA.

⁹² Anka Muhlstein, *La Salle: Explorer of the North American Frontier* (Arcade Publishing, 1995), 157.

⁹³ Muhlstein, 157.

to understand the benefits in taking advantage of the woods proper to building vessels and to trade with the islands of America, and of the coal pitch and tars that can be obtained from foreign powers.)⁹⁴

Claiming Louisiana was dangerous as it could be prone to attacks and invasions from its neighbors but, at the same time, it provided France with great opportunities that could not be disregarded. In addition, the letter from King Louis detailing his desire to claim the area officially marked the start of a quest to tame this disaster and storm prone region for France.

According to Powell, “as early planners viewed things, the new colony would be a hybrid of the British Chesapeake and New Spain: a slave-powered tobacco society, to be sure, but one whose plantations were concentrated around a principal town as opposed to being broadcast hither and yon, as was the case in the English tidewater. This urban-anchored strategy would facilitate the transaction of commerce and legal business and make colonial defense less problematic. Spain’s success at colonizing Mexico and Peru by building cities was frankly the model.”⁹⁵

1. The French and Indian Encounter

Before La Salle’s exploration, Native Americans, mainly Choctaws, peopled this gigantic land. Because of their uncommon looks and customs the Choctaws originally frightened the first Europeans exploring the area. They were heavily

⁹⁴ La Harpe, *l’Etablissement des Français à la Louisiane*, trans. Celine Ugolini, 369.

⁹⁵ Powell, *The Accidental City*, 42-43.

tattooed, especially on their faces, and used fire smoke as a mosquito repellent. Even though they washed daily this process gave them a dark and dirty appearance. The attitude of the French settlers towards the local native population was similar to that in Canada. After Jacques Cartier, the French explorer who asserted ownership of what is today Canada for France, failed to “subdue [local indigenous people] by force,”⁹⁶ the colonists understood that befriending the Indians would be a more effective way to perpetuate a good and peaceful relationship.

The way the French perceived the presence of native nations on or near their area of settlement was very different from what the English perceived in their Northeastern colonies. The French saw a collaboration with the Indians as very profitable, both for commercial purposes as well as to be able to count them as allies if faced with potential English attacks. Additionally, the French were able to use Indians’ knowledge of the land and its produce. According Muhlstein, “from the swamp the [Indian] women gathered large roots, called macopin, which tasted something like a sweet onion. La Salle has left an exact recipe: “The Indians make a hole in the ground and into it put a layer of stones that are red from the fire, then a layer of leaves, then one of macopins, another of reddened stones, and so on to

⁹⁶ Jerah Johnson, “Colonial New Orleans: A Fragment of the Eighteenth-Century French Ethos,” in *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization*, ed. Arnold R. Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana University Press, 1992), 20.

the top, which they cover with earth and let the root sweat inside. It is quite a good dish as long as the roots are well cooked.”⁹⁷

La Harpe noted that:

on trouve dans cette colonie quantité de simples utiles à la médecine, comme l'esquine [et] le sassafras ... Il y a pareillement le baume de copaline, et plusieurs gommes, plusieurs simples et racines inconnues dont les sauvages se servent avec succès. On y a fait récemment la découverte d'une racine que les sauvages nomment tisaougène, qui teint en rouge.

(there are in this colony number of leaves useful to medicine, such as white Asian plants [and] sassafras ... There is also copaline balm, and several plant gums, several unknown leaves and roots that the savages use successfully. A root that the savages call *tisaougène* and that is a red dye was recently discovered.)⁹⁸

Over time, the French depended on the existing local population and their knowledge of the land for survival. According to Powell, “in times of famine, various Indian nations—such as the Choctaws and the Houmas, the Natchez and the Chitimachas—fed the colony, even taking settlers and soldiers into their villages when colonial warehouses were bare.”⁹⁹ While subsistence on the local Indians was essential to the French settlers, historians disagree about the situation in the colony. Most argue that the French often starved and therefore that without the help of the local Indians they may not have been able to sustain. While others,

⁹⁷ Muhlstein, 148.

⁹⁸ La Harpe, *l’Etablissement des Français à la Louisiane*, trans. Celine Ugolini, 370.

⁹⁹ Powell, *The Accidental City*, 36.

such as Powell, claim that if the French were starving, “from the perspective of the Mississippi-Caribbean worlds ... Louisiana and its colonial capital were actually eating quite well.”¹⁰⁰

As in Canada, the concept of “one blood”¹⁰¹ developed by Jean Baptiste Colbert, French minister of finance, emerged in the Louisiana colony. This concept consisted in intermarriages between French settlers and local natives. Its purpose was to populate the vast and empty area that the Canadian part of New France constituted, and to help protect the region from potential invasions from the not too distant British. It was, according to ethnographer and historian Antoine Simon Le Page du Pratz, “a prudent precaution to live in peace with the natives, and treat as legitimate the children they had by the daughters of the Arkansas [and other tribes], with whom they matched out of necessity.”¹⁰² The problem with using this policy was the fact that since the natives were much more numerous than the French colonists, it seemed they ended up influencing the French and leaving their marks on their culture a lot more than the French actually did on the natives’ culture. The French identity therefore quickly began to fade among the Indians’

¹⁰⁰ Powell, *The Accidental City*, 105.

¹⁰¹ Johnson, “Colonial New Orleans,” 23.

¹⁰² Le Page du Pratz, *History of Louisiana*, 6.

culture.¹⁰³ The French way of interacting with the local population was more fruitful in terms of cooperation and coexistence than that of the English.

As explained by historian Gary B. Nash, this process of toleration of the native cultures in addition to the “greater flexibility and willingness” of the French “to accept native culture on its own terms . . . led to a far greater degree of interaction between the cultures in New France than in England’s colonies.”¹⁰⁴

Despite the fact that the French seemed to show greater degrees of toleration towards the native population, in their quest to “Frenchise” the Indians, the missionary priests neglected a very important detail: language. Many Frenchmen, including *commissaire ordonnateur*¹⁰⁵ Jean-Baptiste du Bois Duclos, seemed convinced that this was part of the reason why the conversion of natives to Christian faith was not entirely successful.¹⁰⁶ The colonists chose to disregard, or at least not pay a particular attention to the locals’ language and culture in the process of acculturating the existing population. One person who seemed to have understood the importance of language is Bienville, the founder of New Orleans.

¹⁰³ Johnson, “Colonial New Orleans,” 28.

¹⁰⁴ Gary B. Nash, *Red, White, and Black: The People of Early America* (Englewood Cliffs, 1974), 106.

¹⁰⁵ Chief of the police.

¹⁰⁶ Jean-Baptiste du Bois Duclos, sieur de Montigny to the Ministre, Fort Louis, July 15, 1713, 2, “Memoire Pour repondre aux Instructions envoyées par Monseigneur Le Comte de Pontchartrain au S. DuClos Comm. le la Marinne ordinnateur a la Louisiane,” Reel 4, WRC, New Orleans, LA.

According to Powell, “gifted at Indian languages, often sending cabin boys to live among various tribes, [so] that they too might become bilingual ... [Bienville] approached the Indian culture of greeting and insult with high solemnity ... He understood that the calumet (the pipe was named for its decorative stem, usually adorned with variously colored feathers, depending on the ceremonial occasion) was essential for achieving harmony and building new relationships. And he took in the importance of gift exchanges.”¹⁰⁷ This was a form of early resilience as the French had to adapt to the locals, their culture, and their language. As for the English, according to Bienville, “*Les anglois de la Caroline font tous leurs efforts pour s’attirer les Sauvages allies des francois*” (The English from Carolina make every effort to befriend the savages who are the allies of the French)¹⁰⁸ yet remained unsuccessful at considering them as allies.

The English attempted several times to befriend the Indians near their northeastern colonies. After realizing they could not conquer them, the English chose a different type of strategy. As Charles Philippe Aubry – newly appointed Governor of Louisiana – explained in a letter dated April 24, 1765, “*les sauvages donnent beaucoup d’occupation aux anglois*” (the savages keep the English very

¹⁰⁷ Powell, *The Accidental City*, 38.

¹⁰⁸ Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne, Sieur de Bienville to the Ministre, October 12, 1708, 4, Reel 2, trans. Celine Ugolini, WRC, New Orleans, LA.

occupied),¹⁰⁹ and the English faced “*beaucoup de peine a les contenir*” (much trouble containing them).¹¹⁰ In 1646, following almost forty years of war with the Indians – especially the Powhatan Indians located in the eastern part of Virginia, whose chief Wahunsenacawh was the father of the famous Pocahontas – the English wrote a treaty. The treaty set specific areas for the Indians to live in and in which they would not be attacked or molested so long as they did not go against Englishmen settling on former Indian land. They also implemented a system that made the Indians check in before entering English territories. For that reason, in many ways, the “1646 treaty was the forerunner of the reservation system.”¹¹¹

The alliances between the French and the local Indians enabled resilience.¹¹² The local Indians passed on their knowledge of the land and its plants to the inexperienced Frenchmen in order to help them survive through difficult times. These “friendships,” which the English were never able to accomplish, proved decisive in the development of the early colony.

¹⁰⁹ Charles Philippe Aubry to the Ministre, April 24 1765, Reel 54, trans. Celine Ugolini, WRC, New Orleans, LA.

¹¹⁰ Aubry to the Ministre, April 24, 1765, trans. Celine Ugolini.

¹¹¹ Johnson, “Colonial New Orleans,” 25.

¹¹² If resilience today implies a series a governmental policies, during colonial times, resilience held a different meaning. In fact, it mostly referred to the capability to overcome disaster, and was not regulated but spontaneous.

2. The Four Founding Fathers of New Orleans

This section discusses four prominent figures in the creation of New Orleans and the colony of Louisiana: René-Robert Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle; Pierre Le Moyne, Sieur d'Iberville; Jean Baptiste Le Moyne, Sieur de Bienville; and Adrien de Pauger. These four men had much to do with the development of the colony, the city of New Orleans, and contributed to founding some of the earliest flood protection measures of the area. La Salle was the explorer who claimed Louisiana for France; Iberville and Bienville were two French Canadian brothers who sailed across the Atlantic from France to explore and develop Louisiana. Bienville eventually founded the cities of New Orleans and Biloxi, and co-founded Mobile. He was also Governor of Louisiana for thirty years. Pauger was the assistant engineer who planned and laid the streets of New Orleans. La Salle, Iberville, Bienville, along with Pauger, played a major part in the foundation and development of the city of New Orleans. From exploring the area to deciding the location of the future city, and laying its streets, they engineered the birth of the Crescent City.

La Salle had already undertaken several explorations in the New World before going to the southern part of New France. He discovered the Ohio River in 1669 and explored much of the northern part of today's United States. In 1682, he went down the Mississippi River to find its mouth, which he finally reached on

April 9 of that year. He named the new area he found “*Louisiane*” in honor of King Louis XIV of France who had enabled him to further his exploration of the territory. He also (re)named the river *St. Louis*, in honor of that same king.

According to Former Governor of the English colony of West Jersey, Colonel Daniel Coxe, “the River *Meschacebe* is so call’d by the Inhabitants of the North; *Cebe*, being the Name for a River, even as far as *Hudson’s Bay*; and *Mescha*, great, which is the great River; An by the *French*, who learn’d it from them, corruptly, *Mississippi*; which Name of *Meschacebe* it doth retain among the Savages, during half its Course: Afterwards some call it *Chucagua*, others *Sassagoula*, and *Malabanchia*, as it fares with the *Danubius*.”¹¹³ According to the Baron Marc de Villiers, ““Mississippi, or River Everywhere,” says an anonymous memoir in the National Archives, “comes from the Ontoubas word Missi or the Illinois Minoui, everywhere, and Sipy, river, because this river, when it overflows, extends its channels over all the lands, which are flooded and become rivers everywhere. It is also called Michisipy, Great River; and the Illinois call it Metchagamoui, or more commonly Messesipy or Missi-Sipy, All-River, because all the rivers, that is to say very many, empty into it, from its source to its mouth.””¹¹⁴

¹¹³ Colonel Daniel Coxe, *A Description of the English Province of Carolana, by the Spaniards call’d Florida, And by the French La Louisiane*, a facsimile reproduction of the 1722 edition (Gainesville, The University Presses of Florida: 1976), 4.

¹¹⁴ De Villiers trans. Dawson, “History of the Foundation of New Orleans,” 163.

In addition, according to de Villiers, colonists used the name Mississippi (what the Illinois Indians knew the river as) to refer to the river because it was discovered going downstream. Should the river have been discovered from its mouth going upstream, it would probably have been referred to as Malbanchia, name used by the Indians living south of the Arkansas.¹¹⁵ It is also historical circumstances that have given the Mississippi River its name, as the Missouri River is longer than the Mississippi. For that reason, geographically speaking, the Missouri should be considered the main river and the Mississippi should be its tributary thus technically placing New Orleans on the Missouri River, but history decided otherwise when the Mississippi River was discovered first.¹¹⁶

Upon La Salle's return to the southern part of Louisiana, he was unable to locate the mouth of the river, coming from the Gulf of Mexico for the first time. He had previously found the mouth going downriver from the northern part of *Nouvelle France* and had therefore no idea of what the mouth would look like from the Gulf. La Salle missed it and landed somewhere in what is now Texas, where he built a fort which would later be destroyed by Native Americans. He named the settlement located in Matagorda Bay *Fort St. Louis*, between today's cities of Houston and Corpus Christi, where the Texas Colorado River meets the Gulf of

¹¹⁵ De Villiers trans. Dawson, "History of the Foundation of New Orleans," 163.

¹¹⁶ Kimmel, Jim, *The San Marcos: A River's Story* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2006), 2.

Mexico. “But after several days,” according to Le Page du Pratz “some of his people, irritated on account of the fatigue he exposed them to, availing themselves of an opportunity, when separated from the rest of his men, basely assassinated him.”¹¹⁷

By 1697, the project to establish a new large settlement emerged to prevent the English from developing their existing colony to the east and taking possession of the French territory. According to Le Page du Pratz:

The facility of the commerce with St. Domingo was, undoubtedly, what invited [the colonists] to the neighbourhood of the sea, though the interior parts of the country be in all respects far preferable. However, [the existing] scattered settlements, incapable to maintain themselves, and too distant to be able to afford mutual assistance, neither warranted the possession of this country.¹¹⁸

On May 12, 1712, Pierre D’Artaguiette, an officer in the French Army, wrote in a letter to the government minister that “*les anglois sont les voisins les plus a craindre*” (the English are the neighbors we need to fear most).¹¹⁹ Well before that, at the turn of the century, Bienville’s brother, French Canadian Iberville, saw the opportunity to financially secure his future by building a new settlement. Iberville was one of Charles Le Moyne’s eleven sons. Charles was a

¹¹⁷ Le Page du Pratz, *History of Louisiana*, 6.

¹¹⁸ Le Page du Pratz, *History of Louisiana*, 6.

¹¹⁹ Pierre D’Artaguiette, “Memoire sur la scituation presente de la Colonie de Louissianne,” Bayonne, France, 4, May 12, 1712, Reel 3, trans. Celine Ugolini, WRC, New Orleans, LA.

dear friend of La Salle. Iberville saw La Salle's explorations in the New World as an admirable career to embrace. The crown of France accepted his plans and granted him permission to explore the area. With the approaching succession to the throne of Spain that could impact the ownership of Louisiana and neighboring colonies, developing the North American colonies seemed a cautious solution to protect the existing posts from potential English attacks. France wanted to establish itself either in a position to inherit the throne of Spain (and therefore to have access to assets in New Spain) or, if not, to be in a good position to attack the latter¹²⁰ if the royal house of Austria, the Hapsburgs - who also had a valid claim to the throne - inherited it. Charles II of Spain's mother was Mariana of Austria. As it happened, the new king of Spain was to be Philippe de France, or Philip V of Spain, the first of the Bourbon dynasty to rule in Spain.

Iberville lacked financial means to venture across the ocean and start his project, and therefore looked for a sponsor who could help him. The Comte de Pontchartrain became his benefactor. Iberville sailed across the Atlantic Ocean in October 1698 alongside his younger brother Jean-Baptiste, Sieur de Bienville. When Iberville, Bienville and their men arrived ashore, they followed some advice given by the Indians they had encountered and who had told them that the mouth of the river was a short distance west of their arrival ground. They finally reached

¹²⁰ Johnson, "Colonial New Orleans," 28-29.

the mouth of the Mississippi on March 2, 1699.¹²¹ Iberville and Bienville stopped and made camp for the night by a river. At the time, they did not know that river was the Mississippi. They moved near a smaller river to rest and decided to name the place “*Pointe du Mardi Gras*” in honor of the French celebration taking place every Shrove Tuesday¹²² since the middle ages, as they reached it on that day. They also decided to name the shorter river out of the two Bayou Mardi Gras. These were the first known uses for the words Mardi Gras in Louisiana.¹²³

During his exploration, Iberville also encountered two lakes. He named one of them Pontchartrain after his sponsor, and the second Maurepas, after the Comte de Pontchartrain’s son. While examining this vast empty area, the Le Moyne brothers knew they had to build towns, posts, and forts, to enable the colony to grow and to protect it. Iberville attempted to build a settlement at Biloxi Bay to the east. Since this location did not provide access to the interior of the Louisiana colony and was very prone to flooding, it was a failure. Another attempt at a settlement took place at Mobile Bay in 1702. There again, the location was not

¹²¹ John B. Garvey and Mary Lou Widmer, *Beautiful Crescent: A History of New Orleans* (New Orleans: Garmer Press, 1982) 18.

¹²² Shrove Tuesday is the day before Ash Wednesday, which marks a day of eating festively before fasting for Lent until Easter.

¹²³ According to Aurélie Jousseume, “The Survival of French Identity in New Orleans through the 19th Century” (Master’s Thesis, Bordeaux 3, 2002), 96, it would not, however, be until a “1781 report to the Spanish colonial governing body, the Cabildo,” that a written reference to an actual carnival would be discovered.

ideal. Ships could hardly access the town, which made commerce and delivery of resources almost impossible.

Iberville left the colony and went back to France before going to Havana where he died from yellow fever in 1706. His younger brother Bienville was from then on in charge of the Louisiana colony and became its governor. Bienville was a French Canadian from the region of Ville Marie, later called Montreal, who received his title (Sieur de Bienville) at the death of his elder brother François in 1691.¹²⁴ In 1698, he and his brother Iberville became the first Europeans to reach the mouth of the river and penetrate it from the sea, as opposed to La Salle who had previously discovered the mouth going downriver. After the death of Iberville, young Bienville was to be in charge of building a city that would become the main settlement of the region. In order to do that, he needed to locate a site for the future city.

Adrien de Pauger remains one of the most important figures in the foundation of New Orleans, if not the main one. He is, however, not very well-known and most of the credit for founding New Orleans is usually attributed to Bienville. Pauger laid the streets of the city, named most of the original streets, planned for the original cathedral (that burned during the great fire of 1788), and

¹²⁴ Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online, "Le Moyne de Bienville, Jean-Baptiste," http://www.biographi.ca/009004-119.01-e.php?&id_nbr=1486&interval=25&&PHPSESSID=aks0s05kcsc247mcg01pk5ej02 (accessed March 29, 2008).

encouraged Bienville to petition for the seat of the government to be moved from Biloxi to New Orleans, which eventually took place in 1722. Pauger also surveyed the river mouth and noticed it had deep enough areas to enable large boats to go through. He therefore urged for a larger port to be built at New Orleans, the city he believed had the potential to become the most successful of the colony.

These four men played a large part in the development of the colony of Louisiana. They used local attributes of the region to build several settlements and learned to overcome climate and environment issues.

3. Climatic Considerations

The colony of Louisiana is very different from today's state of Louisiana where New Orleans is located. The conditions in the colony were not uniform in terms of climate, due to its vast size. The southern region presented a warm and agreeable climate, warmer than in France or in Canada, and more humid. The winters were generally mild, and certainly easier to handle than those in Canada or France. The very southern tip of the colony had a very hot climate and was prone to storms and inundations, while the northern part bore colder temperatures, and harsher winters, most often encountering snow. According to La Harpe:

Le climat en général est tempéré; il est le même de la Perse , du Mogol et d'une grande partie de la Chine; toutes les saisons y sont assez bien marquées, et si les nouveau-venus trouvent que le pays soit plus chaud que froid , c'est qu'ils viennent la plupart des pays septentrionaux; ceux qui arrivent des îles pensent différemment. Pour connaître la bonté du climat de cette province il faut remarquer que l'air que l'on y respire est sain , et que

les terres sont très fertiles. On ne sait ce que c'est que les maladies épidémiques qui désolent les autres parties de l'Amérique, et s'il y a dans le pays quelques mortalités, elles n'ont été causées que par les maladies contractées à Saint-Domingue, et par la misère où les colons ont été réduits en arrivant à la côte. L'expérience a fait connaître depuis long-temps que les maladies des Européens se communiquent plus facilement aux Indiens, que celle de ces derniers aux Européens, ce qui vient de ce que les pores de la chair des blancs sont plus resserrés que ceux des sauvages. On remarque à la vérité que les nouveau-venus sont pour la plupart attaqués d'une fièvre lente ; mais quoiqu'elle affaiblisse beaucoup, on ne voit pas de personnes en mourir. Il faut aussi convenir que les côtes de la mer dont le terrain sablonneux est moins humide sont très saines , et dès qu'on a franchi ces bas-fonds, en avançant dans les terres, on y jouit d'une santé très constante; que si l'on voit peu de vieillards parmi les sauvages, c'est qu'ils se tuent les uns les autres avant d'arriver à la vieillesse , ou qu'ils détruisent la bonté de leur tempérament par des travaux qui les épuisent en peu de temps.

(The climate is generally mild, similar to that in Persia, Mongolia, and parts of China. Every season is fairly well defined, and if the new comers find that the country is hotter than cold, it is because most of them come from northern countries; those who come from the islands think differently. To appreciate the goodness of the climate of this province one has to realize that the air is pure, and that the land is very fertile. The diseases that affect other parts of America are not known to Louisiana and if there are some deaths in the country, they are caused by diseases caught in Saint Domingue, and by the poor conditions the colonists were reduced to upon arrival by the coast. Experience has long shown that the diseases the Europeans brought are more easily passed on to the Indians than the other way around, which comes from the fact that Caucasians' skin pores are tighter than that of the savages. It is to be rightfully noticed that the new comers are affected by a slow fever. However much the fever may weaken, nobody is seen dying from it. One must also agree that the sea coasts, of which the ground is sandy and less humid, are very healthy, and as soon as those lands are crossed, going inland, one can enjoy a very stable health, and that if there are only few elderly between the savages, it is because they kill each other before reaching old age, or that they destroy the goodness of their character with hard work that exhausts them very quickly.)¹²⁵

¹²⁵ La Harpe, *l'Etablissement des Français à la Louisiane*, trans. Celine Ugolini, 355-357.

Between these two extremes were numerous places that provided an adequate climate to settle, but that did not offer the commerce possibilities that the north did, through its lakes and waterways, or that the south offered via the Gulf of Mexico and the proximity to the mouth of the Mississippi River.

The area New Orleans is located on presents a sub-tropical climate prone to numerous storms, flooding, and hurricanes during the summer months.

Additionally, as Le Page du Pratz noted:

from Manchac down to the sea, it is probable, and even in some degree certain, that all the lands thereabouts are brought down and accumulated by means of the ooze which the Mississippi carries along with it in its annual inundations, which begin in the month of March, by the melting of the snow to the north, and last for about three months.¹²⁶

On top of bringing a favorable climate, the region was very rich in natural resources: from animals and plants for nourishment to precious metals for trade, commerce, and financial development. The area, according to Le Page du Pratz, was

stored with game of every kind. The buffalo is found on the most rising grounds; the partridge in thick open woods, such as the groves in meadows; the elks delight in large forests, as also the pheasant; the deer, which is a roving animal, is every where to be met with, because in whatever place it may happen to be, it always has something to browse on.¹²⁷

¹²⁶ Le Page du Pratz, *History of Louisiana*, 213. Manchac, Louisiana, was a fort located between Lake Maurepas and Lake Pontchartrain.

¹²⁷ Le Page du Pratz, *History of Louisiana*, 253.

Le Page du Pratz went on to note that:

The ground on which New Orleans is situated, being an earth accumulated by the ooze, in the same manner as is that both below and above, a good way from the capital, is of a good quality for agriculture, only that it is strong, and rather too flat. This land being flat, and drowned by the inundations for several ages; cannot fail to be kept in moisture, there being, moreover, only a mole or bank to prevent the river from over-flowing it; and would be even too moist, and incapable of cultivation, had not this mole been made, and ditches, close to each other, to facilitate the draining off the waters: by this means it has been put in a condition to be cultivated with success.¹²⁸

Louisiana seemed to possess many of the attributes necessary to provide a fertile and prosperous ground, which would give the basis of a successful colony. According to Le Page du Pratz, it was “possessed of a fertile soil, which only require[d] to be occupied in order to produce not only all the fruits necessary and agreeable to life, but also all the subjects on which human industry may exercise itself in order to supply [the colonists’] wants.”¹²⁹ This sounded very promising in theory, but also presented another issue: population, or the lack thereof. The lack of population meant more difficult conditions to build a stronger and disaster proof town, and a smaller workforce for rebuilding after the recurrent disasters. For this colony to be successful and take advantage of the natural features of the land, it needed people, a city, and a major port. New Orleans embodied the need for such

¹²⁸ Le Page du Pratz, *History of Louisiana*, 261.

¹²⁹ Le Page du Pratz, *History of Louisiana*, 329.

city that provided both a large population and a major port, the two attributes the colony lacked.

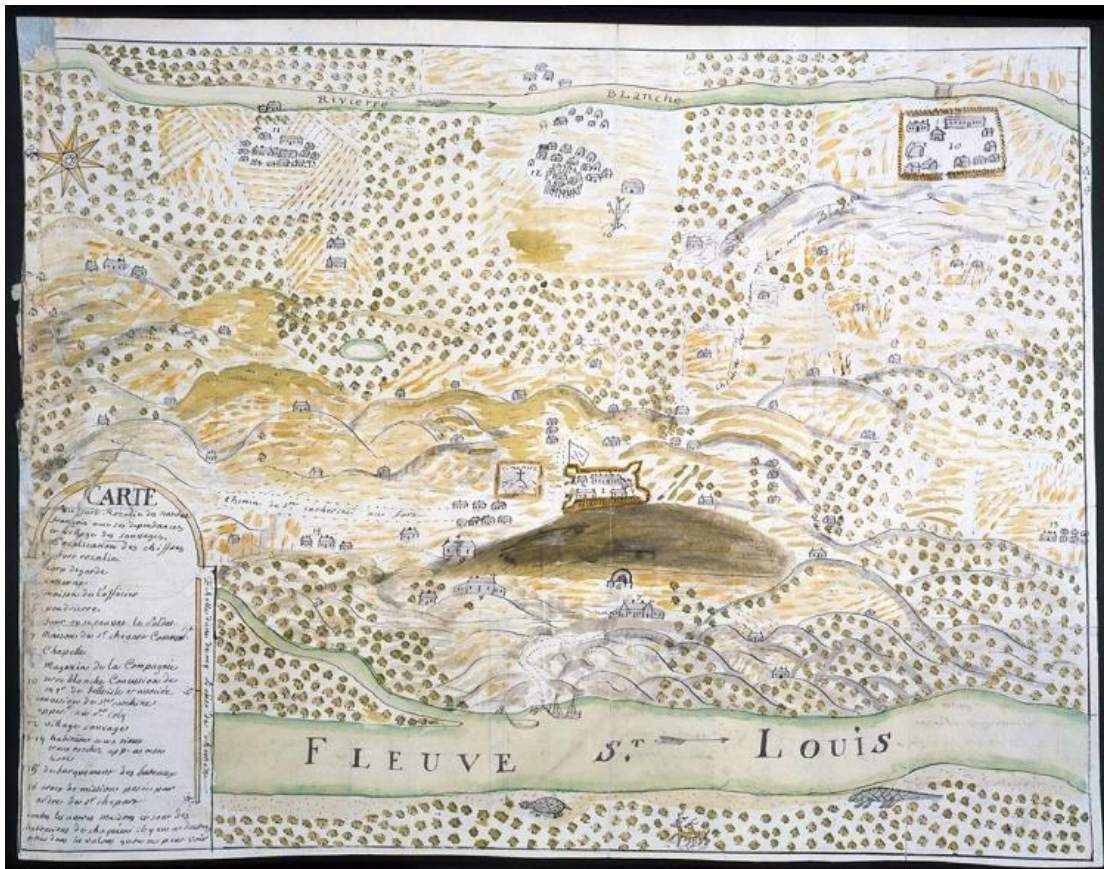
4. The birth of *La Nouvelle Orléans*

In 1712, because of the colony's lack of prosperity, and considering France's financial issues due to its numerous wars with Spain and England, the French crown gave control of Louisiana to an individual, Antoine Crozat. Bienville continued to serve in the colony, under the new governor Antoine Laumet de La Mothe, Sieur de Cadillac. In the "winter of 1715-1716," as de Villiers points out, the wealthy French merchant "Crozat demanded that a post be founded where the city now stands; ... [and even as early as] ... 1702, ... M. de Remonville [had] proposed the creation of an establishment at the Mississippi Portage."¹³⁰

Bienville also rapidly befriended the Natchez Indians and saw this alliance as a very profitable tool. First of all, the Natchez's settlement was located north of the Mississippi River's mouth and therefore in a much drier area, which provided protection to New Orleans. Second, by respecting their land, the chance of generating trade and business with the Natchez was higher. Third, farming among the various swamps and marshlands in the south of Louisiana appeared a more challenging task than it was a few hundred miles north where the Indians cultivated their land. The French started trading and importing Indian food supplies, to the

¹³⁰ De Villiers trans. Dawson, "History of the Foundation of New Orleans," 158.

point where the colony relied more and more on Indian production for sustenance. Numerous settlers lived among Indian tribes in order to benefit from their cultivation while food was low further south in the colony.¹³¹ In 1716, Bienville built Fort Rosalie near the Natchez settlement and moved there. The construction of this settlement marked Bienville's success in befriending the Natchez Indians as he was able to co-exist in such proximity of their living area. Below are a map of the area and a translation of the caption:



“In Comparable Americas: Colonial Studies after the Hemispheric Turn,” The Newberry: Chicago’s Independent Research Library Since 1887, Ayer MS 257,

¹³¹ Johnson, “Colonial New Orleans,” 33.

No.9, Map 204, <http://www.newberry.org/04302004-comparable-americas-colonial-studies-after-hemispheric-turn> (accessed August 20, 2012).

From the map:

Title: “*Carte du Fort Rosalie des natchez françois avec ses dependances et village des sauvages*”

(Map of Fort Rosalie of the French Natchez with its dependence and village of the savages)

“*Explication des chiffres:*” (Explanation of the figures/captions:)

1. *Fort Rosalie* – Fort Rosalie
2. *Corp de Garde* - Guardhouse
3. *Caserne* – Barracks
4. *Maison de l’officier* – Habitation of the Officer
5. *Poudriere* – Magazine
6. *Fort ou se sauvat le soldat* – Fort where the soldier fled
7. *Maison du Commandant* – House of the commander
8. *Chapelle* – Chapel
9. *Magazin de la Compagnie* – Shop belonging to the Company [of the West Indies]
10. *terre blanche Concession de messieurs de belleviste et associéz* – White Land [probably a proper noun, name of the property] Concession belonging to Mr. de Belleviste and his associates
11. *concession (...) appartenant au Dr. Coly* – Concession (...) belonging to Dr. Coly
12. *village sauvage* – Village of the Savages
- 13.14. *habitations (...) natchez appartenant à mon hote* – Natchez (...) habitations belonging to my host
15. *debarquement des bateaux* – Disembarking of boats
16. *croix de missions posées par ordre (...)* – Mission cross put here by order of (...)

toutes les autres maisons ce sont des habitations de chaquiuns[sic] il y en a d’autres posés[sic] dans les valons qu’on ne peut voir – All other houses are regular habitations there are some more in the valleys that cannot be seen

In 1717, John Law, the Duke of Orléans' personal advisor, and his Company of the West took control of the colony following Crozat's failure to make the colony a profitable enterprise. Many at the time, amongst whom Le Page du Pratz, believed that "had M. d'Hiberville [sic] lived longer, the colony would have made considerable progress"¹³² and therefore been more profitable and prosperous.

Several letters from the French colonial period, some from La Salle himself, described the colony having "*tout ce qui a enrichi la Nouvelle Angleterre et la Virginie, et ce qui fait le fond de leur commerce et de leurs grandes richesses*" (everything that helped New England and Virginia prosper and that was the basis for their commerce and great riches).¹³³ Colonists often discussed Louisiana as bearer of

the greatest riches; and in order to produce them, asks only arms proper for tilling the earth, which is wholly disposed to yield an[sic] hundred fold. Thanks to the fertility of our islands, our Sugar plantations are infinitely superior to those of the English, and we likewise excel them in our productions of Indigo, Coffee, and Cotton. Tobacco is the only production of the earth which gives the English an advantage over [them].¹³⁴

¹³² Le Page du Pratz, *History of Louisiana*, 8-9.

¹³³ René-Robert Cavalier, Sieur de La Salle, 6, "Memoire du Sieur de la Salle pour rendre compte a Monseigneur de Seignelay de la découverte qu'il a faite par l'ordre de sa Majesté," Reel 67, trans. Celine Ugolini, WRC, New Orleans, LA.

¹³⁴ Le Page du Pratz, *History of Louisiana*, 365. This part of the book is described as the words from "a late French writer, concerning the importance of Louisiana to France" and may therefore not be the author's own words.

All these constituted further attributes for the colony whose proneness to disasters was balanced by the richness of its soil and climate, which could enable great prosperity.

In addition, according to Le Page du Pratz:

above the Nachitoches dwell the Cadodaquious, whose scattered villages assume different names. Pretty near one of these villages was discovered a silver mine, which was found to be rich, and of a very pure metal. I have seen the assay of it, and its ore is very fine. This silver lies concealed in small invisible particles, in a stone of a chestnut colour, which was spongy, pretty tight, and easily calcinable: however, it yields a great deal more than it promises to the eye.¹³⁵

The presence of such resources in addition to the discovery of precious metals (silver, copper, iron, lead, tin and antimony, according to French explorer and Louisiana Governor La Mothe Cadillac) within their territory encouraged the French to want to keep Louisiana and may therefore have promoted resilience within the colony in order to take advantage of these resources. According to La Harpe:

Quant à ce que la colonie de la Louisiane peut produire, en voici le détail : il y a plusieurs mines de plomb abondantes, peu éloignées du fleuve, et ce plomb est facile à fondre. Si la compagnie des mineurs qu'on a envoyée aux Illinois, sous la direction de M. Renaud, avait pu y être transportée en arrivant à la colonie, elle aurait fait certainement des envois considérables de ce métal; mais son sort a été égal à celui des autres compagnies qui ont péri, ou le temps de leurs engagés s'est écoulé inutilement. Il y a des mines de cuivre dans la rivière des Illinois, dans celle des Ouabaches, et dans plusieurs autres de la partie ouest du fleuve; les Canadiens et les

¹³⁵ Le Page du Pratz, *History of Louisiana*, 279.

sauvages en ont apporté plusieurs morceaux qu'ils ont ramassés dans des plaines et des ravines , à la chute des montagnes : il est certain que la nation Ouabache sait où elles sont; ainsi il ne s'agit que de connaître leur secret , ce qu'il est facile de faire par le moyen de quelques présents. On n'a point encore de certitude qu'il y ait des mines d'or ou d'argent considérables, mais il y a grande apparence qu'on pourrait en trouver.

(Regarding what the colony of Louisiana can produce, here are the details: there are several abundant lead mines, not far from the river, and this lead is easy to melt. If the group of miners sent to the Illinois, under the direction of Mr. Renaud, could have been sent there instead upon arrival to the colony, it would certainly have sent considerable amounts of this metal; but its fate was that of all other groups sent there and who perished, or the labor from its *engagés* was spent uselessly. There are copper mines in the river of the Illinois, in that of the Ouabaches, and in several others in the western part of the main river. Canadians and savages brought several pieces back that they have collected in plains and ravines, at the bottom of the mountains. It is certain that the Ouabache nation knows where they are, so it is a question of finding out their secret now, which should be easy to do with the help of some offerings. There is not yet confirmation that there are considerable mines of gold or silver, but there a great chance that these could be found.)¹³⁶

There was, however, still much more metal in the neighboring colonies belonging to Spain than there ever was on the French land. Le Page du Pratz recalls this in his description of the colony when he explains that he

often reflected on the happiness of France in the portion which Providence has allotted her in America. She has found in her lands neither the gold nor silver of Mexico and Peru, nor the precious stones and rich stuffs of the East-Indies; but she will find therein, when she pleases, mines of iron, lead, and copper.¹³⁷

¹³⁶ La Harpe, *l'Etablissement des Français à la Louisiane*, trans. Celine Ugolini, 365-366.

¹³⁷ Le Page du Pratz, *History of Louisiana*, 329.

The news of such discovery also motivated their British neighbors in their endeavor to acquire parts of the Louisiana colony.¹³⁸ The British had tried for a long time to take possession of Louisiana, and their attempt to befriend the Indians seemed to have been part of a plan, according to Bienville, by the “*Gouverneur de la Caroline [qui] avait dessein de chasser les françois et de se rendre maitre entierement de tout le pays*” (Governor of Carolina [whose] project was to repel the French and to rule over the entire country).¹³⁹ At that stage the new inhabitants of this growing and developing area took inspiration from the local Choctaws in the building of their accommodations. Many houses were made of wood. Because of the humid weather and the area’s proneness to flooding, they turned out to be very fragile. Numerous habitations ended up washed away by the regular floods or would rot and need reconstruction.

Despite the fragility of the area, its natural resources and potential for commercial use via waterways prompted the construction of a large settlement. The need for a new strategic and commercial city for the colony grew. Several attempts at building a sizeable city had occurred at Biloxi and Mobile but were unsuccessful mostly due to the cities’ fragile location. The best way to make the colony prosperous was to have people gathering as part of a large settlement, in a

¹³⁸ La Mothe Cadillac to the Ministre, May, 18, 1715, Reel 15, WRC, New Orleans, LA.

¹³⁹ Bienville to the Ministre, October 12, 1708, 5, trans. Celine Ugolini.

suitable location. That way, not only would they help keep the colony, but they also would favor the development of agriculture, commerce, and trade. Only one question remained: where to place this city?

5. The Failed Attempts: Biloxi and Mobile

Shortly after La Salle claimed Louisiana for France, the need for a settlement emerged. According to Vogt, “King Louis’ instructions were to go to the Mississippi River, select a good site for a town that could easily be defended, and block entry into the river from other nations.”¹⁴⁰ In 1699 Bienville and Iberville went to Biloxi Bay and founded Fort Maurepas. It was located on the site of present day Ocean Springs, Mississippi. Fort Maurepas was the first permanent settlement in French Louisiana. The Le Moyne brothers named the town they built at Fort Maurepas Biloxi, as it was the name of the local Indians’ tribe.¹⁴¹

According to Le Page du Pratz, the location of the former capital Biloxi bore much inconvenience.

Biloxi is situate [sic] opposite to Ship-Island, and four leagues from it. But I never could guess the reason, why the principal settlement was made at this place, nor why the Capital should be built at it; as nothing could be more repugnant to good sense; vessels not being able to come within four leagues of it; but what was worse, nothing could be brought from them, but by changing the boats three different times, from a smaller size to another still smaller; after which they had to go upwards of an [sic] hundred paces with small carts through the water to unload the lead boats. But what ought still to

¹⁴⁰ Vogt, “Architecture of the French Quarter,” 62.

¹⁴¹ Vogt, “Architecture of the French Quarter,” 62.

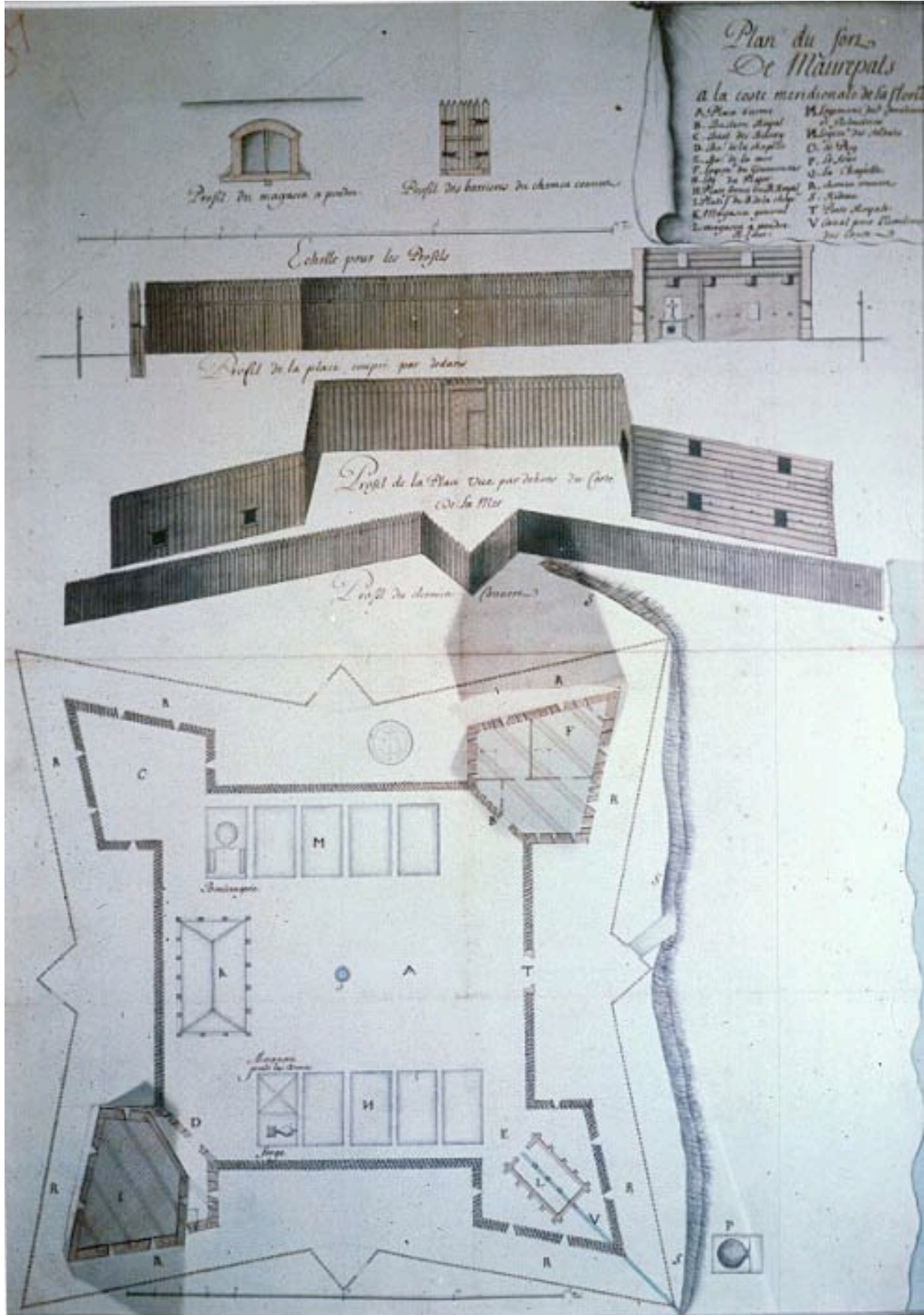
have been a greater discouragement against making a settlement at Biloxi, was, that the land is the most barren of any to be found thereabouts; being nothing but a fine sand, as white and shining as snow, on which no kind of greens can be raised; besides, the being extremely incommoded with rats.¹⁴²

The colony of Louisiana needed a larger port, and a more convenient location for its main city. According to de Villiers, “the fault l[ay] in ignorance that the mouth of the Mississippi [wa]s very safe and easily navigable, even for ships drawing fifteen or sixteen feet, or more, after being lightened at the Balise Island.”¹⁴³ The way that *Fort Maurepas* was designed was similar to that of the later *Fort Louis de la Louisiane*. According to historian Peter J. Hamilton, *Fort Maurepas* presented “four bastions, of which two were of stockade and two of logs. It was guarded by twelve cannons, and seems to have been surrounded by a palisade besides. There was no town laid out, however, and in fact this was intended only as a temporary settlement.”¹⁴⁴ Biloxi was briefly the capital of Louisiana (1720-1723), before the foundation of New Orleans was completed. Before Biloxi, the city that served that purpose was Mobile.

¹⁴² Le Page du Pratz, *History of Louisiana*, 52.

¹⁴³ De Villiers, trans. Dawson, “History of the Foundation of New Orleans,” 223.

¹⁴⁴ Peter J. Hamilton, *Colonial Mobile: An Historical Study, largely from Original Sources, of the Alabama-Tombigbee Basin from the Discovery of Mobile Bay in 1519 until the Demolition of Fort Charlotte in 1821*, Houghton, Mifflin, and Company, the Riverside Press, Cambridge (Boston and New York: 1898), 46.



Plan du fort De Maurepats (sic)
Louisiana State Museum
1710

The author of the plan is uncertain but it was attributed to Remy Reno, an engineer who accompanied Iberville on his 1699 expedition to the Gulf Coast.

<http://www.crt.state.la.us/museum/lsmmaps/mapbase/jpegs/T0055.1997.262.jpg>

French colonists wanted to build a strong capital for their colony -- a place that would enable convenient water transportation and be located at a strategic site. Since Biloxi was not successful because of high tides and recurrent hurricanes, the French had to relocate their main settlement. According to Hamilton, several years prior, during their initial exploration, Iberville and Bienville “sighting land off the coast of Florida [from the sea], in the last days of January, 1699, [...] found Pensacola just occupied by the Spaniards, and proceeded westward, exploring as they went. They cast anchor January 31 off Mobile Point, and carefully examined”¹⁴⁵ the area. They had no clue at the time that they would relocate their main settlement there. A few months later, Hamilton further noted that “on one [...] of his exploring expeditions from Biloxi, Iberville traversed the Mobile country, and seems to have selected it [then] as the [new] seat of his colony.”¹⁴⁶ Iberville saw the opportunity to build a new town that could become an important port and centre for Louisiana and as such he decided upon *Fort Louis de la Mobile*.

¹⁴⁵ Hamilton, *Colonial Mobile*, 44.

¹⁴⁶ Hamilton, *Colonial Mobile*, 50.

According to Hamilton, the French wanted the new settlement to be “near enough Pensacola to keep an eye on the Spaniards, near enough the Mississippi to be the port for the valley trade.”¹⁴⁷ He went on explaining “that Iberville selected the new site before returning to Europe, and when he sailed back towards the end of 1701, his plans were all made and ready for execution.”¹⁴⁸ Work on building the new city probably started in January of the following year (1702).¹⁴⁹ Hamilton points out that Iberville “now set about laying out his city, despite the incessant rain, (...) spent March 20-23 in aligning the streets and locating the inhabitants.”¹⁵⁰

And so in 1702, Mobile was officially founded. The city’s original names were *Fort Louis de la Louisiane*, or *Fort Louis de La Mobile*. It became the first capital of the colony of Louisiana. *Fort Louis de la Louisiane* was named after Louis XIV, unlike the numerous Forts St Louis named after Louis IX (Saint Louis).¹⁵¹ Iberville, however, used the name Mobile as opposed to Fort Louis from the start.¹⁵² According to Hamilton, when “fort Louis, the first Mobile, was founded (...) it was to guard the Mississippi entrance, be the capital of vast

¹⁴⁷ Hamilton, *Colonial Mobile*, 51.

¹⁴⁸ Hamilton, *Colonial Mobile*, 37.

¹⁴⁹ Hamilton, *Colonial Mobile*, 39.

¹⁵⁰ Hamilton, *Colonial Mobile*, 43.

¹⁵¹ Hamilton, *Colonial Mobile*, 53.

¹⁵² Hamilton, *Colonial Mobile*, 40.

Louisiana, the meeting place for the Indian tribes south of the Great Lakes, and the point from which English influence, not only in the Alabama regions, but in all the Mississippi and Ohio valley, was to be overthrown.”¹⁵³ However, as Bienville points out:

il n’y a ni Ruisseaux ni Rivieres qui se jettent dans cette Baye [de Mobile] de sorte que l’Eau qu’on y trouve est tres mauvaise, les Espagnols y ont eu un petit fort il y a environ 18 ans qu’ils ont abandonné-vraissemblablement par- l’impossibilité d’en pouvoir defendre l’entrée a d’autres nations

(there are no streams or rivers that flow into the [Mobile] bay which makes the water found there very poor, the Spaniards held a small fort there about eighteen years ago that they had to abandon- most likely due to the impossibility to defend its invasion from other nations).¹⁵⁴

The climate of the region seemed nonetheless extremely favorable to the building of a new colony, since according to Remonville, the air seemed pure and the climate warm all year round. “*Le Climat de la Prairie de la Louisiane parait fort beau et les terres qui bordent la rivierre de la Mobille assez bonnes*” (The climate of the prairie seems very nice and the lands along the Mobile River very good).¹⁵⁵ Yet, the same document also commented on the fact that some of this rich and fertile environment seemed underexploited as the very few local inhabitants did not appear to make profitable use of it. Additionally, the abundance of that type

¹⁵³ Hamilton, *Colonial Mobile*, 44.

¹⁵⁴ Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne, Sieur de Bienville to the Conseil, September 17, 1718, 3, Reel 8, trans. Celine Ugolini, WRC, New Orleans, LA.

¹⁵⁵ Montigny to the Ministre, Fort Louis, July 15, 1713, 1, “Memoire,” trans. Celine Ugolini.

of prairies and farming land as well as the situation close to several rivers usable for transportation purposes made it easy for the colonists to settle in the area. According to Hamilton, “Iberville [also] never forgot that Mobile was to be the centre of French influence; the only place which, as he expressed it, could protect America against the English.”¹⁵⁶

In spite of a seemingly very enviable position by the Mobile River, according to Louisiana administrator Jean-Baptiste du Bois Duclos de Montigny:

les habitants du fort Louis qui ont esté obligez de changer plusieurs fois leurs habitations, n'estant estably dans l'endroit ou ils sont a huit Lieux dans la rivierre de la Mobille que depuis environ deux ans, et faisant d'ailleurs tres peu ou pour mieux dire nul commerce sont dans une grande pauvreté

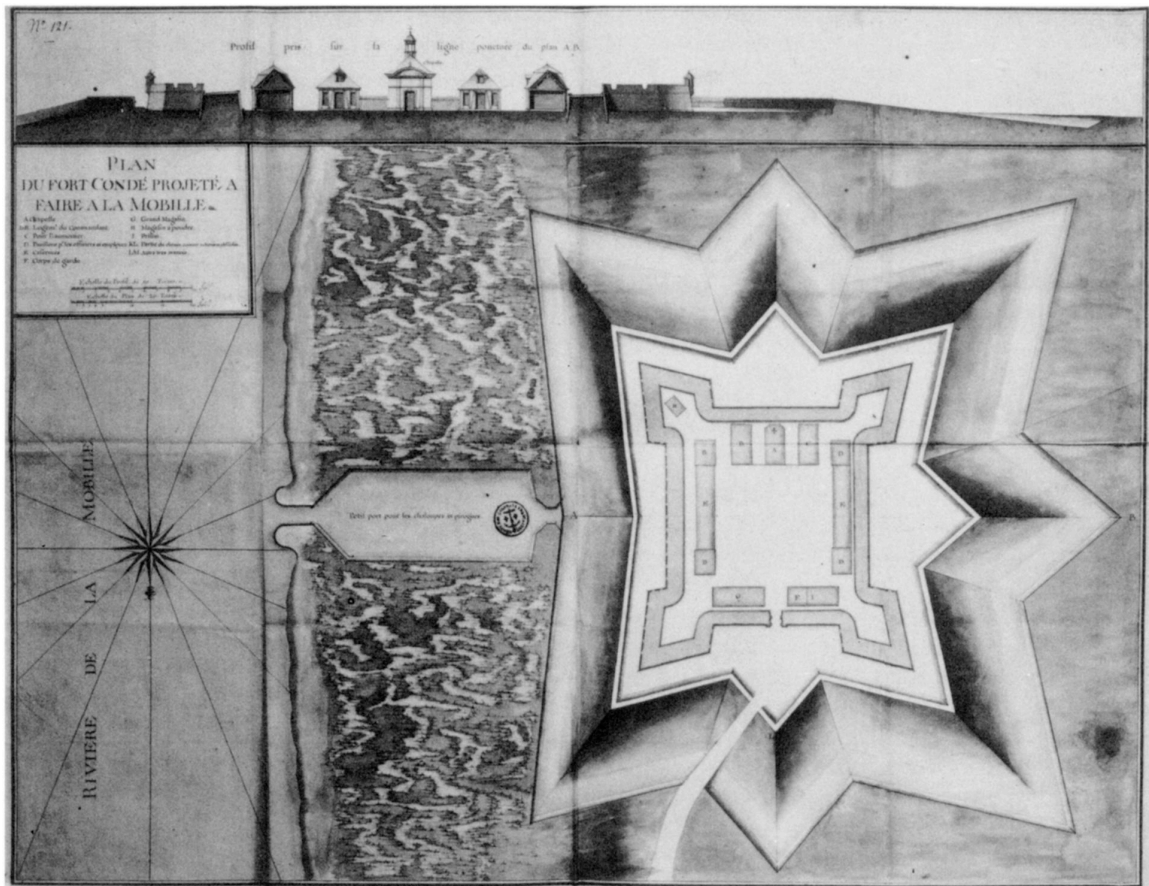
(the inhabitants of Fort Louis [former name for Mobile prior to 1712] had to move settlement several times, and only settled where they are now, about eight miles from the Mobile River, two years ago, doing very little not to say no trade at all and are in the deepest poverty)¹⁵⁷

The initial Old Mobile settlement presented many inconveniences. Most residents suffered from flood on a regular basis and the area did not offer proper drainage. They also had to face numerous and recurrent diseases. In 1711, following a flood that put residents out of their habitations for at least one month and submerged the whole city, Old Mobile was relocated downriver, to the site of current day Mobile. The new site was closer to the bay.

¹⁵⁶ Hamilton, *Colonial Mobile*, 54.

¹⁵⁷ Montigny to the Ministre, July 15, 1713, 1, “Memoire,” trans. Celine Ugolini.

This description of desolation at Old Mobile sharply contrasted with the apparent richness of the land and the possibilities the colony could offer.



Adrien de Pauger, "*Plan du Fort Conde. . .*" Mobile, Ala., May 29, 1724.
(Section Outremer, no. 121, Archives Nationales, Paris.)

Archives Nationales d'Outre Mer

<http://anom.archivesnationales.culture.gouv.fr/sdx/ulysses/notice?n=75&id=FR+CAOM+04DFC121A>

Ultimately, in addition to their disaster proneness, Biloxi and Mobile both were, according to Livingstone de Lancey, “unsatisfactory as commercial and governmental centers”¹⁵⁸ due to their location, removed from the possibilities that the site of New Orleans, on the Mississippi River, could offer.

According to Vogt, “as the search [for the location of a new capital] continued, the advantages of locating the city on the crescent of the river, near the Indian portage route to Bayou St. John and Lake Pontchartrain, were becoming increasingly acknowledged. Traveling over the portage route that led from the river, one could reach Bayou St. John and navigate his way to Lake Pontchartrain, on to Lake Bourgne[sic] and the open Gulf. This was a much shorter, quicker, and safer route to the Gulf of Mexico and the Gulf Coast settlements.”¹⁵⁹

Location became a prime factor in the repositioning of the main settlement for the colony of Louisiana. Because of the lack of success of the previous two ventures, the French were determined to survey the area and to find the new seat for their colony.

6. The Importance of Location

According to La Harpe:

Pour pouvoir juger de l'utilité de la colonie de la Louisiane il faut connaître sa situation ; la voici : ce qu'on appelle le pays de la

¹⁵⁸ Livingstone de Lancey, *The French Influence in New Orleans*, 484.

¹⁵⁹ Vogt, “Architecture of the French Quarter,” 62.

Louisiane est celui de l'Amérique septentrionale qui est entre les Illinois au nord et le golfe du Mexique au sud, ayant à l'est toutes les colonies anglaises qui tiennent la côte de cette partie de l'Amérique depuis l'Acadie jusqu'à la Caroline, peu éloigné du canal de Bahama. La partie de l'ouest de cette province conduit par terre au Nouveau-Mexique, à la province de Lastekas, et au royaume de Léon, où les Espagnols ont des mines considérables.

(In order to evaluate the usefulness of the colony of Louisiana, one has to be aware of its situation; which is as follows: what we call the land of Louisiana is that of Northern America between the Illinois to the north and the Gulf of Mexico to the south, having to the east all the English colonies that hold the coast of this part of America from Acadia to Carolina, near the Bahama canal. The western part of this province leads to New Mexico by land, to the province of Lastekas, and to the kingdom of Leon, where the Spaniards have a large number of mines.)¹⁶⁰

In addition, water surrounds New Orleans. From the lakes to a river with unprecedented potential for commercial transportation, water constituted, and still constitutes today, the greatest asset yet the greatest curse of the city.

Settlers often described natural resources as being in abundance, much larger and of a better quality, especially in the case of fruit, than that in France or in Europe.¹⁶¹ The presence of such resources was an advantage to the newly arrived settlers who did not need to have goods sent to them from the mother country since the land on the new territory was so rich and fertile. The mouth of the river and surrounding areas where the city stood remained somewhat secluded,

¹⁶⁰ La Harpe, *l'Etablissement des Français à la Louisiane*, trans. Celine Ugolini, 353-354.

¹⁶¹ Remonville, 1697, 1-2, "Memoire sur le projet d'établir une nouvelle colonie au Mississipp ou Louisiane," Reel 1, WRC, New Orleans, LA.

accessible du costé de la Mer que par l'embouchure de ce fleuve [Mississippi], le reste de la Coste etant impenetrable a plus de vingt lieues dans la profondeur a cause des bois, des marais (...), des terres tremblantes, ou il est impossible de marcher (...) est peut etre ce qui a fait negliger la decouverte de cette riviere aux Espagnols

(only accessible by the sea at the mouth of the river, the rest of the coast being impenetrable for over twenty nautical miles because of woods, swamps, (...) trapped sand, where it is impossible to walk (...) might be what made the Spaniards miss the discovery of this river)¹⁶²

according to La Salle in his *Memoire to Monseigneur de Seignelay*. As for the construction of *La Nouvelle Orléans*, conflicts emerged even before laying out the city. In fact, choosing the site for its construction was the first issue. Choctaw Indians had shown Bienville and Iberville a shorter route from Mobile to access to the Mississippi River via Bayou St John in 1699.

When looking for a suitable location for the purpose of building a city whose wealth would be built on water transportation, Bienville remembered that place between the Mississippi River and Lake Pontchartrain that he had come across with his brother. According to La Harpe:

Il choisit celui auquel on a donné depuis le nom de la Nouvelle -Orléans, à trente lieues de la mer, dans le fleuve, par rapport à la communication du lac Pontchartrain, par le ruisseau Saint-Jean. Il y laissa cinquante personnes, tant charpentiers que forçats, pour défricher le terrain et y construire quelques logemens.

(He chose the location that was since named New Orleans, thirty leagues¹⁶³

¹⁶² La Salle to Seignelay, 7, "Memoire," trans. Celine Ugolini.

¹⁶³ A league is a unit that originally described the distance an individual could walk in one hour. It represents approximately four kilometers, or two and half miles.

from the sea, in the river, with regards to communication ways to Lake Pontchartrain, through the stream Saint John. He left fifty people there, as many carpenters as convicts, to level the ground and build a few houses.)¹⁶⁴

This location offered a great situation.¹⁶⁵ It would enable the use of water for commercial purposes and presented the possibility of a prosperous future.

According to Lewis, “Bayou St. John (...) is by far the easiest way to get into the great river from either the Gulf of Mexico or the sheltered waters of the Gulf coast.”¹⁶⁶ Several colonists, such as Le Blond de la Tour, the official engineer sent by the King in order to build the city, thought that the location chosen by Bienville, the site of today’s New Orleans, was not suitable and wanted to find another one despite having never set foot on Louisiana soil. De La Tour preferred the location of Biloxi.

Considering the possible choices for the location of the future city, according to Le Page du Pratz, Bienville “pitched upon [the current] spot [for the city] in preference to many others, more agreeable and commodious.”¹⁶⁷ In 1718, eager to carry out his project the way he had decided to, Bienville sought assistance from Adrien de Pauger, de La Tour’s assistant, in order to design New

¹⁶⁴ La Harpe, *l’Etablissement des Français à la Louisiane*, trans. Celine Ugolini, 142.

¹⁶⁵ Situation that opened opportunities for trade via the Mississippi River, despite its poor site on flood prone land.

¹⁶⁶ Lewis, *New Orleans*, 30.

¹⁶⁷ Le Page du Pratz, *History of Louisiana*, 90.

Orleans at his chosen location. This is how an assistant engineer rather than the Chief King's Engineer ended up building the new city.¹⁶⁸ According to Powell, Pauger was "the first to arrive, in November 1720, on one of three company ships (...) His superior, Louis-Pierre Le Blond de La Tour, the chief engineer, debarked, along with the rest of the staff, at Biloxi the following month."¹⁶⁹ Pauger chose to go ahead with his idea of building the city as a grid. The gridiron became a very popular method for town building in North America due to the fact that it facilitated the parcels cut and made it easier to sell land and settle on it.¹⁷⁰ Another advantage of the grid, according to Powell, was to enable a more defined hierarchy within the city. "Neighborhoods would be separated according to class and status. *Les grands* would reside near the river not only because there was higher ground there, but also because it signified a more exalted social status; *les petits gens* would go to the rear of town, set off from their betters by edifices of church and state, yet still subject to monitoring as they traveled along the river."¹⁷¹ This meant that already at the time, the population most likely affected by floods would have

¹⁶⁸ Stanley Clisby Arthur, *Old New Orleans: A History of the Vieux Carré, Its Ancient and Historical Buildings* (New Orleans: Harmanson, 1944) 8.

¹⁶⁹ Powell, *The Accidental City*, 56.

¹⁷⁰ Powell, *The Accidental City*, 63.

¹⁷¹ Powell, *The Accidental City*, 63.

been the poor, just as it was the case in recent floods such as Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

According to La Harpe:

Dans le même temps, M. de Pauger , qui avait relevé le bas du fleuve et sondé exactement sa passe, en avait envoyé la description et le plan à M. de Bienville, en lui faisant sentir combien il serait nécessaire d'employer son crédit pour faire évacuer le fort Louis du Biloxi, afin d'établir le comptoir principal à la Nouvelle Orléans. Depuis long-temps M. de Bienville était de ce sentiment; il en écrivit à la compagnie. M. de La Tour fut mécontent de cet avis; il en témoigna à M. de Pauger son ressentiment; cependant celui-ci n'avait pas manqué à son devoir, puisqu'il lui avait envoyé les mêmes instructions , et qu'il l'avait mis à même, ainsi que M. de Bienville, d'en informer la compagnie et d'appuyer sur ce changement.

(At the same time, Mr. de Pauger, who had surveyed the mouth of the river and its exact trajectory, had sent its description and map to Mr. de Bienville, insisting on how necessary it was for him to use his influence to evacuate the Fort Louis of Biloxi, in order to establish the main post at New Orleans. Mr. de Bienville had long shared this opinion, and wrote to the Company. Mr. de La Tour was unhappy with this idea; he told Mr. de Pauger his disagreement; but the former had not failed his duty, as he had already sent him the same instructions, and he encouraged him, and Mr. de Bienville, to inform the Company and to support this change.)¹⁷²

The purpose of the new city was to be different from any other places in the colony, and great hopes of prosperity were placed upon its success. According to University of Quebec at Montreal's geography professor Martine Geronimi:

A la différence des principaux établissements français le long du Mississippi, La Nouvelle Orleans avait pour but, des [sic] ses fondements, de devenir un comptoir commercial et non pas un avant-poste militaire

¹⁷² La Harpe, *l'Etablissement des Français à la Louisiane*, trans. Celine Ugolini, 251-252.

(To the contrary of the main French settlements along the Mississippi River, New Orleans' goal, from its very foundation, was to become a commercial and trading post as opposed to a military post)¹⁷³

The new city was meant to become the greatest commercial port of the New World. According to Le Page du Pratz, “they who are possessed of the Mississippi, will in time command that continent.”¹⁷⁴ New Orleans gave access to the mouth of the river, and to Lake Pontchartrain, which provided the best situation for trade and commerce with the rest of the continent, as well as with the islands of the Caribbean, and specifically with the French colony of Saint Domingue. Le Page du Pratz further comments that:

The importance of navigation of the Mississippi, and of a port at the mouth of it, will abundantly appear. Whatever that navigation is, good or bad, it is only one for all the interior parts of North America. (...) whoever are possessed of this river, and of the vast tracts of fertile lands upon it, must in time command that continent, and the trade of it.¹⁷⁵

Lewis made a similar statement about the city some two hundred and fifty years later in his *New Orleans: The Making of an Urban Landscape* when he asserted that the city was at such an important location that its possession was crucial. He further explained that the city's “command of the entrance to the Mississippi was like Quebec's command of the St. Lawrence, and [that] both cities

¹⁷³ Martine Geronimi, *Québec et la Nouvelle Orléans: Paysages imaginaires français en Amérique du Nord*, trans. Celine Ugolini (Paris: Belin, 2003) 56.

¹⁷⁴ Le Page du Pratz, *History of Louisiana*, preface xvi.

¹⁷⁵ Le Page du Pratz, *History of Louisiana*, preface xxii.

were seen as gatekeepers to the continental interior.”¹⁷⁶ Commerce generated from the trade with the islands was the most profitable income for the Louisiana colony. This worked with goods such as rice, red peas, cypress plank, and Indian corn (sweet corn with colorful kernels), Apalachean beans, or even tiles or bricks, according to du Pratz.¹⁷⁷ The items the colony would bring back from the islands in exchange for these goods generally were “sugar, coffee, rum, which the negroes consume in drink; besides other goods for the use of the country.”¹⁷⁸

In spite of some doubts as to the fruitful character of the colony because of its proneness to flooding, the building of a new town started when “Bienville revived Remonville’s project.”¹⁷⁹ It is at the location of the new city, that on May 10, 1717, Bienville appeared to have coined the expression “*beau croissant*”¹⁸⁰ describing the future settlement according to its twisted shape alongside the river when proposing the site for building New Orleans. The expression later evolved to become “Crescent City.” The crescent shape was also a great advantage as foreign boats would have to slow down while approaching New Orleans which made them

¹⁷⁶ Lewis, *New Orleans*, 7.

¹⁷⁷ Du Pratz gives a list of all profitable items which constituted the main source of trade with the “islands” in his *History of Louisiana*, 338.

¹⁷⁸ Le Page du Pratz, *History of Louisiana*, 338.

¹⁷⁹ De Villiers trans. Dawson, “History of the Foundation of New Orleans,” 158.

¹⁸⁰ Arthur, *A History of the Vieux Carré*, 9.

vulnerable to potential attacks from the land and gunshots. According to Le Page du Pratz, after Bienville chose the location for the future city,

the capital place of the colony was no longer at Mobile, nor even at Old Biloxi, whither it had been removed: New Orleans, now begun to be built, was [to] become the capital of the country, whither he repaired to give M. de Biainville [sic] an account of his journey.¹⁸¹

In 1722, according to La Harpe,

Messieurs les commissaires donnèrent ordre d'établir un conseil aux Illinois pour juger en dernier ressort, et cependant rendre compte au conseil supérieur, qu'on devait établir à la Nouvelle-Orléans, et d'y former le comptoir principal, enjoignant d'abandonner le fort Louis, et de n'y laisser qu'une simple garnison, et sur toutes choses de faire entrer à l'avenir les vaisseaux dans le Mississipi.

(The *commissaires* ordered for an appeal court to be established at the Illinois, and to report to the superior council, that should be established in New Orleans, where to build the main settlement, and to abandon Fort Louis, where to only leave a simple post, and to have vessels enter the colony through the Mississippi from then on.)¹⁸²

Upon the decision of relocating the capital of the colony to New Orleans and understanding the importance the future city would acquire, Powell notes that “La Tour yanked Pauger’s plans from his pigeonhole, traveled to New Orleans, and took charge of the site, as though he, and not the second engineer, had been the sole architect of the city’s famous grid all along.”¹⁸³ Once this decision was made,

¹⁸¹ Le Page du Pratz, *History of Louisiana*, 19.

¹⁸² La Harpe, *l'Etablissement des Français à la Louisiane*, trans. Celine Ugolini, 303.

¹⁸³ Powell, *The Accidental City*, 57-58.

efforts to elevate this area to the rank of capital started to emerge. A very large number of engineers and architects reached the city. It was so that this, according to Powell, represented “arguably more planners per capita than at any time in the city’s history, including the immediate post-Katrina period.”¹⁸⁴ In spite of the key attributes Louisiana had, according to some local contemporaries, the area destined to become the future city of New Orleans also bore many downsides. According to Lewis, “the situation guaranteed New Orleans prosperity, but the site guaranteed that the city would be plagued by incessant trouble.”¹⁸⁵ Despite acknowledging the fragility of the new settlement’s site, according to Vogt:

the seriousness of the flooding problem was not realized at the time of [New Orleans’] founding but is well documented in records of the early years. A note on a 1719 sketch, attributed to J.M. de Beauvilliers, describes the conditions: ‘The islands or squares of the inhabitants are surrounded with water for three months of the year because of the overflowing of the waters of the river from the 25 March until the 14 June.’¹⁸⁶

One of the main issues with resilience in the city is that about half of New Orleans sits below sea level.¹⁸⁷ According to Sublette, the Crescent City “is not only the lowest elevated of any U.S. city, but also the flattest”¹⁸⁸ in a place

¹⁸⁴ Powell, *The Accidental City*, 61.

¹⁸⁵ Lewis, *New Orleans*, 17.

¹⁸⁶ Vogt, “Architecture of the French Quarter,” 64.

¹⁸⁷ According to a study from Tulane and Xavier Universities, <http://tulane.edu/research/application/story-recovery.cfm>.

¹⁸⁸ Sublette, *The World That Made New Orleans*, 11.

surrounded by the lake on one side, the river on the other, and swamps, making it particularly vulnerable to flooding. It was, however, not the case in colonial time. Despite a very low elevation, none of the city was actually below sea level, nor was the bowl shape of the future so obvious.¹⁸⁹ Nonetheless, the area was already very much subject to flooding. The subtropical climate, very hot and humid, especially during the summer months, was, and still is, propitious to the formation of many storms, contributing to large flooding several times per year during several months. The hot and humid climate also contributed to the development and the spread of disease such as malaria and yellow fever. That said, many early New Orleanians commented on the benefits they felt from the local climate as “they never enjoyed better health even in France.”¹⁹⁰ Du Pratz further commented that

few days pass in Louisiana without seeing the sun. The rain pours down there in sudden heavy showers, which do not last long, but disappear in half an hour, perhaps. The dews are very plentiful, advantageously supplying the place of rain.

We may therefore well imagine that the air is perfectly good there; the blood is pure; the people are healthy; subject to few diseases in the vigour of life, and without decrepitude in old age, which they carry to a far greater length than in France. People live to a long and agreeable old age in Louisiana, if they are but sober and temperate.¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁹ Sublette, *The World That Made New Orleans*, 12.

¹⁹⁰ Le Page du Pratz, *History of Louisiana*, preface xvii.

¹⁹¹ Le Page du Pratz, *History of Louisiana*, 201-202.

The climate certainly was an attraction to the area from settlers coming from the northern provinces of the colony or from the mother country. In addition to the numerous promising features that the new city seemed to provide, it eventually helped justify venturing into this disaster prone area. According to Le Page du Pratz New Orleans' location was crucial in terms of its profitable situation for the colony, which certainly played a part in the need for constant rebuilding following disasters:

New Orleans, the capital of the colony, is situated to the East, on the banks of the Mississippi, in 30 deg. of North Latitude (...) As the principal settlement was then at Mobile, it was proper to have the capital fixed at a place from which there could be an easy communication with this post: and thus a better choice could not have been made, as the town being on the Mississippi, vessels, tho' of a thousand ton, may lay their sides close to the shore even at low water; or at most, need only lay a small bridge. (...) This town is [also] only a league from St. John's creek, where passengers take water for Mobile.¹⁹²

The location of the future city made it a fragile place yet a very strategic one for future transportation and commerce development. Even with its hostile looking swamps and marshlands, the area around New Orleans almost immediately became coveted by the French who rapidly realized the potential and wealth a city in such location, near the mouth of a river having the capacity to be used for transportation all the way to the northern end of Louisiana and towards the Canadian parts of *Nouvelle France* could generate. France saw the inclusion of all the Mississippi

¹⁹² Le Page du Pratz, *History of Louisiana*, 90.

River watershed area when establishing the colony of Louisiana as a way to protect the existing French possessions in Canada. Hence newcomers were prepared to settle by the river. Early 1718, Bienville reached the area “with six vessels, loaded with provisions ... thirty workmen, all convicts; six carpenters and four Canadians.”¹⁹³ According to Le Page du Pratz, that same year,

the West India Company, building great hopes of commerce on Louisiana, made efforts to people that country, sufficient to accomplish their end. Thither, for the first time, they sent, in 1718, a colony of eight hundred men: Some of which settled in New Orleans, others formed the settlements of the Natchez.¹⁹⁴

By 1719, the colony’s Contractor of Public Works Claude Joseph de Villars Dubreuil reached Louisiana with a horde of workers to start on the project.

Although the first formal city plans date back to 1721 the arrival of Bienville with several hundred men to build New Orleans in 1718 is the reason why most historians have agreed upon that year as the date of the foundation for the city.

In March 1721, Adrien de Pauger reached New Orleans and started plotting the streets of *La Nouvelle Orléans* under Bienville’s supervision. According to Powell, “it had taken the Company of the West more than two years to send a replacement for the chief engineer who had died in 1718 while en route to the

¹⁹³ Shannon Lee Dawdy, *Madame John’s Legacy Revisited: A Closer Look at the Archeology of Colonial New Orleans* (New Orleans: 1998) 26.

¹⁹⁴ Le Page du Pratz, *History of Louisiana*, 20.

colony.”¹⁹⁵ At first, the aspect of the area surprised Pauger. He originally thought he would find a settlement, but quickly realized that the area had yet to be tamed and that, according to de Villiers, it resembled more a “virgin forest than ... a town.”¹⁹⁶ The numerous bushes and trees originally prevented him from making the necessary survey for the city. Nevertheless, Pauger eventually planned and built New Orleans. He used a rectangle shape divided in small squares or “blocks” for his plan. This is where the original part of the city takes its name from: the *Vieux Carré*, or old square. According to Vogt, “the plan was a simple gridiron, based on the military planning principles of Louis XIV’s great military engineer, Sébastien Le Prestre, Maréchal de Vauban, and his successor, the Marquis d’Asfeld, in whose Corps of Engineers both LeBlond de La Tour and Pauger had served in Europe.”¹⁹⁷ The idea of constructing cities according to a grid was not actually French. It originally came from the Greeks and spread across Europe with the Romans who applied this plan to their military camps.¹⁹⁸ According to de La Tour’s first signed plan dated April 23, 1722 and largely inspired by Pauger’s map of 1721, the city was initially set to be divided into fifty-four blocks before adopting Pauger’s plan consisting in sixty-six blocks.

¹⁹⁵ Powell, *The Accidental City*, 55-56.

¹⁹⁶ De Villiers trans. Dawson, “History of the Foundation of New Orleans,” 195.

¹⁹⁷ Vogt, “Architecture of the French Quarter,” 63.

¹⁹⁸ Vogt, “Architecture of the French Quarter,” 63.

At a central location, contemporaries dedicated an area adjacent to the river and in front of the city church to the building of a park mainly used for gatherings called *Place d'Armes*. According to Le Page du Pratz:

The place of arms is in the middle of (...) the town which faces the river; in the middle of the ground of the place of arms stands the parish church, called St. Louis, where the Capuchins¹⁹⁹ officiate, whose house is to the left of the church. To the right, stand the prison, or jail, and the guard-house: both sides of the place of arms are taken up by two bodies or rows of barracks. This place stands all open to the river.

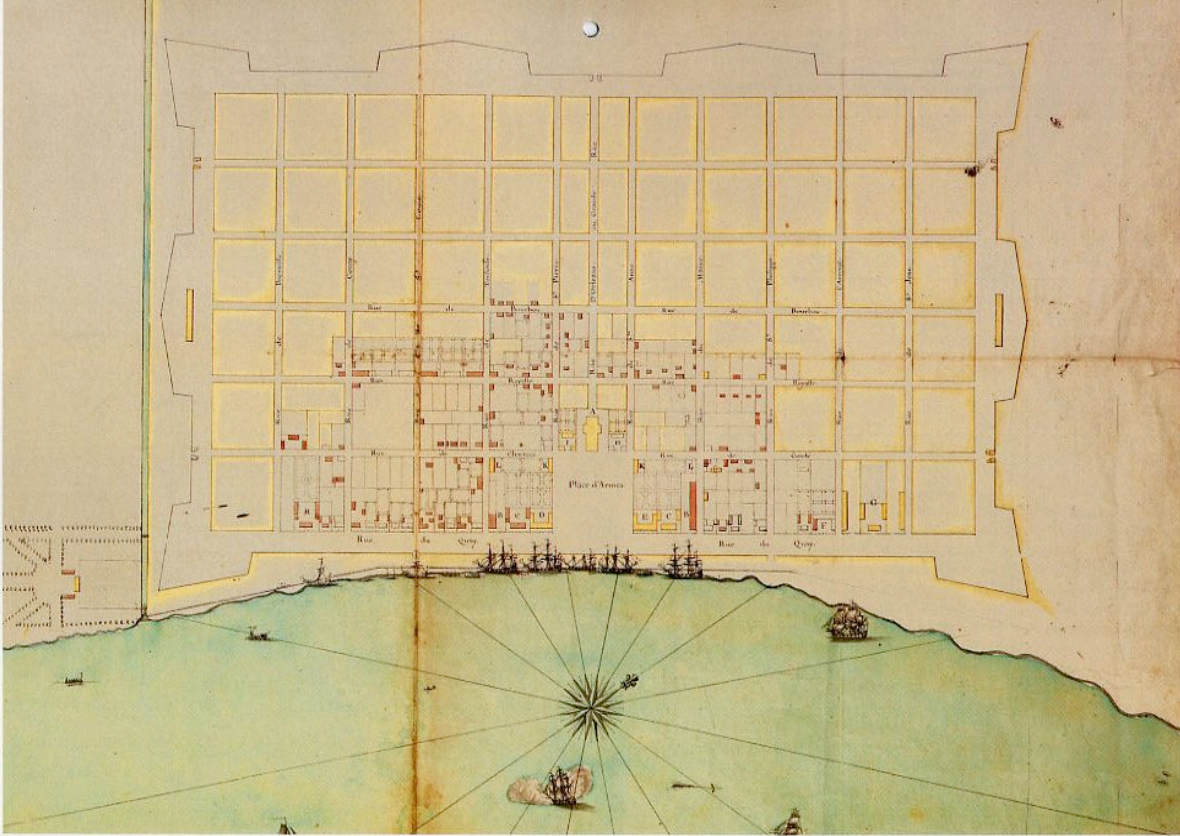
All the streets are laid out both in length and breadth by the line, and intersect and cross each other at right angles. The streets divide the town into sixty-six isles; eleven along the river lengthwise, or in front, and six in depth: each of those isles is fifty square toises,²⁰⁰ and each again divided into twelve emplacements, or compartments, for lodging as many families.²⁰¹

Two maps reveal Pauger's plans for *La Nouvelle Orléans*. Although most scholars acknowledge the first document as the oldest map of the city, it has no precise date. Pauger's second map, however, is dated March 1721, and is much less detailed, and shows the city's projected plan. It could constitute Pauger's draft of the other map. The undated map shows the "*remparts*" of the city, from the French meaning "small wall," or the limit of the original *Nouvelle Orléans*, today known as Rampart Street.

¹⁹⁹ The Capuchins were religious men members of the Franciscan order who led a very strict and pious life.

²⁰⁰ A toise is a unit of measure used in colonial Louisiana by the French and was the equivalent of six feet. The toise was also used as a measure of area and which represented roughly 3.8 square meters.

²⁰¹ Le Page du Pratz, *History of Louisiana*, 91-92.

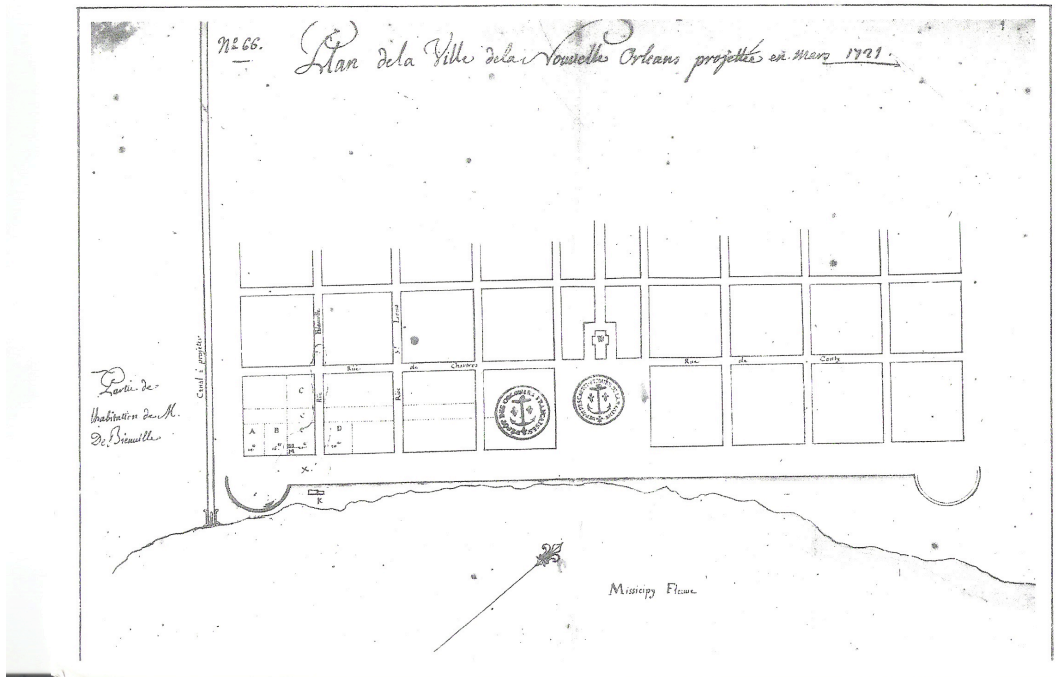


PLAN DE LA NOUVELLE-ORLÉANS, ca. 1721 (détail) (51.5 x 83 cm)

Ce très beau plan de La Nouvelle-Orléans est la première représentation connue de la ville. Son site avait été choisi par le gouverneur de Bienville et des ouvriers arrivèrent en 1718 pour défricher le sol. Ce plan fut dessiné trois ans plus tard, peut-être par Pauger. Le rouge désignait les bâtiments déjà construits et le jaune, ceux qui étaient à bâtir. (Notez le jardin du gouverneur à l'ouest des remparts).

Photo & texte: Yale University Map Collection, New Haven, Connecticut

This magnificent map of New Orleans is the earliest extant view of the city. Its site had been selected by Governor de Bienville and a work force arrived in 1718 to clear the ground for construction. This map was drawn three years later, probably by Pauger. The buildings shown in red had already been erected, those in yellow were yet to be built. (Note the Governor's garden west of the wall.)



Map by Adrien de Pauger, dated April 14, 1721. Williams Research Center in New Orleans.

The ramparts never actually existed until 1760. The problem was that Paris had sent the funds to finance them very early on. Where did that money go? What had it been used for? A large scandal emerged from this after it was discovered that, according to Powell, “earlier maps depicting New Orleans’s fortifications had been a sham.”²⁰²

Most streets in the contemporary French Quarter share the same width (thirty-eight feet). *Orléans* is larger (forty-five feet wide), as it was designed as the main street of the city, starting from the back of the church. It honored the French

²⁰² Powell, *The Accidental City*, 122.

Royal family and the French Regent, the Duke of Orléans, who gave his name to the city. The humid subtropical climate can partly explain the narrow streets of the *Vieux Carré*. The shadow of buildings on each side of the streets would provide citizens with shade. There was no need for wider streets since pedestrian traffic prevailed. This narrowness, however, would enable fire damage to spread to most of the city both in 1788 and 1794.

Pauger named most streets in the French Quarter. According to Father Charles Edwards O'Neill, many Latin countries celebrated saints days. St. Peters, and St. Ann streets, for example, were most likely named to celebrate local contemporary figures Pierre Le Blond de La Tour and his wife Anne.²⁰³ In today's New Orleans, according to Sublette, "the street map is a time capsule. Unpack all [the street names], and a lot of the city's history is right here."²⁰⁴

New Orleans held a valuable place within the colony of Louisiana. Pauger's letter, dated May 29, 1724, to the directors of the Company of the Indies reads that "*la Nelle Orleans ... L'Embouchure du fleuve, et ... La Mobile ... [sont] les trois postes principaux, ou pierres fondamentales de cette colonie*" (New Orleans ... the mouth of the river, and ... Mobile ... [are] the three main posts, or fundamental

²⁰³ Charles Edwards O'Neill, "The French Regency and the Colonial Engineers: Street Names of Early New Orleans," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 39.2 (1998): 209-210.

²⁰⁴ Sublette, *The World That Made New Orleans*, 6.

glue that keeps this colony together).²⁰⁵ He saw in the colony of Louisiana an incredible potential from his very arrival. In 1724, he also wrote that at

*l'embouchure du fleuve St Louis*²⁰⁶ ... selon moy, ... [qui est à] une situation si avantageuse, que si pareille était en France, et que le Roy m'en fait [l'honneur] de me charger d'établir en y faisant une dépense proportionnée à l'importance du poste, J'engagerois ce que j'ai de plus cher, qu'en une seule ou deux années j'en ferois un port magnifique

(the mouth of the river St Louis ... in my opinion, ... [which is located at] such a favorable position, that if a similar situation would happen in France, and that the King would do me the honor of putting me in charge of establishing a post making sure to budget proportional spending according to the size of the post, I would put what is dearest to me on the fact that, in as little as one to two years I would make it a magnificent port).²⁰⁷

Building a settlement on the site of New Orleans also meant exploiting local waterways to enable commerce and trade. As de Villiers points out according to Mandeville's early writings from 1709, it is very easy and convenient to navigate from Mobile to Lake Pontchartrain, and from the lake to the Mississippi River without having to go through the mouth where it is "often flooded and filled with alligators, serpents, and other venomous beasts."²⁰⁸

²⁰⁵ Adrien de Pauger to the directors of the Company of the Indies, New Orleans, May 29, 1724, 2, Reel 12, trans. Celine Ugolini, WRC, New Orleans, LA.

²⁰⁶ The "River St Louis" was the name given by the French to the Mississippi River in honour of the patron saint of France, and also as a reminder of Louis IX, nicknamed St Louis.

²⁰⁷ Pauger to the directors of the Company, New Orleans, May 29, 1724, 2-3, Reel 12, trans. Celine Ugolini, WRC, New Orleans, LA.

²⁰⁸ De Villiers trans. Dawson, "History of the Foundation of New Orleans," 168.

In spite of the rather swampy soil, exposed to floods when the river rose, the choice of a site was good, since it lay sufficiently near the sea and less than a league from Bayou St. John, whence all the coast establishments could be reached by boat. The vision of Bienville had been clear, and the nascent colony would have been spared many calamities if stores had been built at New Orleans early in 1718 and colonists had been enabled to land. But rancorous jealousies, on the part of inhabitants of Mobile and of Biloxi, acted for four years as a check on the new Mississippi counter. In consequence, the growth of Louisiana was arrested [until 1722].²⁰⁹

Conclusion

Despite the vigorous efforts of Mobile and Biloxi's supporters to prevent New Orleans from becoming the most important city of the colony, and after both Mobile and Biloxi encountered serious damage with flooding and storms, New Orleans became the only possible choice for the city that would enable the colony to prosper. Early disasters gave the chance to rebuild a stronger New Orleans. The city's location made it a more suited commercial port than Mobile or Biloxi could have ever offered. After much debate and in the face of recurring storms and floods, building the city of New Orleans at the location it stands today seems to have been the most viable solution, and research shows that contemporary French settlers chose reasonably well considering their need for a major port in the area, thus justifying rebuilding the city after the numerous disasters New Orleans encountered over the years. As Campanella points out, should the city have been located elsewhere, other issues would have emerged and the ability to take

²⁰⁹ De Villiers trans. Dawson, "History of the Foundation of New Orleans," 171-172.

advantage of the proximity to the Mississippi River and the Gulf of Mexico could not have been exploited to its fullest.²¹⁰ For all these reasons, water, New Orleans' most recurrent and serious enemy, became an obstacle that colonists needed to tame, or at least to manage.

Eventually, according to Powell, "New Orleans developed into something greater than a mere entrepôt for a continent. It became a state of mind, built on the edge of disaster, where the lineages of three continents and countless races and ethnicities were forced to crowd together on slopes of the natural levee and somehow learn to improvise a coexistence whose legacy may be America's only original contribution to world culture. For that legacy alone, we owe Bienville some measure of gratitude."²¹¹

²¹⁰ Campanella, *Bienville's Dilemma*, 113-114.

²¹¹ Powell, *The Accidental City*, 163.

Chapter IV: Population Shortage vs. Abundance of Water

Introduction

Water “is the basis of the fluids of living organisms”²¹² and therefore of life itself. In the case of New Orleans it is also what contributes to the downfall of the city and to most of the calamities that have affected its residents over time. Water is, in that case, not a symbol of life, prosperity, and development, but of fear, death, and disaster. It represents the constant struggles of the city, its curse. Yet, water is at the very origin of the city’s foundation. Had there not been water all around New Orleans, the city would simply have been built elsewhere. The new city needed access to water for transportation and development. New Orleans needed viable water to operate prosperously. It needed transportation water. The water that the city, however, had in the largest quantity, was recurrent floodwater. Water surrounded the city to the point that New Orleans became known as *l’Ile d’Orléans* (Orleans Island).²¹³ In the city, as Le Page du Pratz points out, on both “sides of the Mississippi there [were] many habitations standing close together; each making a causey[sic] to secure his ground from inundations, which fail not to

²¹² “Water,” *New Oxford American Dictionary*, Version 2.1.3 (80.4), 2005-2009.

²¹³ Powell, *The Accidental City*, 67.

come every year with the spring.”²¹⁴ Water is therefore a curse and a blessing, a chance and a calamity, a sign of destruction, yet of resilience.

The lack of people was just as important as the excess of water as a barrier to the development of the colony of Louisiana. The lack of people meant that the colony was vulnerable to foreign attacks and invasions, and that cities could not benefit from an adequate workforce to be built and protected from storms, whereas the excess of water constantly threatened the construction progress. Both had to be managed to ensure a prosperous enterprise. The lack of people was a threat to possible takeovers from neighboring colonies and considerably slowed down the development and protection of the city. According to Le Page du Pratz, “many would persuade us [there] is so much to be dreaded on the Mississippi. It is by this means that we have so very few people in all our southern colonies.”²¹⁵

According to Powell, “as the economy languished, so did population growth. In 1702, there were 140 European inhabitants in the colony; twelve years later, the number had barely topped 200.”²¹⁶ To counter the lack of settlers, colonists used the transportation of convicts and slavery to increase the population and resolve the lack of workforce issues that threatened the nascent city of New Orleans. This

²¹⁴ Le Page du Pratz, *History of Louisiana*, 93.

²¹⁵ Le Page du Pratz, *History of Louisiana*, preface xvi.

²¹⁶ Powell, *The Accidental City*, 34.

meant that slaves actively took part in the construction, reconstruction, and resilience of the city. Slaves also contributed to the growth in population, as did the arrival from France of the Ursuline nuns. While the building of the new city did not happen without pain, and much struggle intervened along the way, colonists proceeded with Bienville's plans for the foundation of the new city, in the hope that its strategic situation would justify this difficult venture.

1. People Taming Nature, or Nature Taming People?

In the face of all the existing challenges, New Orleanians tried to tame nature. According to de Villiers:

au mois de mars 1718, declare La Harpe [un officier et explorateur français], l'on a commence l'etablissement de la Nouvelle Orleans (...) dans un terrain uni et marecageux propre seulement a la culture du riz; l'eau et la riviere filtrant par sous la terre et les ecrevisses venant en abondance, fait que les tabacs et les legumes y viennent difficilement. Les brouillards y sont fort communs et le terrain etant fort couvert de bois et de cannes, l'air y est fievreux et l'on y souffre encore l'incommodite d'une infinite de moustiques pendant l'ete.

(in March 1718, La Harpe [a French officer and explorer] declared that, the building of the city of La Nouvelle Orléans started (...) in a uniform and swampy land only proper to rice culture; the water and the river coming to the surface from below the earth and the crawfish being abundant, making all sorts of tobacco and vegetable growing a difficult matter. Fog is a common feature of the region, and as the land is covered with wood and canebrakes, the air becomes feverish and one suffers from an enormous amount of mosquitoes during the summer months).²¹⁷

²¹⁷ Baron Marc de Villiers, *Histoire de la fondation de la Nouvelle Orléans* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1917), trans. Celine Ugolini, 24.

A description of the city at the time of its foundation can be found in French officer and early historian Louis François Benjamin Dumont de Montigny's poem in verse entitled *Poème en vers touchant l'établissement de la province de la Louisiane, connue sous le nom de Mississipy avec tout ce qui s'est passé de depuis [sic] 1716, jusqu'à 1742 : Le massacre des François au poste des Natchez, les Moeurs des Sauvages, leurs danses, leurs Religions, enfin ce qui concerne le pays en general.*²¹⁸ Through his poem, Dumont de Montigny serves as an early historian describing the new colony of Louisiana. Dumont de Montigny was the son of a prominent lawyer from Paris who became a French military officer at Quebec and in Louisiana. In the latter, Dumont de Montigny was in charge of supervising five hundred forced immigrants from France. He also spent several years living at Natchez. Dumont de Montigny often disagreed with Bienville, which is apparent in some of his writings where he criticizes Bienville for his poor management of the colony of Louisiana. Dumont de Montigny eventually sailed back to France and later to India where he died in 1760.²¹⁹

According to his poem, in the New Orleans area:

²¹⁸ The translation of the poem title in English would be: Poem in verse discussing the establishment of the province of Louisiana, known as Mississippi, including everything that happened from 1716 to 1742: the French massacre at Natchez, the customs of the savages, their dances, their religions, and finally what concerned the country in general.

²¹⁹ Gordon Sayre, "Dumont de Montigny," *Le Page du Pratz and Dumont de Montigny: Historians of French Louisiana, 1718-1758*, <http://pages.uoregon.edu/gsayre/DMandLPDP.html> (accessed January 29, 2013).

(...) en cet endroit, autour de cette ville,
 La terre n'en est pas des meilleure et fertile,
 Vu qu'elle est, quatre mois, inondée par les eaux.
 C'est une terre grasse où ne vient que roseaux ;
 Pourtant, on la travaille, et ce n'est pas sans peine ;
 Les nègres, les François y perdent leur haleine
 Aux habitations, même dans le jardin,
 Et même dans les champs, Si l'on a le dessein
 De faire la moisson, il faut faire levée
 Vis-à-vis de ce fleuve, et même la saignée
 Le long de vos terrains, pour évacuer l'eau
 Qui couvrirait la terre. Ors, Lecteur, il te faut
 Savoir, qu'en ces terrains, la terre est bien plus basse
 Que le lit de ce fleuve, et c'est tout ce qui lasse,
 L'ouvrier travaillant, par l'occupation
 Qu'il faut alors avoir en telle occasion.
 Si ce n'est que du riz, on n'a pas tant de peine,
 Vu qu'il vient dedans l'eau, que cela ne le gêne,
 Car, le vingt-cinq de mars est le débordement
 Des eaux de ce beau fleuve ; qu'il faut absolument,
 Pour garantir la ville, y faire une levée

(...) in this location, around this town,
 The earth is neither the best nor fertile,
 Since it is, four months a year, flooded by water.
 It is a land where only reed can grow;
 We work at it, however, and not without pain;
 The slaves, the French are losing their breath
 Building houses, the gardens,
 Even working in the fields, If one plans to
 Do the harvest, one has to build levees,
 In front of this river, and even a ditch
 Along one's land, to evacuate water
 That will cover the land. The reader must know, however,
 That in these pieces of land, the earth is much lower
 Than the bed of the river (...)
 Only for growing rice, we do not have much pain,
 Since it grows in water, it is not too bothered,
 Because from March 25, is the overflowing
 Of the water of this beautiful river; that we absolutely must,

To protect the city, build a levee²²⁰

The first flood occurred in 1719, only one year after the founding of the city. The flood did not come from a hurricane, as the first recorded hurricane in New Orleans' history dates back to 1722. Since the Mississippi River overflowed almost every year at the time, floods were very common and that particular one was considered to have created much damage, not because of the actual size of the damage, but in proportion to the small size of the city at the time. The result was both a catastrophe and a stroke of luck: it enabled the precarious edifices to be destroyed and make room for new stronger ones to replace them. The problem, however, was that men were critically needed to complete the reconstruction, but they were not enough in the colony at the time. New Orleans was a mere settlement, and, according to de Villiers, "news of the flood had been considerably exaggerated by partisans of Mobile or of Biloxi [as the main settlement of the colony]. The Directors of the Company of the Indies stopped work (...). There was even talk of transferring it to the Manchac Plain [between Lake Maurepas and Lake Pontchartrain], about a dozen leagues farther north."²²¹

²²⁰ Louis François Benjamin Dumont de Montigny, *Poème en vers touchant l'établissement de la province de la Louisiane, connue sous le nom de Mississipy avec tout ce qui s'est passé de depuis [sic] 1716, jusqu'à 1742 : Le massacre des François au poste des Natchez, les Moeurs des Sauvages, leurs danses, leurs Religions, enfin ce qui concerne le pays en général*, Quatrieme chant, trans. Celine Ugolini, Louisiana State Museum at the US Old Mint (thereafter US Old Mint), New Orleans, Louisiana.

²²¹ De Villiers trans. Dawson, "History of the Foundation of New Orleans," 158.

De La Tour, who did not agree with Bienville's decision to locate New Orleans on the site where it is today, attempted to delay the construction process of the city by sending Pauger to work at Biloxi. Upon Pauger's return, Jacques Barbazon de Pailloux, who is often considered the first resident of New Orleans as he settled in the city in 1718, using his rank of military commander, sent Pauger to work on tracing the course of the Mississippi River up at Natchez so that this would also slow down the engineer's work at New Orleans.²²² De La Tour did not send the maps that Pauger initially drew to France, although one was sent anonymously and reached Paris.²²³ Pauger was eventually disheartened by what was happening in the colony and was demoted to the benefit of Broutin. In November 1725, Pauger wrote that he was ready to return to France by the first available boat. He became ill and died in June 1726, four days after writing his will in which he requested to be buried in New Orleans' St. Louis' Cathedral and never got the chance to return home.²²⁴

Despite his enthusiasm and his desire to make New Orleans the most important settlement of the colony, even Bienville encountered serious doubts as to

²²² De Villiers trans. Dawson, "History of the Foundation of New Orleans," 222.

²²³ De Villiers trans. Dawson, "History of the Foundation of New Orleans," 223. Bienville would have been the sender of Pauger's maps to Paris.

²²⁴ De Villiers trans. Dawson, "History of the Foundation of New Orleans," 246. It is not known whether Pauger was buried or not in the cathedral but there is no reason to believe that his dying wish was not granted.

the future of the nascent city. On April 15, 1719, following the flood, he wrote: “It may be difficult to maintain a town at New Orleans; the site is drowned under half a foot of water. The sole remedy will be to build levees and dig the projected canal from the Mississippi to Lake Pontchartrain. There would be half a league of cutting to do.”²²⁵ Back in the mother country, the flood was seen as an indication that the town would not survive, and all building work on New Orleans was ordered to be stopped.²²⁶ It was so that, according to Powell, “the start of 1721 also brought orders from Paris instructing La Tour to send Pauger to New Orleans to assess its suitability, and, if necessary, to make arrangements for ‘transferring it to a more favorable spot, at least with regard to floods’ ... La Tour was only too happy to send someone other than himself to Bienville’s river crescent. Since arriving in the colony, the chief engineer had become firmly allied with the faction that believed Biloxi, with its Ship Island harbor, was the only place to situate the capital.”²²⁷ If the supporters of erecting New Orleans to the rank of capital of the colony considered the flood was a devastating event, others, favoring places such as Mobile, Biloxi, or Natchez, saw the flood as an opportunity to abandon the town for good. Following the event, discussions about relocating the town to Bayou

²²⁵ De Villiers trans. Dawson, “History of the Foundation of New Orleans,” 189.

²²⁶ Powell, *The Accidental City*, 51.

²²⁷ Powell, *The Accidental City*, 56.

Manchac (near today's site of Baton Rouge) or Biloxi emerged.²²⁸ Marc Antoine Hubert, *commissaire ordonnateur*,²²⁹ was among the opponents of New Orleans. He had most stores and goods transferred from New Orleans to Natchez, and promoted the higher ground and milder temperatures of the area as a way to attract colonists to the Natchez region.²³⁰

The news of the flood also had an impact on how the new city developed. As the news spread, the Company of the Indies stopped work on the expansion of the new city. This event generated a near desertion of the Crescent City for almost three years, until 1722, ironically, the year of the first recorded hurricane. On the other hand, the flood of 1721 at Mobile was almost unnoticed in Paris since the event was not used to slow down the development of the city as it had been the case for New Orleans a few years prior. It was only after much work and thanks to Bienville's endless perseverance, that, as de Villiers noted, "New Orleans was never completely abandoned, and so managed to exist until the decision of the 23rd of December, 1721, reached Louisiana, raising the town to the rank of capital."²³¹

Many were the downsides to the colony. According to La Harpe:

²²⁸ Powell, *The Accidental City*, 53.

²²⁹ Chief of the police.

²³⁰ De Villiers trans. Dawson, "History of the Foundation of New Orleans," 190.

²³¹ De Villiers trans. Dawson, "History of the Foundation of New Orleans," 158.

il reste à faire connaître les causes qui ont empêché ses progrès , et celle de la situation où elle se trouve en 1 724. Ceux qui ne jugent des choses que par les apparences soutiennent que cette province sera toujours à charge au roi et à la compagnie, qu'on n'en peut rien tirer. Ils appuient leur sentiment sur ce qu'on y a dépensé près de huit millions, sans qu'on ait apporté aucun retour en France. Il est certain qu'une pareille dépense doit donner des idées désavantageuses; mais lorsqu'on examinera sans prévention la manière dont les fonds qu'on reproche ont été employés, on ne pourra point disconvenir que ce n'est pas la faute du pays, mais les dispositions qui ont été prises en France, par les fraudes commises sur les achats des marchandises , et par le peu d'ordre qui a été apporté dans les envois de monde et de vivres , qui , avec la mauvaise régie des directeurs à la Louisiane, ont reculé son établissement. En effet la compagnie l'[sic]a commencé par y faire passer des forçats et gens sans aveu avec des filles de débauche; les troupes qu'elle y a envoyées ont été composées de déserteurs et de personnes ramassées sans distinction dans les rues de Paris.

(the causes that have slowed down the development [of Louisiana] must be discussed, and the situation where it stands in 1724. Those who judge things by their appearance assert that this province will always be costing money to the king and to the Company, that it is useless. They support their claim based on the fact that France spent almost eight millions there, without having any returns. It is certain that such an expense must give a bad impression; but after carefully examining how the funds blamed for the uselessness of the country were used, it will be impossible to blame the country for it, but that it was the dispositions taken in France, by frauds on merchandise purchases, and by the lack of order brought by the sending of food and people, that, because of the bad management of the directors [of the Company] in Louisiana, have set back its establishment. In fact the Company started by bringing in convicts along with women of little virtue; the troops that were sent were made of runaways and people picked up in the streets of Paris.)²³²

There was so much water over the years in the new capital that it became usual and expected that each year, new storms, new floods, and new disasters

²³² La Harpe, *l'Etablissement des Français à la Louisiane*, trans. Celine Ugolini, 371-372.

occurred. According to Vogt, “Drouot de Valdeterre [, a military official who had commanded at Dauphine Island and at Biloxi] wr[ote in the 1720s that]: ‘New Orleans is established in muddy ground brought on by the waters that overflow twice a year . . . The waters stagnate there from two to three months and render the air very unhealthy; there are only some wooden huts absolutely beyond condition to serve if they are not repaired after each overflow.’”²³³ According to Dumont de Montigny:

In this province, from the sea to la Pointe Coupée, that is the extent of eighty-two leagues, the air is not very healthful, because of the inundations of the St. Louis River, which overflows regularly every year from the twenty-fifth of March to St. Jean’s day (midsummer day), covering all the surrounding country, so that, in all this extent of land, one sees only lakes and swamps in the immense forests growing on this land.²³⁴

Floods were so frequent that Garvey and Widmer noted that

at high tide, the river [would flow] through the streets. The subsoil [would be] swampy. New Orleans bec[ame] famous for its tombs. Buried coffins must have holes so that they d[id] not float to the surface when land [wa]s flooded [...] Those living in the city dedicated to the Duke of Orleans fe[lt] as if they were living on an island in the middle of a mud puddle.²³⁵

²³³ Vogt, “Architecture of the French Quarter,” 64.

²³⁴ Louis François Benjamin Dumont de Montigny, *Historical Memoire on Louisiana*, Chapter II: The Climate and Temperature of Louisiana, 14, trans. Olivia Blanchard.

²³⁵ Garvey and Widmer, *Beautiful Crescent*, 33-34.

New Orleans' methods of dealing with its dead generated a nickname for it: "The Wet Grave."²³⁶ Coffins would be found floating around the city several times per year, after each major storm or water surge. In an effort to stop this phenomenon and with it the introduction of disease to the city, New Orleanians decided to reproduce the Spanish way of burying their dead by raising tombs above ground level and making them out of hard materials such as brick.²³⁷

Fairly early on, the idea of digging a canal emerged. The purpose of the canal would be to absorb and drain water surge from storms and direct the excess water towards the lake in the north in order to avoid inundating the city. The elaboration of a canal is an example of early planning for a city that seemed vulnerable to storms. It was to be dug from the Mississippi River to Lake Pontchartrain and to include a spot where to station various ships during hurricanes or storms in order to protect them.²³⁸ Protecting the city became a rightful purpose or even a leitmotiv for New Orleanians over time, even though the planned canal was not constructed.

²³⁶ Nathaniel Rich, "The Pharmacy Museum, New Orleans," *New York Times* http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2013/02/28/magazine/voyages-local-escapes.html?_r=0#/#new-orleans

²³⁷ The shape of the tombs made them almost look like small houses which led to the introduction of another nickname, "Cities of the Dead," when referring to those types of cemeteries.

²³⁸ Adrien de Pauger to the commissioners of the Company of the Indies, Ile de la Balise, September 23, 1723, 7, WRC, New Orleans, LA.

Physical conditions made it hard for colonists to settle in the area. It presented a constant challenge to a few men and women mostly sent against their will to start the colony. This constant hardship made it very difficult for the colony to develop at the pace that the original founders had hoped it would.

This slow development highlighted another major concern. The colony dramatically lacked population. Because of the lack of population, work on the city was neither of a durable nature nor was it carried out rapidly. Therefore, when the flood of 1719 took place, there was not much to rebuild. Further disasters also took quite some time to recover from precisely because of this lack of population. With time, and the arrival of slaves who took part in the rebuilding process, reconstructing the city after each disaster became more rapid and made more sense, as the city and its economy started to develop. When Le Page du Pratz arrived in Louisiana on August 25, 1718, New Orleans “existed only in name.”²³⁹ The following year New Orleans only counted four houses, on which work was still incomplete²⁴⁰ and the city encountered a major flood that destroyed a large part of it and considerably slowed down its establishment. The lack of settlers to Louisiana put a strain the reconstruction efforts and on the colony’s development.

²³⁹ Le Page du Pratz, *History of Louisiana*, 89.

²⁴⁰ A. Baillardel and A. Prioult, eds., *Le Chevalier de Pradel: Vie d'un Colon Français en Louisiane au XVIIIe Siecle d'après sa correspondance et celle de sa famille*, ed. Maisonneuve Freres (Paris: Librairie Orientale et Americaine, 1928), 29. Note from the editors.

According to LSU history professor James D. Hardy Jr., “not many people wanted to go to Louisiana. No amount of advertising, no concession, no liberal tax rebate could recruit the large number of colonists that the Company wanted. The frenzied advertising campaign of 1718 failed to produce prospective settlers. The Company [of the West] saw it would have to do something drastic about colonizing Louisiana. That something was transportation of criminals.”²⁴¹

France either kidnapped or forcefully sent large numbers of prisoners, prostitutes and other individuals to Louisiana. The need for workforce and men to populate the area grew and France wanted to protect its colony from potential attacks from its Spanish and English neighbors. Consequently, these needs led to the implementation of forced emigration. Additionally, according to the Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo, a population “increase [was] needed for the development of the agriculture, commerce and all other productive enterprises, which products w[ould] drop in proportion with the decrease in population.”²⁴² The

²⁴¹ James D. Hardy, Jr. “The Transportation of Convicts to Colonial Louisiana,” *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (Summer 1966), 210.

²⁴² Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo, 1769-1803, *A Record of the Spanish Government in New Orleans* (New Orleans, December 19, 1794), New Orleans Public Library. According to the City Archives at the New Orleans Library’s website “the original digest was compiled and edited by the Work Projects Administration (WPA) under the supervision of Mrs. E. D. Friedrichs, Custodian of the City Hall Archives. It was WPA project #665-64-3-112. The digest was completed as a single typewritten volume in August, 1939.”

French government had anticipated the population problem and thus on November 16, 1716, Louis XV, King of France, by means of the Regent, ordered for all

Négociant des Ports de France, qui envoient des Vaisseaux dans les Colonies Françaises de l'Amérique & de la Nouvelle France en Canada, d'y embarquer un certain nombre d'Engagez . . . Et ordonné que lesdits Engagez qui sçauroient les mestiers de Masson , Tailleur de pierres , Forgeron , Serrurier , Menuisier, Tonnelier, Charpentier . . . & autres mestiers utiles dans les Colonies

(commercial tradesmen of the ports of France, who send ships to the French colonies of America and New France in Canada, to board a certain number of volunteers . . . and to order that the said volunteers²⁴³ who know the professions of builder, stone cutter, blacksmith, locksmith, joiner, wet cooper, carpenter . . . and other professions useful in the colonies)²⁴⁴

be sent in large numbers. In June 1718, several ships carrying three hundred immigrants and five hundred soldiers and convicts arrived. This maneuver more than doubled Louisiana's population. Involuntary Louisianans were indentured servants, and had to work for approximately three years. After this they were entitled to freedom and to a small piece of land on which they could work and settle permanently to keep the population level up. These forced Louisianans enabled the construction (and reconstruction) of a larger town, one closer to what Bienville had hoped for as the major city of the French colony.

²⁴³ "Engagez" or "volunteers" refers here to forced migrants.

²⁴⁴ "Ordonnance du Roy, Au sujet des Engagez" February 15, 1724, 2-3, trans. Celine Ugolini, Kuntz Collection, Tulane University Special Collections (thereafter Kuntz Collection), New Orleans, LA.

It was also very important to make sure the population remained high to avoid invasion from the English. Huge incentives existed in France for the police force to apprehend citizens denounced by a neighbor or a relative as harboring wrong behavior. Concrete evidence was not necessary to have someone shipped off to the colony and the police were offered financial rewards per person arrested and sent away.²⁴⁵ Populating the colony became such an important aim that, according to Hardy, the apprehension of individuals on the streets led to the “transportation to the colonies as a penalty for begging, unemployment, or vagabondage.”²⁴⁶ Around twenty five percent of the original male population of the city of New Orleans was made of criminals of some sort.²⁴⁷

In addition, because settlers from both sexes were needed, the Company had many prisoners marry young women before sailing across the Atlantic Ocean and reach New Orleans. John Law himself visited several “hospitals” in Paris in order to select those whom he wanted to ship to Louisiana. He notably went to the Salpêtrière, known for housing the poor, the mentally ill, the criminals, prostitutes, and other delinquents. According to Jean Buvat’s *Journal de la Régence*, on September 18, 1719:

²⁴⁵ Midlo Hall, “Afro-Creole Culture,” 62.

²⁴⁶ Hardy, “The Transportation of Convicts,” 215.

²⁴⁷ Powell, *The Accidental City*, 69.

... au matin, on maria dans l'église du prieuré de Saint-Martin-des-Champs, à Paris, cent quatre-vingts filles avec autant de garçons, qu'on avait tirés de la prison de ce prieuré et d'autres prisons de cette ville, ayant laissé la liberté à ces pauvres filles de choisir leur époux dans un plus grand nombre de garçons. Après laquelle cérémonie, on les fit partir liés d'une petite chaine deux à deux, le mari avec sa femme, suivis de trois charrettes chargées de leurs hardes, et pour les soulager de temps en temps, ou pour voiturer ceux ou celles qui se trouvaient malades en chemin, escortés par vingt archers, pour les conduire à la Rochelle et de là être transportés au Mississipi [sic], dans l'espérance d'une meilleure fortune.

(... in the morning, at the monastery of the church of Saint-Martin-des-Champs in Paris, one hundred and eighty four girls were married to as many boys, that were taken from the prison of that monastery and from other prisons in town, having enabled these poor girls to choose their husbands amongst a larger number of boys. After the ceremony, they left enchained two by two, the husband with his wife, followed by three carts and their belongings, and to relieve them from time to time, or to carry those who fell sick en route, escorted by twenty archers, to take them to La Rochelle and from there to Mississipi [sic], in search of better luck.)²⁴⁸

Forced immigration generated a violent reaction from many incarcerated in Paris. As a result, and in order to avoid further riots and disorder, the French Regent stopped the sending of convicts and other outcasts on May 9, 1720.

Following this event,

SA MAJESTÉ, de l'avis de Monsieur le Duc d'Orléans Regent, a deffendu & defend sous peine de la vie à tous ses Sujets de quelque qualité et condition qu'ils soient, de sortir du Royaume [de France] sans une permission expresse de Sa Majesté signee du Gouverneur, Commandant ou Intendant desdites Provinces.

(his Majesty, in agreement with the Regent Duke of Orleans, asserted and asserts that, all his subjects of whatever quality or condition they may be,

²⁴⁸ Jean Buvat, *Journal de la Régence (1715-1723)*, Vol. 1, trans. Celine Ugolini, (Paris: 1865), 438-439.

should pay the price of their lives, if leaving the Kingdom [of France] without permission from his Majesty and signed by the Governor, Commander or Administrative Official of the said provinces.)²⁴⁹

This ordinance therefore forbade any settlers to leave any part of the Kingdom of France, including its colonies, and was therefore another way to prevent colonists from leaving the area and maintain a high population level. Additionally, another device was put in place as to make sure the “Engagez,” or “volunteers” did not leave the colony. Each captain or ship owner should pay,

un mois après l'arrivée de leurs Vaisseaux dans le Port du débarquement, la somme de Soixante livres pour chaque Engagé qu'ils n'auront pas remis dans lesdites Colonies , & dont ils ne rapporteront pas Certificat conformément audit Reglement . . . Et que pour les Engagez de mestier qu'ils ne remettront point . . . ils payent la somme de Cent vingt livres.

(one month after the arrival of their ship to the port of disembarkation, the amount of sixty livres for each volunteer they did not deliver to the said colonies, and for whom they did not bring a valid certificate . . . And that for the skilled volunteers they did not deliver, they should pay the amount of one hundred and twenty livres.”)²⁵⁰

Despite forced immigration, by 1727, New Orleans was still a very small settlement. Ursuline Nun Marie-Madeleine Hachard’s father wrote in a letter to his daughter dated October 27 of that year that he purchased two maps of the colony in

²⁴⁹ “Ordonnance du Roy, Portant Deffenses sous peine de la Vie, à tous Sujets du Roy de sortir du Royaume jusqu’au premier de Janvier prochain, sans Passeport ou Permission,” October 29, 1720, 2, trans. Celine Ugolini, Kuntz Collection.

²⁵⁰ “Ordonnance du Roy, Portant Deffenses sous peine de la Vie, à tous Sujets du Roy de sortir du Royaume jusqu’au premier de Janvier prochain, sans Passeport ou Permission,” October 29, 1720, 2, trans. Celine Ugolini, Kuntz Collection, New Orleans, LA.

France, and that neither showed the city of New Orleans. New maps showing the city did not exist. According to Powell, “‘New Orleans [was] being scarcely more than shaped.’ They refused to depict it on maps forwarded to Paris.”²⁵¹ This confirms, as Ursuline Marie-Madeleine Hachard put it in 1728, that it was “not until 1723 [that] New Orleans beg[a]n to take on the appearance”²⁵² of a town. According to Powell, “by the time the Company of the Indies surrendered its charter in 1731, New Orleans had scarcely emerged from its land-clearing stage, its notional neatness still only visible for a few blocks back from the river. A hurricane the following year submerged even that bit of clearing for several weeks. A dozen more years would elapse before an ambitious public-works program finally drained inland water from every area of New Orleans.”²⁵³

The eventual growth of the city happened through several factors. The Ursulines contributed to the growth of the population. They promoted women’s education, marriage, and helped improve health. At the other end of the spectrum, slavery constituted an important factor in the growth of population. Slave labor became widely used, readily available, and very common throughout the colony overall. As will be discussed further, slaves also took active part in the rebuilding

²⁵¹ Powell, *The Accidental City*, 50.

²⁵² Marie-Madeleine Hachard Ursuline of New Orleans, letters, 1727-1728, trans. Myldred Masson Costa. US Old Mint, New Orleans, Louisiana.

²⁵³ Powell, *The Accidental City*, 67.

process after each disaster and therefore enabled New Orleans' resilience through time.

a. The Ursuline Nuns

The Ursulines were a group of nuns belonging to the Sisters of the Order of Saint Ursula, a Catholic congregation founded in 1535 in Italy and which set foot for the first time in New Orleans on August 6, 1727. Their mission was to help the colony of Louisiana. As their name attests, their patron saint was Ursula. Ursula, according to the Catholic religion, was a virgin who sailed from Britain to Gaule (today's France) along with thousands of other virgins and who encountered a storm, from which she was ultimately saved. Several places have been named after her such as the Virgin Islands. The Ursulines were "the first group of Catholic teachers to come to North America"²⁵⁴ when they set up their first schools on that continent in Quebec in 1639. As teachers, they were among the few educated settlers who could read and write, and that therefore could contribute to leaving written records of life within the colony. Their high point was at the beginning of the eighteenth century, exactly when a group of them arrived in New Orleans, led by Mother Marie Tranchepain, a French born nun from Normandy, in order to build the first school for girls of the city. The goal of the Ursulines was not only to

²⁵⁴ "Ursuline Sisters," Handbook of Texas Online, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/UU/ixu1.html> (accessed June 27, 2009).

provide education to the local young ladies, but also to make sure that they would become well-mannered and knowledgeable about home keeping and children raising. In other words, the Ursulines' main purpose was to prepare young girls for marriage. This was considered very helpful at the time, especially keeping in mind the very high number of women considered of little virtue or of immoral customs within the city. The Ursulines had, in a sense, the mission to purify and educate young ladies who had been deported to the colony and to turn them into housewives for the local men. Since the male to female ratio was high, it was very important to make sure that the few women within the colony could become well-bred wives, and to help increase the population. The Ursulines became quite successful at educating young women. According to Powell, "by the 1760s, literacy rates for white women in New Orleans had not only surpassed those for white men but were twice that of white females anywhere in British North America."²⁵⁵

The Ursulines also had another very important role in the city. Due to the shortage of doctors and nurses and the relative ability for the Ursulines to provide care and assistance to the ill, they offered the first type of adequate medical assistance known to New Orleans. This meant that the Ursulines would have played a part in disaster relief and helping the injured residents following floods,

²⁵⁵ Powell, *The Accidental City*, 126.

hurricanes, and other events. According to Le Page du Pratz, “the house of the Ursulin Nuns is quite at the end of the town, to the right; as is also the hospital of the sick, of which the nuns have the inspection. What I have just described faces the river.”²⁵⁶ The Ursulines moved to Chartres Street in 1734, where in 1752 they built their convent, today known as the Old Ursuline Convent.²⁵⁷

Another role of the Ursulines nuns was to Christianize the locals as well as the slaves. According to Powell, “the Catholic Church itself was the largest beneficiary of the Ursulines’ evangelizing of the African population, for Catholicism in New Orleans was first and foremost black Catholicism.”²⁵⁸

All in all, the Ursuline nuns not only had the impact of enabling the population to grow by preparing young women to become wives, they also took active part in the betterment of the city. Indeed, the Ursulines offered relief following disasters, thus developing the residents’ resilience. They also offered education, favoring the development of knowledge as well as written records and accounts of colonial Louisiana.

²⁵⁶ Le Page du Pratz, *History of Louisiana*, 92.

²⁵⁷ The Ursuline convent is the oldest building in the Mississippi River Valley, and according to KnowLa, the online encyclopedia of Louisiana, it is the “only French colonial structure in the French Quarter known to have survived the fires of 1788 and 1794.” <http://www.knowla.org/entry.php?rec=579> (accessed on September 16, 2012) Today, the convent is open to the public in the form of a museum.

²⁵⁸ Powell, *The Accidental City*, 126.

b. Defense and Police in the City

Promoting a large population was also important to provide a workforce to build the town, and skilled workers to enable its development. This would ensure that in case of disasters, the workforce would be adequate to provide relief and repair. Considering that many of the original workers were either convicts or sent by force, there was a large necessity for law enforcement officers. Planning also became mandatory very early on in the form of fortifying the city to prevent foreign attacks, especially from the British. There had been early plans involving a fortification ordered by the crown which had never happened, so in 1760, Louisiana governor Louis Billouart, Chevalier de Kerlrec (also nicknamed “*Chef Menteur*”²⁵⁹ or “chief liar” by Choctaw Indians)²⁶⁰ started pleading the need for a palisade to be built around the city in order to protect it. The French were so concerned by the French and Indian War (also known as Seven Years’ War) that was taking place at the time (involving the Britons in the North of New France and which led to the loss of the colony of Canada), that they completely disregarded the colony of Louisiana. They did not show much support to the city of New Orleans, which seemed far away and unimportant. Motivated by rumors coming

²⁵⁹ Today, the “*Chef Menteur*” Kerlrec has a main road and a street named after him in New Orleans.

²⁶⁰ John Churchill Chase, *Frenchmen, Desire, Good Children: ... and Other Streets of New Orleans!* (Gretna: Pelican Publishing, 2001), 62.

from the Indians, the English were preparing an attempt to take over New Orleans using ships coming from the river.²⁶¹ Governor Kerlerec wrote a letter to the Ministre asking for help in order to achieve “*une defense plus vigoureuse*” (a more vigorous defense)²⁶² which, to him, consisted in the erection of a wall protecting the Crescent City and its inhabitants. He came across a major issue with regards to financing the project. New Orleanians at the time were even poorer than they had been in the past due to taxation linked with the funding of wars with Britain within the colonies. They were unable to contribute to the payment of fortifications for the city. In his letter to the Minister, Kerlerec seemed to fear riots if citizens had to pay for the fortification themselves and did not receive help from France whom they already felt was letting them down. Kerlerec wrote that

dans un autre temps, et toute autre position [il] ser[ait] parvenu à assujettir L’habitant a La moitié de cette depense, malgré l’opinion générale que c’est au Roy a fortifier ses places

(at any other point in time, in any other circumstances, [he] would have been able to subject inhabitants to contribute to half of this expenditure, in spite of the general opinion that it [wa]s down to the King to fortify his places).²⁶³

²⁶¹ Louis Billouart, Chevalier de Kerlerec to the Ministre, New Orleans, March 30, 1760, 1, Reel 50, WRC, New Orleans, LA.

²⁶² Kerlerec to the Ministre, New Orleans, March 30, 1760, 2, trans. Celine Ugolini, WRC, New Orleans, LA.

²⁶³ Kerlerec to the Ministre, New Orleans, March 30, 1760, 3, trans. Celine Ugolini, WRC, New Orleans, LA.

In this very fragile environment, as Kerlerec further notes, “*la prudence et la modération ... [sont] nécessaires surtout vis a vis d’un peuple injustement imposé Et qui jusqu’a présent s’est comporté en fidel sujet dans toutes Les horreurs que vous Connoisés*” (caution and moderation ... [are] necessary especially facing a unfairly taxed population and whom behaved as faithful subjects until now despite all the atrocities that you know of).²⁶⁴ Considering the British desire to expand their colony in the New World, Kerlerec’s request to the crown to help fortify the City of New Orleans seemed legitimate. Moreover, he went further and expressed his expectations, and the fact that the palisade could go as far as making the city more peaceful and quieter than it had ever been in the past. He defended this position in a letter dated March 30, 1760:

De la Cloture de cette ville et de la police qui s’en suivra par des corps-de garde placés a propos, quand nous aurons des troupes; il ressortira une tranquillité parfaite, et le bon ordre si fort a desirer dans La Societé civile

(from the enclosure of this city and the arrival of the police force that will be followed by troops strategically placed throughout; will rise a perfect peacefulness, and the so longed for order within the civilian community).²⁶⁵

²⁶⁴ Kerlerec to the Ministre, New Orleans, March 30, 1760, 5, trans. Celine Ugolini, WRC, New Orleans, LA.

²⁶⁵ Kerlerec to the Ministre, New Orleans, March 30, 1760, 7, trans. Celine Ugolini, WRC, New Orleans, LA.

The growing need for law enforcement officers was notably officially expressed later on, during the Spanish period in an act of the Cabildo dated April 30, 1779 when

the Attorney-General presented a memorandum regarding the growth of the population of [New Orleans], and the necessity of increasing the number of citizens to serve as Justices of the Peace of Wards, to assist in keeping order and preserving peace.²⁶⁶

Additionally, the arrival of the new police force increased the colony's population. Not only was it difficult to populate the colony, but maintaining the population level also presented a challenge. Many writings of the time address the poor conditions of the colony and the constant hurdles inhabitants faced. In a place saturated with water, encountering regular storms, and surrounded by unstable land, many wondered about deserting. Some eventually did, due to the recurring character of disasters linked with the city's poor site. The substandard conditions of the colony raised concern over the possibility of residents leaving. The causes of this "depopulation"²⁶⁷ were discussed in official meetings of the local government, held during the Spanish period at the Cabildo, next to the city cathedral. The consequences of the depopulation were yet some additional challenges in finding adequate workforce to rebuild the city following disasters. Local officials tried to

²⁶⁶ Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo, 1769-1803, *A Record of the Spanish Government in New Orleans* (New Orleans, April 30, 1779), 1.

²⁶⁷ Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo, 1769-1803, *A Record of the Spanish Government in New Orleans* (New Orleans, October 4, 1771).

convey the colony's conditions to the governing bodies in France and Spain to generate help from them. Attorney-General Don Santiago Beauregard notably requested permission during a reading from the Cabildo to "make known the deplorable conditions of the Province and having agreed, that it be put in writing which will be conveyed to the King."²⁶⁸

The all too frequent disasters worried local officials who had dreamt of making the colony prosperous and New Orleans a viable commercial city. Many felt they had no choice but to leave in order to start a new venture elsewhere, in a location not threatened by water and devastation several times per year. Remaining in New Orleans was in many cases a risky enterprise, a gamble. According to the Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo, often, "colonists and farmers, [found] themselves obliged to abandon their possessions and land ... perhaps causing an emigration of subjects."²⁶⁹ Another reason for leaving was the initial failure for the city to become the commercial project it had been designed to be.²⁷⁰ Officials at the Cabildo knew of

²⁶⁸ Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo, 1769-1803, *A Record of the Spanish Government in New Orleans* (New Orleans, August 23, 1771).

²⁶⁹ Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo, 1769-1803, *A Record of the Spanish Government in New Orleans* (New Orleans, November 8, 1782), 2. This situation is very similar to what is still happening today in the wake of hurricane Katrina.

²⁷⁰ New Orleans only became a successful and prosperous city in the nineteenth century.

the great devastation of the Colony, due to lack of commerce which ha[d] been very much reduced for all those engaged in business and other trades, the residents and merchants s[ought] to go and leave this Colony in order find their livelihood in foreign land which [was] very detrimental to the State and to the Province, and [that] it [was] urgent and necessary, to remedy this at once before it bec[ame] more serious.²⁷¹

This was the subject of a special meeting to evaluate the extent of the issue. There were so many disasters that

discouraged with ... misfortune, several individual[sic] [were] willing to leave a country which, besides having all resources exhausted to so many calamities, the fear of other similar misfortune, depresse[d] the strongest spirits in starting anew to develop enterprises exposed to certain ruin.²⁷²

Faced with the possibility of losing a large proportion of the local population, the numerous meetings from the Cabildo documented the use of city funds to finance recovery projects. Whether after a storm, a flood, a hurricane, or a fire, an appeal was made to the mother country and to the city to help the destitute in order to allow them to stay on the land that they may have abandoned otherwise to try their luck elsewhere, on more stable land. Officials could not perpetuate this negative assessment, as they believed too much in the potential of the city and wanted to make it a success. If a way of thinking

(solely based on ... misfortunes) [was] propagated, the migration of several useful residents must be expected, who w[ould] go to work in other

²⁷¹ Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo, 1769-1803, *A Record of the Spanish Government in New Orleans* (New Orleans, August 16, 1771), 1.

²⁷² Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo, 1769-1803, *A Record of the Spanish Government in New Orleans* (New Orleans, December 19, 1794).

countries less exposed to so detrimental risks now desolating our own, and this same misfortune w[ould] keep away others from coming to establish themselves here, the population w[ould] decrease instead of increasing.²⁷³

According to the Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo, the only possible resolution to prevent this was the help of the mother country.

In order to remedy this terrible loss and to incite with the necessary reviving action their spirits, to re-establish our destroyed commerce as well as our declining agriculture, great and extraordinary aid is indispensable, which we can only expect of the powerful hand of our August king Monarch.²⁷⁴

Relief did come and enabled New Orleans' residents to rebuild, and show resilience. This did not solve the lack of population and workforce issue, but it contributed to minimize it, at least temporarily. As previously mentioned, another means to populate the area and attend to some of the existing issues rapidly emerged: the use of slavery.

2. The Slavery Problem

Slavery provided the colony with a larger population, which was dramatically needed, and contributed to making use of the inhospitable conditions that pioneers faced. The use of slavery also played a part in the resilient character of the city of New Orleans and in creating its unique culture. Slave labor was

²⁷³ Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo, 1769-1803, *A Record of the Spanish Government in New Orleans* (New Orleans, December 19, 1794).

²⁷⁴ Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo, 1769-1803, *A Record of the Spanish Government in New Orleans* (New Orleans, December 19, 1794).

widely used as part of the recovery efforts after each disaster. First and foremost, colonists saw slavery as a way to tame the difficult natural environment.

According to Johnson:

Bienville ... imported the first two slaves from the West Indies in 1708. These few years also saw the decline of the ability for southern colonists to look after their own subsistence due to the harsh farming conditions and therefore to their periodic exile to Indian tribes seeking help from them. Wanting to remain on their lower ground by the mouth of the river in order to exploit the latter, settlers started developing a new idea that would enable them to make the most of their land without having to exert themselves. Hence they started “to encourage their Indian allies to bring in captured Indian women as slaves to grow food for them.”²⁷⁵

Moreover, with the building of the new city, more and more settlers became attracted to New Orleans. They moved out of the rural areas and took residency in the city. This took manpower away from local plantations and other agricultural businesses that were originally located out of the city. In order to remedy this lack of laborers, a new and large workforce had to be brought in. Consequently, starting in 1719, slaves started arriving to the colony in huge numbers when two French ships, the *Du Maine* and the *Aurore* arrived in New Orleans with over five hundred black slaves coming from Africa onboard. According to Powell, “the town’s early infrastructure, its network of streets and drainage canals, was built by slaves from Africa. They shoveled the dirt that raised the levees Bienville threw up hurriedly

²⁷⁵ Johnson, “Colonial New Orleans”, 34.

after the 1719 overflow nearly led to the official abandonment of his site.”²⁷⁶ Slave labor became a solution to improve the colony’s prosperity. Powell also noted that “as of 1721, more than two-thirds of the free households inside the town limits contained slaves, the widest dispersal of slave ownership in the history of the town. They were not uniformly [dispersed amongst] persons of high social status, either. A gunsmith received a slave, a carpenter got two, a joiner three, a retired sergeant six, as did a warehouse guard and a storekeeper.”²⁷⁷ By the end of 1721, New Orleans counted 1256 inhabitants of which about half were slaves.²⁷⁸ By 1724 there were twice as many blacks as whites in New Orleans. Then, by way of natural reproduction, slaves contributed to maintaining the colony populated. They also actively took part in the reconstruction efforts that the numerous disasters generated. Considerable rebuilding efforts actually started to become more visible in the city during the Spanish period since the Spaniards were much better planners than the French, but also because the population had increased to the point where water could somewhat be tamed. According to Powell, “the colony’s African-descended people not only tilled the fields and built the levees; in New Orleans they framed the houses, plastered the walls, and shingled the roofs. As well, they

²⁷⁶ Powell, *The Accidental City*, 73.

²⁷⁷ Powell, *The Accidental City*, 54.

²⁷⁸ Martin Siegel, *New Orleans: A Chronological and Documentary History 1539-1970* (New York: Oceana Publications, 1975), 2.

forged the tools that made the barrels that stored the tobacco and indigo, which were then carried to market in wagons and carts that their hands built and kept repaired.”²⁷⁹ After having settled in the colony for a long enough period, slaves, who were also the cooks in their masters’ kitchens, gained the ability to know how to mix local food ingredients with what they knew from their own culture and country as well as adding items their masters’ would recommend from their culture. This led to the birth of New Orleans’ unique Creole cuisine.²⁸⁰

A few years after the introduction of African slaves, Indian women began to marry these newly arrived slaves.²⁸¹ This enabled the growth of the slave population in the city and was an asset for its masters as well as for the slave community as a whole, which would keep on growing. Slaves had become the largest portion of New Orleans’ inhabitants. Thus it gave that community a certain power. The large amount of Indian women within colony also meant that there were more and more intermarriages not only between them and African slaves, but also between Indian women and colonists who seemingly preferred them to French women according to Governor Antoine de Cadillac.²⁸² At that time, police official Martin d’Artaguet also recommended the use of slave labor as a way to solve

²⁷⁹ Powell, *The Accidental City*, 76.

²⁸⁰ Powell, *The Accidental City*, 98.

²⁸¹ Johnson, “Colonial New Orleans,” 34.

²⁸² Johnson, “Colonial New Orleans,” 34.

agricultural difficulties. The local residents would have had to face very difficult conditions in laboring the land and therefore turned towards the use of slavery.

According to historian Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, “almost all the slaves brought to Louisiana under French rule came directly from Africa and arrived within a twelve-year period following the founding of New Orleans.”²⁸³ Some five thousand African slaves were brought to the colony during that time period, which represented over ninety percent of all slaves reaching Louisiana during the French colonial period. A continuous use of slaves proceeded as the economic situation of the colony in the early 1740’s became extremely harsh, when numerous wars with Indians, decreasing financial help from the mother country and very little local production favored the expansion of slavery in order to accomplish the difficult tasks colonists faced. As a result, by 1740 the population of the city of New Orleans alone was 1,100, the vast majority of which was made of slaves. Meanwhile, the whole colony of Louisiana counted about 5,200 inhabitants of whom about four-thousand were African slaves. Slaves largely contributed to building and maintaining levees around the city for decades. According to Powell, they “would continue building, repairing, and elevating those earthen dikes for private owners and government entities alike. France may have founded Louisiana

²⁸³ Midlo Hall, “Afro-Creole Culture,” 66.

as we know it, but it was slaves from Senegal and Congo who laid the foundation.²⁸⁴

Place of Origin	Year Landed	Number of Slaves
Juda (Whydah):		
<i>L'Aurore</i>	1719	200
<i>Le Duc du Maine</i>	1719	250
<i>L'Afriquain</i>	1720	182
<i>Le Duc du Maine</i>	1721	349
<i>Le Fortuné</i>	1721	303
<i>La Diane</i>	1728	464
Total	1,749	
Cabinde:		
<i>La Néréide</i>	1721	294
Total	294	
Senegal/Goree:		
<i>Le Ruby</i>	1720	127
<i>Le Maréchal d'Estrees</i>	1721	196
<i>L'Expédition</i>	1723	88
<i>Le Courier de Bourbon</i>	1723	87
<i>L'Aurore</i>	1726	290
<i>La Mutine</i>	1726	228
<i>L'Annibal</i>	1727	261 (average)
<i>Le Prince de Conti</i>	1727	300
<i>Le Duc de Noaille</i>	1728	237
<i>Le Vénus</i>	1728	341
<i>La Flore</i>	1728	356
<i>La Galathée</i>	1729	273
<i>La Vénus</i>	1729	363
<i>Le Duc de Bourbon</i>	1729	319
<i>Le St. Louis</i>	1731	291
<i>Le St. Ursin</i>	1743	190
Total	3,947	
Grand total:	5,989	

SOURCE: Jean Mettas, *Répertoire des expéditions négrières françaises au XVIIIème siècle*, ed. Serge Daget and Michelle Daget (2 vols.; Paris, 1978, 1984), Vol. II.

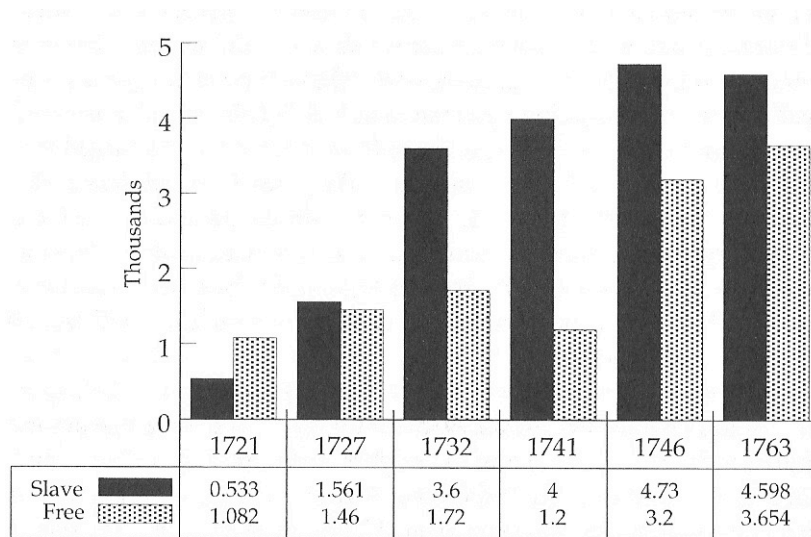
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Origins and Amount of Slaves that Reached Louisiana from Africa from 1719 to 1743

²⁸⁴ Powell, *The Accidental City*, 74.

²⁸⁵ Midlo Hall, "Afro-Creole Culture," 70. Original source: Jean Mettas.

On the above table, the origins of the slaves are described as: Juda (or Whydah), a town in Benin, on the west coast of Africa; Cabinde (or Angola), a country on the Atlantic coast of southern Africa, between Namibia and Gabon; and Senegal (also from Goree, an island off of the coast of Dakar, the capital of Senegal), a northern Africa country located on the west coast, between Mauritania and Guinea.²⁸⁶



SOURCES: Charles R. Maduell, *The Census Tables for the French Colony of Louisiana from 1699 Through 1732* (Baltimore, 1972); Mémoire sur la colonie de la Louisiane (around 1740), C13C 1, 384, Archives Nationales, Paris; Mémoire sur l'état de la Colonie de la Louisiane en 1746, C13A 30, 244–57, Archives Nationales; Antonio Acosta Rodríguez, *La población de Luisiana española, 1763–1803* (Madrid, 1979), 31, 110. The 1763 census covers territory only from the mouth of the Mississippi River through Pointe Coupee.

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Slave and Free population in Louisiana for the years 1721 to 1763

²⁸⁶ Gwendolyn Mildlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), 59-60.

²⁸⁷ Midlo Hall, “Afro-Creole Culture”, 66.

In 1724, perhaps in an effort to maintain a peaceful colony, the large amount of African slaves within the colony generated the implementation of Louis XV's "*Code Noir*" (Black Code) in Louisiana. Louis XIV's original "*Code Noir*" dates back to the late seventeenth century. In appearance, the code had the purpose of protecting African slaves. Slaves were becoming more and more numerous and the white population of colonists was very small and scattered inside the huge territory that Louisiana represented. A way to avoid dangerous riots and uprisings was by granting slaves more freedom and enabling them to remain together as a family while serving a master. The Code's main positive point was to forbid the separation of family members, especially the separation of children from their parents by the mean of selling one of them to another master. However, a young person was considered an adult by the age of thirteen and therefore after that age, separation from one's family was acceptable. Masters relied on slave labor for cultivation of their land and could not afford to spark off rebellions that may have turned into violence or escapes from runaway slaves called maroons. The word "maroon" comes from the French "marron" which itself comes from the Spanish "cimarrón" and means feral or fugitive.²⁸⁸

²⁸⁸ "maroon, n.2 and adj.2". OED Online. September 2012. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/114284?rskey=4rzX8n&result=2> (accessed September 17, 2012).

Fear of revolts was particularly palpable, according to Powell, “after the French revolutionary government freed all slaves on France’s Caribbean islands in 1794.”²⁸⁹ The French First Republic temporarily abolished slavery in all French colonies in 1794 after adding an amendment to the first constitution of 1791 stating that all men were born free and equal in rights. Consequently, according to the website of the French Embassy in the UK, “all men, irrespective of colour, living in the colonies [were declared] French citizens and [became entitled to] enjoy all the rights provided by the Constitution.”²⁹⁰ Although these events took place during the Spanish colonial period, New Orleans’ residents were mostly French speaking at the time. The Spanish government in charge then worried about possible impact on the colony since many former French Caribbean slaves decided to settle in the region of New Orleans and to tell their story to the Louisiana slaves. Slaves in New Orleans felt that had they still been officially French, they may have had a chance to benefit from the initial abolishment of slavery. This event could have influenced them into rebelling and claiming their own freedom.

On April 9, 1795, rumors of a possible plot from slaves to organize a rebellion against their masters came to light and to the attention of Captain Don

²⁸⁹ Johnson, “Colonial New Orleans,” 54.

²⁹⁰ France in the United Kingdom, “France and the abolition of slavery: slavery was first abolished in France in 1794, then definitively abolished in 1848,” French Embassy, <http://www.ambafrance-uk.org/Slavery-Slavery-was-abolished-in.html> (accessed June 27, 2009).

Guillermo DuParc,²⁹¹ the commandant of the Pointe Coupée settlement. The presumed large size of the slave congregation pushed the latter to immediately report his discovery to Francisco Luis Héctor de Carondelet, the then governor, who decided to use forceful ways in order to reinstate masters' authority towards their slaves. The authorities hanged as many as twenty-three slaves suspected of plotting in order to frighten the remaining slaves and discourage them from organizing further riots. Following this event, the slave trade with the West Indies almost immediately became illegal to prevent the number of slaves in the colony from growing to an amount that would become unmanageable by the masters and the government in charge. The ban remained in place for two years, was repealed, and finally became permanent in 1803.²⁹²

The *Code Noir* also had the purpose of freeing slaves from work on Sundays,²⁹³ in order for them to be able to practice religious activities of the Catholic Church, to which they were mandatorily converted, since that was their only day off of hard labor. According to the Article II of the *Code Noir* of 1724,

²⁹¹ Jack D. L. Holmes, "The Abortive Slave Revolt at Pointe Coupée, Louisiana, 1795," *Louisiana History* (Fall 1979): 341-362.

²⁹² Johnson, "Colonial New Orleans," 56.

²⁹³ "Primary Documents: Louisiana's Code Noir (1724)," University of Washington, Department of History, accessed 5 Dec. 2013, http://faculty.washington.edu/qtaylor/documents_us/LA_code_noir.htm

masters had the duty to provide their slaves with religious education.²⁹⁴ Slaves' days off were also beneficial to their masters who, during the 1740s crisis had more and more trouble feeding them. Slaves were therefore expected to feed themselves and look after themselves on these days. This practice had another effect, which was to give more power to the slaves, who started cultivating their own gardens and crafting their own items in order to sell them. In such a way they actively participated in the economic development of the colony while at the same time they increased their independence and self-subsistence. Bienville, who put the *Code Noir* into effect, also included a section banning all Jews from the colony and forbidding Protestant worship, which completely cut any kind of religious freedom and obligated all Louisiana people to convert to Catholicism if they had not already done so.

The Code also forbade “intermarriage between white settlers and black”²⁹⁵ slaves. If the Code did have some limited advantages for the slaves, its main concern, however, was for masters to ensure that slaves would not run away and create revolts, thus they were allowed some degree of freedom and rights. The Code enabled families to remain together to a certain extent, and allowed slaves to

²⁹⁴ “Primary Documents: Louisiana’s Code Noir (1724),” University of Washington, Department of History, accessed 5 Dec. 2013, http://faculty.washington.edu/qtaylor/documents_us/LA_code_noir.htm

²⁹⁵ Siegel, *New Orleans*, 2.

own property. The Code was, however, on balance much more profitable for the masters than the slaves.

Slaves were so numerous in the colony that slavery became an essential part of its development. According to Johnson, “Louisiana did not develop a mature plantation economy until planters perfected sugar granulation and introduced cotton during the last decade of the eighteenth century, on the very eve of the U.S. purchase”²⁹⁶ but as the plantation economy grew, the colony needed even more manpower. Slavery therefore became such a common and widely used practice that the whole economy of the south depended upon it. Until the Civil War, and therefore the abolishment of slavery, the main crops in Louisiana were cotton and sugar for which slave labor was predominantly used. Further, slavery developed elsewhere on the continent and in Europe and was considered common practice. Most people in the colony were pro-slavery. Very few masters provided their slaves with access to education, especially at a time when colonists were not themselves educated. One of the rare masters to enable this was John McDonogh. McDonogh freed all his slaves by the end of his life in 1850.

As late as towards the early nineteenth century, there were still no universities or colleges, or even a library other than the scarce private ones that some rare wealthy colonists may have owned. There was no place in town where to

²⁹⁶ Johnson, “Colonial New Orleans,” 19.

purchase books. Had there been a bookstore, and considering that probably only about two percent of the 8,000 New Orleanians could read and write, there would not have been much use for it. Needless to say that in the case of slaves, if their masters were not educated, the likelihood of them becoming educated was next to nothing. As a consequence of this lack of literacy, a vast majority of slaves were unable to leave a written account of their customs, religious practices or lives. Slaves mostly passed on their traditions and habits orally from one generation to the next, in the same way that it had been the case for centuries with their ancestors in Africa. This also means that written records from slaves on their role in the development of the colony and the rebuilding efforts cannot be found.

To face the recurring issues with water and underpopulation, flood after flood, disaster after disaster, colonists also used slave labor to rebuild the city. According to the Louisiana Historical Quarterly, in 1771, reports detailed how “when the river rose to an extraordinary height th[at] year, it caused many cracked and breaks to appear, in the levee, which kept the negroes continually occupied to close them up”²⁹⁷ at an indigo plantation site. The slaves were therefore not able to work on the plantation as they had to repair the damaged levees. This was a common phenomenon.

²⁹⁷ The Louisiana Historical Quarterly, October 18, 1771. Thimoleon Chataubaudau vs. Francisco la Chapelle. No. 138, 138 pp. Court of Governor Unzaga. Assessor, Cecilio Odoardo. Escribano, Andres Almonester.

After yet another flood, the Cabildo recorded use of slave labor in 1789 on the levees when, according to its Acts and Deliberations:

after considering the importance of this work, as well as the tranquility of these, safety for their property, and guard against the risk of the public health in this vicinity, of the damage caused by the ravages of floods, and sickness that in the past year caused considerable mortality, knowing the hardships suffered by the inhabitants of this coast, by repairing the levee twice on the McCarty lands,²⁹⁸ having to employ in said work the best slaves on different occasions, at the time they needed them more for their own work, losing thereby part of their crops, it is not just according to these damages suffered they should again pay for this work.²⁹⁹

Here again the fragility of the city is apparent when simply abandoning land meant that it threatened the rest of the city. Yet, in the face of this apparent fragility, the necessity for the city to remain at its original location prevailed. Such rebuilding was never questioned and was always carried out. The permanent reconstruction was also enabled by the use of slave labor. When slaves were sent to work on the levees as opposed to their masters' land, frictions between the government and the slave owners who saw their own land lacking men to work on them emerged. The McCarty lands were particularly problematic as they were

²⁹⁸ McCarty lands in New Orleans had been abandoned by their owner and presented a problem to the city due to their location by the levee. Since individuals were responsible for maintaining the levees on their land, after abandonment, there was a need to protect the existing levee.

²⁹⁹ Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo, 1769-1803, *A Record of the Spanish Government in New Orleans* (New Orleans, October 30, 1789).

abandoned and situated by the river. Again, in 1790, another flood, according to the Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo:

destroyed the newly repaired levee, which was strongly rebuilt on the lands of His Majesty abandoned by Don Juan Bautista McCarty and Don Leonardo Mazange caused by the extraordinary and unexpected flood of the river endangering the health if the inhabitants of this City, flooding, as at other times and causing great damages as in former years, experiencing the same misfortune with reference to the lands of the inhabitants in the country, damaging their crops and live-stock, and although the Commissioners unanimously agreed as the only means to stop the mentioned imminent risks, was to use all possible efforts to close the break, and for this purpose it was necessary to employ besides the negro workers furnished by each one of the inhabitants of the outskirts, to assist as on other occasions with their negroes and free mulattoes of the City, or slaves which their respective masters wish to rent, there was the great difficulty of not having in the City Treasury any funds with which to pay the laborers, due to the fact the funds of said treasury were exhausted on account of constant extraordinary expenses due to previous resolutions to which expenses caused by the fire³⁰⁰ were added notwithstanding this fact, the said Commissioners finding that there was no other way to procure funds.³⁰¹

The issue lasted for so long and was so important that numerous inhabitants also had to take part in the reconstruction process. The workforce provided by slave labor was not sufficient to take care of this major problem. The issue gave birth to new guidelines for abandoned land. The Cabildo Council reported on February 19, 1790, that

³⁰⁰ Referring to the great fire of 1788, two years prior to the report.

³⁰¹ Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo, 1769-1803, *A Record of the Spanish Government in New Orleans* (New Orleans, April 9, 1790), 1.

to remedy the break in the levee (...) on the property of the inhabitants Don Juan Bautista McCarty and Don Leonardo Massange, which happened very frequently. It is expected if the lands abandoned by them are not taken over by other owners, who would take care of the said levee, as all other citizens maintain them in good condition, said levee would decay and destroy those which have just been repaired, thus causing floods, which the Cabildo had proposed to avoid at the meeting of October 30th of last year [1789], taking into consideration such imminent risk, which exacts prompt action as the high water season is approaching, this causing the ravages experienced in former years, this Cabildo has decided that once the formalities of placing Edicts in public places and through a public crier, for the purpose of auctioning said lands in the presence of the annual Commissaries, they be auctioned to the highest bidder, who would be obligated not to abandon them, in the future, without a levee as solid as the one which was on the land at the time he took charge.³⁰²

The abandonment of the McCarty land constituted such a problem that the Cabildo considered giving the land away as long as the person who would take charge of it could commit to maintaining the levee in good condition.³⁰³ Two years after this resolution, it appears that the land had still not found an owner, as it was documented in another report that “the river having carried away the levee on the lands abandoned by Don Juan Bautista McCarty and Don Leonardo Mazange, it is his opinion that it is indispensable to proceed with its repair.”³⁰⁴ These numerous issues may have led to Governor Carondelet’s Levee Ordinance of 1792 in which

³⁰² Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo, 1769-1803, *A Record of the Spanish Government in New Orleans* (New Orleans, February 19, 1790).

³⁰³ Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo, 1769-1803, *A Record of the Spanish Government in New Orleans* (New Orleans, March 5, 1790).

³⁰⁴ Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo, 1769-1803, *A Record of the Spanish Government in New Orleans* (New Orleans, August 31, 1792), 1.

he wrote that each person would be responsible for maintaining landowners'

levees. Furthermore, the same ordinance called for:

Des qu'il Se sera une crevasse le Sindic du district passera un ordre a chaque habitant du dit district d'y envoyer le nombre de Negres qu'il jugera nécessaire (...) Si les Negres du district ne peuvent suffir le Sindic en avertira le Gouvernement qui y pourvoira Sans delay (...) Mrs. Les Sindincs feront egalemt part au gouvernement des habitans qui Sont hors d'état de maintenir leurs levées par faute de Negres et de moyens, et il Leurs Sera enjoint de rendre leurs terres a la fin de la recotte

(As soon as there will be a break [in the levee] the responsible authority of the district will order that each inhabitant of the said district to send the amount of Negroes it will judge necessary (...) If the Negroes of the district cannot suffice the authority will inform the Government which will send more without delay (...) The members of this authority will also inform the government of the names of the inhabitants who are unable to maintain their levees by lack of Negroes and means, and it will be requested that they surrender their land at the end of the harvest season)³⁰⁵

Issues of underpopulation, lack of means, and water, were, however, not restricted to the New Orleans area and could be felt throughout the colony.

Another strategically located town further downriver also encountered similar issues. The fate of that settlement was, however, much different than that of New Orleans.

3. Water at *La Balise*

Wherever part of the lower colony of Louisiana pioneers attempted to settle in, they had to face water. Colonists attempted to build a post called *La Balise*.

³⁰⁵ Baron de Carondelet, New Orleans, June 28, 1792, "Governor Carondelet's Levee Ordinance of 1792," trans. Celine Ugolini, from the certified copy in the archives of the Louisiana State Museum, New Orleans, donated by the late Miss Kate Minor.

According to Le Page du Pratz, “Fort Balise is at the entrance of the Mississippi, in 29 deg. Degrees North Latitude, and 286[sic] deg. 30’ of Longitude. This fort is built on an isle, at one of the mouths of the Mississippi.”³⁰⁶ *La Balise* was meant to play a pivotal role in the transportation of large cargoes from the Gulf of Mexico up the Mississippi River. Le Page du Pratz noted that the island that *La Balise* was built on was made of

sand, [and the settlement was] secured by a great number of piles bound with good timber-work. There are lodgings in it for the officers and the garrison; and a sufficient number of guns for defending the entrance of the Mississippi. It is there they take the bar-pilot on board, in order to bring the ships into the river.³⁰⁷

The settlement was created to diminish the problem of sandbars at the mouth of the river preventing ships from going through. Ships could, at *La Balise*, unload and transfer their goods to smaller barges to be delivered to New Orleans.³⁰⁸

According to Dumont de Montigny, this small town seemed to be flourishing and to present a prosperous future, at least at first:

*Enfin étant entrés [dans le fleuve], [à] La Balise l’ont voit :
C’est un poste, établi dans ce premier endroit,
Bâti sur pilotis. L’ont y voit une église,
Caserne, magasin, et tout avec surprise ;
D’autant plus que ce n’est, partout, que des roseaux,
Dont elle est entourée, et bâtie sur les eaux. (...)*

³⁰⁶ Le Page du Pratz, *History of Louisiana*, 86.

³⁰⁷ Le page du Pratz, *History of Louisiana*, 257.

³⁰⁸ Shannon Lee Dawdy, *Building the Devil’s Empire: French Colonial New Orleans* (University of Chicago Press, 2009), 111.

*De cet emplacement, sur lequel de Pauger,
 Second ingénieur, est venu y fonder
 Cet endroit, que l'on nomme, au pays, La Balise,
 Sur laquelle, on y voit une belle entreprise,
 Étant pour empêcher l'entrée libre du port,
 Pouvant, quand on le veut, le défendre du fort,
 Construit en palissades, avec grand génie,
 Il est bien défendu par une compagnie
 Détachée de la ville avec un commandant,
 Lequel détachement y passe tout un an. (...)*

Having finally entered *La Balise* [through the river], one sees:
 It looks like a post, established on this first site,
 Built overwater. One can see a church,
 Barracks, a gunpowder magazine, with much surprise;
 Especially as everywhere else there is only reed
 That surrounds the town, which is built on water. (...)
 From this location, on which de Pauger,
 Second engineer, came to found here,
 This place, that is called *La Balise*, back in the home country,
 On which, one can see a beautiful venture,
 Built to prevent free access to the port,
 Able when needed, to defend the fort,
 Built in palisade, with great ingenuity,
 It was well protected by a company
 Detached from the city with a commander,
 Which spent there a whole year. (...) ³⁰⁹

Pauger believed that the “*Isle of La Balise dont le terrain est solide, [est] non sujet a l’Inondation, comme L’on a voulu faussement vous en prevenir*”

(Island of *La Balise* of which the land is strong and stable, [is] not subject to

³⁰⁹ Louis François Benjamin Dumont de Montigny, *Poème en vers touchant l'établissement de la province de la Louisiane, connue sous le nom de Mississipy avec tout ce qui s'est passé de depuis [sic] 1716, jusqu'à 1742 : Le massacre des François au poste des Natchez, les Moeurs des Sauvages, leurs danses, leurs Religions, enfin ce qui concerne le pays en général*, quatrième chant, trans. Celine Ugolini, US Old Mint, New Orleans, Louisiana.

flooding, as you may have wrongly heard the contrary)³¹⁰ was suitable for the establishment of a new city at an essential position by the mouth of the river. His beliefs turned out to be wrong. The initial problem was that *La Balise* was sinking. According to Powell, “the makeshift port at La Balize left much to be desired. Less than thirty years after its construction, it had shifted some four miles from its initial location, and was sinking into the delta.”³¹¹ Over time, *La Balise* also encountered many devastating hurricanes as described by Dumont de Montigny in the following poem:

*On se sent, en hiver, assez de la froidure ;
Au contraire, en été, la chaleur, on endure ; (...)
Ors, presque tous les jours, c'est un bruit de tonnerre
Qui, par ses fréquents coups, menace cette terre,
Et ce qui peut surprendre, c'est que, tous les sept ans,
L'on ressent au pays, de rudes coups de vent.
Il semble, à cet instant, que c'est la fin du monde ;
Chacun ressent ce mal, la tristesse profonde
S'empare des esprits. Ce vent impétueux
Renverse des maisons (...)
Les arbres les plus forts se renversent par terre ; (...)
La pluie tombe en ruisseaux d'une telle manière
Que l'on ne peut alors sortir de la maison ;
On craint d'être noyé, avec juste raison.
Trop heureux celui qui, pendant cet orage,
N'est point desur les eaux, faisant quelque voyage
Il seroit fort à plaindre étant dans un bateau,
Voyant de toute part précipice et tombeau,
Ne pouvant aborder nulle part au rivage,*

³¹⁰ Pauger to the directors of the Company, May 29, 1724, 4, trans. Celine Ugolini, WRC, New Orleans.

³¹¹ Powell, *The Accidental City*, 49.

Étant à la merci des flots et de l'orage.

We feel, during the winter, much cold;
To the contrary, in the summer we endure the heat; (...)
However, almost everyday, we hear the sound of thunder
Which, by its frequent strikes, threatens this land,
And what can be surprising, is, that every seven years,
We feel in this country, vigorous wind blows.
It seems, at that instant, that the world is coming to an end;
Each person feels this pain, a deep sorrow
Grabs each person's mind. This relentless wind
Knocks over houses (...)
The strongest trees fall on the ground; (...)
Rain falls as a river so that
One cannot leave his house;
One fears to be drowned, rightfully.
Happy is the one who, during this storm,
Is not at sea, in a voyage
He would be much to pity, the one onboard a boat,
Seeing all around him, precipice and gravesite,
Unable to dock, anywhere by the bank,
Being at the mercy of the water and the storm.³¹²

In 1723, Pauger wrote that *La Balise*

*avoir été mangée par l'ouragan jusqu'à Estre couppée et il ny restois plus
qu'une Penissulle de terre . . . couverte de Brouissailles et de sources d'Eau
salées*

(was eaten by hurricanes to the point of being cut and having only a strip of
land as peninsula . . . covered with weeds and salt water springs left).³¹³

³¹² Dumont de Montigny, *Poème*, trans. Celine Ugolini, US Old Mint, New Orleans, Louisiana.

³¹³ Adrien de Pauger to the commissioners of the Company of the Indies, Ile de la Balise, September 23, 1723, 3, Reel 11, trans. Celine Ugolini, WRC, New Orleans, LA.

Le Page du Pratz wrote: “Tho’ there are but seventeen feet water in the channel, I have seen vessels of five hundred ton enter into it. I know not why this entrance is left so neglected, as we are not in want of able engineers in France, in the hydraulic branch.”³¹⁴ Despite hurricanes causing the near destruction of the small town approximately ten times in the first century of its existence, residents rebuilt it. The hurricane of 1860, however, was the last storm encountered by the small post located at the mouth of the river. *La Balise* was no longer rebuilt after that date.

Conclusion

The disappearance of *La Balise* shows further evidence that only very carefully considered locations in the area could generate successful cities and exploitable ports. It thus displays once again the ingenuity of the French settlers and particularly of Bienville in deciding of the location for New Orleans, which at a place where despite its storm and flooding prone character, allowed colonists to develop one of the largest ports on the continent. This could not have been possible had the city been placed further inland despite avoiding most of the flooding issues. Had the city been placed further east or west, the same flooding would have occurred but the city could not have been used efficiently as a port since it would have been too far from the river and its mouth. Overall, the disappearance of *La*

³¹⁴ Le Page du Pratz, *History of Louisiana*, 86.

Balise displays the fact that its role and function were not as important as that of New Orleans, and therefore reminds us that the resilience of New Orleans can certainly be evaluated in terms of efficiency of its location.

Further, the abundance of floodwater required manpower to be tamed. The original lack of population in the colony therefore presented a considerable challenge. Since very few individuals voluntarily traveled to Louisiana, the early settlers used forced immigration and slavery in order to palliate this lack of workforce. These forced Louisianians, whether slaves or criminals sent from the home country, played a large part in rebuilding New Orleans. They had no choice but to stay in the colony and therefore they had to invest in the only place they could live in. Early colonists that could not leave also invested in rebuilding the colony since there was no other choice for them either. It was only after slavery developed on a large scale that the colony started to become prosperous and thus this favored the continuous use of this practice within the harsh Louisiana land since slaves took active part in the construction of the city and in its numerous reconstructions following disasters.

Chapter V: The Ingredients for Disaster

Introduction

The elements are the downfalls of New Orleans: earth, water, air, and fire. The earth below New Orleans is mostly below sea level, making the city dangerously prone to attacks from water. The water taking over New Orleans mostly comes from hurricanes and other storms, often flooding the city and generating large water surge from the river. These storms also bring along high-speed destructive air, or winds. And if natural disasters did not constitute enough of a reason to debate on the wisdom of locating the city at its current location, two major fires destroyed over eighty percent of New Orleans in the late eighteenth century. As it seems, New Orleans' curse and disasters are the elements.

As previously defined, disasters are commonly designated as sudden events that bring misfortune upon those who experience them. Disasters have historically always existed and will always remain. Certain regions, however, are more prone to these calamities than others, and therefore the fate of these areas may be disproportionately affected by such events. A multitude of cities have encountered devastating disasters comparable to that of New Orleans, such as San Francisco's earthquake of 1906, St. Louis' tornado of 1927, London's Great Fire of 1666, or Galveston's hurricane of 1900. The difference, however, lies in the fact that

disasters have struck New Orleans numerous times and on a regular basis; yet, the city always rebuilt. Such resilience, that is to say the ability to recover from a major disaster and to bring the city back to its operative state, is due to a mixture of reasons, just as the population of the city constitutes a mixture of people. From the unwillingness to forsake their cherished city to the coalition of disaster-struck residents, New Orleanians always rebuilt their city... but until when? Will future disasters eventually lead to the demise of the Crescent City; or to the contrary will this resilience prove to be durable?

While answering this question would be an impossible venture, this research discusses historical disasters as to assess the resilience of the city during its first century of existence. As previously defined, resilience is “the capacity of [a] system to absorb change and disturbances, and still retain its basic structure and function-its identity.”³¹⁵ New Orleans did not at first “absorb” disturbances from disasters but took advantage of these as opportunities to rebuild a completely new and improved town. Each reconstruction enabled not only to retain the city’s functionality, but with time, to rebuild a somewhat stronger city. “Somewhat,” because the city conserved most of its fragile features for a very long time, especially throughout the French period. It was only after the Spaniards took over that the city started improving on a large scale. Their resolutions, especially in

³¹⁵ Walker and Salt, *Resilience Thinking*, Kindle Locations 1383-1384.

terms of sturdier constructions following the two fires, not only enabled the city to use brick to be better equipped to face potential future fires, but also offered stronger edifices more resistant to hurricanes. This ability to rebuild a city founded on unstable land, prone to flooding and storms, and to make it a viable venture, also displays the wisdom of the choice for the city's location by Bienville, in spite of all the arguments that the location would be doomed. The need for such a port and commercial city further justified rebuilding after man-made disasters such as the two great fires of the late eighteenth century, which eventually and ironically had a beneficial impact on the city's fire protection.

1. Hurricanes: *Grands Coups de Vent*³¹⁶

Hurricane: "A name given primarily to the violent wind-storms of the West Indies, which are cyclones of diameter of from 50 to 1000 miles, wherein the air moves with a velocity of from 80 to 130 miles an hour round a central calm space, which with the whole system advances in a straight or curved track; hence, any storm or tempest in which the wind blows with terrific violence."³¹⁷ According to the National Hurricane Center, hurricanes and typhoons are "tropical cyclone[s] in which the maximum sustained surface wind ... 74 mph or 119 km/hr or more. The

³¹⁶ French for "great wind blows," also used to call the early hurricanes as equal to the French word "ouragan."

³¹⁷ "hurricane, n.". OED Online. September 2012. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/89594?rskey=fuXp90&result=1> (accessed September 16, 2012).

term hurricane is used for Northern Hemisphere tropical cyclones east of the International Dateline to the Greenwich Meridian. The term typhoon is used for Pacific tropical cyclones north of the Equator west of the International Dateline.³¹⁸ Hurricane season in Louisiana runs from June 1 to November 30.

The French word *ouragan*, or hurricane, comes from the word “Hurican,” the Caribbean god of evil. Variant spellings exist. The name of this god itself derives from the Mayan god “Hurakan.” Hurakan was one of the Mayan deities who suffered from the chaos of the sea and created dry land, and who later destroyed a number of men with an enormous storm accompanied by a flood.³¹⁹ Other versions of the words existed at the same time in other civilizations such as that of the Taino People whose God of chaos *Juracán* gave his name to this type of storms.³²⁰

The first hurricane recorded in the history of New Orleans took place on September 11, 1722. According to La Harpe,

Le 11 au matin , commença un ouragan qui dura jusqu'au 16, les vents

³¹⁸ “hurricane” in Glossary. National Hurricane Center. (Accessed May 9, 2014) <http://www.nhc.noaa.gov/aboutgloss.shtml>

³¹⁹ “ouragan” Météo France. Ministère de l’Écologie, du Développement durable et de l’Énergie. (Accessed September 16, 2012) <http://www.meteo.nc/cyclone/faq/22-noms-des-cyclones-tropicaux/61--quelle-est-lorigine-du-mot-qhurricaneq-ouragan->

³²⁰ “Hurricane: From the Goddess Guabancex to Fierce Irene,” *Indian Country*. (Accessed December 6, 2013) <http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/2011/08/26/hurricane-goddess-guabancex-fierce-irene-49368>

depuis le sud-est passant par le sud jusqu'au sud-ouest. Cet ouragan tort de plus de 8,000 quarts de riz, dont on était prêt à faire la récolte, sans compter les fèves et le maïs. La plus grande partie des maisons de la Nouvelle-Orléans furent emportées.

(On the morning of the 11, started a hurricane that lasted until the 16, winds from the south east going through the south to the south west. This hurricane bent over 8,000 quarters of rice, that we were ready to harvest, without counting the and the corn. Most houses in New Orleans were destroyed.)³²¹

Since most houses were, according to Geronimi, “*de maigre qualite, faites en bois*” (of a poor quality, made of wood),³²² they were particularly fragile and vulnerable to recurring hurricanes and storms. They were similar to Indians’ habitations. These were the same Indians that were already onsite before the Europeans arrived and with whom the latter coexisted. According to La Harpe,

Le vaisseau l’Epiduel, trois traversiers, et presque tous les bateaux, chaloupes et pirogues périrent. Le Neptune et le Santo-Cristo qu'on devait mettre en état, suivant les ordres de messieurs les commissaires , furent entièrement hors de service”

(The ship *Epiduel*, three ferries, and almost all the ship, launches and pirogues perished. The *Neptune* and the *Santo-Christo* that needed to be refurbished, according to the commisaires orders, were entirely out of order.)³²³

At the time, many letters sent to the home country described the hurricane as

³²¹ La Harpe, *l’Etablissement des Français à la Louisiane*, trans. Celine Ugolini, 339-340.

³²² Geronimi, *Québec et la Nouvelle Orléans*, trans. Celine Ugolini, (Paris: Belin, 2003) 57.

³²³ La Harpe, *l’Etablissement des Français à la Louisiane*, trans. Celine Ugolini, 340.

a “*grand vent*”³²⁴ (a great wind) that lasted for hours and demolished everything on its path. The King’s Engineer Le Blond de La Tour called the storm “[*une*] *des plus terribles tempêtes ... ouragante*” (one of the most terrible hurricane storms).³²⁵ It was so violent that the hurricane storms, according to de La Tour, “*ont renversé au moins les deux tiers des maisons*” (destroyed at least two-third of the houses),³²⁶ many boats on the river were sunk, “*il faudra ... refaire l’Eglise, le presbitere, l’hospital*” (we will have to rebuild the church, the presbyter, the hospital).³²⁷ According to de Villiers, “Bayou St. John rose three feet, the Mississippi rose nearly eight feet.”³²⁸ According to La Harpe,

Le 14 [septembre], M. de Bienville envoya une pirogue porter une lettre au vaisseau l’Aventurier, qui avait déjà mis à la voile pour faire son retour en France. Il avait à bord vingt- sept passagers au nombre desquels était M. Hubert; il écrivit à messieurs les commissaires pour les informer de l’ouragan qui avait emporté la moitié de la récolte de riz; il leur demandait un secours de vivres , particulièrement de viande.

(On the 14 [of September], Mr. de Bienville sent a letter by pirogue to the vessel *l’Aventurier*, that had already sailed back to France. There were twenty-seven passengers onboard, among whom was Mr. Hubert; he wrote

³²⁴ Le Blond de la Tour, September 30, 1722, 1, Reel 10, “Sur le houragan arrivé a la Louisiane, Et l’Estat ou il a mis la nouvelle orleans,” WRC, New Orleans, LA.

³²⁵ de la Tour, September 30, 1722, 1, “Sur le houragan,” trans. Celine Ugolini, WRC, New Orleans, LA.

³²⁶ de la Tour, September 30, 1722, 1, “Sur le houragan,” trans. Celine Ugolini, WRC, New Orleans, LA.

³²⁷ de la Tour, September 30, 1722, 1, “Sur le houragan,” trans. Celine Ugolini, WRC, New Orleans, LA.

³²⁸ De Villiers, *History of New Orleans*, 235.

to the chiefs of police to inform them of the hurricane that had destroyed half of the rice harvest; he asked for relief and food, particularly meat.)³²⁹

The storm also completely razed to the ground the original St Louis church that stood on what is today Jackson Square. The workforce was not sufficient to help reconstruct the city in a timely manner. It took New Orleans five years to plan and rebuild a new church that would replace the one “swept away”³³⁰ by the hurricane. The church completed in 1727 was stronger than the original church as it was made from more durable materials such as brick. Few contemporary accounts of the 1722 hurricane exist. Amongst them is the poem by Dumont de Montigny, counting how strongly the city was impacted and damaged, and how its residents rebuilt a more robust town following this tragic event:

*... au mois de septembre, une horrible tempête
Et, pour mieux l'expliquer, un terrible ouragan,
Qui survint tout d'un coup, fit trembler l'habitant,
Renversa les maisons. Au vent, à la poussière,
La grêle se mêlant d'une telle manière
Qu'elle fit craindre à tous, en ce triste moment,
Que l'on alloit avoir le Dernier Jugement ...
Chacun étoit à plaindre en sa triste misère.
Ce vent ne dura pas pour un jour seulement ;
Pendant trois jours entiers, on souffrit l'ouragan,
Et la perte du bien fit jeter maintes larmes
A ceux qui, par ce coup, se trouvoient en alarmes.
Le quatrième jour, la tempête cessa,
Et le beau temps survint, qui, de joie nous combla.
On se mit à bâtir à l'envi l'un de l'autre,*

³²⁹ La Harpe, *l'Etablissement des Français à la Louisiane*, trans. Celine Ugolini, 341.

³³⁰ Arthur, *Old New Orleans*, 104.

*S'entrepoussant chacun comme de bons apôtres ;
On fit tant, qu'à la fin, cet établissement
Fut propre à recevoir Bienville et tous ses agents.*

... in September, a horrible storm
And, to explain it better, a terrible hurricane,
Which appeared suddenly, petrified locals,
And knocked over houses. In addition to the wind and dust,
Hail appeared in such way
That it generated everyone's fear, in this despairing moment,
That we will receive our last judgment ...
Each person was to be pitied in his sorrowful fate.
This wind did not last only for one day;
During three entire days, we suffered from the storm,
And material losses produced many tears
From those affected by this blow.
On the fourth day, the storm ceased,
And the nice weather came back, and filled us with joy.
We started rebuilding,
Encouraging each other like good apostles;
We rebuilt so well, that this establishment
Became suitable to welcome Bienville and his agents.³³¹

Since New Orleans was only made of few unstable habitations randomly spread out at the time, the hurricane eventually enabled complete reconstruction of a stronger city and was almost a fortuitous event. According to de La Tour, all the existing buildings in New Orleans at the time of the 1722 storm “were temporary

³³¹ Dumont de Montigny, *Poème*, trans. Celine Ugolini, US Old Mint, New Orleans, Louisiana.

and old³³², not a single one was in the alignment of the new town, and they were to have been pulled down.”³³³

The hurricane was of a very large magnitude and caused much damage not only to New Orleans, but also to other towns in the province. It was notably felt in Biloxi, where Louis Tixerant, a storekeeper of the company of the Indies reported “*la force d’un gros vent*” (the strength of a great wind)³³⁴ that put the “*marchandises ... en très mauvais état*” (merchandise in a very bad state)³³⁵ because of the “*pluies continuelles ... depuis deux jours*” (continuous rainfall ... for two days)³³⁶ that also caused “*debris de la charpente ..., bateaux chaloupés ..., magasin abbatu ..., et d’autres batiments [ont été] perdus ... pendant cet ouragan*” (debris from the frame of the shop ... ship swayed ..., shop torn down ..., and other buildings [were] lost ... during this hurricane).³³⁷

³³² The word “old” must have been used in relative terms, maybe in comparison to other settlements nearby, as New Orleans was only four years “old” at the time de La Tour wrote this.

³³³ De Villiers, *History of New Orleans*, 236.

³³⁴ Louis Tixerant, “Damages to the property of the company of the Indies at Biloxi by a storm”, September 12, 1722, trans. Celine Ugolini, US Old Mint, New Orleans, Louisiana.

³³⁵ Tixerant, “Damages at Biloxi by a storm,” September 12, 1722, trans. Celine Ugolini, US Old Mint, New Orleans, Louisiana.

³³⁶ Tixerant, “Damages at Biloxi by a storm”, September 12, 1722, trans. Celine Ugolini, US Old Mint, New Orleans, Louisiana.

³³⁷ Tixerant, “Damages at Biloxi by a storm”, September 12, 1722, trans. Celine Ugolini, US Old Mint, New Orleans, Louisiana.

Although this was the first recorded hurricane in New Orleans, writings by Le Page du Pratz recounting the same event suggest there were hurricanes in the province before that. These climatic events were known to the colonists as Du Pratz recounts in his “History of Louisiana.” He mentions after his return from New Orleans in March 1722 that

a phaenomenon [sic] happened which frightened the whole province. Every morning, for eight days running, a hollow noise, somewhat loud, was heard to reach from the sea to the Illinois; which arose from the west (...) This frightful noise was only the prelude of a most violent tempest. The hurricane, the most furious ever felt in the province, lasted three days (...) in the places, where the force or height of the hurricane passed, it overturned every thing in its way (...) the place where it passed being entirely laid flat.³³⁸

The hurricane generated flooding from the Mississippi River. “It so swelled the sea, that [,according to Le Page du Pratz,] the Mississippi flowed back against its current, so as to rise upwards of fifteen feet high.”³³⁹ The hurricane of September 1722 did have one positive outcome, as La Harpe points out, which was that:

Dans le même mois, on fit une seconde récolte de riz qui fut assez considérable : les grains que l'ouragan avait renversés avaient repris en terre, et cette seconde moisson fit connaître la fertilité de la terre de la Louisiane.

(During the same month, we had a second rice harvest that was fairly large: the grains that the hurricane had spread had grown back by themselves on

³³⁸ Le Page du Pratz, *History of Louisiana*, 56.

³³⁹ Le Page du Pratz, *History of Louisiana*, 57.

the ground and that second harvest enabled us to realize the land's fertility in Louisiana.)³⁴⁰

In addition to the slow development of the city, newly arrived colonists did not have much knowledge of the area. According to a letter dated December 12, 1708 by Bienville, early settlers faced troubles along the Gulf Coast to such extent that they were forced “*d’aller dans le Mississypy vivre avec les sauvages*” (to go to the Mississypy [sic] to live with the savages)³⁴¹ until they could receive help from the mother country. It is this past, filled with struggles that prevailed for most of New Orleans’ history, and to date. With water as its most fearful enemy, according to Colten, “keeping the city dry, or separating the human-made environment from its natural endowment, has been the perpetual battle for New Orleans.”³⁴²

In the wake of the numerous calamities New Orleans faced during the early colonial period, countless inhabitants started complaining and became angry. Some of them even held Bienville personally responsible for the outcome of the recent storms since he was the governor at the time, and tensions grew within the colony. Most crops were also destroyed as a result of this huge disaster. Dumont de Montigny mentioned the inability of Bienville to make the colony prosperous in his poem stating that:

³⁴⁰ La Harpe, *l’Etablissement des Français à la Louisiane*, trans. Celine Ugolini, 345.

³⁴¹ Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne, Sieur de Bienville to the Ministre, December 12, 1708, 2, Reel 2, trans. Celine Ugolini, WRC, New Orleans.

³⁴² Colten, *An unnatural metropolis*, 2.

As long as the Sieur de Bienville
Will be, of this country, master of the city
We will always see great misfortune. . . .³⁴³

Besides, more and more pressure was put upon Bienville to acquire the Natchez Indians' drier land because of its ability to grow tobacco in a way that would not be possible on the lower ground closer to the city of New Orleans. Bienville's refusal to comply with this and his personal scheme to avoid destroying the friendship with the Natchez Indians he had spent years preserving (in which he would illegally allocate a larger amount of slaves to citizens who agreed not to venture on his allies' territory) led to his dismissal.³⁴⁴ In 1724, the company dismissed Bienville from his functions, France recalled him and he had to leave Louisiana. The person sent in order to replace him, Etienne de Périer, decided to go ahead with the expansion policy towards the Natchez Indians' land and generated a rebellion from the latter against their former French allies which ended after only three years with the near obliteration of the Natchez Nation. According to Le Page du Pratz:

The French army re-embarked, and carried the Natchez as slaves to New Orleans, where they were put in prison; but afterwards, to avoid an infection, the women and children were disposed of in the King's plantation, and elsewhere . . . Some time after, these slaves were embarked for St. Domingo, in order to root out that nation in the Colony; which was the only method of

³⁴³ Louis François Benjamin Dumont de Montigny, *Historical Memoire on Louisiana*, trans. Olivia Blanchard, US Old Mint.

³⁴⁴ Johnson, "Colonial New Orleans," 37.

effecting it, as the few that escaped had not a tenth of the women necessary to recruit the nation. And thus that nation, the most conspicuous in the Colony, and most useful to the French, was destroyed.³⁴⁵

This fiasco led to the reinstatement of the colony as a royal enterprise with Bienville returning as its governor in 1733.

1733, just as the year before, also witnessed a major hurricane. It landed in July, and, according to *commissaire ordonnateur*³⁴⁶ Salmon, “*Le 17 de ce mois a 9 heures du matin nous avons eu le Commencement d’un coup de vent qui a duré pres de 30 heures*” (on the seventeenth of that month at nine o’clock in the morning we have seen the beginning of a great wind blow that lasted for about thirty hours).³⁴⁷ Although it was described as less violent than the one which had hit the city the year before, “*il a ... fait beaucoup de tort aux cultures de tabac ... les Cotons ont beaucoup souffert et les maiz brisés et couchés*” (it caused ... much damage to tobacco crops ..., cotton crops suffered a lot and corn were ruptured and laid flat on the ground).³⁴⁸

In addition to manifesting very strong winds, hurricanes, and in particular the one of 1733, brought, according to Salmon,

³⁴⁵ Le Page du Pratz, *History of Louisiana*, 161.

³⁴⁶ Chief of the police.

³⁴⁷ Salmon to the Ministre, New Orleans, August 1, 1733,1, Reel 24, trans. Celine Ugolini, WRC, New Orleans, LA.

³⁴⁸ Salmon to the Ministre, New Orleans, August 1, 1733,1-2, trans. Celine Ugolini, WRC, New Orleans, LA.

une pluie tres abondante qui avoit precedé pendant plus de 40 jours presque consecutivement et cette pluie avoit succedé a une Secheresse de pres de 2 mois [alors qu'] on avoit point encore Oublié la misere de l'année dernière

(very abundant rainfalls that poured for over forty days beforehand and almost consecutively and which succeeded a drought of almost two months [at a time when] we had not forgotten about last year's misery yet).³⁴⁹

Faced with such a catastrophe and the recurring aspect of hurricanes in this region, Salmon further comments that “*les habitans ... prennent le party de demander leur passage pour [la] france ... [ou] vendent leurs habitations pour monter aux Illinois*” (residents either ask[ed] for their right of passage to France ... [or] s[old] their homes in order to move up north to the Illinois territory).³⁵⁰

The then *commissaire ordonnateur*,³⁵¹ wrote in a letter that he was very unsettled by the threat of seeing most colonists leave New Orleans to go up north to higher ground, which would have amplified reconstruction issues following disasters as well as further slowed down the city's development. He expressed his concerns by asking what the state of France had planned “*afin que la Colonie ne deserte point*”³⁵² (in order for the colony not to be abandoned)³⁵³ and what kind of

³⁴⁹ Salmon to the Ministre, New Orleans, August 1, 1733, 2-3, trans. Celine Ugolini, WRC, New Orleans, LA.

³⁵⁰ Salmon to the Ministre, New Orleans, August 1, 1733, 3, trans. Celine Ugolini, WRC, New Orleans, LA.

³⁵¹ Chief of the police.

³⁵² Salmon to the Ministre, New Orleans, August 1, 1733, 3, WRC, New Orleans, LA.

financial assistance would be put into place for relief. Growing fear over the future of the area and the city of New Orleans seems to have been a major theme from an early stage. Salmon, after the 1733 hurricane, and in the face of the city's precarious situation, had to "*faire faire non seulement des prets en marchandise mais en argent pour retablir Les maisons de quelques particuliers que l'Ouragan avoit renversées*" (not only to take loans on merchandise but also on money in order to help rebuild the houses of a few individuals that were destroyed because of the hurricane).³⁵⁴ In another letter, dated August 10, 1733, he describes again the "*coup de vent [du] 17 juillet dernier qui ne fait qu'augmenter notre misere.*" (wind blow [of the] 17th of July [of that year] that only increased our misery).³⁵⁵

After the city started to recuperate from the hurricane of 1733, many more storms appeared. The city flooded almost every year in the spring. It quickly became apparent that the spring and summer seasons were simply prone to storms and flooding, and that this was a reality the colonists would have to constantly face and find ways to cope with since they could not tame it. According to Dumont de Montigny, "the summer season lasts in Louisiana from the month of March until

³⁵³ Salmon to the Ministre, New Orleans, August 1, 1733, 3, trans. Celine Ugolini, WRC, New Orleans, LA.

³⁵⁴ Salmon to the Ministre, New Orleans, August 1, 1733, 10-11, trans. Celine Ugolini, WRC, New Orleans, LA.

³⁵⁵ Salmon to the Ministre, New Orleans, August 10, 1733, 1, Reel 24, trans. Celine Ugolini, WRC, New Orleans, LA.

September, with extreme heat, sometimes followed by violent storms. These storms are usually accompanied by hail and frightful thunder. ... In the year 1737, on Palm Sunday, there was a hail storm in New Orleans, the stones of which were as large as hen's eggs."³⁵⁶ Only a couple of years later, in 1739, yet another major storm reached the new city, when, according to colonist Henry Chevalier De Louboey, a[n] "*coup de vent extraordinaire qui s'est fait sentir ... violemment pendant 24 heures*" (extraordinary wind blow that was ... violently felt during twenty-four hours)³⁵⁷ caused much damage to the city and the crops.

On July 25, 1770, another large storm occurred at Chapitula,³⁵⁸ about 9 miles from New Orleans. French Captain and explorer Jean Bernard Bossu described it as

a most furious hurricane ... struck ... on the right bank of the Mississippi (going upstream). This tornado destroyed all that la[id] in its path, among other things a house constructed of cypress wood. This violent wind, which travel[led] by twisting, tore out the windows and doors of this building,

³⁵⁶ Louis François Benjamin Dumont de Montigny, *Historical Memoire on Louisiana*, Chapter II: The Climate and Temperature of Louisiana, 14, trans. Olivia Blanchard.

³⁵⁷ Henry Chevalier De Louboey to the Ministre, New Orleans, October 20, 1739, 1, Reel 31, trans. Celine Ugolini, WRC, New Orleans, LA.

³⁵⁸ Chapitula, (variant spellings: Chapitulas, Chapitoula, Chapitoulas, *Les Chapitoulas* in French) comes from the name of an extinct Indian tribe and evolved with time to become "Tchoupitoulas." Chapitula was a long strip of land on the east bank along the Mississippi River. The area where the 1770 hurricane took place would be located in today's Jefferson Parish, near the Huey P. Long bridge. More information can be found on the St Agnes Church website at: <http://www.stagnesjefferson.org/churchHistory.html>

lifting it into the air with a Negress inside, and whom nobody has heard anything since.³⁵⁹

Few accounts of hurricanes towards the middle of the eighteenth century exist. Does this mean that fewer hurricanes took place or that written accounts are simply not available? Considering that hurricanes display an active period of approximately thirty years, before encountering a quieter period of about the same amount of time³⁶⁰ might explain the lack of data on active storms for the period between 1740 and 1770-80. That period is likely to have been a quieter period, judging by the numerous accounts of hurricanes the thirty years prior, which tends to confirm the pattern of active followed by passive periods.

Accounts from official documents from the Cabildo in the fourth quarter of the eighteenth century exist. Most of them describe the devastation incurred by these storms, the remedial measures used, and the rebuilding process.

Amongst the damage recorded to the city, not only did residential and commercial buildings deteriorate, but official buildings also suffered great harm. For example, a report of the mid-August 1780 hurricane from the Cabildo describes how the city jail suffered from the latest storm. This report not only mentions the destruction, but also the fact that prisoners' security could be in

³⁵⁹ Jean Bernard Bossu to Mr. Douin, New Orleans, *New Travels in North America 1770-1771*, trans. Samuel Doris Dickinson, University of West Florida's John C. Pace library.

³⁶⁰ According Barry D. Keim and Robert A. Muller during a lecture on hurricanes of the Gulf of Mexico on February 17, 2011 at the Presbytere in New Orleans.

jeopardy should the repairs not be conducted in a timely manner. The problem at the time, as often, was the lack of funds to undertake the remedial work because the city finances were, according to the Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo, “in such condition as to be unable to pay for the said repairs.”³⁶¹ That particular hurricane seems to have caused severe damage to the city as it was again mentioned in a report of the Cabildo the following year. According to the Cabildo records, the resolution of the monarch was to help finance the repair. As mentioned in the Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo, after reading about

the destruction caused by the hurricane in that Province on the 14th of the same month [August 1780], His Majesty has suffered with fatherly love the terrible blow, which caused as much destruction among his loved subjects, but the pious sentiments of His Majesty inseparable from His merciful heart, has inspired his generous Royal compassion . . ., he ordered me to advise Your Excellency [Don Joseph de Galvez, member of His Majesty’s council of State and first Secretary of the Universal office of the Indies] that in His Royal name, offers to the citizens of this Province the sovereign protection and all assistance called for in the actual circumstances of the war, as same will be justified.³⁶²

An act of July 13, 1781, almost one year after the occurrence re-states how “His Majesty ha[d] been informed of the fatal blow suffered by His beloved subjects of Louisiana from the hurricane of August 24th last, in which generous

³⁶¹ Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo, 1769-1803, *A Record of the Spanish Government in New Orleans* (New Orleans, September 1, 1780).

³⁶² Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo, 1769-1803, *A Record of the Spanish Government in New Orleans* (New Orleans, June 15, 1781).

disposition of the King, expresses His great compassionate sentiments.”³⁶³ It is unclear whether there were two distinct hurricanes in the year 1780, on August 14 and on August 24 as described in the Cabildo papers, or if the reference to two separate events is an error. Although reconstruction took place following each hurricane, New Orleans was never able to mitigate for future disasters. Most improvements to the city occurred following a disaster and New Orleans was made stronger because of the damage occurred. New Orleanians did not plan for future disasters that could be even more damaging or different from those they encountered, but for disasters equivalent to those already known. This, therefore, appeared to be more a manifestation of spontaneous resilience than a really structured and thought out plan including mitigation.

In 1794, the same year a major fire took place, the city also encountered a hurricane whose documented damage generated a special meeting between the members of the Cabildo to “discuss the means that must be taken in order to repair the damage caused by the River to the levee and meat market of this city, during the night of the 10th to the 11th inst., during which night there was a strong hurricane.”³⁶⁴

³⁶³ Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo, 1769-1803, *A Record of the Spanish Government in New Orleans* (New Orleans, July 6, 1781).

³⁶⁴ Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo, 1769-1803, *A Record of the Spanish Government in New Orleans* (New Orleans, August 13, 1794).

That decade seems to have been particularly active, as detailed in another Cabildo report dated December 19, 1794.

The many calamities which [New Orleans' residents] have endured since the year 1779 up to the present year, during which time [they] experienced five hurricanes, many floods and two great fires which have successfully destroyed the greatest part of the crops and almost and commercial and industrial products used in re-establishing the agricultural labors, in repairing the ships which were destroyed, and in order to rebuild the city which, notwithstanding the many obstacles and another no less destructful [sic] as it is the last and present war and the considerable losses sustained due to the sudden and unexpected withdrawal of the paper money, which was issued in order to attend the urgent needs in the Royal Service during the War, and this had almost restored the activity and efforts of all the inhabitants, this has come to discourage them, seeing, repeatedly, their failure in obtaining the product or benefit of their toil, who, discouraged with ... misfortune, several individual [sic] are willing to leave a country which, besides having all resources exhausted by so many calamities, the fear of other similar misfortune, depresses the strongest spirits in starting anew to develop enterprises exposed to certain ruin.³⁶⁵

2. The Two Great Fires

Weather-related issues were not the only major type of disasters the newly built municipality of New Orleans faced. Two major fires occurred in the eighteenth century, which required reconstruction of the city and, therefore, showed the determination of its inhabitants not to abandon the town they had built. In spite of the destruction of most of the French Quarter,³⁶⁶ it was eventually

³⁶⁵ Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo, 1769-1803, *A Record of the Spanish Government in New Orleans* (New Orleans, December 19, 1794).

³⁶⁶ Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo, 1769-1803, *A Record of the Spanish Government in New Orleans* (New Orleans, March 26, 1788).

entirely rebuilt. The two fires broke during the Spanish colonial period and the look of the city dramatically changed from a French colonial city to a different appearance that somehow, was neither French nor Spanish. According to Johnson, “Spanish ownership failed to make Louisiana or New Orleans Spanish in culture, language, or architecture”³⁶⁷ Both fires ended up being somewhat beneficial to the fragile French city, as described by historian Grace King when she explained that “what lay in the ashes was at best, but an irregular, ill-built French town.”³⁶⁸ They each gave an opportunity for the Spaniards to rebuild their city stronger as well as to leave their imprint on the colony, but they focused on making New Orleans better protected from potential future catastrophes.

No Spaniards were among the architects who designed the new city. The latter were mostly French-Creole, Canadian, and some were Anglo-American. According to Johnson, the Spanish Government decided to work on rebuilding the city using “maritime-French and French-Canadian architectural tradition, enriched with a few elements from the Anglo-American design stream.”³⁶⁹ As a result, the newly built city raised from its ashes as a completely new and innovative architectural style reflecting the melting pot created within the city’s population.

³⁶⁷ Johnson, “Colonial New Orleans,” 51.

³⁶⁸ Grace Elizabeth King, *New Orleans: the Place and the People* (New York and London: The Macmillan Company, 1902), 130.

³⁶⁹ Johnson, “Colonial New Orleans,” 51.

The city no longer looked entirely French; neither did it look Spanish or American, or entirely Creole or Canadian. New Orleans became singular in its own way combining various specificities from its people and representing them through its unique features. The name French Quarter remained and still does today as a reminder of the French presence and ties to the city.

The first fire took place on Good Friday, March 21, 1788. According to Stanley Clisby Arthur, it completely “swept *Nueva Orleáns* [...] 856 buildings, including the Church of Saint Louis, were reduced to smoldering ruins.”³⁷⁰ The origin of the first fire occurred at 538 Chartres Street, in a private chapel belonging to Don Vincente José Nunez. According to Arthur, it happened

while candles were burning before a shrine, [as] a gust of wind blew the window curtains against the lighted tapers. A few moments later the whole house was ablaze. ... four-fifths of the populated section of the city was reduced to ashes, including the parish church and house, the *Casa Capitular* [today known as Cabildo, the seat of the Spanish government], and city jail.³⁷¹

According to the Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo, on March 26 of that year, the Governor General

convoked an extraordinary session of the Cabildo at his house, on account of the disastrous fire which occurred of the 21st inst., at 1:30p.m. which originated by the burning of a wooden cabinet at the house of Don Joseph Vicente Nunez, State Treasurer of this Province, situated at Chartres Street, facing the garden of the Government building; the fire started with such fury

³⁷⁰ Arthur, *Old New Orleans*, 105.

³⁷¹ Arthur, *Old New Orleans*, 120.

due to a strong south wind and impossible to control same until four hours later, during which time 4/5 of the populated section of this City was reduced to ashes, comprising the Parish Church and House, Cabildo and Jail³⁷²

The damage caused by the fire required relief for the city. A vast majority of New Orleans was turned to ashes as the young city had just started to develop and take the appearance of a prosperous town. The local authorities attempted to meet and decide on measures to take and how this would impact future regulations and fire protection, but at first,

during the confusion there was not a chance to call a meeting of the Cabildo until [March 26, 5 days after the fire took place], as His Excellency, the Governor, the Judges, Commissioners and the Attorney General, were busy trying urgently to aid the victims of said catastrophe³⁷³

The Board of Government and Royal Treasury implemented a series of relief measures in order to provide assistance to the families affected by the disaster, so that they would not leave the city of New Orleans and further contribute to its lack of population. According to the Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo, these measures were as follows:

First: It will be necessary to investigate the families who were left completely broke and without resources, to the end, in the meantime they can find the means to support themselves, to aid them with daily rations of food, and to build a cottage of pickets for their urgent shelter, for which

³⁷² Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo, 1769-1803, *A Record of the Spanish Government in New Orleans* (New Orleans, March 26, 1788).

³⁷³ Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo, 1769-1803, *A Record of the Spanish Government in New Orleans* (New Orleans, March 26, 1788).

motive an official letter will be addressed to the Intendant requesting him to distribute this relief for account of His Majesty, in the same manner as it had been done with the families who had migrated to this Province, thus avoiding much immigration which would cause misery.³⁷⁴

As it happened it was “the part of the City most important and best situated [that] has been consumed by the fire, (and) for this reason a great many of its inhabitants have been reduced to the most miserable conditions.”³⁷⁵

Relief after the first fire took place fairly rapidly. A large number of the population found themselves out of their homes, having lost everything, and living on the city’s main square in tents. According to a Cabildo report,

since the day after the fire . . . , the Intendant General of this Province [has been] distributing rations of food from the Royal Warehouse to all families and needy individuals who appear before him requesting relief . . . classifying the persons who have legitimate urgency for prompt relief, especially those families arriving from far away places at His Majesty’s expense.³⁷⁶

In another meeting, orders were given to build “a sufficient number of Barracks in which to lodge all those who are absolutely without shelter”³⁷⁷ which did not actually take place since the Intendant denied that request by stating in a

³⁷⁴ Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo, 1769-1803, *A Record of the Spanish Government in New Orleans* (New Orleans, March 26, 1788).

³⁷⁵ Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo, 1769-1803, *A Record of the Spanish Government in New Orleans* (New Orleans, April 4, 1788).

³⁷⁶ Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo, 1769-1803, *A Record of the Spanish Government in New Orleans* (New Orleans, March 27, 1788).

³⁷⁷ Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo, 1769-1803, *A Record of the Spanish Government in New Orleans* (New Orleans, April 4, 1788).

letter as a response “the reasons for not building the Barracks.”³⁷⁸ The said reasons do not appear on any reports from the Cabildo.

According to the Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo, as a result of the relief provided following the fire of 1788, the treasury found itself

considerably indebted on account of the reconstruction of nearly all the bridges of this City, which were burned during the fire, the Royal Jail, ruined by the same fire; the new Cemetery built at the proper distance from the City, to insure the public health; the fire pump and buckets which serve as a protection in case of another fire; the new meat market to provide for the wants of the public; the old one having burned in said fire.³⁷⁹

The second fire, which broke out in 1794, still during the Spanish colonial period, confirmed the city’s new architectural type. New Orleans became more and more a distinctive, melting pot city rather than the French one it used to be from its construction. The second fire destroyed fewer houses than the one of 1788 but more commercial buildings, and therefore its financial damage to the city was greater. According to Arthur, following the fire, having realized the vulnerability of the city to natural disasters such as hurricanes, floods and other storms, and due to the weak nature of the structures that were built, the Governor of Louisiana, the Baron de Carondelet “ordained that all homes in the center of the city, built more

³⁷⁸ Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo, 1769-1803, *A Record of the Spanish Government in New Orleans* (New Orleans, April 4, 1788).

³⁷⁹ Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo, 1769-1803, *A Record of the Spanish Government in New Orleans* (New Orleans, May 7, 1790).

than one story high, be constructed of brick³⁸⁰ and ground oyster shells were used in order to level the streets' pavements and ease pedestrians as well as carriages' paths through the city.

The 1794 fire generated financial assistance from the Monarch. It was, according to the Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo:

distributed amongst the owners of the houses burnt in the last fire, will permit them to rebuild same, it being understood that this will be made in proportion with the size of the houses they may construct, which must be built of bricks and a flat roof or tile roof, and the distribution of said money will be made under a mortgage of the said property.³⁸¹

This made it clear that although relief occurred, it was in the form of a loan that would have to be reimbursed. The Cabildo Council also described the fire of 1794 as:

destructful [sic] [and]... reduced to ashes one third of the best buildings of this Capital city, the greatest part of the departments stores and other shops and groceries, leaving a large number of families of the well to do class of people, in need and some of them completely ruined and all the inhabitants stricken with horror, worried with such lamentable happening, added to the many calamities which they have endured since the year 1779.³⁸²

The situation was very similar to that in 1788. Many of the same buildings were destroyed, and the same issues of funding the repairs emerged. The city

³⁸⁰ Arthur, *Old New Orleans*, 11.

³⁸¹ Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo, 1769-1803, *A Record of the Spanish Government in New Orleans* (New Orleans, December 19, 1794).

³⁸² Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo, 1769-1803, *A Record of the Spanish Government in New Orleans* (New Orleans, December 19, 1794).

treasury also had very little funds available at the time, especially due to the last fire only having taken place a few years prior but the city once again rebuilt and showed resilience.³⁸³ What was missing, however, was mitigation. New Orleans had to go through yet another fire to improve further its constructions. As discussed in an earlier chapter, this method does display resilience, but it lacks in resistance. In other words, while New Orleanians constantly rebuilt their city and bounced back following each disaster, they did not use pre-disaster planning to prevent or reduce the damage from potential future disasters. The Spaniards did, however, introduce a series of new building codes following the two fires.

In addition to the numerous threats that the city of New Orleans encountered in the first century of its existence, other factors also contributed to portraying a detrimental image of the city.

3. Filth, Disease, and Moral Decadence

New Orleans was known to be squalid and sinful. In the first few decades of its existence, according to Governor Kerlerec, the

Ville de la N.elle Orléans capitale de [la Louisiane] sans aucune Enceinte depuis qu'elle a commencé a se former, a toujours été un Lieu d'obomination sans nulle ombre de police. Composée (Pour les deux tiers des maisons quelle Contient) d'autant de cabarets ... et de lieux de debauche, qui ennivrent perpetuellement les [esclaves] et les Sauvages

³⁸³ Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo, 1769-1803, *A Record of the Spanish Government in New Orleans* (New Orleans, December 12, 1794).

(the city of New Orleans, capital of [Louisiana] without any fortification from its foundation, has always been a place of abomination without even the shadow of a police force. Made (of two-third of the houses it counts) of as many cabarets . . . , and decadent places, where slaves and Indians [would] frequently get drunk).³⁸⁴

This was how the city was described in 1760. Yet, many factors proved that New Orleans from the start had everything to become one of the greatest cities on the North American continent. Initial hopes for a city located at such a favorable situation faded away as the Crescent City moved more and more towards economic difficulties, poverty, slavery and eventually decay in the first century of its existence. Having said that, at the time of the Louisiana Purchase, New Orleans was no longer the fragile French town it started off as and the city had a lot to offer. It had developed into a major port. Additionally, the nineteenth century was a period of strong prosperity for New Orleans, and it became one of the five largest cities in the United States; and the only of the five not being located on the East Coast.

Before becoming the large and prosperous city that the nineteenth century brought, the *Vieux Carré* became known for its “disrespectable”³⁸⁵ establishments, its dirt and lack of sewage system. Over time, the city also became famous

³⁸⁴ Kerlerrec to the Ministre, New Orleans, March 30, 1760, 6, trans. Celine Ugolini, WRC, New Orleans, LA.

³⁸⁵ Charles B. Hersch, *Subversive Sounds: Race and the Birth of Jazz in New Orleans* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

worldwide for other many unfortunate developments in the prime of its commercial prosperity. In the 1740's, the increase of New Orleans' grandeur notably due to the introduction of the production of cotton within the local plantations enabled the city to finally reach the level of wealth that many had long predicted but that had never really taken place in the past. At that time, Pierre Cavagnal de Rigaud, Marquis de Vaudreuil became governor of Louisiana. The arrival of Rigaud to the position of governor marked the first time a non-native of France (Rigaud was born in Quebec City) was appointed to such a high administrative position. During the ten years he occupied this position, he condoned unfavorable activities, which contributed to perpetuating the negative perception of New Orleans. According to the King's councilor and commissary of the Marine Honoré Michel de Villebois de la Rouvillière, the city was the home to

un trop grand nombre de nonchalants qui ne sont propres à rien ... resté[s] dans la ville ... par la trop grande Complaisance de M. De Vaudreuil: La plupart n'ont point de métier... [ils sont] paraisseux, Et tous trouvent trop de facilité à vendre à la dérobée de l'eau de vie

(too large a number of good-for-nothings ... [who] remain in the city ... because of the immense complaisance of Mr. De Vaudreuil: Most of whom d[id] not work ... [were] slothful, And [were] all able to sell effortlessly bootlegged fruit brandy).³⁸⁶

³⁸⁶ Honoré Michel de Villebois de la Rouvillière to the Ministre, January 18, 1752, 4, Reel 43, trans. Celine Ugolini, WRC, New Orleans, LA. Honoré Michel de Villebois de la Rouvillière was a Naval Commander and the General Commissioner of Louisiana.

On top of being a place where idleness and illegal activities were widely acceptable, the area counted many vagabonds and criminals that made it an unattractive location to settle in. “*Le desordre est dans la ville, ... Il est dangereux ... que ce païs soit negligé à ce point*” (Disorder is in town, ... It is dangerous ... that this country be neglected to this point)³⁸⁷ as further detailed by Villebois de la Rouvillière who was among the ones believing that “*Il ... faut ... une bonne police pour la ville, et une discipline bien exacte dans les troupes. [Et qu’] il ni a jamais eu ny l’un ny l’autre*” (It is necessary ... for the city to have a good police force, and a strict discipline within the troops. [And that] neither has ever been present in New Orleans).³⁸⁸

In addition, many epidemics broke out in the city very early on as Pauger mentioned in 1723 that “*tout le monde est encore malade de fièvre*” (everyone is ill again with fever)³⁸⁹ in New Orleans. Pauger himself died of yellow fever in 1726. The squalid condition of the city facilitated the development and spread of epidemics. The humidity added to the dirt and lack of sewage facilities contributed to the spread of many diseases on a regular basis, thus generating a very high

³⁸⁷ Rouvillière to the Ministre, January 18, 1752, 5, trans. Celine Ugolini, WRC, New Orleans, LA.

³⁸⁸ Rouvillière to the Ministre, January 18, 1752, 7, trans. Celine Ugolini, WRC, New Orleans, LA.

³⁸⁹ Pauger to the commissioners of the Company, Ile de la Balise, September 23, 1723, 2, trans. Celine Ugolini, WCR, New Orleans, LA.

mortality rate. Wastes were be disposed of in the streets of the city. According to the Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo, “vapors emanating from the stagnant waters in the streets ... contribut[ed] to sickness and fever which has been spreading ... in this Capitol.”³⁹⁰ These conditions generated fear from colonists and farmers, who were, according to the Cabildo Council, “worn out with the repeated calamities and f[ound] themselves obliged to abandon their possessions and land, and perhaps causing an emigration of subjects.”³⁹¹ Moreover, another sanitary issue materialized. It was linked with wandering animals and the way their dead bodies were disposed of. These stray animals were most commonly poisoned, but their bodies remained lying in the streets causing the spread of germs and disease.

Conclusion

In spite of the issues the young city of New Orleans faced in addition to its natural disaster prone aspect and its initial lack of mitigation, the resilience its inhabitants displayed once again proved the viability of the city. The fires provided the opportunity to rebuild a stronger city with a better design. Disease was a major issue for the city, notably during the nineteenth century, but in time it was also overcome. The city finally replaced the old pipe and cistern system used for

³⁹⁰ Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo, 1769-1803, *A Record of the Spanish Government in New Orleans* (New Orleans, November 8, 1782), 3.

³⁹¹ Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo, 1769-1803, *A Record of the Spanish Government in New Orleans* (New Orleans, November 8, 1782), 3.

transporting and storing water at the beginning of the twentieth century following the last outbreak of yellow fever encountered. Again, New Orleans proved to be (spontaneously) resilient and its misfortune eventually turned into a positive outcome despite the lack of pre-disaster planning.

Chapter VI: Remedial Measures of a Resilient City

Introduction

With time, and with the various leaderships, the recovery efforts after each disaster gave New Orleans residents an opportunity to rebuild a stronger city and to display resilience. Because of the city's predisposition to flooding and storms, levees have been and perhaps will always be the part of New Orleans that needs constant attention, repair, and improvement. In addition, the type of constructions found throughout the city evolved with time and disasters. In this chapter I will comment on the changes that the city saw through leaderships, disasters, areas that have needed and received most work and on how after each impact New Orleans displayed resilience.

Louisiana was initially a French possession, then moved on to be transferred to Spain, before being transferred back to France, and finally to the United States. Here, I will also discuss the situation in North America from the 1750s to the early 1800s. This time period mostly equates to the Spanish colonial period in New Orleans and is an important part of the city's history during which the two great fires occurred. Each fire destroyed the vast majority of New Orleans. As a result of these events, new construction legislation appeared, improved fire protection for

the city and therefore resilience to disasters. This section also touches on the various changes in Louisiana possessions up to the time of the Louisiana Purchase.

1. Building Levees

The city of New Orleans was for a long time, and to some extent still is today, in a perpetual reconstruction process. This constant battle for reconstruction and protection required better planning to prevent the yearly floods, or at least to reduce the effects of their damage to the city.

The first manifestation of this attempt to protect the city was through the building of levees. It was as early as the eighteenth century when, according to Dumont de Montigny:

in order to protect themselves from inundation, those who live in the vicinity of the capital ... [were] obliged to build levées or elevations of earth, high and wide enough [to keep out the river]. Behind these levées, a ditch [wa]s dug to receive the water that might ooze through the ground and from these ditches, at certain distances, little canals carry away the water to the rear of the land, or to the cypress woods along the river As there are many crawfish in the country, they frequently bore through the levées during the night. In the morning one sees that they have worked during the night, by the little streams of water seeping out. This mischief must be remedied at once, else the levée w[ould] naturally cave in, and the repairs would be hard work, because of the rapidity of the water that carries away everything with it.³⁹²

The levees are a mandatory measure to help diminish the flooding in a city located below sea level but also a fragile means of protection. Reconstruction of levees after storms was as frequent as the storms themselves.

³⁹² Louis François Benjamin Dumont de Montigny, *Historical Memoire on Louisiana*, Chapter III: The Soils of Louisiana and Their Qualities, trans. Olivia Blanchard.

During the Spanish colonial period, a report from the Cabildo dated December 9, 1769 mentions the need “to repair the sidewalks and bridges, also to fill with sand the streets wherever needed”³⁹³ suggesting that a storm had recently occurred. The numerous obstacles the newly created city encountered certainly called into question the likelihood of its success as a prosperous commercial venture. Several other official acts of the Cabildo commented on the bad conditions and neglect of the public roads, in addition to the lack of maintenance of the levees. These poor infrastructures, especially the levees being unable to contain flood water, contributed to the frequent damage to the crops when the flooding season would come. Official records often mention the issue, which reveals its importance.³⁹⁴

At the time, according to Governor Carondelet, “*l’entretien des levées repos[ait] sur la reponsabilité des habitants sous peine d’amende chaque saison après les recoltes*” (failure to maintain the levees located on residents’ own land was punished by a fine).³⁹⁵ After abandoning their land, some owners feared repercussions from other inhabitants because they were unable to look after their

³⁹³ Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo, 1769-1803, *A Record of the Spanish Government in New Orleans* (New Orleans, December 9, 1769), 1.

³⁹⁴ Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo, 1769-1803, *A Record of the Spanish Government in New Orleans* (New Orleans, October 12, 1781), 1-2.

³⁹⁵ Carondelet, New Orleans, June 28, 1792, “Levee Ordinance of 1792,” trans. Celine Ugolini.

property and left the colony. Others had then to take over looking after the abandoned levees in order to protect the rest of the residents. Because of the numerous and recurring disasters, what seemed initially to be a successful venture, quickly turned into a set back and a much more complicated endeavor.

Repairs were frequently needed. Water was a well-known enemy that periodically threatened the city. Engineering at the time was very limited and not always undertaken in the most adequate manner.

The Spanish period was marked by two major fires, which were the most important disasters the city of New Orleans had to handle at the time. As a vast majority of the city was destroyed, the Spaniards not only rebuilt their colonial town, but also started planning for a stronger city and implemented fire resistant structures through the use of tougher materials for every new construction. It was so that by the time of the Louisiana Purchase, the city was no longer as disaster prone as it had been in the past, and the Americans (since the French only briefly regained the colony before the American purchase) were dealt with the possibility of expanding the commercial port in a more effective manner.

Before the city reached that level of sturdiness, many parts of the city retained fragile features. The levees were and still are part of these features. Cart drivers traveling on the levees also constituted an issue and damaged the already fragile structures so that, according to the Cabildo, “it was agreed to forbid the

cart-drivers to drive their carts over the levees ... which [are] the only protection this City has from the overflow of the river which occurs every year with imminent danger of inundating the City.”³⁹⁶ The vulnerability of the existing edifices prompted actions to make them more sturdy and efficient to handle repetitive storms better. As per records of the Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo, often

the work upon the levee was discussed as this [was] the only defense the City ha[d] and experience has shown ... that the river is higher one year than other times, and especially the present rise threatens to destroy the present levee and, in consequence, the river is about to inundate the City, and for this reason it was agreed to build a solid levee to protect the City from the current of said river and to attend to this work the Commissioners Senor Oliver and Don Joseph Ducros were appointed for this purpose.³⁹⁷

After making the decision to build stronger levees, another question remained. Who would pay for this? Considering the financial struggles of the colony and its residents, as previously discussed, it would have been a risky venture to impose taxes upon inhabitants to finance this project. On March 15, 1776, the Cabildo therefore agreed that “the payment of Six Hundred (600) Pesos owed ... for the work on the levee [would be paid] out of the funds of the City.”³⁹⁸

³⁹⁶ Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo, 1769-1803, *A Record of the Spanish Government in New Orleans* (New Orleans, March 1, 1770), 1.

³⁹⁷ Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo, 1769-1803, *A Record of the Spanish Government in New Orleans* (New Orleans, April 22, 1774), 2.

³⁹⁸ Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo, 1769-1803, *A Record of the Spanish Government in New Orleans* (New Orleans, March 15, 1776).

Six hundred pesos of the time represented the annual salary of a hospital midwife, or a quarter of the annual salary of a colonel.³⁹⁹

Following this resolution, according to the Cabildo, other measures were imperative to improve the existing levee. Rapidly the

necessity to dig a ditch at the foot of the embankment of the levee, for the purpose of holding the water that filters through from the river and damages the roads, also the necessity of draining the ditches around the Plaza [today Jackson Square] in order to receive the waters, to which the Commissioners agreed and appointed Don Nicolas Forstall to see that this is done and as soon as possible pay for same out of the City Funds when the work is done.⁴⁰⁰

Strengthening the levees was not the only issue that needed to be addressed.

Repairs were often unsatisfactory and therefore needed perpetual work. In fact, the

bad conditions of public highways, bridges and levees of the River at different places [generated] the complaints and clamor of the inhabitants (...) due to the unsounded and careless repairs which have been done in order to prevent the inundations which have[sic] destroyed or damaged by the force of the great current on the lands (...) situated four leagues above the City and abandoned by the owner.⁴⁰¹

Storms not only damaged New Orleans, but also the crops that needed to be protected as to secure commercial revenues for the city. This process was however again interrupted by several storms and therefore required numerous attempts.

³⁹⁹ Daniel H. Jr. Husner, *Indians, Settlers, and Slaves in a Frontier Exchange Economy: The Lower Mississippi Valley Before 1783* (The University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 226.

⁴⁰⁰ Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo, 1769-1803, *A Record of the Spanish Government in New Orleans* (New Orleans, March 26, 1779).

⁴⁰¹ Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo, 1769-1803, *A Record of the Spanish Government in New Orleans* (New Orleans, November 8, 1782), 1-2.

Every inhabitant was fearful once again, not only because of the recurring and devastating threat of yearly floods and storms, but due to the lack of appropriate response. Despite numerous reports from the Cabildo documenting the call for better levees and the actions taken in order to accomplish such measures,

many inhabitants [were] fearful of a break of the levee of this city, ... and that if this would [sic] happen, it would cause the total loss of this city and said that it is his opinion that the proper measures should be taken in order to avoid such calamity, making the necessary repairs on the said levee ... that no saving should be made in the said repairs, as the finds in the City Treasury are contributed by the inhabitants, so it is most proper to invest it in such work which insures the preservation of the city.⁴⁰²

There has always been, and probably will always be, that “necessity of repairing the levee ... to protect the city from the menace of the River in case it continues to rise.”⁴⁰³ In the process of repairing the latter, as in the past, New Orleans used convict labor. It constituted cheap workforce and profited the whole city, just as slave labor had. This was also documented in reports from the Cabildo in which it was agreed that

repairs made on the levee on the lands belonging to the City, located across the river in front of the City, which has been assigned to the Hospital for patients with smallpox, and for the purpose of saving on said repairs, convict labor had been used, without any other expense except 20 pesos.⁴⁰⁴

⁴⁰² Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo, 1769-1803, *A Record of the Spanish Government in New Orleans* (New Orleans, March 6, 1801), 1-2.

⁴⁰³ Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo, 1769-1803, *A Record of the Spanish Government in New Orleans* (New Orleans, March 9, 1792), 1-2.

⁴⁰⁴ Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo, 1769-1803, *A Record of the Spanish Government in New Orleans* (New Orleans, March 24, 1797).

Repairs were also a complicated matter due to the frequency of the storms.

To arrange for the repairs of the river bank in that part where the orange groves have been washed away by the river, having done considerable damage when the river receded, ... it was urgent to repair this washout ... In view of the fact that the work can not be started, because the river has not entirely receded, and it being the time for the hurricanes, same will be commenced as soon as the Commissioners judge it can be done without risk of future trouble.⁴⁰⁵

The method used to repair the levees, according to a Cabildo report, was that of the “fascine”⁴⁰⁶ which consists in pipes or banks along the river in order to strengthen the side protective structure.

In addition to the levees, according to the Cabildo,

the urgency and the necessity to build six flood-gates on the ditches of this City, due to the fact that the river is at a height, not seen for many years, and if there should be a break in the Tchoupitoulas levee this City would be inundated, this can be prevented by placing the flood-gates.⁴⁰⁷

Efforts towards achieving that goal had been considered for a long time, as demonstrated in the following quote from a Cabildo report dated 1798:

the Commissioners having discussed in the previous sessions of the Cabildo about how useful it would be to build four declivities near the edge of the Mississippi River so that the filth be carried into the River instead of being carried through the muddy streets as at present and to repair the levee from

⁴⁰⁵ Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo, 1769-1803, *A Record of the Spanish Government in New Orleans* (New Orleans, August 9, 1802), 1-2.

⁴⁰⁶ Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo, 1769-1803, *A Record of the Spanish Government in New Orleans* (New Orleans, November 18, 1803), 1.

⁴⁰⁷ Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo, 1769-1803, *A Record of the Spanish Government in New Orleans* (New Orleans, April 1, 1796), 1.

the section fronting the Government building up to the block in front of the house of Don Francisco Duplessis.⁴⁰⁸

Storms were not the only factor that damaged the very fragile levees.

According to the Cabildo Council, “Attorney General presented an official document in regard to the bad condition of various roads on both sides of the City ... calling attention to the damages caused by the animals (bovine and equine) on the levee and the highways.”⁴⁰⁹

2. Construction of the City

The late first French period is characterized by the lack of major storms and hurricanes. In fact, as previously mentioned, hurricanes have cycles of approximately thirty years during which they become active then passive. Thus, during the early Spanish period, the yearly floods did take place, but no major hurricanes required heavy reconstruction on the city.

The soil underneath New Orleans is anything but stable. In fact, according to Sublette, “thirty feet down [below the city] there is no bedrock, but peat and clay. The water table is so high that the city has to bury its dead in aboveground tombs. ... There are vacant pockets underground where long buried tree trunks and other organic material have rotted away. Many houses in the city sit on pilings that go

⁴⁰⁸ Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo, 1769-1803, *A Record of the Spanish Government in New Orleans* (New Orleans, August 31, 1798).

⁴⁰⁹ Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo, 1769-1803, *A Record of the Spanish Government in New Orleans* (New Orleans, May 28, 1784), 1.

fifty feet deep, or more.”⁴¹⁰ Despite concerns about the site, the French first created plans for the city and divided its area, then started to build houses. According to Vogt, “buildings of importance, such as churches and public facilities, [were] located facing the commons, where their importance c[ould] be properly announced and viewed.”⁴¹¹ City planners designed other buildings that were of less importance to look alike and blend together as to create a uniform style throughout the city. The goal was to create an overall appearance that would compliment significant edifices while harmonizing others.⁴¹²

The houses were originally huts similar to what the local Indians lived in. After a few years, the French built more durable housing. As detailed by Livingstone de Lancey, in an effort to acclimate themselves, French colonists made a point to build New Orleans as similar to Paris as possible so they would not have to live in the wilderness that the area was prior to the construction of the city.⁴¹³

The French houses were, however, originally of a poor quality and revealed to be very fragile and vulnerable to hurricanes and other disasters they faced. Most were, according to Arthur, “were low frame structures, bricked between posts and

⁴¹⁰ Sublette, *The World That Made New Orleans*, 8.

⁴¹¹ Vogt, *Architecture of the French Quarter*, 55.

⁴¹² Vogt, *Architecture of the French Quarter*, 55.

⁴¹³ Livingstone De Lancey, *The French Influence in New Orleans*, 484.

roofed with cypress shingles ... briqueté entre poteaux.”⁴¹⁴ The “bricks between posts” method involved large timber frames and posts dug into the ground in order to bring some stability to the house while bricks were inserted between the posts. This method also included a type of insulation called *bousillage*, which consisted in a mixture of Spanish moss and mud. According to Powell, this technique was used until the settlers “discovered that the area’s numerous Indian oyster-shell middens could be made into lime and used to plaster exposed surfaces.”⁴¹⁵ Despite providing an improvement in habitations, these structures were still precarious and only lasted a couple of decades. In addition, numerous residents did not even benefit from housing, such as the poor, and many soldiers.⁴¹⁶

The French from the northern part of New France called Acadia, part of today’s eastern provinces of Canada, introduced the brick between posts structures to Louisiana. When the Acadians reached Louisiana following their forced removal by the British from their habitat during the Seven Years War, their name evolved to become “Cajun” because of an effect of mispronunciation. Canada represented the first French attempt at colonization in North America. Since the climate there was closer to that in France - as opposed to the climate in Louisiana - it was easier

⁴¹⁴ Arthur, *Old New Orleans*, 10.

⁴¹⁵ Powell, *The Accidental City*, 65.

⁴¹⁶ Powell, *The Accidental City*, 65.

to build houses and other structures suited for that environment. These, however, were not quite so suited for the climate of Louisiana. The French failed to take their environment into account when building early structures. This led to numerous setbacks in their effort to build strong settlements. The French built most of their houses with wood, which made them vulnerable to both fire and water, as they could rot after large floods. It was only when the Spanish took over the colony that the houses started being built in response to the threat that disasters presented.



Madame John's Legacy is one of the most famous examples of "*briqueté entre poteaux*" (bricks between posts) houses. However, the house was built in 1788, after the great fire of that year and during the Spanish period. As a result, the building is not an original French building from the French colonial period, but a reproduction of this style in the later Spanish colonial period. Source: New Orleans Visit at: <http://www.neworleansvisit.com/architecture1.html>.

French houses were usually lower than the Spanish ones and mostly only had one story. They were detached houses, as opposed to the terraced houses found later in some areas, and often had a garden which enabled its residents to grow vegetables or raise animals at the back.⁴¹⁷

Typical houses in the French Quarter, whether French or Spanish, would have an outside area, generally at the back, called “*cour*” in French and “*patio*” in Spanish. The term *patio* remained in the English language as opposed to the French *cour*.⁴¹⁸ Another common feature between the French and Spanish houses was the presence of balconies. Virtually every house bearing more than one story had one. Balconies were a way to surround houses, to provide an outside area useful in hot climates, and to supply an area of shade below them by the entrance to the house, and to a certain extent, on the street. None of the foreign words used for balconies (*galeries* in French or *miradors* in Spanish) remained as part of the common use in English to describe them. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, however, the word “balcony” comes from the Italian *balcōne* (derivations are the French *balcon*, the Provençal *balcon*, the Spanish *balcon*, and

⁴¹⁷ Vogt, *Architecture of the French Quarter*, 65.

⁴¹⁸ Arthur, *Old New Orleans*, 10-11.

the Portuguese *balcão*). The word is formed with augmentative suffix *-one* from Italian *balco, palco*, which means scaffold, or a beam.⁴¹⁹

French houses were neither strong nor of a durable nature, which made them particularly vulnerable to disasters. It was so that by the 1760s the city looked very similar to what it had been when first built and had not encountered any major improvements. Out of all the streets in the *Vieux Carré*, according to Geronimi:

only the streets and blocks closest to the river and having structures on them were laid out; the rest of the town was undeveloped. The best buildings were made of brick, but they were few and costly. A less expensive and more widely used building style was brick between posts called colomage.⁴²⁰

According to Le Page du Pratz, however, “the greatest part of the houses [was made] of brick; the rest of timber and brick,”⁴²¹ which seemed durable. What must also be considered is that the face of New Orleans dramatically changed after each new belonging to various countries.

In Spanish New Orleans, some might say that considering the poor quality and fragility of the French city originally built, the two fires of 1788 and 1794 had a long term positive outcome as it gave an opportunity to rebuild a stronger and

⁴¹⁹ "balcony, n.". OED Online. September 2012. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/14823?redirectedFrom=balcony> (accessed September 16, 2012).

⁴²⁰ Geronimi, *Québec et la Nouvelle Orléans*, 58. Original source: Gilbert C. Din, John E. Harkins, *New Orleans Cabildo : Colonial Louisiana's First City Government, 1769-1803* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1996).

⁴²¹ Le Page du Pratz, *History of Louisiana*, 93.

better city than the French had. The city that emerged from the fires of the Spanish period was sturdier, better designed and better prepared to face hurricanes and other disasters. This was yet again another reconstruction that displayed the resilience of New Orleans and adaptation to local conditions. The type of material used to build houses went from “*briqueté entre poteaux*,” according to Arthur, to buildings made “wholly of bricks ... Tile was substituted for wooden shingles; some roofs were covered with the familiar half-round red tiles, others with flat green tiles.”⁴²² The Spanish had also established more construction regulations from the start of their governance. Vogt notes that “as Spain expanded its empire, planning principles were guided by the Laws of the Indies (*Recopilacion de leyes de las Indias*) ... The Laws imposed a standard town plan for all new settlements, directing the colonists to integrate regional geographic factors (climate, wind direction, availability of water, soil quality, and suitability for defense) into the Spanish model.”⁴²³

Livingstone De Lancey explains that “New Orleans is the only remaining city in what is now the United States whose French origins are still apparent.”⁴²⁴ This comes from the fact that the original city, the *Vieux Carré*, has been

⁴²² Arthur, *Old New Orleans*, 10.

⁴²³ Vogt, *Architecture of the French Quarter*, 59.

⁴²⁴ Livingstone De Lancey, *The French Influence in New Orleans*, 483.

maintained as the centre of today's tourist-oriented New Orleans. It therefore displays the city's colonial attributes. Despite the efforts and opportunities for the Spaniards to rebuild the city, they did not replace the French aspect of New Orleans, where most street names are still written in French. At the time of the Louisiana Purchase New Orleans counted around 10,000 inhabitants, mostly of French and Spanish decent. When compared to the local population today, roughly 360,000,⁴²⁵ it is astonishing that the French influence remains so present considering most inhabitants came after the Louisiana Purchase and therefore might be descendent of U.S. citizens. The 10,000 or so New Orleanians that were "transferred" to the United States along with the Louisiana Purchase, according to De Lancey, were at the time not strictly French, but Creole.

According to Herbert Asbury, the word "Creole" is derived from the Spanish language and was therefore not used during the French colonial period. The original meaning of the word, which has almost disappeared today, comes from the Spanish *criar* meaning to raise, to educate. It would refer to a servant raised in his master's house, and appeared in the twelfth century.⁴²⁶ During colonial times, the use of the word meant "native" and as such it described any person of any decent

⁴²⁵ U.S. Census Bureau, 18 Sep. 2012, 4 Dec. 2012
<<http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/22/2255000.html>>

⁴²⁶ "créole," Centre National de Ressources Textuelles et Lexicales
<http://www.cnrtl.fr/lexicographie/créole> (accessed May 9, 2014)

born in Louisiana, as opposed to born in the home country. With the years, this applied to almost the entire population and the term became more restrictive. Creoles were known as natives of the colony whose ancestors either came from France or Spain, and who had been part of the original colonists.⁴²⁷ As Asbury further remarks, the word “Creole” was only used as a noun to qualify white men. In all other circumstances, it was used as an adjective.

Very shortly after the first fire, an act of the Cabildo and Spanish governor Esteban Rodríguez Miró, mentioned the necessity to discuss the measures that “should be taken to guard against another fire and to place [ourselves] in a position to fight the fire, to stop its progress in case another should occur.”⁴²⁸ While only a few years later another fire did occur and caused more damage, the first fire also provided the opportunity for the city, under the leadership of governor Francisco Luis Héctor de Carondelet, to order “four pumps, one of the best methods for combating fire, (...) 60 leather buckets (...), so that in case of fire can easily supply enough water,”⁴²⁹ thus displaying yet again the resilient capacity of New Orleans’ residents and the city itself.

⁴²⁷ Asbury, *The French Quarter*, 92.

⁴²⁸ Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo, 1769-1803, *A Record of the Spanish Government in New Orleans* (New Orleans, April 4, 1788).

⁴²⁹ Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo, 1769-1803, *A Record of the Spanish Government in New Orleans* (New Orleans, April 18, 1788).

The Spanish built numerous huts following the second fire as to provide temporary accommodation to those affected by the disaster. Since these had a temporary character, they were made of provisional materials such as wood. According to a Cabildo report dated August 23, 1797, the said huts were only meant to last until the end of 1794, the year of the second fire. They were, however, still standing in 1797.⁴³⁰ This is the reason why the Cabildo finally ordered for them to be “demolished for the purpose of avoiding a[nother] fire.”⁴³¹

Since no Spanish architects took part in the realization of the city’s reconstruction after the great fires, New Orleans created a sort of identity of its own, taking inspiration from its various occupants, such as the Spanish and the French, but also Native Indians, Creoles, and other communities co-existing within the city. Very few of the original French buildings survived the fires. The Ursulines Covent is one of them.

As a result of the fires, the Cabildo implemented a “method which must be followed in the future when constructing houses, which roof must be made of a

⁴³⁰ Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo, 1769-1803, *A Record of the Spanish Government in New Orleans* (New Orleans, August 23, 1797).

⁴³¹ Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo, 1769-1803, *A Record of the Spanish Government in New Orleans* (New Orleans, August 23, 1797).

fireproof material, and that a period of time be allowed in order to roof all houses as ordered, which provisionally were permitted to be roofed with shingles.”⁴³²

Furthermore, many other issues needed to be addressed within the city. The fires did not only raise the question of housing and finding more suitable materials to build habitations, according to the Cabildo Council, they also brought to light the fact that

the city [did not have] the proper sewerage and that there was plenty of stagnated water which [wa]s very much detrimental to the public health, the reason being that after the fire experienced in this city, each individual made their own ditch and sidewalk, without paying attention to grading it to the proper level of the city and [therefore] the Commissioners agreed that Don Gilberto Guillemard and Finiel [were] requested to proceed to grade the ditches of all the streets, authorizing the Commissioner and City Treasurer to pay those small expenses which might be required.⁴³³

Additionally, according to Vogt, “since there was very little cultural interaction between New Orleans and the rest of North America from the time of its colonization until the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, the [French] Quarter more closely resembles a Caribbean port than an American city.”⁴³⁴ Because almost every ship from France to Louisiana stopped in Cap-Haitien, a port city in today’s

⁴³² Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo, 1769-1803, *A Record of the Spanish Government in New Orleans* (New Orleans, August 23, 1797).

⁴³³ Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo, 1769-1803, *A Record of the Spanish Government in New Orleans* (New Orleans, February 15, 1799).

⁴³⁴ Vogt, *Architecture of the French Quarter*, 59.

Haiti, their sailors could see the West Indian architectural types.⁴³⁵ As a consequence, houses often took the appearance of that in the West Indies and as such, were often raised from the ground to accommodate the climate and the tendency of the land to flood and to be continuously engorged with water. According to Vogt, raising houses from the ground also enabled protection from the local wildlife.⁴³⁶

If the appearance of the city changed with time and various foreign occupations, this also had an impact on the practices held within the city. The city became so similar to Paris that even habits such as gambling quickly spread and generated a proclamation from the king to ban the practice.⁴³⁷ After the Louisiana Purchase, because of conflicts between French and Americans, the Americans developed and dominated the business and commercial side of the city while the French took on the more social and cultural side.⁴³⁸ According to Samuel Wilson Jr., the stated policy of France in colonial Louisiana was to convert the natives. In actual fact, the French were primarily a military power trying to reduce the development of the nearby English and Spanish colonies for its own economic development. As a result, the type of buildings found in the colony was affected.

⁴³⁵ Vogt, *Architecture of the French Quarter*, 65.

⁴³⁶ Vogt, *Architecture of the French Quarter*, 95.

⁴³⁷ Livingstone De Lancey, *The French Influence in New Orleans*, 484.

⁴³⁸ Livingstone De Lancey, *The French Influence in New Orleans*, 484.

As an early writer put it, where the French built a fort, the Spanish would have built a church and the English a tavern to display their intentions.⁴³⁹

Spain remained in control of the colony for several decades, and on October 1, 1800, the secret Third Treaty of San Ildefonso took place in which Spain retroceded its land in Louisiana to Napoleon Bonaparte in exchange for the promise by Napoleon that he would help Spain gain a “kingdom for the son-in-law of Spain's king if Spain would return Louisiana to France.”⁴⁴⁰ Napoleon had also agreed never to let go of Louisiana to another power in the treaty. He chose to disregard these terms at the time of the Louisiana Purchase with the United States in 1803. This event generated much discontent from Spain, which claimed that the sale was invalid as Spain was to give its consent for any further sale of the territory by the French.⁴⁴¹ Despite these claims James Monroe took possession of Louisiana on behalf of the Jefferson administration. President Jefferson had himself long coveted the area.

The last few years before the Louisiana Purchase saw several transfers and changes in possessions for the colony. The Third Treaty of San Ildefonso was kept

⁴³⁹ Wilson, “Religious Architecture in Colonial Louisiana,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 8, (1973): 63.

⁴⁴⁰ “The Louisiana Purchase,” Louisiana State Museum, <http://lsm.crt.state.la.us/cabildo/cab4.htm> (accessed July 17, 2009).

⁴⁴¹ “Treat of San Ildefonso,” *The Napoleon Series* (accessed 20 December, 2013) http://www.napoleon-series.org/research/government/diplomatic/c_ildefonso.html

secret for almost three years. The decision to sell Louisiana from France to the United States dates from April 30, 1803, at a time when New Orleans residents still believed to be Spanish subjects. The Louisiana Purchase official transfer took place on December 20, 1803 in the Spanish Cabildo located on the *Place d'Armes*, today known as Jackson Square, inside the *Sala Capitular*. This was also where the official transfer between Spain and France had taken place only a few days earlier. New Orleans inhabitants had only just found out that they had been transferred from being Spanish subjects to French nationals. The French flag had floated over the city for twenty days before the American flag had come to replace it.⁴⁴²

The Louisiana Purchase occurred because France faced numerous wars, especially with Britain, which had weakened her financially, and after the loss of the colony of Saint Domingue,⁴⁴³ which became Haiti. No money was left to invest in maintaining the colony of Louisiana, which because of its recurring disasters demanded a lot of funds, or to look after its residents. France then considered Louisiana an infertile territory, which would cost much more to maintain than it could ever repay the country that owned it. This was exposed in the French newspaper *La Gazette de France* in an 1802 article later cited by General Milford

⁴⁴² Jousseume, "French Identity in New Orleans" (master's thesis, Bordeaux 3, 2002), 33.

⁴⁴³ "Louisiana Purchase," *History* (accessed December 20, 2013) <http://www.history.com/topics/louisiana-purchase>

Tastanagy in a letter to the Ministre de la Marine in which he explained the appeal of the United States President for an area of little importance to France:

On pretend savoir que le president des Etats-Unis de L'amerique convoite la partie de La Louisiane située sur la rive gauche du Mifsissippi. C'est une langue de terre formée de sables mouvans, [et] de marécages

(It is said to be known that the president of the United States of America is coveting the part of Louisiana located on the left bank of the Mississippi River. It is a long patch of land made of trapped sands, [and] swamps).⁴⁴⁴

In the same letter, Milford Tastanagy further comments it is “*sur cette terre à peu près inutile et insignifiante qu'est bâtie la Nouvelle-Orléans*” (on this almost useless and insignificant land that is established the city of New Orleans).⁴⁴⁵ In another letter, dated 28 Thermidor An 10 (August 16th 1802) Milford Tastanagy mentions a document written by the United States' ambassador to the First Consul

qui a pour objet de discuter la question de savoir s'il peut etre de l'interet de la france de leur céder la louisiane et qui tend à prouver qu'il lui serait plus profitable d'en avoir le recevoir le prix qui en est offert

(whose purpose is to discuss whether it would be in France's best interests to cede Louisiana to the United States and which seems to conclude that it would be more profitable [to cede the territory and] to receive its financial value).⁴⁴⁶

⁴⁴⁴ Milford Tastanagy to the Ministre de la Marine et de la Colonie, 3 Thermidor an X (July 27, 1802), 1, “Article de La Gazette de France du trois Thermidor,” Reel 60, trans. Celine Ugolini, WRC, New Orleans, LA.

⁴⁴⁵ Tastanagy to the Ministre de la Marine, 3 Thermidor an X (July 27, 1802), 1, “Article de La Gazette,” trans. Celine Ugolini, WRC, New Orleans, LA.

⁴⁴⁶ Milford Tastanagy to the Ministre de la Marine et de la Colonie, 28 Thermidor an X (August 16, 1802), 1, “Article de La Gazette de France du trois Thermidor,” Reel 60, trans. Celine Ugolini, WRC, New Orleans, LA.

Tastanagy went on further to explain that since the purpose of this pamphlet was to show the United States' opinion in a certain light, it was probably only handed to the few people that may agree with such a position and who would be influential enough to help their cause and push for the transfer of Louisiana to the United States. As for Tastanagy's personal opinion, it is also clearly stated that "*cet arrangement que je suis persuadé d'avance devoir etre funeste à la france, quel que soit le prix ou Indemnité qu'on en offre*" (this agreement that I am already convinced will reveal to be deadly for France, whatever price or compensation given in exchange).⁴⁴⁷ However much persuasive and valid Tastanagy's arguments were, they seem to have been disregarded by a government already convinced that the colony of Louisiana had become a useless and an expensive territory to retain. As a result, there seemed to have been no other solution than to get rid of the whole area. On the American side, Thomas Jefferson had been interested in acquiring New Orleans for quite some time as he valued the area because of its access to the Mississippi River and its potential for commerce. He declared that there was "on the globe one spot, the possessor of which is our natural and habitual enemy. It is New Orleans,"⁴⁴⁸ which therefore suggested that owning the area

⁴⁴⁷ Tastanagy to the Ministre de la Marine, 28 Thermidor an X (August 16, 1802), 1, "Article de La Gazette," trans. Celine Ugolini, WRC, New Orleans, LA.

⁴⁴⁸ Lewis, *New Orleans*, 10.

would be an asset for his country. And so, on April 30, 1803, Napoleon Bonaparte made the decision to sell Louisiana to the young United States, which had shown interest in expanding their territory westward for a long time.

According to Arthur, “Louisiana was purchased at the price of 4 cents per acre,”⁴⁴⁹ for a total area of five-hundred and thirty million acres and for a total amount of fifteen million dollars (the actual purchase price was \$11,250,000 in currency and \$3,750,000 represented various debts the French held towards American citizens).



Map of the area acquired by the United States in 1803 known as The Louisiana Purchase. Approximately one third of today's United States mainland. Source:

⁴⁴⁹ Arthur, *Old New Orleans*, 102.

U.S. Department of State: Office of the Historian at
<<http://history.state.gov/milestones/1801-1829/LouisianaPurchase>>.

Several factors convinced Napoleon that keeping the colony would be too costly. Napoleon's original plans were to develop a French power in the New World that would include the province of Saint Domingue, a large sugar colony. However, a slave rebellion generated France's loss of the colony. This event therefore prevented Bonaparte's plans from materializing. The rebellion led to the independence of Saint Domingue under the name of Haiti, as the first Black-led government in the world. Since France faced numerous and costly conflicts at home with England, this pushed Napoleon not only to accept Monroe's offer that he had previously declined about buying New Orleans but to sell Monroe the whole of Louisiana, which had become unprofitable in Bonaparte's eyes.⁴⁵⁰

The news that the territory of Louisiana was going to be sold to the United States by the French started to spread even before the official transfer from Spain to France took place. The U.S. transfer, however, generated many reactions from the local population as described by Pierre Clement de Laussat, the last French Governor in Louisiana.

⁴⁵⁰ U.S. Department of State: Office of the Historian, "Milestones 1801-1821: Louisiana Purchase 1803", <http://history.state.gov/milestones/1801-1829/LouisianaPurchase> (accessed July 17, 2009).

Cet arrangement, a produit ici une sensation considerable. Les Anglo-Américains extravagent d'allégresse; les Espagnols entre la joie de voir cette colonie échapper a la domination Française et le regret de la perdre eux-mêmes (...); les Français, c'est-à-dire, les neuf-dixièmes de la population, sont stupéfaits et désolés: ils ne parlent que de vendre et de fuir loin de ce pays

(this agreement, generated here much sensation. The Anglo-Americans [were] taken by the most vivid joy; the Spaniards [were] caught between the joy to see the colony escaping French domination and the regret to lose it themselves (...); the French, that is to say ninth-tenth of the population, [were] shocked and inconsolable: selling their property and leaving this territory to go as far as possible [was] on everyone's lips).⁴⁵¹

Conclusion

Following the transfer, Louisiana kept many of its French features as well as its language for several decades before it finally gave way to becoming an American city. One thing remains common in history to all the periods that characterized New Orleans: its resilience. The city displayed resilience through each government and foreign power. Despite the lack of preventive measures from the French, New Orleans showed resilience and rebuilt time after time. The Spanish implemented building legislations to prevent extensive damage from disasters such as fires, which further showed resilience. Under U.S. territorial leadership then statehood, New Orleans' whole wooden pipe and cistern system disappeared to prevent disease from spreading as they had done in the past. These

⁴⁵¹ Pierre Clement de Laussat to the Ministre de la Marine et des Colonies, New Orleans, 20 thermidor an XI (August 8, 1803), 1, Reel 61, trans. Celine Ugolini, WRC, New Orleans, LA.

show the various contributions each government decided to put in place to preserve the city. Most of all, each disaster seems to have taught the city a lesson, enabled it to rebuild stronger, and to remedy some of its issues proving once again the need to keep New Orleans alive.

In spite of the uncountable obstacles, the yearly devastating storms, and the lack of adequate repair, New Orleans demonstrated yet again along the years considerable resilience as its residents have constantly rebuilt the city. One may wonder why New Orleanians displayed such resilience and the obvious answer to that question would be: because they could. The early disasters that took place before 1722 actually had the result of flattening the ground and getting rid of inadequate buildings and vegetation that would have been hindering the city more than enabling its development. Since the location of New Orleans became obvious for commercial prosperity at that time, the early disasters actually provided the opportunity to rebuild a new town, more adapted to the needs of the colony. Once that town was built and the other local cities proved to be ineffective as capital of the colony, New Orleans appeared as a suitable choice and therefore colonists started investing more into the future of their city. With time, resilience became a question of maintaining the city and continuing to take advantage of a prime location that no other could match. Two cities had already failed as capital of the colony because of their poor locations, but contrary to Mobile and Biloxi, New

Orleans' access to the Mississippi River trumped all the inconvenience that it too presented with regards to flooding and storms. Originally rebuilding a very small settlement proved an easy solution, then as the city developed and demonstrated itself to be more and more economically sound thanks to its strategic location, it became natural to continue the rebuilding effort. This again emphasizes Campanella's theory that had the city been placed elsewhere, similar issues would have emerged but the general situation granting access to the Mississippi River for commercial purposes could not have been matched. It therefore also further validates Bienville's choice to place his *Nouvelle Orléans* where it stands today.

Culture and leadership from various countries over Louisiana have had a tremendous impact on building the city of New Orleans as we know it today. If the French were inexperienced and struggled with the climate of the area, the Spanish seemed to have been more organized, and put in place regulations to help with taming their environment, improving defenses and building a stronger town overall. Colonial New Orleans started as a fragile settlement whose existence was questionable, and constantly threatened by recurring disasters, but it ended as a prosperous city and a large port. Although the regularity of the disasters remained, the city gradually learned not to anticipate them, but to live with them and overcome their impact. *La Nouvelle Orléans* was a strategic town for water transportation and commerce that, should the French have not needed to jettison

for financial reasons, could have been retained as a European anchor in North America. It was, however, the newly formed United States that acknowledged the necessity of New Orleans and eventually purchased the whole area of Louisiana from Napoleon Bonaparte in 1803 in the hope to develop their commercial venture on this new continent. Despite the removal of European leaders from the city, street names, family names, customs, and language for a long time, kept a very European flavor to remind its inhabitants of the city's origins. New Orleans did, and to some extent still does today, remain one of the least American U.S. cities.

Conclusion

Remarkable: “Deserving notice or comment; worthy of remark or attention. Hence: striking, unusual, singular.”⁴⁵² Such is the character of New Orleans.

The city of New Orleans was born a fragile settlement. It has remained a very frail city that encountered numerous misfortunes since its initial foundation and for the vast majority of its history. This study discussed the apparent fragility, which ultimately turned into the very strength of the Crescent City and enabled it to develop the remarkable resilience that characterizes New Orleans to date. The study examines the various leaderships New Orleans encountered throughout the colonial era and how the different regimes had contrastive approaches and rebuilding techniques. If the French built a very fragile town, the Spanish helped developing a stronger city, especially in the aftermath of the two fires. Disasters in early New Orleans ultimately enabled its residents to rebuild a stronger town, made of more durable materials, and with time (mostly by the end of the colonial period), to implement remedial measures to prevent more disasters from occurring as regularly. The first chapter defines the concepts of resilience and mitigation, and discusses New Orleans’ resilience to disasters and disease over time, and resilience

⁴⁵² "remarkable, adj., n., and adv.". OED Online. December 2012. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/162074?redirectedFrom=remarkable> (accessed February 19, 2013).

in other parts of the world. It concludes by the realization that the absence of mitigation in New Orleans played a major part in its lack of rapid adaptation to the disasters facing the city. Chapter two introduces the major players in the race for colonizing the New World. Most of them had their eyes on Louisiana due to its resources and its access to water for commercial and transportation purposes regardless of the disaster prone character of the area. Chapter three evaluates the importance of Louisiana and the reasons behind its foundation and the selection of New Orleans as the main settlement for the colony. It concludes that despite its proneness to flooding and disasters, colonists chose well in locating the Crescent City on its present site. Chapter four points out the major issues the colonists encountered, which were the lack of people (thus workforce to build and rebuild the city following disasters) and the excess of water. It details the measures and factors that enabled colonists to handle these issues such as the use of slavery and the help from the Ursuline nuns. Finally, it discusses the case of another strategic town, *La Balise*, which after encountering numerous disasters was finally abandoned, thus promoting the idea that its location was not as strategic as that of New Orleans. Location played a determining role in the decision to rebuild New Orleans disaster after disaster and thus was a major component in the city's resilience. The chapter concludes by highlighting the ingenuity of the initial French settlers who chose the location of New Orleans for the main town of the colony.

Chapter five specifically deals with detailing disasters that struck colonial New Orleans. It concludes once again in asserting the resilience displayed by a city, which used every disaster as a trampoline to bounce back and rebuild a stronger settlement. In the late eighteenth century, New Orleans' then Spanish government implemented new building legislations following the fires. Despite the lack of adequate mitigation in terms of hurricane protection, the city, at l(e)ast, was able to rebuild a somewhat stronger (Spanish) town than the original French city, thus continuously turning its misfortunes into positive outcomes. Finally, chapter six considers remedial measures. It examines the construction of the city of New Orleans and the evolution of the materials used to once again point to the fact that New Orleans was a much stronger town by the time of the Louisiana Purchases than it had been the century prior. If the city did not represent a worthy colony on the eve of the Purchase, the U.S. saw potential in developing the area and did not face the costly wars France had to face with England. New Orleans technically became American, but always kept a European flavor. Every chapter in some way points to the same conclusion: New Orleans is, and has been, a resilient city since its very foundation.

Resilience is a key concept in the history of New Orleans. According to the Resilience Alliance, "Ecosystem resilience is the capacity of an ecosystem to tolerate disturbance without collapsing into a qualitatively different state that is

controlled by a different set of processes. A resilient ecosystem can withstand shocks and rebuild itself when necessary. Resilience in social systems has the added capacity of humans to anticipate and plan for the future ... "Resilience" as applied to ecosystems, or to integrated systems of people and the natural environment, has three defining characteristics:

- The amount of change the system can undergo and still retain the same controls on function and structure
- The degree to which the system is capable of self-organization
- The ability to build and increase the capacity for learning and adaptation⁴⁵³

Not only has the city displayed resilience but it was also able to maintain it over the years, the decades, and eventually the centuries. The main reason behind such need for resilience probably comes from the city's location. Such a crucial trading center and commercial port could not be abandoned as other nearby locations such as *La Balise* had been. As time went by and colonists settled in the area, a sense of place also developed through which New Orleans no longer was that city far from home, it was home. New Orleans' resilience happened despite a crucial lack of funds portrayed throughout most of its history, and still today, thus highlighting even further the resilient character of its population. Today, still in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, which took place in 2005, the city is slowly

⁴⁵³ <http://www.resalliance.org/index.php/resilience>

recuperating, rebuilding, and as always, displaying an incomparable resilience to the rest of the world.

New Orleans' first recorded major disaster was the flood of 1719, only one year after the initial construction of the city. In spite of the amplitude of the disaster, since the city merely “existed only in name,”⁴⁵⁴ the flood allowed for the intention to build a stronger city, additional levees, and at the same time did not impose heavy reconstruction as there was simply not much to rebuild due to the small size of the city. By 1722, New Orleans encountered its second serious disaster and first hurricane, or, at least, the first hurricane recorded on the site of the city. Again, this event called for reconstruction, although only rebuilding a very small settlement. As previously discussed throughout this paper, “not until 1723 [did] New Orleans beg[i]n to take on the appearance”⁴⁵⁵ of a town. These two early disasters foreshadowed what seemed inevitable: the city had been located on disaster prone land. Despite the realization that settlers would in all likelihood have to learn to tame their surrounding environment, they still decided to carry on the venture of developing the city. It was, in fact, the location of the city that for them

⁴⁵⁴ Le Page du Pratz, *History of Louisiana*, 89.

⁴⁵⁵ Marie-Madeleine Hachard Ursuline of New Orleans, letters, 1727-1728. US Old Mint, New Orleans, Louisiana.

justified this frequent rebuilding. The need for New Orleans at this precise location, or situation justified the struggles to make it stay.⁴⁵⁶

As the years went by and the disasters struck, New Orleanians rebuilt their city constantly. The opportunity to exploit the Mississippi River for transportation purposes and the proximity to the Gulf of Mexico offered an ideal situation. As Campanella asked: “Should a settlement be built on the safest site, despite its inconvenience? Or should it exploit the most strategic situation, despite its risk?”⁴⁵⁷ The French decided on exploiting a strategic location, despite the risk involved.

The fact that today, according to Lewis, “a million people work and make a living on this evil site only emphasizes the excellence of the situation. There is no contradiction. If a city’s situation is good enough, its site will be altered to make do.”⁴⁵⁸

The colony of Louisiana was immediately faced with a series of problems that in many ways have defined New Orleans history. By looking at the early history of the city, and particularly the repeated attempts to build and populate a settlement under extremely difficult conditions, this dissertation suggested two things. First, it discussed the city’s location, and particularly its susceptibility to

⁴⁵⁶ Lewis, *New Orleans*, 17.

⁴⁵⁷ Campanella, *Bienville’s Dilemma*, 15.

⁴⁵⁸ Lewis, *New Orleans*, 17.

storms and flooding, which have defined New Orleans from the very beginning.

The original founders chose well. New Orleans was vulnerable to storms and prone to flooding, but so were the other alternatives, and few, if any, locations were as well situated in terms of strategic access to important waterways. The city was destroyed, or nearly destroyed, by weather and fire numerous times, offering its inhabitants and the colonial authorities multiple opportunities to leave. Instead, they chose to stay, recognizing the city's economic potential and strategic importance and deciding to continue investing in its future and continuously rebuild. No other cities offered a better possible exploitation of the Mississippi River and connection to the Gulf of Mexico for commercial transportation. Other cities that may have had viable situations, had even more precarious sites, such as *La Balise*, which was eventually abandoned. Second, the repeated experience with disasters and the resilience it gradually established have been both a difficult venture and a defining feature of New Orleans' history. Few cities have faced so many disasters during their formative years, an experience that pushed the limits of human and financial capacity, while at the same time making New Orleans the unique city it is today.

In the late 1600s and early 1700s, it was very difficult to get anyone to settle in the new French colony of Louisiana. This led colonial authorities to get creative. Among other tactics, they forced prisoners, prostitutes, and other convicts to move

to Louisiana in order to both build the city and protect it from Spanish and English incursions.

According to Campanella, “the proximate cause motivating the foundation of New Orleans was the need for a convenient port and company office for the commercial development of Louisiana; the ultimate cause was the French imperial need to defend their Louisiana claim by fortifying its Mississippi River Basin gateway against the English and the Spanish.”⁴⁵⁹ Despite all the existing challenges of building a city in such an uncertain environment, the plans proceeded.

From the fragile French settlement founded in 1718, a stronger Spanish city sprung, better prepared to face the numerous disasters it encountered over the years. By the time of the Louisiana Purchase by the United States, there were no longer any doubts, at least on the American side, as to the validity of the presence of the city. New Orleans had become a much stronger and developed city. Its inhabitants had also developed a sense of home by that time. In addition to the constant wave of new comers that reached the city, a large part of New Orleanians was no longer made of immigrants and first generation settlers but sons and daughters of New Orleanians by then. Their history and decent were in New Orleans, it was their home, and as such, after each disaster, they cared to rebuild

⁴⁵⁹ Campanella, *Bienville's Dilemma*, 110.

their city. New Orleanians had to adapt. Adapting meant rebuilding a stronger city, building levees, and implementing new regulations on levee maintenance, construction materials, and fire prevention. Most of them occurred during the Spanish period.

In addition, as pointed out by professor Gavin Smith,

communities are defined by their physical characteristics and spatial patterns of development, economic interdependencies, social bonds, and sense of place. Disasters disrupt and fracture these constructs. Thus, it is not surprising that the principal impulse after an event is to return to what is familiar—that which defined the community prior to the event—even if pre-event conditions may have been fraught with social injustice, high hazard vulnerability, inadequate housing and public infrastructure, economic fragility, and poor leadership.⁴⁶⁰

In other words, it can be easier to go back to a known environment, no matter how dysfunctional, rather than leaving and experiencing the unknown.

The same conclusion, regarding the relationship between disaster and resilience, seems to apply to the numerous misfortunes New Orleans encountered throughout its young life as a colonial city. Despite the adversity brought upon the colony, local residents displayed resilience over time, they came to constantly rebuild a place that they had invested in and build their lives and families in; a feeling that remains today: many New Orleanians have spent their whole life in the city and could not bear the thought to leaving it. This proved that disasters can

⁴⁶⁰ Gavin Smith, *Planning for Post-Disaster Recovery: A Review of the United States Disaster Assistance Framework* (Island Press, 2012), 3.

actually have an overall positive outcome, boost, and possibly brighten a city's fate. The amount of disasters faced by the city over the years is uncountable, routinely raising the question of whether the city should be rebuilt, moved, or better protected. It is the singularity of that experience, of rebuilding and resilience, which characterizes the Crescent City and which is today transpiring once again in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

As very appropriately defined by Vale and Campanella, the ability for a city to recover is “not due to a mysterious spontaneous force, but because people believe in them. Cities are not only the places in which we live and work and play, but also a demonstration of our ultimate faith in the human project, and in each other.”⁴⁶¹ New Orleans is no exception. It is the faith its residents have in one another and in their city that has enabled long term resilience to date, even in the face of such catastrophic events as the 2005 Hurricane Katrina... But until when?

⁴⁶¹ Lawrence J. Vale and Thomas J. Campanella, “Axioms of Resilience,” in *The Resilient City: How Modern Cities Recover from Disaster*, ed. Lawrence J. Vale and Thomas J. Campanella (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005), 353.

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Tome I:

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1678 p. 1 – 12 mai, St-Germain-en-Laye, lettre de Louis XIV à Cavalier La Salle autorisant la decouverte de la partie occidentale de la Nouvelle-France

1697 p. 71 – anterieure au 10 décembre mémoire sur le projet d'établir une nouvelle colonie en Louisiane (Remonville à Argoud)

1699 p. 147 Moufle au ministre – prise de contact avec les sauvages

1700 p. 241 – 27 fevrier, Paris. envoi d'un mémoire sur l'établissement de la colonie – Juchereau de St. Denis à Monseigneur de la Fourche, Le ministre

1702 p. 365 résumé du jugement de Champigny (utilite d'une installation de Canadiens au Mississippi)

10 octobre 1706 – p. 514 mariage des Français avec des sauvagesses

Bobine 2:

1707 – p. 33 proposition au comte de Pontchartrain pour former une compagnie pour l'établissement de la Louisiane.

1709 – p. 57 possibilité d'établissement pres du lac Pontchartrain

1708 – p. 89 nécessite d'un établissement massif vers le lac Pontchartrain et le Mississippi

1708 – p. 165 - 12 octobre trafic d'esclaves entre Saint Domingue et la Louisiane, concubinage entre Français et Indiennes. De Bienville au ministre

Bobine 3:

Sans date – p. 651 gouverneur La Mothe-Cadillac au ministre, questions concernant la politique

1712 – p. 803 – 12 mai à Bayonne, misère des populations, améliorations à apporter , d'Artaguiette au ministre.

Bobine 4:

1713 – p. 125 – 15 juillet – Fort Louis, Duclos au ministre. Mémoire général sur la Louisiane (géographie, peuplement, pauvreté) 3 premières pages

Bobine 5:

1715 – p. 855 – 18 mai , Illinois. La Mothe Cadillac au ministre, prétentions anglaises sur la Louisiane, nécessité de la conserver, découverte de métaux précieux.

Bobine 6:

1716 – p. 29 memoire sur la Louisiane, historique et mise en valeur

Bobine 8:

1718 – F° 148 - 12 juin, etablissement de La Nouvelle Orléans, Bienville.

Bobine 9:

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1721 - F° 136 – 14 avril, La Nouvelle Orléans, envoi pour approbation d'un plan projeté pour La Nouvelle Orléans – lettre et carte de Pauger aux conseillers du Conseil Souverain de La Nouvelle Orléans.

Bobine 10:

Sans date - F° 302 (vers 1722) état des cartes et plans

1722 - F° 303 – choix de l'emplacement de La Nouvelle Orléans

1722 - F° 321 envoi de plans de La Nouvelle Orléans, choix de son emplacement

1722 - F° 339 30 septembre, La Tour, La Nouvelle Orléans, ouragan sur La Nouvelle Orléans, dégats causés, conduite à tenir pour y porter remède.

1722 - F° 346 carte du fleuve, emplacement de La Nouvelle Orléans

1722 - F° 388 récit d'évènements, effets de l'ouragan

1723 - F° 392 N°2. 24 janvier – destruction des récoltes par l'ouragan, état des travaux.

1723 - F° 400 [v°] 15 janvier – La Tour – effets de l'ouragan du 11 septembre 1722, état des constructions, envoi de divers plans.

1723 - F° 403 [v°] 30 octobre 1722 – Delorme – dégats causés par l'ouragan.

Bobine 11:

1723 – F 190 - 24 avril analyse d'une lettre de Bienville sur la remise du Fort de Pensacola aux Espagnols.

1723 – F 257 – 23 septembre - ile de La Balise, Pauger aux commissaires de la compagnie des Indes - percement d'un canal, construction d'un quai à La Nouvelle Orléans, aménagements de l'embouchure du Mississippi.

Bobine 12:

1724 – F 50 – 29 mai – La Nouvelle Orléans – Pauger aux directeurs de la compagnie des Indes. Heureuse situation de La Nouvelle Orléans, ouvrages faits et à faire: églises, gouvernement... extrait – 6 premières pages

Bobine 13:

1725 – F 422 – Québec - 15 octobre l'évêque de Québec aux directeurs de la compagnie des Indes - désordre des mœurs à La Nouvelle Orléans.

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Bobine 16:

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Bobine 24:

1733 – F165 – 22 juillet – La Nouvelle Orléans – Salmon au ministre - dégats causés par l'ouragan au presbytère. 4p

1733 – F181 – 1er aout - La Nouvelle Orléans – Salmon au ministre - conséquences de l'ouragan du 17 juillet 1733 sur les cultures, découragement des habitants. 11p

1733 – F187 – 1er aout - La Nouvelle Orléans – Salmon au ministre - dégats causés aux barques et aux vaisseaux par le dernier ouragan. 5p

1733 – F198 – 10 aout – La Nouvelle Orléans – Salmon au ministre - conséquences de l'ouragan du 17 juillet 1733. 3p

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Bobine 44:

1753 – F14 N5 – 28 avril – La Nouvelle Orléans – Kerlerec et d'Auberville au ministre - les casernes s'écroulant, il faudra les rebâtir en s'adaptant au climat et au terrain. 6p

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Bobine 55:

1766 – F32 et 85 – 1er août nécessité pour les espagnols (pour lesquels la Louisiane représente un grand intérêt stratégique comme couverture du Mexique, d'en faire une colonie de peuplement et d'accorder la liberté aux Français de commercer dans le pays pour augmenter la population. 4p pas d'auteur inscrit

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Bobine 60:

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Vita

Celine Ugolini is a French native from Corsica, France who spent five years living in New Orleans. In 2006, she obtained her bachelor's degree in English and American studies from Michel de Montaigne Bordeaux 3 University in France. She went on to graduate with a master's degree in Anglophone studies from that same university in 2008. She has been working on a dual Ph.D. from Bordeaux 3 in Anglophone Studies and from the University of New Orleans in Urban History since 2008.

Celine has done extensive research at the Williams Research Center, Tulane Library, and the New Orleans public library and has acquired there a competency in archival perusal and primary text exhumation, an activity which has contributed to her taste and interest in the past of New Orleans. Celine is a native speaker of French and her expertise in that language has made it possible for her to analyse or even decipher the memoirs of French founding fathers, since no other translations exist to date.

She has traveled extensively to this day, either to her family home in Corsica and in France, or to many locations in the south of the USA, to Mexico, and other countries that have enabled her to broaden her horizons and experience different cultures. The exposure to these diverse cultures and environments has triggered a keen interest in human interaction and mores. She intends to continue historical research and stay in the academic world, in the hope to join a higher education institution and teach.

Celine has a son, Jackson Christopher, born in New Orleans on October 30, 2012. She used to live with her son and his father in the Marigny neighbourhood of the city. The three of them have now relocated to Corsica, France, where most of her family is settled.