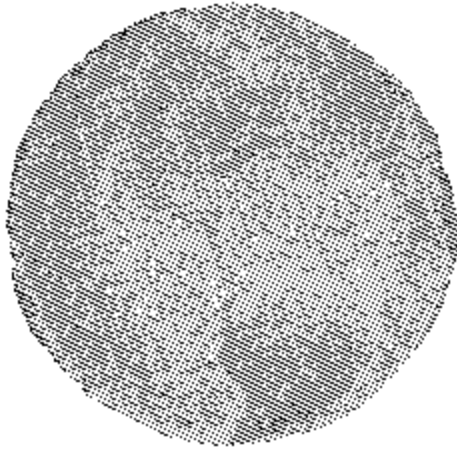


1 Situation



An aerial perspective sees the greater New Orleans metropolitan area. The river created New Orleans, gave settlers to its banks, gave rise to industries, and has served the city for centuries. *by Sam R. Sutton, The History Channel*

Casual and veteran observers of New Orleans may cite the Mississippi River as the premier geographical circumstance defining the Crescent City. They are correct. But Baton Rouge and Memphis are also on the river and, though interesting and historical in their own regard, lack the cultural singularity of New Orleans. The premier geographical circumstance that has earned New Orleans its various reputations, forming and affecting it in ways physical, economic, and cultural, is its situation on the Mississippi *nearest the river's mouth*, closest to the Gulf of Mexico and the greater water bodies that communicate with the rest of the world. It is one of those cities that must exist, an inevitable¹ metropolis that guards the gate between the richest valley on Earth and the worldwide demand for its resources, between millions of people in the American heartland and the global market that both supplies their economic demands and consumes the fruits of their productivity. New Orleans' situation makes it both a riverport and a seaport, inwardly impressionable via the river and the vast hinterland it drains and outwardly influenced via the sea and the scores of nations it touches. In this regard, New Orleans' geographical situation differs from most other American ports, which generally serve either a river or an ocean/gulf/sea/lake, but not both on large and roughly equal scales.²



New Orleans' strategic geographical situation—near the mouth of a great river, draining a vast and fertile basin, and convenient to navigation from the rest of the world—underlies much of the city's history and character. *The International Relations Committee of International House, "New Orleans, World Trade Center" (ca. 1965)*

It also differs in the magnitude of its river—the 2,340-mile-long Mississippi drains 600,000 cubic feet of water per second from a 1,125,910-square-mile watershed interspersed with 14,500 miles of navigable waterways—and in the isolation of its perch, where for over a century it had little of the trade competition that characterized Eastern Seaboard ports. "All ports, of course, enjoy a certain worldly quality that comes from the constant mingling of products and

people from far-off places," wrote Peirce Lewis in 1976, but "New Orleans is not even ordinary as a port. . . . The port of New Orleans is big—ranking second only to New York in volume and value of cargo handled—[but unlike New York], which does a good many things besides handling cargo, New Orleans embraces marine commerce with the same single-minded enthusiasm as Detroit makes automobiles . . . thoroughly relishing her bigamous marriage to the river and the ocean."³ New Orleans' keystone geographical situation between the North American interior and the southern seas affected it in a manner so fundamental that many of the city's defining traits stem from it in some manner or another. To characterize the role of geography in the development of New Orleans, we begin by investigating the geological origins of this geographical situation, the historical events that led to the siting of New Orleans *in* this situation, and the myriad consequences *of* this situation.

"By repeated admeasurement upon the best constructed maps, the Mississippi river and its tributary streams drain more than 1,400,000 square miles. If this expanse was peopled [by] about 60 persons to each square mile, the aggregate would be 84,000,000. . . . At a period not more than two centuries distant, more than 100,000,000 of human beings will send the surplus fruits of their labour to New-Orleans."

—William Darby (as quoted by Paxton, 1822, 32)

1. I use "inevitable" with caution. As we shall see, a number of other sites could have hosted New Orleans; moreover, the concept of inevitability in this context gives perhaps too much credit to geography and too little to man in the siting of a city. Nevertheless, the junction of a great river with the sea provides a strong incentive for the founding of an important settlement in the general vicinity. For further thoughts on this subject, see Kidder, 9-21.

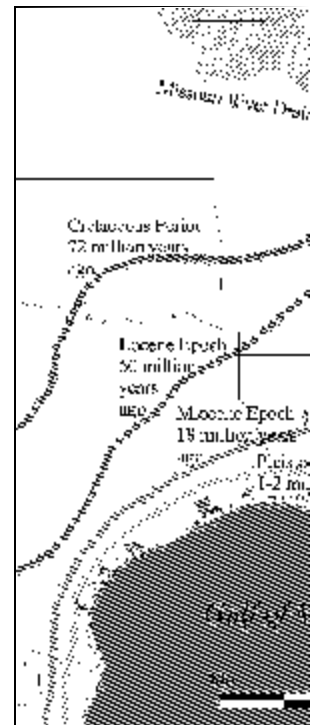
2. On a continental scale, Montreal and Québec probably come closest to sharing New Orleans' river/sea juxtaposition; not coincidentally, the three cities share a common cultural heritage. One writer, Oliver Evans, observed that New Orleans resembled a cross between Québec and Havana. For a substantial comparative review, see Hero.

3. Lewis, 7. Since Dr. Lewis penned these words, petroleum and tourism rose to greater importance in the local economy, but not yet to the

Geological Origins of N

New Orleans was established the city a current life span o span—72 million years ago—t indistinct watery spot far off t in the Cretaceous Period traced tuated by a series of folds in t hundred miles.⁴ The largest of Mississippi Valley to Cairo, indentation drained sediment-l than its natural subsidence. Gr were replaced by the sedimen deposited along the margins of million years ago, or 60,000 t southeastern United States for York.⁶ At this point, howeve component of the hydrosphere

Around 6,000 New Orleans coastline traversed the "Florid Orleans' location. This coasta sands, and gravel—gradually | Mississippi Embayment (fully



Historic coastlines of the pres since the Cretaceous Period, 7

level of the port. The petroleum sector have steadily and significantly increase

4. Hunt, 209-19.

5. Sibley, 20.

6. Hunt, 218, and Lower Mississippi R

of the Gulf Coast into a profoundly dynamic geological region, one that man would exploit as a strategic location for a city and struggle to maintain against the forces of nature. The agent of transformation was the vast ice sheet advancing, melting, depositing, and gouging the upper half of the North American continent. Glaciation reached as far south as present-day Cairo, Illinois, not coincidentally the northern tip of the Mississippi Embayment and later the lower Mississippi Valley. The ice sheet blocked old drainage basins and forced its melting water to seek new paths to the sea; what is now the Missouri River provided one such path, the Ohio River another. These two rivers conflowed near Cairo to form the rapidly developing and suddenly enlarged Mississippi River system. Waters of the Mississippi, laden with sediment once embedded in the glaciers, followed the gradient towards the Gulf of Mexico, where the load would be deposited to form the precarious deltaic plain that would eventually host New Orleans. Steamy, silty New Orleans, hundreds of miles from glaciated terrain and devoid of a single pebble, is an offspring of the Ice Age.

The ice sheets impacted the Gulf Coast not only by creating the Mississippi River and loading it with sediments, but also by fluctuating the level of the sea nine times throughout the Pleistocene Epoch, from 2 million years ago to the end of the Ice Age, 10,000 years ago. When the ice melted, sea level rose; when global temperatures chilled and the glaciers advanced, sea level dropped. During times of glacial augmentation, gulf waters dropped as low as 450 feet below present levels. It was during these times that New Orleans' future site at 30° north 90° west emerged from the hydrosphere (a few hundred feet above sea level) and joined the lithosphere—temporarily. But its location would have been of little geographical value to man: the river and gulf waters, two key reasons for the siting of the city, converged far south of this site, near the Continental Shelf.

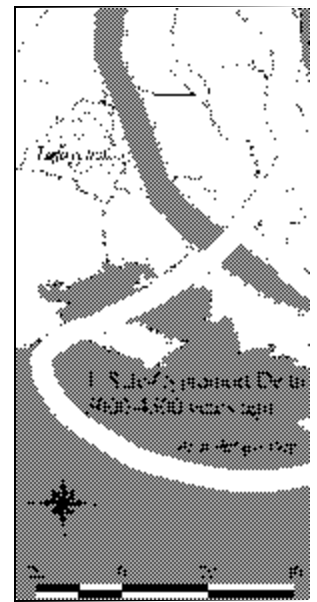
Ten thousand years ago—less than thirty-five New Orleans life spans—marked the end of the Ice Age, the beginning of the Recent Epoch in geological time, and the commencement of hyperactive geomorphological processes in what is now southeastern Louisiana.⁷ The melting of the ice sheets on a massive scale put three major processes in overdrive: increased flow in the Mississippi River, increased sediment load in the flow, and a rising sea level. The rising sea level would push the coastline inland, the increased sediment load in the river would form more deltaic lands faster near the mouth the river, and the increased flow in the river would deliver more load from the interior to the coast.

By 5,000 years ago, New Orleans' site was once again flooded by rising gulf waters, forming a coastline along the southern shore of not-yet-formed Lake Pontchartrain.⁸ At this time the local land-building agent, the Mississippi River, emptied its muddy waters a hundred miles to the west, in the Salé-Cypremort Delta southeast of Lafayette, Louisiana.⁹ A thousand years later, gulf water levels rose an additional forty feet to their present level, forming a bay (Pontchartrain Embayment) that would eventually become Lake Pontchartrain.

Cupping the southeastern quadrant of this bay was a sandbar, formed and nudged along by longshore currents, that currently underlies the Interstate 10 corridor from Hancock County in Mississippi to City Park in New Orleans. This barrier spit (Pine Island Trend)¹⁰ was soon smothered by Midwestern topsoil, the first such land-building in this area during the Recent Epoch, as the Mississippi changed courses and formed the Cocodrie Delta directly upon New Orleans' future site. For a millennium (4,500 to 3,500 years ago), this delta established the nexus between the Mississippi River and the Gulf of Mexico, the fundamental premise for the future city of New Orleans.

But the lower Mississippi River is a tumultuous, roiling current flowing upon a broad, flat, malleable basin (meander belt), indicating that channel changes are an inevitable part of the river's dynamics. Around 1500 B.C., the Mississippi jumped channels toward the west and emptied into the gulf near present-day Houma (Teche Delta) for the next 700-1,000 years. Then it acquired its current channel and formed the St. Bernard Delta for the next millennium (roughly 2,600-1,500 years ago), building upon lands created during the days of the Cocodrie Delta in Orleans and neighboring parishes while creating the remote marshlands of eastern St. Bernard Parish.

About A.D. 500, three New Orleans life spans ago, the river diverted near Donaldsonville to form the twin lobes of the Lafourche Delta; a few centuries later, a second delta developed below New Orleans' future site, near Pointe a la Hache (Plaquemines Delta). For about 400 years, almost up to historical times, the lower Mississippi diverted in these two directions. The diversion near Donaldsonville was still prominent enough in 1699 for Pierre Le Moyne, sieur d'Iberville to name the distributary *Lafourche*, "the fork,"¹¹ a name that remains today. But by this time, in fact at the time of Columbus's discovery of the New World, the main flow



Deltas of the Mississippi River, and major cities. Darkest channel occurred at the future site of New Orleans based on U.S. Army Corps of Engineers maps.

of the Mississippi returned to its northern Balize Delta, 100 miles south of New Orleans.

In the centuries since, the river's meandering ways and the inadvertent hand of man have altered the river's course. That second millennium, but a technicality, allowed the deprivation of its mouth. The constructed the Old River Control Basin, maintaining the Mississippi River's approved rate of flow.¹² With the river's meandering ways and the inadvertent hand of man, the Mississippi's rambles and deposits in southeastern Louisiana, characterizing the river and its distributaries, these natural levees—the only wetlands (swamps), open wetlands, bays, and waterways.

Hence through this geological flailing river, was formed the recognized the criticality of the Gulf Coast and Caribbean, identifying a key geographical site selection is a

7. In *Roadside Geology of Louisiana* (49), Darwin Spearing describes southeastern Louisiana as "one of the most dynamic landscapes in the world," accentuating "human interaction with the forces of nature as perhaps no other place can, not even California with its earthquakes." The region's relentless geological forces "create a drama on a scale unmatched in virtually any other natural environment."

8. Snowden, Ward, and Studlick, 5-7.

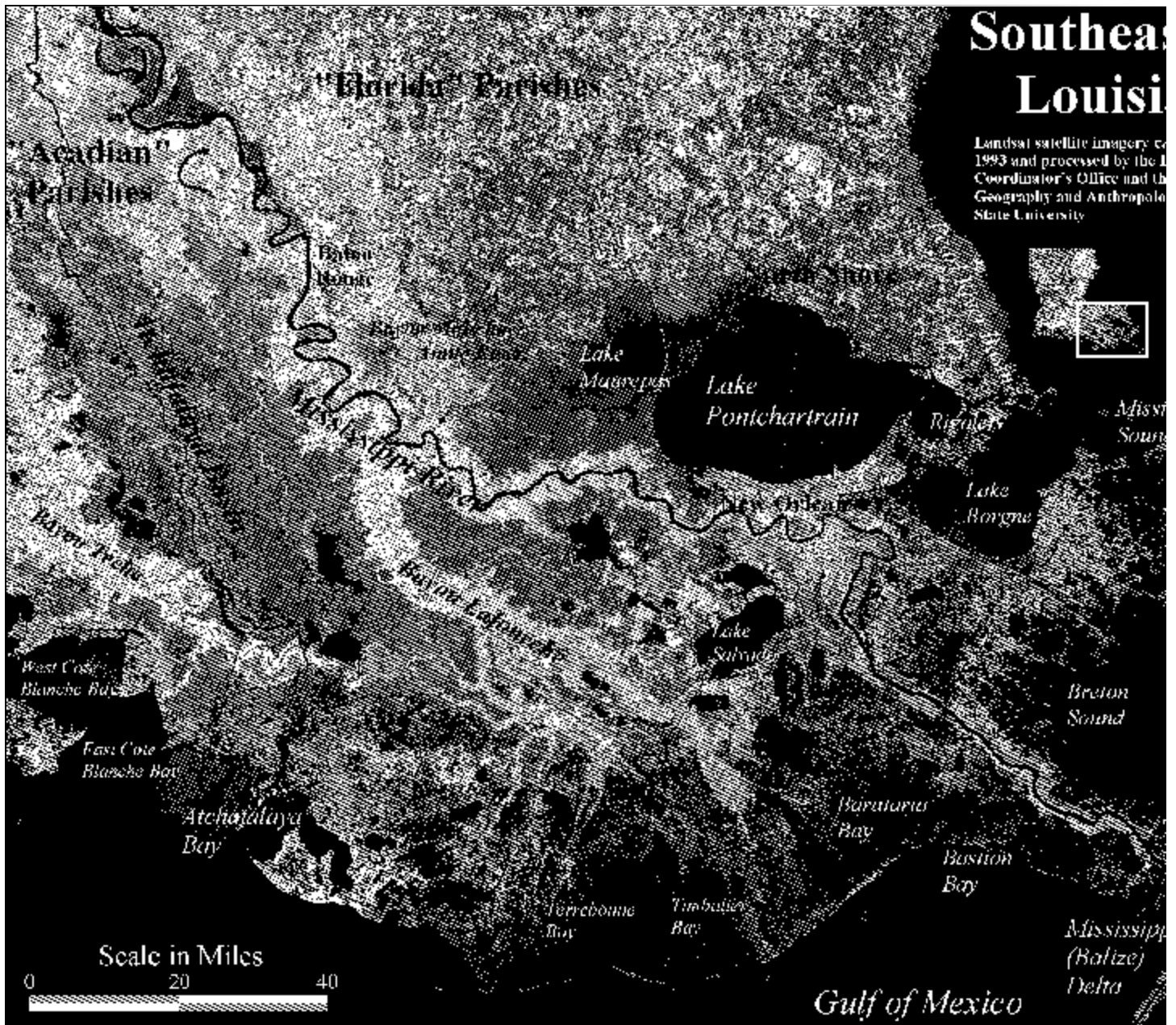
9. Kolb and Van Lopik, 120, as quoted and interpreted by Snowden, Ward, and Studlick and Kniffen and Hilliard.

10. Spearing, 59-61.

11. Newton, 44-47.

12. See John McPhee's classic essay, "The River."

13. See Newton, 44-45, for a discussion of how the square miles measures the general area of the delta.



surrounding region and adjacent features of a place, observed at a distance and considered in geographical context; *site* is the actual terrain chosen for development, the specific location of the city proper.¹⁵ The distinction is one of scale: situation is to site what neighborhood is to house or what climate is to weather. Selecting a site for the city that would be named *La Nouvelle Orléans* within the outstanding geographical situation where the

menced an epic 2,000-mile or Arizona, and northern Mexico, de Vaca's great contribution w

14. "Memoir of M. Cavalier de La Salle" (ca. 1684) and "Memoir of the Sieur de La Salle Reporting to Monseigneur de Seignelay" (ca. 1684), as reproduced in Falconer, 3 and 21 of appendix. These memoirs recount Colbert's call for a French port in the Gulf of Mexico, to which La Salle responded with the recommendation of a settlement on the lower Mississippi—among the first official recognitions of the strategic geography of this region and the importance of a colony to control it.

15. Jordan and Rowntree, 366, and Lev
16. Ogg, 9-10; Rivera Novo and Martí
17. Ogg, 16.
18. *Ibid.*, 13-21.
19. Sauer, *Sixteenth Century North Am*

of the geography of sixteenth-century North America as well as the first descriptions of the Mississippi River delta and adjacent formations. Cabéza de Vaca's reports refueled Spanish interest in the exploration of the North American interior and motivated Hernando de Soto, a former comrade of Peruvian *conquistador* Francisco Pizarro, to launch a gold- and empire-seeking expedition to the region.

De Soto and his 600 soldiers landed near present-day Tampa, Florida in May 1539 and proceeded to explore a circuitous 4,000-mile route through the coastal plain, piedmont, and Appalachian region of the future American South. The expedition came upon the Mississippi River near modern-day Memphis in May 1541, making them the first Europeans to sight and explore the inland channel of the river and first to recognize its "magnitude and importance."²⁰ The arduous journey cost the expedition over 40 percent of its men, including De Soto, who died probably near present-day Vidalia, Louisiana and was interred in the Mississippi. The remnants of the expedition, under the rule of Luis de Moscoso, headed overland toward Texas then returned to the Mississippi, floating down the river in July 1543 and possibly passing the future site of New Orleans during the second week of that month. (A 1544 map resulting from the expedition depicts a *Río del Espíritu Santo* that resembles the Mississippi in size and importance but not in shape and form, leading some to believe that the expedition took the Atchafalaya River or other fork to the gulf.²¹ If this is true, then no Spaniard nor any other European left documented evidence of sighting the future New Orleans region in the sixteenth century or earlier.)

The wild ride of the 322 survivors of the De Soto expedition in seven rough-hewn vessels, at times under severe Indian attack as they sailed down the untamed Mississippi and escaped, ragged and starved, to Tampico, Mexico,²² marked the ignominious departure of the Spanish from the Mississippi Valley for centuries to come. They sought not settlement and colonization but power and riches; finding none, they left no permanent mark. How different the region's history would be if the Spanish came with different motives. Pineda, Narváez, Cabéza de Vaca, De Soto, and their men did, however, reveal the region's geography to the Western world, and while these revelations languished on maps and documents for decades, the future New Orleans region and the lower Mississippi Valley persisted and evolved for the final century and a half of its primeval state.

The Arrival of the French

The French in seventeenth-century North America also sought riches, but, invested as they were in the colonies of New France, pursued a means—trade routes and empire—towards that end, not the end alone. Throughout the middle years of the 1600s, rumors circulated among the French in Canada of a "great water" to the west, an equivalent to the St. Lawrence River that would give them claim to distant lands and trade access possibly to the Orient. Explorations of the Great Lakes region in the mid-seventeenth century and the discovery of the upper Mississippi by Jacques Marquette and Louis Joliet (1673) helped demystify the western frontier and put to rest the notion of a nearby Pacific Ocean, but no French explorer had yet confirmed the connection between the upper Mississippi and the Gulf of Mexico and the implications of such a nexus.

René-Robert Cavelier, sieur de La Salle, an ambitious young Norman who migrated to New France in 1666, recognized the likelihood and importance of this connection and set out in 1682 to explore the full length of the River Colbert (Mississippi) and expand the French empire. His name for the river honors Jean Baptiste Colbert, a financial minister for Louis XIV who in 1678 foresaw the importance "for the glory and service of the King to discover a port for his vessels in the Gulf of Mexico,"²³ one of the first documented visions of the city that would become New Orleans. La Salle, his chief lieutenant Henri de Tonti (Henry de Tonty), and their crew sailed down the Mississippi and past New Orleans' future site²⁴ in the winter and early spring of 1682;

upon reaching the delta on Ap his king, Louis XIV. After ov River was finally fully proven, city of New Orleans.

Upon returning to France, leagues²⁵ above the mouth of disposition of the savages," fe tunity to "harass the Spaniards France's exertions in this regio fortification would also serve Mexico, storing supplies, hart Louisiana.²⁸ In selling the col port or two [here] would make of a settlement on the lower M vulnerable to attack from "as : post, established towards the lc 800 leagues from north to sout the sea through the mouth of ti leagues."³⁰ La Salle's concep Rouge, perhaps at the Bayoug

La Salle returned to France dently set out in 1684 with gre the mouth of the great river. V some historians, though La S labyrinth of the delta region ol perate search for the river tha Texas. Indeed, in the lower Mi foggy day can spell the differe North America's greatest river.

The alternate hypothesis ca the mouth of the Mississippi v Spanish in Mexico. La Salle's location of its lower channel a ers.³² In any case, the expedit mutinous crew members, and i

20. Ogg, 27-28, 44.

21. Kniffen and Hilliard, 116.

22. Hudson, 387-97. Ogg put the number of the surviving crew at 372.

23. "Memoir of the Sieur de La Salle," as reproduced in Falconer, 21 of appendix.

24. According to historian Villiers du Terrage (161), La Salle may have first beheld the future site of New Orleans around March 31-April 2, 1682, when his men came upon a recently destroyed Tangibaho (*sic*) village in Quinipissas territory, situated upon a portage that was probably associated with Bayou St. John.

25. A league at that time measured betw

26. "Memoir of M. Cavelier de La Sall

27. The original communication from l

stated that "there is nothing we have mc

etrate to Mexico" (emphasis added). "I

reproduced in Falconer, 18 of appendix

28. "Memoir of the Sieur de La Salle,"

29. Ibid., "Memoir of M. Cavelier de L

30. Ibid., "Memoir of the Sieur de La S

31. McWilliams, "Iberville," 127-40. T

These features are extrusions of mud pi

32. De Vorse, 5-23.

the Fort St. Luis they had founded about a hundred miles southwest of present-day Houston. (Incredibly, La Salle's ship, the *Belle*, was discovered in Matagorda Bay in 1995; a year later, the Fort St. Luis site was finally found at a ranch near Victoria, Texas, about fifteen miles from the shipwreck.)

We can only hypothesize about La Salle's motives and speculate on the city he might have founded on the Mississippi. But his legacy was significant:³³ first to explore the entire Mississippi River, claimer of its vast basin for France, and first true believer in the criticality of controlling the North American hinterland through a settlement near the mouth of the river.³⁴ In effect, La Salle executed the phase-one consideration in the positioning of the city that would be New Orleans: identification of a key geographical situation.

La Salle's vision might have died had it not been for his colleagues and competitors, who kept the issue of Mississippi River/Gulf of Mexico exploration in front of the French government. Chief among them was La Salle's friend and lieutenant, Henri de Tonti, the Italian nobleman in service of France who accompanied him on the 1682 expedition and searched for him in 1686. During this fruitless search, Tonti formed important alliances with the natives along the Mississippi, established a post upriver, and left a letter for La Salle with the Bayougoulas (Quinipissas) in the hope that it would someday find him. Tonti later advocated to the French court "the completion of the discovery of the late M. de La Salle,"³⁵ recognizing, like La Salle, the importance of a settlement on the lower Mississippi for ship building and harboring, communication with the Gulf of Mexico, conquest of Mexican silver mines, agriculture, and fur trading—a business of personal interest to Tonti. Throughout the 1690s, Tonti and other prominent Frenchmen warned their government about the English threat to the Mississippi River from the gulf, the Spanish threat from Texas and Florida,³⁶ and other perils and lost opportunities in delaying the French settlement of Louisiana.

It was not until 1697 that the French government came around and began to actively pursue the exploration and colonization of Louisiana. In that year, Tonti's memoirs were published, representing "the immediate expression of the growing interest which the occupation of Louisiana aroused."³⁷ Gabriel Argoud, a Paris lawyer in the employ of the Court, authored an influential plan to colonize Louisiana, alluding to the English threats of invasion from the south and colonial settlement from the north. The plan included commercial aspects offered by Antoine Alexandre de Rémonville, ship owner and former explorer of the upper Mississippi, who foresaw the commercial viability of a Louisiana enterprise and participated in the effort to convince the government to colonize. Scientific, patriotic, and religious elements in French society also began to direct their attention to Louisiana.³⁸

France's worries of foreign intervention were further exacerbated that same year by the publication in Utrecht of Father Louis Hennepin's *A New Discovery of a Vast Country in America*, a voyage narrative of the upper Mississippi first published under the title *Description of Louisiana* in France in 1683, which urged William of Orange to take possession of Louisiana.³⁹ A cessation of hostilities between England and France (King William's War) in 1697 and the growing rivalry of the old foes in the New World returned the French government's attention to colonial matters. With an heirless Carlos II near death in Spain, Louis XIV envisioned a potential reshuffling of the colonial landscape and sought to position France strategically, between the English on the Atlantic seaboard and the Spanish in Mexico.⁴⁰ That strategic position was at the mouth of the Mississippi, and the message was increasingly clear: *seize it or lose it*. Minister of Marine (Navy) Louis

33. Giraud, vol. 1, 3-4. Giraud states that "the expeditions of La Salle, preceding as they did the decisive intervention of France in the Mississippi Basin by only ten years, were the determining factor in establishing a firm foothold there."

34. Edwin Adams Davis (29-30) offers an alternate interpretation: "La Salle deserves a place with the great French colonial explorers . . . but for his expedition to the mouth of the Mississippi he should be placed as just another explorer along with his Spanish predecessors." He cites a Spanish diplomat who in 1818 complained to the French government that "La Salle did nothing more than traverse . . . through territories which, although included in the dominions of the Crown of Spain, were still desert, and without forts or garrisons to check the incursions of that French adventurer; and that nothing resulted from them."

35. Letter of Henri de Tonti, as quoted by Dufour, *Ten Flags in the Wind*, 29, and Giraud, vol. 1, 10.

36. The Spanish were greatly alarmed by La Salle's claims and sent a number of expeditions from 1686 to 1693 to gain back the Mississippi Valley advantage. Two of these expeditions—one by Juan Jordán de Reina and another by Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora—left documentary evidence of a "palisade" that kept them from entering the *Rio de la Palizada* (Mississippi River). According to one researcher, this barrier comprised not a jam of trees and logs but a series of "mud lumps," extrusions of mud pushed to the surface by the pressure of compacting sediments, a geomorphological peculiarity of the delta region. Once again, the restless geography of the lower Mississippi changed the course of history: had the Spanish found their way around this obstacle, "they might have held not only the lower valley but much of the southern area of North America east of the river for the next seventy years or even longer" (McWilliams, "Iberville," 127-32).

37. Giraud, vol. 1, 19-20.

38. *Ibid.*, 15-20.

39. Brasseaux, "The Image of Louisiana," 153-54; Giraud, vol. 1, 15; and Cross, v-xv.

40. Jerah Johnson, 28-29.

Phélypeaux, Count de Pontchartrain, sieur d'Iberville, a thir against the English in the recei site that can be defended with the phase-two consideration in actual site within the key geog

Enter the Le Moyne Br

Iberville, his teenaged brother, island (now Ship Island) off th for the elusive mouth of the M tually the main channel of the feast they observed that day. E crew discovered among the Quinipissas by Henri de Tonti-

While seeking this importa gained crucial knowledge (cou ic plain, naming features along Gulf Coast via the present Pontchartrain-Rigolets-Lake B Pontchartrain, marking the fut described this humble portage ers and the North American in

The Indian who accomp bay, where the Indian t fine path, where we fou portage. This Indian, ou of the trail and the othe

(This "fine path" followed a sl road in New Orleans and the and the Gulf of Mexico at the shortcuts would allow explorer the Gulf Coast in less time, sl entirely, to the indigenous peo

After the explorations, Ibe survey, established in early A first tangible French effort to c

41. Tennant S. McWilliams, as quoted i recently acquired a hitherto-unknown r his appointment to Louisiana but had y sons, a strategic military advantage in t Iberville to occupy Louisiana (Arnold, 42. McWilliams, "Iberville," 138. Iber a lucky break that evaded his predecess less "rocks" (probably a combination Mississippi a few years earlier. Iberville River) and was thus convinced that he l 43. "In Louisiana, the dominant usage ing waterways along a route that provic we will use the term *portage* to reflect 44. Brasseaux, *A Comparative View of* 45. Wilson, "Colonial Fortifications," 3



This photograph shows the vicinity of the Indians' landing site on Bayou St. John, near present-day Bell Street. "The bay" that Iberville mentioned would be called Lake Pontchartrain, "this river" was the Mississippi, the "fine path" would become Bayou Road, and the "other" end of the trail would become the original city of New Orleans, now the French Quarter. *Photograph by author, 2000*



First capital of French Louisiana. This historical marker and replica bridge as the location of this end-day bridge, somewhere else.

this site was one of last resort; it had an adequate channel and provided some protection from storms but lacked a great river, good soils, and even drinking water. It would suffice for now. The fort built, Iberville set sail for France in early May to report to his superiors, leaving Bienville chief lieutenant of the nascent colony.

During the next year, with Iberville in France for some months and the colony under development, Bienville and his men made continued use of the Bayou St. John portage for sojourns between the Gulf Coast and the Mississippi River. The lordly youth was apparently impressed with the strategic and convenient situation of this area, for he would later found a city here and govern it for many years. But immediate threats loomed. On September 15, 1699 (August 3, according to Tonti), while sailing the lower river, Bienville encountered a shocking sight: an English frigate, the *Carolina Galley*, heading straight into French Louisiana on a mission of colonization. Bienville famously bluffed the English captain, Louis Bond, into believing that the French would forcibly expel them from the region; the departure of the vessel gave English Turn, the last great meander of the Mississippi, its name.

The incident convinced Iberville,⁴⁶ who returned in January 1700, that while coastal Fort Maurepas had its advantages, it neither guarded nor exploited the true geographical prize of the region—the Mississippi River—from English invasion and other considerations. He sent his brother to select a site for a riverside fort, which Bienville located on the east bank about fifty miles above the delta, where the Rivière aux Chênes neared the Mississippi, probably between the present-day towns of Burbridge and Phoenix.⁴⁷ Bienville probably selected this site because the Rivière aux Chênes provided a backdoor shortcut to the gulf and because the slight natural-levee crest was said by an Indian to be safe from flooding.

Fort de Mississippi (later named Fort de la Boulaye, or Boulaix), really a crude blockhouse erected in matter of days in February 1700, was the first European establishment within the current boundaries of Louisiana. It marked the French realization of the need of a garrison on the Mississippi, and provided the young Bienville with his first experience in site selection in the challenging conditions of the lower Mississippi. (The site proved problematic, prone to floods and lacking in pure fresh water because of tidal influences.) For the next few months, before again returning to France in late May 1700, Iberville resumed exploration of the Mississippi, reaching the Natchez region and its tangential Red River into Spanish territory, then returning to the Gulf Coast and heading to Mobile Bay, all the while making and renewing contact with various Indian tribes.

46. Sauvole, commandant of the Post of Biloxi in Iberville's absence, recorded in his journal (1699-1701). "The meeting of the English frigate in the Mississippi has made [Iberville] decide to keep all peoples from the river, so that no one could take it by force. . . . He instructed me to go find a proper place to change the colony and to put it half way up to the portage which is twenty-two leagues lower than the Bayogoulas [sic], in a river of calm water that I found to have enough current." According to Jay Higginbotham, translator and editor of the journal, Sauvole is referring to the future New Orleans area as the optimal location for Iberville's new river fort. Although this is not entirely clear in the journal, the river fort (Fort de Mississippi) was eventually located downriver, near Phoenix. Sauvole later makes a clearer reference to the future New Orleans area: "We have discovered a land which is not inundated. It is about ten leagues above [Fort de Mississippi]. There are seven to eight cabins of savages at the present time. One can communicate there by the great lake; but it is not well to locate men there, because of its small extent; it is a quarter of a league from the Miciscipi." Sauvole is not describing the future site of the French Quarter but the area where Bayou St. John meets the uplands of the Metairie/Gentilly distributary, which is indeed "small" in extent. Higginbotham, *The Journal of Sauvole*, 38, 54.

47. Artifacts possibly from the old fort (actually a two-story blockhouse with outlying structures) were found in the 1930s after the Gravolet Canal was excavated, but research in the 1980s suggested that this may not have been the exact site. U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, *Final Report of Cultural Resource Investigations*, C-1-4.



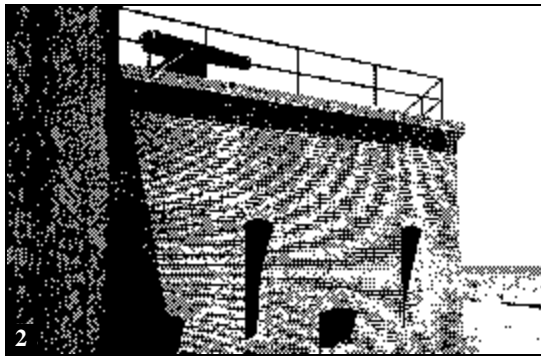
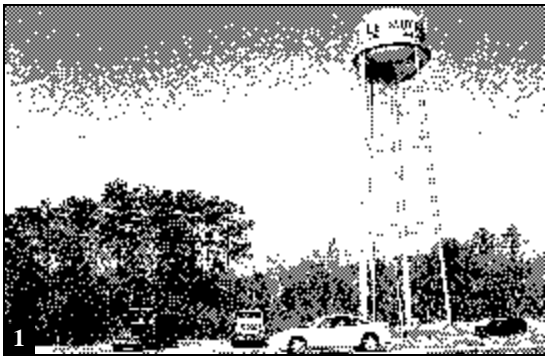
At this bend in the Mississippi (Fort de la Boulaye), founded state of Louisiana, reflected France that New Orleans would play a

The dawn of the eighteenth century of Louisiana. The king and other disappointment at the progress of XIV to the Spanish throne (Philip eventually triggering the War of 1763) securing the Gulf Coast against

Iberville sought to collaborate. The rejection of the idea led Iberville on the Mississippi and the alliance he and his brother established. The colonial government was transferred to a permanent colony, and located about fifteen miles up the Mississippi near the tiny present-day town of Mobile would emerge as the first

Meanwhile, Fort de Mississippi to Bienville, whom he designed

48. Descendants of these families formed



1. Behind this aptly named Le Moyne Water System tower is Twenty-Seven-Mile Bluff, site of Fort Louis de la Mobile (1702), located about fifteen miles up the Mobile River from present-day Mobile near the tiny community of Axis, Alabama. It was to this riverside site—described as the “Jamestown” of French Louisiana—that Iberville moved the colonial capital from Fort Maurepas (present-day Ocean Springs, Mississippi) in 1702. The actual site was discovered in 1989 and has since been under archeological excavation by the University of South Alabama.
- 2-3. Sentinel of Mobile Bay, Dauphin Island played a key role as port and gateway to the Louisiana colony during the early French years and served as headquarters for its governor in the 1710s, before New Orleans was cleared out of the forest. Its historical criticality is reflected in the Civil War-era Fort Gaines. Today, the island attracts sportsmen, tourists, and retirees.

In 1711, Bienville relocated Fort Louis de la Mobile to a more commanding and strategic position on Mobile Bay, site of present-day Mobile. It was a good move: Mobile has prospered by the bay for nearly three centuries, despite numerous changes of government during the first half of its history. Mobilians cringe when they hear their city described as “a small version of New Orleans,” but the two cities exhibit undeniable parallels in their history, geography, culture, and built environments, with most differences related to the disparate sizes of their hinterlands.

4. Southwestern city-limit marker on Government Street in downtown Mobile.
- 5-6. Historic houses in downtown Mobile with Mobile Bay in the background.
7. Barton Academy, designed by James Gallier, Sr., in a style very similar to his famous St. Charles Hotel (1837-51) on St. Charles Avenue in New Orleans.
8. Antebellum townhouse like hundreds in New Orleans.
9. Port facilities on Mobile Bay seen from the convention center.
10. Montage of historic and modern buildings, of renovation and ruin, all common sights in both Mobile and New Orleans.
11. Three centuries of Mobile architecture. *Photographs by author, 1999*



Pontchartrain.⁴⁹ The advice came from Rémonville, the Illinois-country explorer whose knowledge of the coastal region predated the Le Moyne brothers' initial visit. Rémonville wrote on August 6, 1702:

The fort which was in [*sic*] the Mississippi River . . . should be transferred eleven leagues higher, to the eastward, in a space of land twelve leagues long and two leagues wide (at barely a quarter of a league from the Mississippi, which is very fine) beyond the insulting reach of floods and near a small river [Bayou St. John]. The latter flows into Lake Pontchartrain and, by means of the canal [probably the Rigolets or Chef Menteur Pass.] . . . joins the sea about a dozen leagues from Mobile. This will make communications much shorter and easier than by sea.⁵⁰

Rémonville is of course describing the New Orleans area and its strategic attributes. Over the next two decades, he would champion the exploitation of the Bayou St. John portage as a site for a settlement. One might ask why did Iberville not relocate the main colony from Biloxi directly to this attractive site on the Mississippi, rather than to Mobile. The answer probably lay in Iberville's concerns regarding the spread of the English along the Atlantic Coast and into the interior and Gulf Coast. Iberville's plan "called for the French to evolve a strong position on the Mississippi, remove themselves from the unimportant position of Biloxi Bay to the far more strategic Mobile Bay-Mobile River area, and, at the same time, urge his government to persuade the Spaniards to cede Pensacola to France," according to historian Glenn R. Conrad. "[Thus] three major Gulf portals to the interior of the present United States would be securely sealed to English supplies and communications."⁵¹ With Fort de Mississippi providing as least *some* presence on the Mississippi, Iberville's immediate concern was to secure the valuable and vulnerable Mobile Bay, hence the Biloxi colony was moved there. Iberville probably passed his vision of a Mississippi stronghold on to his brother Bienville, who would act on it with resolution in later years.

Outposts in the Wilderness

At this time (ca. 1702) there were about 140 subjects of the French crown—mostly Canadians, many sailors, soldiers, craftsmen, and freebooters from the mother country and Saint-Domingue and some *coureurs de bois* from the upper Mississippi—strewn out between the forts on Mobile Bay and the Mississippi River. Iberville lamented the lack of colonizers, especially families that would settle down and cultivate the land, and complained that the French lacked the "colonizing spirit" that he witnessed in the English.⁵² Despite the importation of marriageable French women to Mobile in 1704, the population hardly grew over the next four years, due in large part to the debilitating effects of the War of the Spanish Succession on France and the inherent risks to life in a subtropical wilderness.

Among the casualties were Henri de Tonti, who died of yellow fever in Mobile in 1704, and Iberville, who succumbed to the same disease while on war-related duties in Havana two years later. "Louisiana thus lost its principal guiding force" and suffered in isolation for the next few years, having been visited by a mere three supply ships from 1706 to 1711.⁵³ During these difficult times Bienville was forced to abandon Fort de Mississippi (1707) and relocate Mobile to its present-day location (1711), because of limited resources and poor site selection.

An effort to encourage agricultural production led to the granting of land concessions at Bayou St. John⁵⁴ to some Mobile colonists in 1708, the first development by Europeans in the future New Orleans area. These early long-lot plantations, which would come to dominate the Louisiana landscape for centuries, fronted the bayou by 2.5 to 4 arpents and extended back by 36 to 40 arpents along the natural levees of the now-extinct bayous of Metairie and Gentilly (Sauvage).⁵⁵ (A linear arpent measures about 192 English feet. See page 85 for a detailed discussion of the unit *arpent*.) The pioneers' wheat crop at Bayou St. John proved to be yet another disappointment, but the venture helped put the site "on the map," literally and figuratively, throughout the 1710s.

49. Giraud, vol. 1, 38-47.

50. M. de Rémonville's *Historical Letter Concerning the Mississippi*, as quoted by Villiers du Terrage, 166.

51. Conrad, 27.

52. Giraud, vol. 1, 91-97.

53. *Ibid.*, 109-10.

54. This settlement is sometimes (confusingly) referred to as Bilochy, or Biloxi, for the Indian tribe that lived there since 1700. The historic effort in 1708 to settle Bayou St. John was preceded eight years earlier by very meager attempts by Iberville and one Father du Ru to clear land and farm in this same area; both failed to get off the ground and made no lasting impact (Giraud, vol. 1, 190, 99, and Freiberg, 33).

55. Ekberg, *French Roots in the Illinois Country*, 22, and Freiberg, 29-30.

Despite these failures, Jérôme est in Louisiana during this period. The decision was for Louisiana to a prominent final land developments and no tax and formed the Company of Louisiana a few obligations to the government on each of two ships per year,

The concession was a logical government endeavor, in that it required the country to reap benefits if the venture was probably inevitable. "I his Louisiana colony in 1713."⁵⁶ mismanagement, feuding among business in five years. "My three maintenance of workers for play to the Ministry of Marine in 17

Despite the commercial failure, in 1714, Louis Juchereau de Saint-Denis asserted the French claim to lower Alabama, to guard against English encroachment—Fort Rosalie, now Natchez providing the French with a cor



Four years before Bienville founded Juchereau de Saint-Denis established mentioned as a possible capital homes within its limits and out

56. Jérôme Phélypeaux de Maurepas, Pontchartrain, since 1693 (when the so 1699. Confusingly, both men are often Maurepas. Rule, 179.

57. Giraud, vol. 1, 249-50.

58. Lemann, 360.

59. As quoted by Dufour, *Ten Flags in* 60. Kniffen and Hilliard, 120. The Spanish strip of land in modern-day north-cent

an eye on the potentially hostile Natchez Indians. Together with Mobile, Biloxi, and a smattering of outposts on the upper Mississippi, these new French bases formed clutches in the effort to control the unwieldy and problematic Louisiana claim. Fourth, while Crozat's monopoly starved the colony of both competing commercial investment and government financing, it kept Louisiana in the private sector—a status that would soon be exploited and that would eventually lead to the founding of New Orleans. Finally, it was during the Crozat years that Louis XIV died (1715) and left the throne to his five-year-old great-grandson, Louis XV, for whom Philippe, duc d'Orléans would act as Regent of France. During his company's five-year life, Crozat kept alive the idea of a garrison "at the point where [Bayou St. John] runs from the Mississippi River into Lake Pontchartrain,"⁶¹ but it would be up to the next regime of Louisiana mavericks to finally seize the site.

Founding of New Orleans, Phase I: 1717-18

Those mavericks were the Scottish rogue businessman John Law and his French royal patron Philippe, duc d'Orléans. John Law was a flamboyant character of almost cinematic proportions, "handsome and personable, a mathematical wizard, a gambler in the grand manner," and "a fantastic promoter and speculator" skilled in banking and finance.⁶² Born in Edinburgh in 1671, Law roved the great cities of Europe and hobnobbed with their aristocracy while dueling, gambling, wheeling and dealing along the way.

Settling with his millions in Paris in the early 1710s, he allied himself with a kindred spirit, Philippe, duc d'Orléans, and received his authorization to establish the *Banque Generale* in 1716. The bank prospered just as Crozat surrendered his Louisiana monopoly, providing an opportunity that the gambler Law seized by proposing to the duc d'Orléans a land-development scheme for the Mississippi Valley that would enrich all investors and the country. On August 13, 1717, Crozat formally relinquished Louisiana; on September 6, John Law, head of the new Company of the West, received a twenty-five-year monopoly charter for the land that he promised to populate with 6,000 settlers and 3,000 slaves during the next ten years.

The Company then launched a marketing campaign of historic dimensions across France and the continent to drum up investment in Louisiana stock and land, and to entice the lower classes to emigrate to the riches of the New World. Speculation in the grossly exaggerated claims of Louisiana's mineral wealth and commercial potential eventually inflated the "Mississippi Bubble" to the bursting point, rendering early Louisiana one of history's great real-estate hoaxes and John Law as a fraud for the ages. These judgments aside, Law and his Company of the West, unlike the ambivalent dabblers of previous years, thrust Louisiana into the forefront of European attention and, more importantly and more permanently, decided resolutely to found a city to be called *La Nouvelle Orléans*. The resolution appeared in the Company's register with a probable date of September 9, 1717⁶³—only three days into its charter—and read, "Resolved to establish, thirty leagues up the river, a burg which should be called New Orleans, where landing would be possible from either the river or Lake Pontchartrain."⁶⁴ The name *Nouvelle Orléans* probably came from a May 1717 report by Bienville and Jean Michelle Seigneur de L'Épinet, which suggested founding a new port and naming it after Philippe, duc d'Orléans;⁶⁵ the specified situation between the river and the lake presumably came from Bienville's recommendations and knowledge of the area. (It should be noted that this instruction could imply numerous locations between the river and lake, not necessarily the site eventually chosen.)

Working with information-age speed, the Company declared Bienville "Commander General of the Louisiana Company" and appointed, on October 1, a man named Bonnaud as a cashier "at the counter [office] which is to be established at New Orleans, on the St. Louis [Mississippi] River."⁶⁶ Sometime during the next six months—the historical record is scant here—Bienville drew upon his twenty years' experience and his employer's instructions to decide and act upon the siting of New Orleans at its present-day location. Perhaps

61. Crozat, as quoted by Giraud, vol. 2, 42.

62. Dufour, *Ten Flags in the Wind*, 76-77.

63. Villiers du Terrage, 174. The register lists the resolution to establish New Orleans next to an incomplete date ("9th"). It is probable that the date was September 9, 1717, since the company received its charter on September 6 and made a clear reference to the proposed city on October 1, 1717. The register also called for a port at Ship Island, a town at Natchez, and forts in Illinois and Natchitoches country.

64. As quoted by Villiers du Terrage, 174.

65. Villiers du Terrage, 173, 175, and Freiberg, 36.

66. As quoted by Villiers du Terrage, 173-74. After nearly two decades of vacillation in both the government and private sectors, why did the final decision to found New Orleans come about so rapidly, within a single month? Perhaps because the Company, like any enterprise gathering venture capital, strove to impress potential investors with a flurry of tangible activity—essentially the establishment of offices and the hiring of staff.

he was carrying on the vision of management of Louisiana, an English advancement in the M

"I myself went to the spot, cleared the area. Jean-Baptiste

In the month of March, flat and swampy ground Mississippi and the St. ground there is higher than from Bayou St. John, a Mississippi with the La served only as warehouse this port is that ships of

La Harpe's passage recognizes a canal proposed to connect imply that this new settleme

Historian Marc de Villiers, mid-March and mid-April 17 implies "founding,"⁷⁰ and then Bienville. However, Villiers did at pleasure anywhere between [ified the city plan] drawn up Bienville's report and the Cartographical debate ensued as to wilderness of Louisiana. At St New Orleans.

Where to Site the Princ

Controversy surrounded the sit Mississippi Valley and coastal vantages, but no clearly superior worthwhile debate emerged pu

67. As quoted by Villiers du Terrage, 17

68. This vision would finally come to f

69. Villiers du Terrage, 180. André Pé

New Orleans occurring in the latter hal

down from the Natchez he had noticed :

the embouchure of the river, on the rig

ters with M. de Bienville to show them

built and two large warehouses" (Péni

Villiers du Terrage describes Pénicaud'

if they were not evidently deliberate" (

ing numerous new land claims and dev

70. This seems to be the local consensu

ute to its founder, identifies 1717 as th

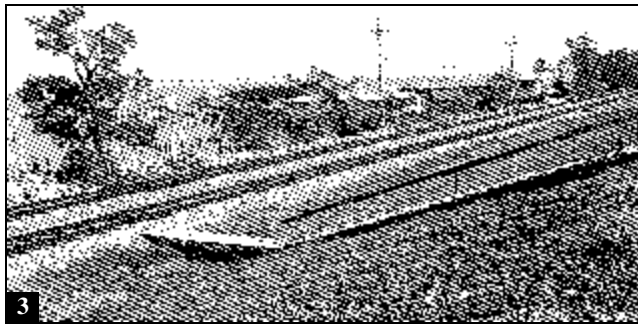
in 1917, a recognition of the Company'

71. Villiers du Terrage, 158.

72. Perhaps this is too kind. "Almost un

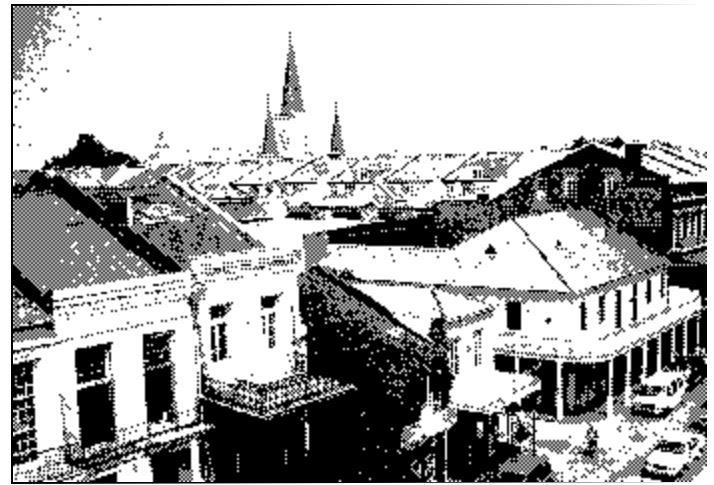
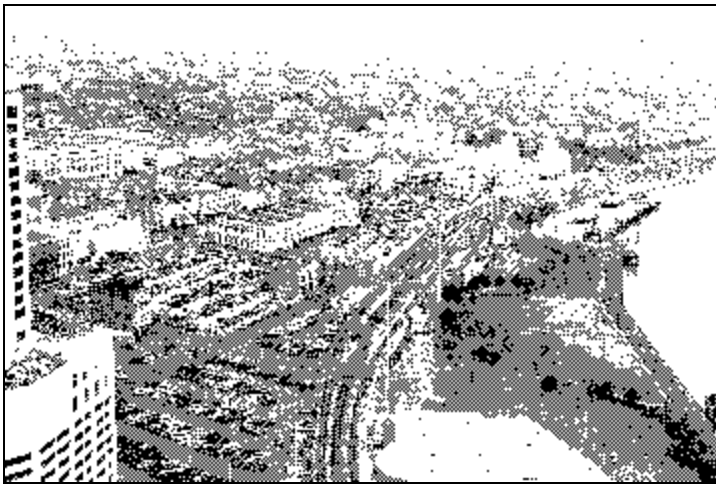
F. Lewis characterized the suitability o

Landscape, 30.



Ascending the Mississippi River from its mouth was slow, difficult, and dangerous. Instead, early settlers gained access to the river from the gulf by penetrating mazes of bays, bayous, and marshes (almost all generously revealed to them by the Indians) to reach high ground leading to the Mississippi. The major route that accomplished this goal led directly to the founding of New Orleans at its present-day site and cannot be overemphasized in its importance to the city's history. It is generally known as the Bayou St. John portage or the Bayou Road portage, but those names reflect sections of a larger route. The route began when sailors exited the salty waters of Lake Borgne at the edge of the Gulf of Mexico, entered the Rigolets (1) or Chef Menteur Pass (2) into Lake Pontchartrain, and followed the south shore of the lake (3) to the mouth of Bayou St. John, seen here at the Spanish Fort ruins (4). "If there is one element of geographic knowledge that makes

[New Orleans] inevitable, it is this s ascend narrow, log-strewn Bayou St c) to Bell Street (5d), then disembark *St. Jean* ridge toward the river, they of Faubourg Tremé (8), North Rar Governor Nicholls Street (10-11), a market (12-13) on the banks of the *riverbank during the early years ma*



Bienville strongly advocated this site—at the cusp of a sharp bend of the Mississippi on the relatively high ground of the river’s natural levees—to host the city to be called *La Nouvelle Orléans*, which the Company of the West first proposed to create in September 1717. Bienville founded his settlement in the spring of the following year, at the point near the center of the left photo, and started clearing the forest around present-day Decatur Street just upriver from Jackson Square

(middle photo) in March-April 1718. The future of the Louisiana colony and its future was uncertain. The settlement in the wilderness, now the center of the city, was the author, 1996-2000

a number of years by 1718 and therefore had advocates with something to lose by the rise of a new and inevitably competing city.⁷³ Hence, timeless hometown partisanship accounted for some of the opposition to New Orleans as well. An analysis of each site that vied to be the premier city in French Louisiana (that is, its principal port or its capital or both), and its advantages and disadvantages as recognized at the time, provides insight into the historical development of the region and the emergence of the city of New Orleans:

1. French Quarter Site Previous discussion described Bienville’s personal knowledge of the Bayou St. John portage and his eventual selection of a riverside site to exploit that connection. Bienville was *the* iron-willed advocate of that locale—the French Quarter site⁷⁴—as the home for New Orleans, at times against strong opposition from partisans on the coast and Company directors in France.⁷⁵

Advantages of the French Quarter Site

- **Shortcut Route** The premier advantage to the French Quarter site was its location on a least-cost/minimum-distance route between the Gulf of Mexico and the Mississippi River. Instead of taking the long and perilous route from the mouth of the river, mariners could slip through the protected waters of the Mississippi Sound and Lake Borgne, and traverse the Rigolets land bridge via the Rigolets or Chef Menteur Pass, to gain access to Lake Pontchartrain and eventually the placid waters of Bayou St. John. Three miles up this bayou lay a slight upland (Bayou Road/Esplanade Ridge) that rose above the swamps and led to the natural levee of the Mississippi River, where Bienville selected his site. In grandiose terms, this site represented the optimal connection between the Old World, where schemed the Company of the West and its investors and government, and the New World, where lay the unknown riches of the Louisiana territory. In plainer words, the French Quarter site was simply on the quickest and safest route to get from point A to point B.
- **Topography** Sediments deposited by periodic floods over the centuries formed natural levees paralleling the river and bayous throughout the deltaic plain. These uplands provided the French Quarter site with just enough relief—perhaps five to seven feet above average river stage and ten to fourteen feet above sea level at the time—to host a settlement. The French Quarter site being at a cutbank portion of a

river meander, the natural levee of the Bayou Road/Esplanade Ridge, the Bayou Metairie and Gentilly levees, and believing this land to be safe from all three threats.

- **Riverside Guard** A primary advantage of the French Quarter site was the English—penetration of the interior of Louisiana and probably in the early days of the city’s location, since the city found the same observation in 1718 opportunities for river access.
- **Relative Location** The French Quarter site was an asset in French Louisiana.
- **Soils** Proponents of French Louisiana argued that the French Quarter site was a better choice than the French Quarter site.

Le Page du Pratz, eyewitness to the French Quarter site in *The History of Louisiana*, argued that it was a better choice could not be made. A thousand tons of iron, may lay their heads on St. John’s creek [Bayou St. John], and on the St. Louis [Pontchartrain], and on the

73. Villiers du Terrage, 172, 186-87.

74. In this particular discussion, we will refer to the final site selected for New Orleans as the *French Quarter site*, rather than as *New Orleans*, to distinguish the site from the “theoretical” New Orleans—the envisioned principal city and capital of Louisiana—that could have been sited in a number of locations. *French Quarter site* implies the riverside location selected by Bienville in 1718 that is known today as the French Quarter, or Vieux Carré.

75. It is probably safe to assume that Bienville, like his adversaries in the competing settlements, was motivated by both a sense of professional responsibility and personal gain. After all, Bienville owned two vast concessions near the French Quarter site (see pages 86-88) and would benefit personally from the relocation of the capital to that area. Then again, he had selected the French Quarter site prior to the acquisition of these concessions. Charles T. Soniat, 9, and Freiberg, 39, 52-53.

76. Davis, 55.

77. Charlevoix, 178. In this particular case, the two main reasons for New Orleans’ selection were the French Quarter site.

Disadvantages of the French Quarter Site

- **Topography** The natural levees provided protection from flood only when compared to other areas along the river that had even less elevation. Relative to the bluffs of Natchez and Natchitoches, the French Quarter site was most certainly threatened by rising river waters and in fact suffered from them in 1719.
- **General Environs** While all prospective sites for New Orleans suffered from heat, humidity, and fetid summertime conditions, the French Quarter site was disadvantaged in that it was almost surrounded by mosquito-infested swamplands, deprived of both the breezes of the coast and the cooler temperatures of the inland.
- **Distance from Coast** While guarding the river, the French Quarter site neglected the coast by a distance of at least fifty miles and added travel time for ships arriving from the Gulf Coast, the Caribbean, and France. Alternately, distance from the sea may be viewed as a protective measure for a port against enemy raids and a buffer against frontal assaults by hurricanes in the Gulf of Mexico.
- **Sandbars at the Delta** All Mississippi River sites suffered from constraints on accessibility rendered by the periodic silting of the mouth of the Mississippi. Some observers considered this problem to be insurmountable, reason to exclude the possibility of a river capital.

2. Bayou Manchac Site A strong and reasonable contender to host New Orleans was the area where Bayou Manchac flowed off from the Mississippi, between Lake Maurepas and the river, southeast of present-day Baton Rouge and northwest of Gonzales.⁷⁹ Valued for its position on the busiest route⁸⁰ between the gulf and the river, Bayou Manchac's champions included the Company of the West, Bénard de La Harpe, Drouot de Valdeterre, and others, though some of these supporters were more interested in denouncing the French Quarter site than backing Bayou Manchac. Apparently unaware of Bienville's work already under way at the French Quarter site, the Company itself instructed Chief Engineer Perrier on April 14, 1718, "to find the most convenient place for trading with Mobile, whether by sea or by Lake Pontchartrain, . . . in the least danger from inundation when floods occur, and as near as possible to the best agricultural lands. These various considerations convince us, as far as we can judge, that the most convenient site is on the Manchac brook; the town limits should stretch from the river-banks to the edge of the brook."⁸¹ Perrier died en route to Louisiana (in Havana), allowing Bienville to continue his progress at the French Quarter site. But in late 1720 New Orleans was very nearly relocated to the Bayou Manchac site.

Advantages of the Bayou Manchac Site

- **Shortcut Route** Like the Bayou St. John portage, Bayou Manchac ("Manchac" has been translated as "rear entrance")⁸² provided a fairly direct east-west shortcut from the coast to the river. Mariners could enter Lake Pontchartrain as they would traveling to the French Quarter site, but instead of hugging the southern shore of the lake, a westward route was followed through Pass Manchac and across Lake Maurepas to reach the Amite River and finally Bayou Manchac,⁸³ bringing sailors to within a few miles of the Mississippi, depending on river conditions. By one later estimate, traveling the Manchac route to

79. Bayou Manchac was a distributary of the Mississippi, formed by a low point along the natural levee through which water passed during times of flooding. The waterway, never easily navigable in its upper reaches, was dammed by Andrew Jackson's men in 1814 and permanently closed off from the river in 1824-28, severing the only major eastward distributary of the lower Mississippi. Dalrymple, 12, and Kniffen, "Bayou Manchac," 462. See also Chambers, 107.

80. *The Louisiana Historical Quarterly*, 372.

81. As quoted by Villiers du Terrage, 184.

82. Bragg, 213, and Detro, 193.

83. Iberville christened the Bayou Manchac/Amite River system the "Iberville River" in 1699, a name that was used until the nineteenth century. Bayou Manchac now refers to the distributary that joins the Amite River (a system that drains the hills of southern Mississippi and the Florida parishes) near Port Vincent. Brasseaux, *A Comparative View of French Louisiana*, 65.

this site from the gulf was able," continued the Com where, because of the cor

- **Topography** The natu Quarter site relative to se some flood protection, b advantage.⁸⁶ Bluffs at Ba commanding perch on the
- **Other Attributes** and the Yazoo region (a p ing, and "healthiness of tl surrounding marshes prov

Disadvantages of the Bayou

- **Distance from the Coast** Manchac brook, is its dist
- **Neglect of the Lower Ri** miles of riverbanks below Bend to guard against this thus competing with Bay
- **Navigability** The Con expense,"⁹⁰ but this was he encountered it in 169 clogged with debris and d the Bayou Manchac/Ami for half the year, [such] th water flow from the Miss restrial portage of about f
- **Port Limitations** French Quarter site; river
- **Distributary** The Bay through which high water crevasse could have beer major undertaking for a n

3. Natchez The rugged lo fluence, where in 1716 Bienvill tenacious promoter was Marc / general of the New Orleans Cou and once promoted that area to l at St. Catherine's Creek and m

84. "The voyage from Pensacola to the weeks usually required to go by the Mi

85. As quoted by Villiers du Terrage, 13

86. Kniffen, "Bayou Manchac," 463-64

87. As quoted by Villiers du Terrage, 13

88. *Ibid.*

89. *Ibid.*

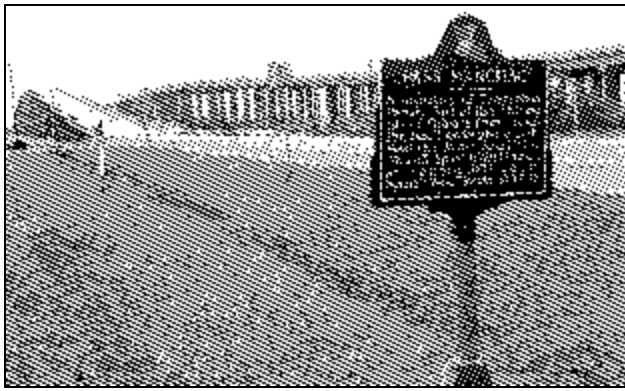
90. *Ibid.*

91. Brasseaux, *A Comparative View of*

92. Villiers du Terrage, 193.

93. Kniffen, "Bayou Manchac," 462-64

94. Villiers du Terrage, 186; Pénicaud, :



Looking south toward the Highway 51/I-55 bridges over Pass Manchac (left) and east Highway 51 bridge into Pass Manchac and the Manchac Swamp. Pass Manchac (an Indian loosely translated as “rear entrance”), connecting Lake Pontchartrain and Lake M allowed explorers from the Gulf of Mexico to sail across these lakes and reach the Mississippi means of Bayou Manchac. That site was eyed as a potential location for New Orleans. Yet Pass Manchac was a segment of a series of international colonial-era borders; it is now gone. *Photographs by author, 2001*



There were times in 1718-20 when New Orleans was almost relocated to the point where Bayou Manchac flowed off from the Mississippi, a few miles south of present-day Baton Rouge. The original riverside site has been swept away by the river, but had that decision been executed, these cornfields along Highway 327 at the East Baton Rouge/Iberville Parish line (above) might have hosted part of the initial grid of streets. Instead, New Orleans flourished at Bienville’s site far downriver, today’s French Quarter. The British realized the commercial potential of the Bayou Manchac site, as a portage from the Mississippi to Lakes Maurepas and Pontchartrain and thence to the gulf, and established the community of Manchac and Fort Bute here in the 1760s (to the left of the forested area in the above photograph, marking the channel of Bayou Manchac). To the right of the forest in the above photograph was Spanish territory, guarded by Fort San Gabriel de Manchack. The British village of Manchac (not to be confused with the modern community of Manchac south of Ponchatoula) was rocked by the Revolutionary War and disappeared by the end of the century, leaving us to speculate what might have become of these cornfields. The photograph below shows the Mississippi at the Manchac Bend; somewhere in the river lies the spot that could have hosted New Orleans. *Photographs by author, 1999-2000*



Advantages of Natchez

- **Topography** At over 200 feet above sea level and 175 feet above the river, Natchez is high enough to view the horizon westward over the Mississippi Valley, completely protected from river floods and well suited for guarding the river.
- **Other Attributes** Proximity to the Red River confluence, rich agricultural soils (though not as vast and accessible as areas on the lower river), and slightly less hot and muggy conditions than the low country made Natchez an attractive site. Le Page du Pratz, overseer of Company plantations, friend of Hubert, and a Natchez plantation owner, quoted Father Charlevoix's defense of the place in Pratz's *History of Louisiana*:

Fort Rosalie, in the country of the Natchez, was at first pitched upon for the metropolis of this colony. But though it be necessary to begin by a settlement near the sea . . . it appears to me, that the capital . . . cannot be better situated than in this place. It is not subject to inundations of the river; the air is pure; the country very extensive; the land fit for every thing, and well watered; it is not at too great a distance from the sea, and nothing hinders vessels to go up to it. . . . It is within reach of every place intended to be settled.⁹⁵

Mississippi historian J. F. H. Claiborne also extolled the attributes of Natchez in his 1880 account of the debate, describing the area (perhaps with a bit of home-state bias) as "elevated, healthy, picturesque, contiguous to the alluvions on the west of the river [and] the highlands beyond, sufficiently removed from the sea to be inaccessible to an invader [yet] near enough for all commercial purposes, and three hundred miles nearer the posts of the Illinois! These were the recommendations that presented themselves to [Hubert's] practical and comprehensive mind, and it is a great misfortune that they did not prevail. The proudest city of the new world would now have stood on the ancient village of the Natchez."⁹⁶

Disadvantages of Natchez

- **Distance from the Coast and Neglect of the Lower River** Like the Bayou Manchac site, only more so, Natchez was simply too removed from the coast to serve as the gatekeeper and port that the envisioned city of New Orleans needed to be. Its perch on the inland hills of present-day Mississippi would have left hundreds of miles of banks along the lower river open to either competition or invasion. In brief, Natchez's *site* was attractive, but its *situation* did not fulfill the requirements—despite the advocacy of Hubert and others.

4. English Turn English Turn, the first hairpin meander of the Mississippi for travelers heading up from the delta, earned its name from Bienville's 1699 encounter with the *Carolina Galley*. The ten-mile-long 200° swerve (English Turn Bend)⁹⁷ around the narrow point bar made it a navigational challenge and a potential strategic opportunity for the French—if not for a capital then at least for a garrison or a counter.

Advantages of English Turn

- **Riverside Guard** A stronghold at English Turn would achieve excellent military control of the lower river, close enough to the delta to preclude the establishment of a substantial settlement lower down the river. The French eventually would build two forts here, one on each side of the river.

95. Pratz, 26.

96. Claiborne, 37.

97. Colonial manuscripts refer to this area as *Détour à l'Anglois*, *Détour aux Anglois*, *Détour de l'Anglois*, and *Détour des Anglois*, translated variously as English Turn, English Reach, and English Bend. "English Turn" as used here refers to the east-bank point bar known as Shingle Point, while "English Turn Bend" implies the ten-mile-long river meander shared by the parishes of Orleans, St. Bernard, and Plaquemines. Many people refer to this entire region simply as English Turn. Ekberg, "The English Bend," 212-13.

- **Other Attributes** The A naval officer recognized could be made."⁹⁸ Three y citing the straightness of t slow and often arduous re engineer of the street net English Turn would event for transporting thither th slowing ship movement at site, since it was located a curred with this view in 1

Disadvantages of English Turn

- **Lack of Coastal Access** Bend¹⁰² in the same ma Maurepas and Pontchartr New Orleans. But compar been serpentine and diffic gerous through the moutl ending more credence to



This point at the settlement and ev traffic, no substa adequate shortcut military fortificat

98. As quoted from *Le Nouveau Mercu*
99. As quoted from *Relation de la Loui*
100. As quoted by Villiers du Terrage, 1
101. Father Charlevoix nevertheless di
not the mouth of the river be defended
102. In fact there was a waterway betw
the swamp, small and difficult to navig
the interior to warrant the constructio
(Lake Borgne Canal) in pursuit of the
Orleans' successful effort to do the sam
the Violet Canal) has been used most
Alternative, 55.

- **Topography** The natural levee is fairly narrow on both banks along English Turn Bend, measuring only about a mile wide and less than five feet high. The natural levee of the crescent near the French Quarter site is more than twice as broad in some places and a few feet higher.



Bayou Dupre transected the marshes between English Turn and Lake Borgne and thus provided a gulf/river shortcut, a key factor in siting settlements in the Louisiana wilderness of the early 1700s. But the waterway was narrow, shallow, and difficult to navigate; for this and other reasons, no major settlement developed on English Turn. Bayou Dupre was enlarged and opened in 1890 as the Lake Borgne Canal, and since 1947, the waterway (also called the Violet Canal) has been used mostly by commercial fishermen. This photograph shows the lock of the Violet Canal seen from the St. Bernard Parish community of Violet, looking toward Bayou Dupre and Lake Borgne. *Photograph by author, 1999*

5. Lake Pontchartrain Shore

Historian Marc de Villiers du Terrage recounts the obstinacy of François Le Maire, a “geographer-missionary” who stalled in his recognition of the site selected for New Orleans apparently because he hoped “that New Orleans may be created on Lake Pontchartrain, so that its counter may be tributary to Biloxi.” Perhaps this site would have been located at the mouth of Bayou St. John (present-day Spanish Fort), as erroneously indicated by a 1721 map of the area stored at the Archives Hydrographiques.¹⁰³



This is the point at which Bayou St. John flowed into Lake Pontchartrain, once suggested as a site for New Orleans. It would have been a terrible choice: too low in elevation, too far from the river, and poor for agriculture. Nevertheless, its strategic location warranted the erection of a series of bastions during the colonial era and early American years, including Fort St. John (Spanish Fort), which survives in ruins. The construction of the lakefront in the 1920s and 1930s moved the bayou’s mouth into the lake by a half-mile. New Orleanians know this general area as Spanish Fort. *Photographs by author, 1999*

Advantages of Lake Pontchartrain Shore

- **Shortcut Route** Like the French Quarter site, a settlement on the shore of Lake Pontchartrain would have exploited the Bayou St. John portage between the lake and the river.

Disadvantages of Lake Pontchartrain Shore

- **Topography** Neither Bayou St. John nor Lake Pontchartrain were rimmed by natural levees, hence this site—a backswamp partially below sea level—would have been highly susceptible to flooding.

103. Villiers du Terrage, 180-81.

- **Lack of Coastal or River** (miles away) nor the coast
- **Soils** While good soil culture.

6. Other Sites For a while Pensacola, some Company dir port of Louisiana. Biloxi partis it bolstered the role of the coas tent Biloxi advocate was Chie in 1721. (In fact Biloxi became nearby Dauphin Island, capital on the Red River in 1714 by S

Advantages of These Sites

- **Coastal Guard** Loc English and Spanish exp development than militar would have made it vulne
- **Establishment** In a sites and with rudiment sc
- **Avoidance of the Mississipp** river sites during certain sites had silting problems

Sites considered by the Compa ital and principal city of the LC 1a. The “French Quarter site” (keep that name and ascend in Bayou Road shortcut route in strategic position on the river.

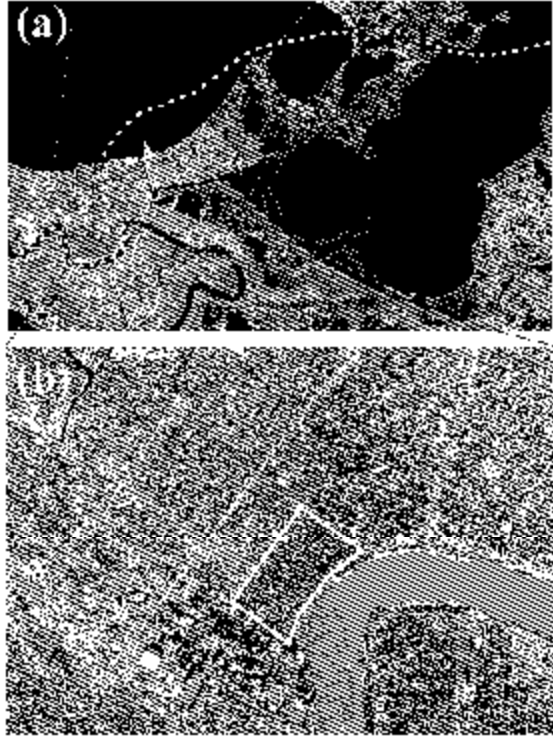
1b. The site eventually succee with a grid-pattern street netwo 2a. A strong contender to becon Manchac shortcut intersected v 2b. In 1720, officials proposed flowed off from the Mississipp 3a. Natchez (Fort Rosalie) in f Louisiana and a major landow 3b. Natchez’s main advantage ital elevation model of the Ne twenty-five feet above mean s east. These elevations are over 4a. Some suggested English Tr of Mexico via a labyrinth of b 4b. Most attractive about Eng incoming ships slowed.

5. One commentator suggest Pontchartrain shore, where Ba 6.-10. Others advocated conce Island (a), and Pensacola (b). T the lives and livelihoods they 1 exert over its vast North Amer *by author*

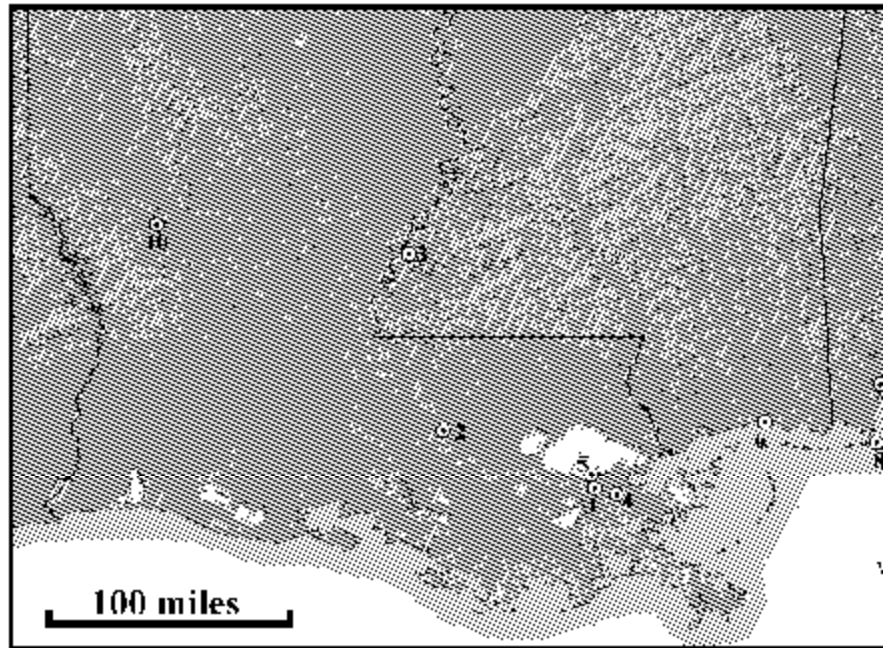
104. Chambers, 107.

Sites Competing To Be the Premier City/Capital of France

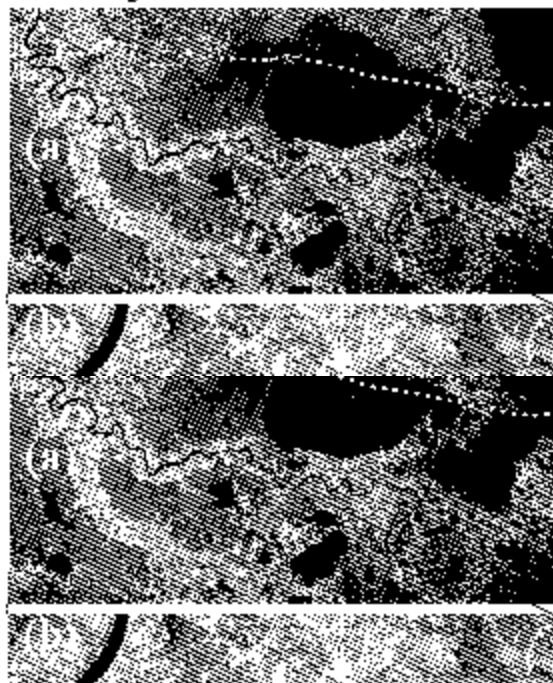
1. French Quarter Site



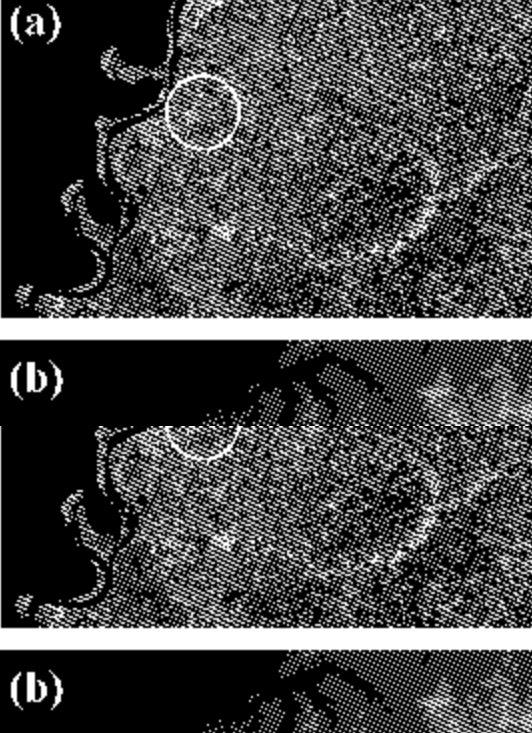
Satellite images courtesy Louisiana State University Department of Geography and National Air and Space Museum, and Arizona State University Department of Geology



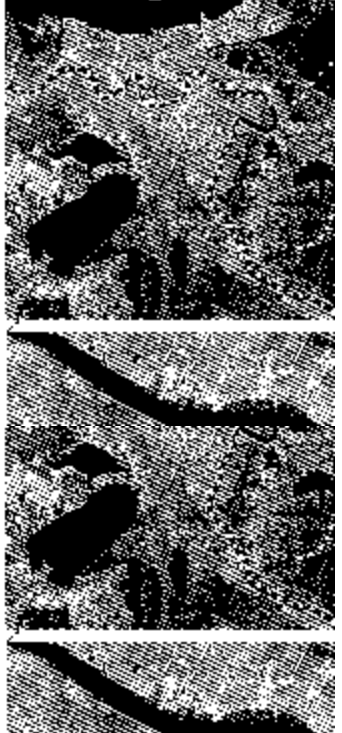
2. Bayou Manchac Site



3. Natchez



4. English Turn



Disadvantages of These Sites

- **Neglect of the River** Any coastal site and Natchitoches would have sacrificed the strategic value of the Mississippi River and complicated the flow of goods, probably only delaying, not eliminating, the eventual emergence of a major river port. Had Pensacola been selected, “merchandise from Illinois would have had not one single transshipment at New Orleans, but four: at Pensacola, at Biloxi, at Bayou St. John or Manchac, and finally on the banks of the Mississippi.”¹⁰⁵
- **Distance from French Louisiana** Pensacola’s location beyond the far eastern edge of French Louisiana made it politically and militarily vulnerable. Originally a Spanish settlement created in response to La Salle’s exploration of the Mississippi Valley for France, Pensacola was seized by the French, regained by the Spanish, recaptured by the French, and returned to the Spanish after the Franco-Spanish War of 1719-22¹⁰⁶—not a good track record for a principal city. Natchitoches marked the far western edge of southern French Louisiana, near the Spanish Texas frontier, and suffered from the same disadvantage compounded by extreme isolation.
- **Soils** Biloxi and Pensacola lack the rich alluvial soil of the river valley and are better known for their infertile clay earth and spindly pine forests.
- **Other Disadvantages** Biloxi’s waters were too shallow for larger vessels to dock or anchor, requiring the use of longboats to ferry seamen from ship to shore.¹⁰⁷ Le Gac also mentions a sort of worm in the waters of Biloxi that apparently damaged ship hulls,¹⁰⁸ and La Harpe claimed that “contrary winds” made Old Biloxi (Ocean Springs) an unfavorable port.¹⁰⁹ But most disadvantageous of all, coastal sites would have been much more prone to hurricane damage than inland sites; in fact, a storm in 1717 damaged the headquarters at Dauphin Island and silted up its harbor, providing Bienville with another reason to cast his eyes toward the French Quarter site.

In sum, Pensacola, Biloxi, Mobile, Natchitoches, and other sites outside the lower Mississippi Valley failed to address the original purpose of occupying Louisiana—“to ensure for France the domination of the Mississippi”¹¹⁰—while Natchez and Bayou Manchac may have been too far upriver, and English Turn and Lake Pontchartrain inadequate and inconvenient for other reasons. Although the capital of Louisiana shifted from the Biloxi area (Fort Maurepas, later called Old Biloxi and now Ocean Springs) to two sites near Mobile Bay (Fort Louis, Mobile, and a headquarters and port at Dauphin Island) and back to two sites in the Biloxi area (Old Biloxi and New Biloxi)¹¹¹ from 1699 to 1722, it became apparent that the principal economic and political city needed to command a more strategic location.

Competition and Indecision, 1718-21

Hence in the four years following Bienville’s selection of the French Quarter site in the spring of 1718, stakeholders in France and throughout Louisiana vied to relocate *La Nouvelle Orléans* to their particular corner of the land. Governor Bienville was practically the sole proponent on the Company board of the French Quarter site.¹¹² “He pitched upon this spot in preference to many others, more agreeable and commodious,” recalled Le Page du Pratz of Bienville’s advocacy of the site, concluding thoughtfully, “it is not every man that can see so

105. Villiers du Terrage, 192.

106. Holmes, “Dauphin Island,” 103-25.

107. Pénicaut, 208.

108. Villiers du Terrage, 195. Writing almost two centuries later, James S. Zacharie reported that “the waters of the Gulf [near Biloxi] are infested with ‘*Teredo*,’ a species of barnacle, which fastens itself to wood under the water and bores into it until it becomes honey-combed.” Zacharie, *New Orleans Guide* (1893), 11.

109. La Harpe, 44.

110. Giraud, vol. 2, 137.

111. Higginbotham, *Fort Maurepas*, 69-73.

112. Claiborne, 36-37, and Villiers du Terrage, 196.



Downtown Biloxi in 2000. The Bay (at a site in the distant up peninsula in the foreground, not visible) is visible in the background. Photograph by author

far as some others.”¹¹³ The old encouraged the coalition of Mobile business was threatened by riv New Orleans,”¹¹⁴ and the “ma which the prestige of Biloxi ar

During those years, progress a modern-day chamber of commerce hut”¹¹⁶ on the riverside site in houses were under way.”¹¹⁷ The Indians had not seen beforements. The resilient Bienville champion of Natchez and ene the land lies higher and the he

News of the flood and other after a three-way merger) to succast its eyes toward the excell the Franco-Spanish War of 171 talk of making Pensacola the when the Superior Council, or relocating Company headquart Maurepas (November 1719) at thing of a blow to Bienville’s

113. Pratz, 53.

114. Villiers du Terrage, 186.

115. Chambers, 105.

116. As quoted by Villiers du Terrage,

117. *Ibid.*, 182.

118. *Ibid.*, 190.

119. Howell, 126-27.

Governor Bienville reluctantly obeyed by leaving some of his command to continue working at the French Quarter site and taking the others to build the new fort at the Bay of Biloxi. Chief Engineer Le Blond de La Tour,¹²⁰ a pro-Biloxi adversary of Bienville and his French Quarter site, presented plans for New Biloxi in January 1721—a rectangular grid surrounding a *Place d'Armes*—that, ironically, would later evolve into the plat for New Orleans,¹²¹ which survives today at the site La Tour disdained. New Biloxi was established across the bay (present-day Biloxi) from old Fort Maurepas (now Ocean Springs), and with Ship Island as its harbor, this new capital received the first major wave of immigrants to French Louisiana. Thousands of settlers recruited by the Company from Germany, Switzerland, and France arrived through Biloxi from 1719 to 1721, dispersing throughout the territory and increasing its population from mere hundreds to 5,420 whites and 600 blacks¹²² (numbers vary in different sources). Many of these immigrants, naturally drawn to the rich agricultural lands of which Biloxi had none, settled in or near New Orleans, which rebounded a year after the 1719 flood with a company store, hospital, houses for the governor and director, over 100 employees, and 250 concession holders ready to take possession of their land.¹²³

But adversity countered prosperity in equal or greater doses throughout the venture in these years: thousands died en route or upon arriving to the subtropical frontier; financial return on the Company of the Indies' investment was practically nonexistent; and in 1720, concerned investors began to withdraw their gold and silver deposits, rendering worthless the increasing amount of paper money circulating in France and nearly bankrupting the country in the process. The once-flamboyant tycoon John Law was chased out of Paris, and as the Company struggled to reorganize, settlers in Louisiana grappled with economic and political uncertainty as well as physical hardship. According to historian Edwin Adams Davis, it was the German, Swiss, and other non-French immigrants, who had come not “to make quick riches and return home or because they had been shipped out as criminals or moral lepers,” but “to build homes and to make a new life for themselves and their families, [who] probably saved the Louisiana colony.”¹²⁴ Many Germans settled just upriver and west of New Orleans (*La Côte des Allemands*, or German Coast), bringing industriousness and a sense of stability to the river area at the expense of the coast.

As the “Mississippi Bubble” was bursting in 1720, the struggling Company of the Indies again addressed the issue of where their principal city should be located, deciding on September 15 of that year to build an establishment at the Bayou Manchac site; either it or Bienville’s New Orleans would serve as “general warehouse for the interior of the Colony,” answering to Biloxi, “the Company’s first counter and [its] business-centre.”¹²⁵ Jean-Baptiste Bénard de La Harpe favored the Bayou Manchac plan—“best place to establish the principal bastion in Louisiana”—and derided the French Quarter site as “flooded, impractical, unhealthy, unfit for the cultivation of rice,” fearing that its founders “were not informed of [its] true geographical situation.”¹²⁶ Drouot de Valdeterre echoed these sentiments, endorsing the need for “changing and transporting New Orleans to the Manchac Plain, on the little river between the stream and Lake Maurepas, to establish the principal seat there.”¹²⁷ “The capital city must be at Manchac, where the high lands begin,” wrote one M. de Beauvais in another memoir.¹²⁸ But in fact, the Company was mired in indecision regarding this potentially expensive relocation decision, perhaps because it was preoccupied with the larger problems of the faltering business and impending economic chaos in France. So in the time-honored tradition of countless institutions, the Company procrastinated the decision by instructing Chief Engineer Le Blond de La Tour to send his assistant engineer to study the situation some more. This proved to be a turning point for New Orleans.

120. Le Blond de La Tour replaced Perrier as chief engineer of Louisiana. Perrier, who carried with him instructions from the Company to consider the Bayou Manchac area as the site of New Orleans, died in Havana en route to Louisiana in 1718. Wilson, “Colonial Fortifications,” 385, and Villiers du Terrage, 184-86.

121. Wilson, “Colonial Fortifications,” 385.

122. Claiborne, 38.

123. As quoted from *Etat de la Louisiane* (June 1720) by Villiers du Terrage, 194.

124. Davis, 58.

125. As quoted by Villiers du Terrage, 218.

126. It should be noted that in his report, La Harpe “merged” the sites at Bayou Manchac and Natchez, calling it *Manchae [sic] in Natchez*, either by generalization, mistake, or intention. In any case, he spoke highly of both sites’ qualifications for a capital. La Harpe’s interesting review of sites appears in a section entitled “Ports and Harbours to be Protected on the Coasts of Louisiana,” in which he listed *Pansacolle* (Pensacola), *L’Ile aux Vaisseaux* (Ship Island, near Biloxi), *Biloxy* (Ocean Springs), *New Orleans* (French Quarter site), and *Natchez* (which he fused with the Bayou Manchac site). La Harpe, 43-46.

127. As quoted by Villiers du Terrage, 219.

128. *Ibid.*, 220.

Founding of New Orleans

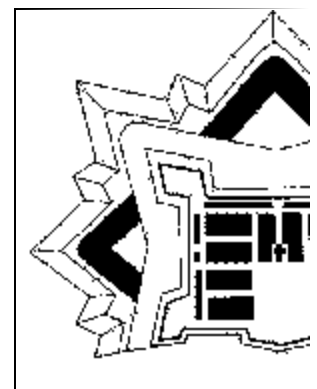
La Tour’s assistant, Adrien de Pauger sent his superior’s rough design. Within a month, Pauger sent them on to Paris, but historian of New Orleans, shelved the plans made it to Paris anyway,

Why the significance of the plans probably “had weight in father to the new capital, was street network, with its town’s essential French military engineer three years had heard little modest conditions.

Adrien de Pauger also continued the lower Mississippi now had been harboring at the realization of the river route and “ships from France to be stoppishment.”¹³² Also in 1721, the the Company designated New mandant general.

While some of Pauger’s competing posts, the groundswell as the capital and principal city Orleans. From a military post November, a small town, and

Bienville and his colleague most difficult hurdle in an organization into definite plans. On December of Louisiana from Bil on May 26, 1722, and sudden Blond de La Tour and Natchez New Orleans and the wisdom dated April 23, 1722, La Tour



At left is one of Le Blond de La Tour’s plans for New Orleans. At right is his (and Adrien de Pauger’s) plan for New Orleans, preserved (sans the ramparts) in the Archives Nationales.

129. Villiers du Terrage, 222-23.

130. Wilson, “Colonial Fortifications,” 385.

131. Chambers, 108.

132. Villiers du Terrage, 223.

133. *Ibid.*, 229.

Orleans that survives today as the French Quarter (*Vieux Carré*, or Old Square), one of the best-preserved colonial city plans in America and a direct link between the modern metropolis and its earliest days in the wilderness.

As if to wipe the slate clean, a hurricane struck the Gulf Coast from Mobile to New Orleans in September 1722, destroying dozens of makeshift structures in New Orleans but allowing Pauger to commence surveying the streets of the newly planned city. By November, “the streets of the old quarter had received the names they still bear.”¹³⁴ Recalled one observer a few years later, “New-Orleans began to assume the appearance of a city, and to increase in population, . . . in 1722.”¹³⁵

More hardship lay ahead: the Company of the Indies lost interest in unproductive Louisiana and finally relinquished it in 1731; a massacre of settlers by Indians at Natchez in 1729 frightened the isolated city; and the everyday struggle of life under subtropical conditions took its toll. In future decades exasperated settlers would occasionally suggest relocating the city and, in time, even its status as capital would move on. But after 1722, New Orleans was firmly established at the site that Bienville first saw nearly a quarter-century earlier, as a youth under the wing of his long-gone brother, Iberville, and at this site New Orleans would grow into Louisiana’s premier city and one of the world’s great ports. Through the efforts of four principal parties—John Law, who made the business decision to found a city named for the duc d’Orléans thirty leagues up the river; the indigenous peoples of the area, who had discovered the critical portage and passed this knowledge on to the French; Jean Baptiste Le Moyne, sieur de Bienville, who founded the city, defended its attributes, and governed the colony for thirty of the years spanning 1701-43; and Adrien de Pauger, whose engineering turned the sloppy outpost into an organized and serious contender for a capital city¹³⁶—New Orleans was sited on the great crescent near the Bayou St. John portage linking Lake Pontchartrain and the Mississippi River, situated between the Gulf of Mexico and North America’s Father of Waters.

Influence of Geographical Situation on the Character of New Orleans

So what of this situation, this site? How has this controversial and geologically precarious perch between two worlds contributed to the formation of New Orleans, this most idiosyncratic and memorable of cities, source of cultural icons and mental images unique in its nation? First it is necessary to identify exactly what makes so many people characterize New Orleans as unique and interesting: those attributes that have physically, economically, and culturally isolated it from the American mainstream for most of its three centuries and even today set it apart from Atlanta and Dallas and Houston and all the rest. Itemizing the character of a city is like measuring the personality of an individual—a difficult and debatable exercise—but certain traits do predominate and those are what we seek to identify here. Many of these traits are now trivialized on postcards and stereotyped in cinema, others are underappreciated, but all are relevant.

“During most of the nineteenth century, New Orleans remained in counterpoint to the rest of urban America. Newcomers from the South as well as the North recoiled when they encountered the prevailing French language of the city, its dominant Catholicism, its bawdy sensual delights, or its proud free black population—in short, its deeply rooted creole traditions.”

—Arnold R. Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon, 1992 (xi)

First, there is the port. The great and ancient effort to route resources between the world within the Mississippi Valley and the world beyond the Gulf of Mexico is the fountainhead of New Orleans as an urban place and as a multicultural society. For almost a century and a half, the port of New Orleans, “Key of the Great Valley,”¹³⁷ enjoyed a transportation monopoly in the region, buttressed not only by the criticality of the gulf/river situation but by the isolation from its competitors. Today, the Port of New Orleans handles 88 million tons of freight annually, behind only Houston and New York/New Jersey; when combined with other south

134. Henry P. Dart, “Allotment of Building Sites,” 564-65.

135. Dumont, 41.

136. Said Pauger in 1723, “If I had not taken upon myself all that could be done to overcome ill-will, things would not yet have got beyond the stage of sending ships into the river, and the principal seat would have remained at Biloxi, where the country could not provide sufficient food, as it does here [at New Orleans].” As quoted by Villiers du Terrage, 246. Bienville served as colonial governor of Louisiana during 1701-13, 1716-17, 1718-25, and 1733-43.

137. Ingraham, 96.

Louisiana ports, it is by far the most important port, the port is mother to most

Second, there is the French colonial cultures, exceptions to the rule and are apparent today in the present legal system, and the social

Third, there is the African American influences, and emigration from the American ports, making New Orleans



Caribbean look and feel: Steep tropical vegetation, and majestic especially neighborhoods such as Faubourg Tremé, unique vistas for an American city. Claude Avenue in Faubourg Tremé

Fourth, there is the immigration from Ireland, and other lands between the Americas and Vietnamese today, but by the *oldest historically* multiethnic mix of Spanish, African, and Caribbean influences in the interior South. “No city perhaps has a more diverse mix of national manners, language, and religion.”

Fifth, there is the religious and Catholicism influences that are pervasive and paradoxical atmosphere of the city.

138. U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, *Waterways of Louisiana*, 186.

New Orleans' prominent Jewish congregation and numerous Protestant faiths further enrich the city's religious dimension.

Sixth, there is the urban layout. La Tour's and Pauger's design for the French Quarter survives today as a reminder of the European instinct for order through engineering in a threatening wilderness; later developments in neighboring *faubourgs* show the influence of classical design, American ideas, the arpent land surveying system, and the hydrologically based geography of the city. "The city of New-Orleans," wrote Joseph Holt Ingraham in 1835, "is planned on a magnificent scale, happily and judiciously combining ornament and convenience. Let the same spirit which foresaw and provided for its present greatness, animate those who will hereafter direct its public improvement, and New-Orleans, in spite of its bug-bear character and its unhealthy location, will eventually be the handsomest, if not the largest city in the United States."¹⁴⁰

Seventh, there is the architecture. New Orleans' building styles and their glorious adornments are the most ubiquitous and photogenic of its local signatures, the ones most likely to burn themselves into memory and evoke the essence of the city. Architecture is New Orleans' greatest contribution to the national material culture, and it is a truly substantial contribution: tens of thousands of structures, covering about half the developed portion of New Orleans and a quarter of the metropolitan area, may be described as architecturally or historically interesting components of the cityscape. Much, if not most, of this inventory comprises styles and embellishments rarely found beyond the city limits: camelback shotgun houses, Creole townhouses with iron-lace balconies, brick-between-post cottages with center chimneys and double-pitched roofs, double-gallery houses, "jigsaw Victorian" cottages. . . .

Eighth, there is the food. While all places have local specialties, New Orleans is often described as the only city in America with an indigenous cuisine, distinct from its deep-fried neighbors by a rich menu of complex dishes that draws heavily from the heritage of the place and its people. While the prevalence of local dishes has diminished in recent decades, the art and appreciation of New Orleans cooking—"as brilliantly idiosyncratic as it gets"¹⁴¹—is still deeply embedded in the city's soul and is one of its two great cultural exports to the nation and the world.

Ninth, there is the music—New Orleans' other great cultural export, probably *the* greatest. Jazz epitomizes the creative and whimsical impulse of New Orleans and is, not coincidentally, often recognized as the only major art form born and developed entirely in America. The magnitude of its influence on American and world culture throughout the course of the twentieth century is only now being fully appreciated. Beyond jazz, New Orleans was famous for its opera in the nineteenth century and was a national hearth for rhythm and blues in the 1950s and early 1960s. Today it is a mecca for funk, blues, brass bands, gospel, Cajun, zydeco, local variations of rock, and both traditional and modern jazz. For a relatively small city, New Orleans' local music scene is disproportionately big and vivacious—practically a sub-economy and a subculture, with its own newspapers, community-supported radio stations, unions, activists, and factions. Broadly possessed musical genius spanning generations within the confines of a single city speaks volumes about the dynamic and creative character of a community.

"[New Orleans] is destined by its very situation to be the centre of an immense commerce between all nations, and the vast continent bathed by the rivers Misisipi, Misuri, San Francisco, Colorado, etc."

—Baron de Carondelet, in a 1794 letter recommending fortification of the Spanish colony against the threat of invasion (Turner, 495)

Finally, New Orleans is distinguished from other American cities by sundry traditions and images that have become clichés, mined mercilessly by the tourism industry, but nevertheless play an important role in enriching the overall fabric of the city. Carnival, streetcars on St. Charles, café au lait and beignets, potted ferns spilling from galleries, a jazz funeral—these and other icons impart *character to place* in New Orleans, rescuing the city from the modern descent toward placelessness that has homogenized most other American cities.

Behind these distinguishing attributes of New Orleans are geographical influences. The port, of course, is an exploitation of a fundamentally geographical circumstance, and is the taproot of much of the city's history and economics. The port attracted the French and Spanish colonial interests, which in turn brought the African influence and eventually attracted the Caribbean, Anglo-American, and immigrant elements. These groups, at first largely Catholic in religion and Latin by culture, laid out their city with urban-planning methods and architectural styles brought from the mother countries and adapted to local conditions (geographical and otherwise) that gave it an appearance that was both colonial and indigenous.

140. Ingraham, 147.

141. Hahn.

142. Errol Laborde, 47.

143. The references are to Oliver Evans and A. J. Liebling.

From this isolated multicultured from distant lands, emerged local dialect. The birth of jazz in the city due to its nexus of melodies from the Mississippi tunes and martial music. The metaphor—and from it emerge

Likewise, New Orleans' multicultural Catholic by tradition but Yankee of cultures (from places as varied Philadelphia) in a single geographic events and factors stem from the situation on the least-cost path that facilitates the harbor

Many large cities share some perhaps for this reason, visitor places: Québec and Havana accessible to another.¹⁴³ Appreciation of the from other American cities is credited at one of the other proposed at Bayou Manchac, or Nat

"There is on the globe one such Orleans, through which the tility it will ere long yield m—Thomas Jefferson, in a letter by Farber and Gar Mississippi River for Louisiana to France in power with an aggressive and could have led to war resolution: th

Would New Orleans be *New* distributed from the Mississippi the Indies in 1718-20? In this e would have occurred—the French grants in a similar manner, and French Quarter site. But then a miles from the coast—much farther below the Bayou Manchac site coast, draw off the port trade a French were first establishing t ment opportunities: witness the

144. Again, a word of caution is in order New Orleans. Every one of the ten a mine" that a port should arise or that ja suffer, or change, and thus *contributes* 145. The urge to build a port closest to a "Millennium Port" at any one of ten ping lanes. By June 2000, the Millennium terminal: Myrtle Grove, Woodland, Mississippi Bayou Lafourche delta. Later that year of man's drive to improve a bad geographic Whatever the final choice, port activity and the France Road Container Terminal river terminals to create a "mega-whar als aim at competing with rival ports at Orleans in the early 1700s continues in "Officials Take to Air," and "Dock Bo

would have diminished the effect of isolation from which New Orleans benefited, and would have dispersed the cultural traits that were concentrated in New Orleans and consequently became enduring icons. Additionally, perhaps the Bayou Manchac site would have lacked adequate riverside harboring opportunities,¹⁴⁶ and the navigability of the bayou itself might have proven limiting.

A similar case may be made for Natchez, advocated by Hubert and lauded as a superb site for a major city but not necessarily offering an optimal situation. If New Orleans were located at the Natchez site, hundreds of miles of the lower Mississippi (prime plantation country) would have been left open for the development of smaller cities, which might have siphoned off resources and population from the city at Natchez. The bluffs at Natchez do not provide for major port facilities, and the later preeminence of the Spanish and English in this region (if this would have come to pass under these speculative circumstances) may have erased the imprint of the French and made the hypothetical city less distinctive in America today.

Coastal sites at Biloxi, Mobile, or Pensacola probably would have only delayed, not replaced, the establishment of a city on the Mississippi; most major rivers have important cities near their mouths. But had New Orleans been sited on the coast, as a seaport and not a riverport, it would have been deprived of most Mississippi Valley influences. The “Kaintock” flatboatsmen of the early 1800s would not have arrived, the cotton factors and sugar and rice traders of the antebellum years might have settled elsewhere, and the fruits of the plantation economy would not have enriched a coastal city to the degree that they sustained the river city.

“New Orleans will be forever, as it is now, the mighty mart of the merchandise brought from more than a thousand rivers, unless prevented by some accident in human affairs. This rapidly increasing city will, in no distant time, leave the emporia of the Eastern World far behind. With Boston, Baltimore, New York, and Philadelphia on the left; Mexico on the right; Havana in front, and the immense valley of the Mississippi in the rear, no such position for the accumulation and perpetuity of wealth and power ever existed.”

—Thomas Jefferson, 1887 (As quoted in House Executive Documents, 185. While New Orleans’ national influence waned with the diminished criticality of Mississippi River shipping, the cultural fruits reaped during its early-nineteenth-century heyday remain in the city’s modern-day character.)

A city at Natchitoches would have been too distant from both the coast and the Mississippi to have fostered the development of a major port that was so rudimentary to New Orleans’ history. If New Orleans were sited on the shore of Lake Pontchartrain, it probably would have migrated over to the higher banks of the Mississippi and developed in manner equivalent to what eventually came to pass. Likewise, if New Orleans were sited at English Turn, it too might have migrated or spread upriver to the more convenient portage and broader natural levees of the French Quarter site, and developed accordingly.

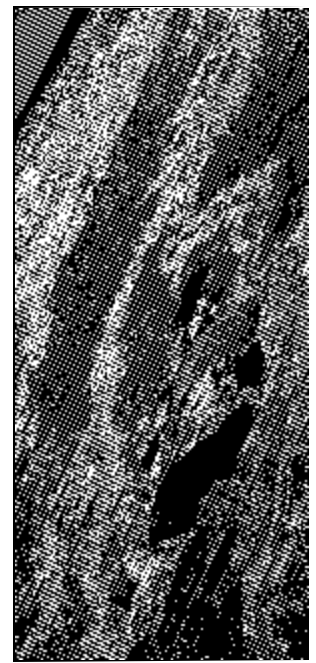
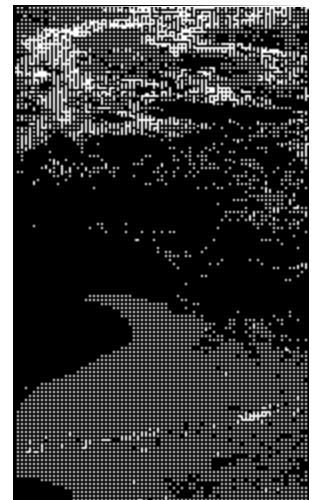
In short, had New Orleans been sited too far upriver, competing cities might have usurped its seaport advantage; had it been sited on the coast or in the interior, it might have been supplanted by some other city that seized the riverport advantage; and had it been sited too far downriver, it would have been constricted by a limiting topography and accessibility.

Although this exercise is based entirely on speculation (and the dubious assumption that history would have progressed generally within the channel that it eventually took), a case may be made that New Orleans’ geographical situation and site comprised critical ingredients in the formation of the city that we cherish today as a unique component of the world’s built environment. “The lower [Mississippi] valley contains the one truly cosmopolitan city, New Orleans, itself in turn a product of its geographical position,” wrote the distinguished cultural geographer Dr. Fred B. Kniffen.¹⁴⁷ That geographical position may have imparted to New Orleans just

146. Although Baton Rouge was founded nearby, no major city ever developed at the Bayou Manchac site. However, in the 1760s and 1770s, the British, realizing the potential of this area, formed a small community called Manchac (Point Iberville) and proceeded to excavate the clogged bayou to establish a permanent connection with the Mississippi. British governor Johnstone declared in 1764, “There is no place of so much consequence, to this Province, as that Settlement now [that] the Iberville [River] is open’d, & which will command the whole Trade of the Mississippi.” British plans in ensuing years foresaw Manchac growing to compete with New Orleans for Mississippi River trade. Their Fort Bute and the Spaniards’ Fort San Gabriel de Manchack, on the other side of the bayou, attested to the perceived value of this place. But the American Revolution intervened, and tiny Manchac became embroiled in the conflict, even in the actual fighting, “the only land clash between British and American forces to take place in Louisiana.” This site that might have become the premier city in the region—French, English, or Spanish—instead dwindled by the close of the century and was eventually swept away by the Mississippi River. Dalrymple, 11-33; quotes from 12, 26.

147. Kniffen, “The Lower Mississippi Valley,” 3.

the right mix of (1) coastal acclivity to the mouth of the river, (2) rich agricultural soils into a distinctive and great city, (3) Formosan shroud the otherwise festive city, (4) rich agricultural soils into a distinctive and great city, (5) rich agricultural soils into a distinctive and great city, (6) rich agricultural soils into a distinctive and great city, (7) rich agricultural soils into a distinctive and great city. comings have challenged engineering, and regardless of the merits, heavily in the historical development phenomenon we recognize today. cent selected by Bienville in the New Orleans should have been *Orleans*.” Perhaps it is this “place” in trying to articulate ex-



148. See Lewis, 27, for a “Catalogue of