

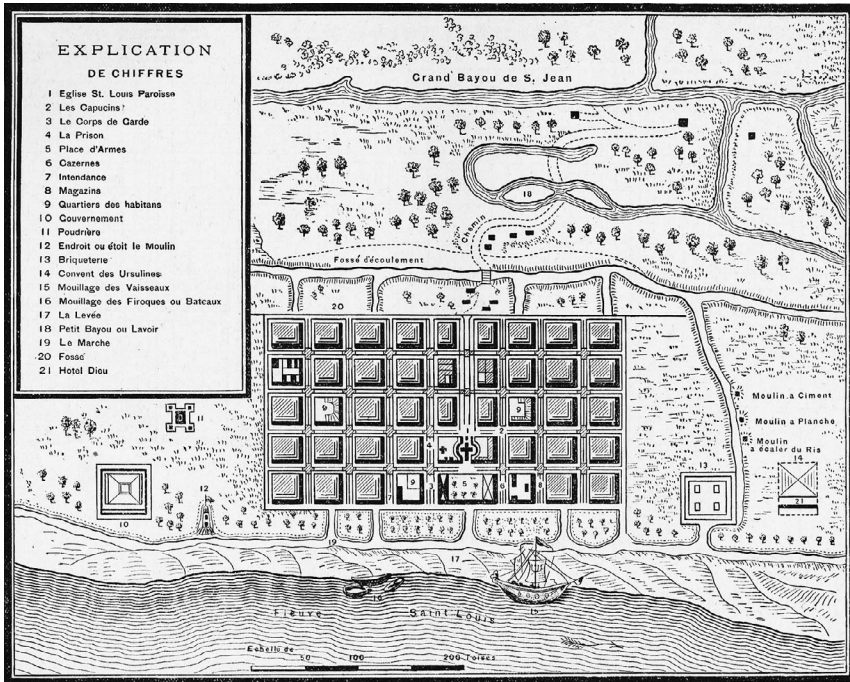
CHAPTER 1

Early Colonial Period (1711-40)

In 1699, the French established La Balize in the mudflats at the mouth of the Mississippi River, which marked the river's entrance and served as a beachhead for commerce and inland exploration. The founding of New Orleans about one hundred miles upriver took place only twenty years later. The city was built on the highest ground in the area: the natural levee on the river's east bank near Bayou St. John, which drained runoff from the new settlement to Lake Pontchartrain six miles north. This bayou became an important factor in the city's growth, facilitating navigation from New Orleans to the other French colonies along the Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida coasts. Historian John Kendall provides a good description of the young settlement:

New Orleans could boast of 100 houses and 500 inhabitants. The plan of the town, however, as projected by Bienville's engineer, De Pauger, contemplated a far greater population. De Pauger laid it out on lines reminiscent of La Rochelle, in France. It was approximately a parallelogram, 4,000 feet long on the river, by 1,800 feet in depth, divided into regular squares 300 feet on each side. The streets were not named until 1724. At that time the settled area did not extend beyond Arsenal (Ursulines) Street in one direction, or Bienville in the other, nor back further than Dauphine. The dwellings were rude cabins of split cypress boards, roofed with cypress bark.¹

The Mississippi River introduced the fledgling settlement to its nature within the first year of the city's founding, allegedly rising over the natural levee. Rivers around the world experience seasonal flooding, so the colony's military engineer oversaw the construction of the first manmade levees. Unlike the natural levees, which were broad with low slopes, the colonists threw up a trapezoidal cross-sectioned



A 1728 map of New Orleans. (Perry-Castaneda Library—Wikipedia)

line for the one-mile stretch fronting the settlement. This pile of soil was only about three feet above the existing elevation, but the record does not mention its width or the source of the soil used. Logic dictates that the material came from ditches dug to transport rain runoff and sewage, but it would have been more practical to take it from the riverside.²

Runoff and occasional river flooding plagued the city from the beginning. Within a few short years of its founding, the population quickly expanded to around 500. Over the next twenty years, 1,000 people called New Orleans home, and as the population grew, so did the need for creating appropriate storm and sanitary runoff systems. The issue was addressed in some fashion as soon as streets were laid out and buildings erected, but the record is unclear. By the early 1720s, drainage ditches surrounded each city block, but this was not sufficient. Thus, the government authorized a system of brick-lined drainage ditches in 1732 and suggested levying a tax to pay for it along with levee maintenance.³

The levee stood between the moored ships and the settlement. The record does not indicate whether the levee was vegetated to prevent erosion, but it is conceivable that it may have suffered some degradation from foot, beast-of-burden, and wagon traffic moving across it to the docks. We do know that the levee was extended both up- and downstream over the years to protect the plantations. By 1735, the levees reached about thirty miles upriver and about twelve miles downriver.⁴

1711

David Roth's compilation of Louisiana-centric hurricanes stated that the first colonial event impacted the Gulf Coast from Pensacola to the mouth of the Mississippi, leaving significant damage in its wake. No specifics are provided as to the damage at La Balize or if it was inhabited at the time.⁵

Whether any storms affected New Orleans between its foundation in 1718 and 1722 is unknown. Interestingly, the first recorded event is sufficiently detailed for present-day meteorologists to speculate where it made landfall.

1722

This hurricane reportedly pushed a seven- to eight-foot surge far up the Mississippi and two to three feet above the south shore of Lake Pontchartrain into Bayou St. John towards New Orleans.⁶ The high winds, surge, and heavy rain caused considerable destruction.⁷ Diron D'Artaguiette thoroughly described in his diary the terror caused by the storm:

Sept. 12. New Orleans. Toward ten o'clock in the evening there sprang up the most terrible hurricane which has been seen in these quarters. . . . Thirty-four houses were destroyed as well as the sheds, including the church, the parsonage, and hospital. . . . All the other houses were damaged about the roofs or the walls. . . . The wind came chiefly from the southeast. . . . It was remarkable that if the Mississippi had been high this hurricane would have put both banks of the river more than 15 feet under water, the Mississippi, although low, having risen 8 feet.⁸

D'Artaguiette's speculation about the water's possible depth is



A 1726 painting, by Jean-Pierre Lassus, of New Orleans viewed from Algiers Point. (Wikipedia)

likely highly exaggerated. The river's banks were the highest elevation in the area and would have overflowed somewhere below New Orleans. At the settlement, overflow would have traveled to Lake Pontchartrain and caused considerable destruction and erosion along that course, but there would not have been significant water depth. Even during and following the disaster of Hurricane Katrina, the early settlement's location (the French Quarter) was mostly dry due to the topography. D'Artaguiette's description continues for several days:

Sept. 13. The hurricane, continuing until mid-day, has not ceased to rage, but at noon, it having become much calmer, we learned from some people who had just come from the settlements of Srs. Trudeau and Coustillas, the houses there were blown down and their crops lost.

Sept. 30. The Bayou [St. John] . . . has over flowed by two or three feet, by reason of the hurricane. The waters having subsided, they found upon the surface of the water many dead fish, which caused a great stench.

Oct. 5. We have learned by means of a canoe which arrived from the lower part of the river . . . that all the houses and storehouses which are in Fort Louis were either blown down or damaged and that the sea rose 7 or 8 feet more than is ordinary. . . .

Oct. 6. I set out from New Orleans to go to Cannes Bruslees [a few miles upstream from New Orleans in present-day Kenner]. The same day I spent the night at the house of Sr. Massy where I noticed that the greatest injury which the hurricane had done there was to their houses which it had completely destroyed. The crops are not in such a hopeless condition; the rice, which was only in flower, having straightened up again. The loss to the colony, however, will be very considerable, because there was a great deal of rice ready to cut but which is entirely lost.

Oct. 7. I arrived in Cannes Bruslees where I found all the houses and barns blown down and not fit to be used. We set to work to repair the loss and to build sheds for the workmen and the grain.⁹

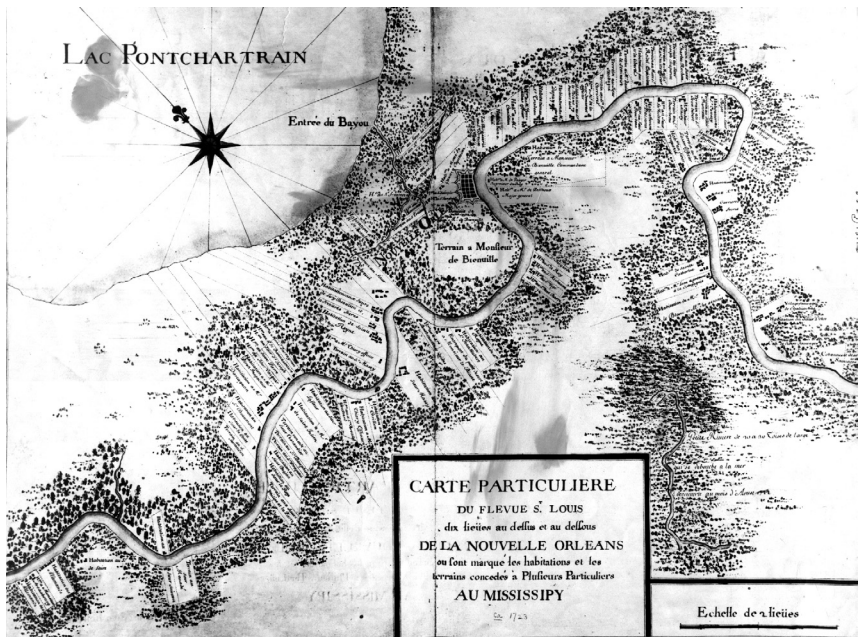
In his 1909 description of two defunct German settlements located about thirty miles upriver from New Orleans, J. Hanno Deiler stated that the wind came from the southeast and shifted around to the southwest. This led Ludlum to conclude that the storm's center moved inland west of the mouth of the Mississippi. Deiler said:

People were drowned out by the storm water of the great hurricane, and the waters of the lake. This storm lasted five days. . . . There being large bodies of water in the rear of the German Coast, Lac des Allmonds [*sic*] on the north, Lake Salvador on the south . . . it must have been the waters of these which hurled against the two German villages.¹⁰

The properties above and below New Orleans that would have been subjected to the hurricane are shown in the map below, attributed to 1723.

1740

One hurricane hit the mouth of the Mississippi River on September 22, and a second struck a week later on September 29. Charles Gayarré's



Map dated 1723 showing New Orleans in upper center with flanking rice and sugarcane plantations along the river. (Louisiana State Museum)

account in the French archives stated that a “Loubois” (possibly Chevalier Henri du Loubois, commandant of New Roads in the early 1700s) had reported that these two hurricanes damaged the battery at La Balize and the storm surge covered the mouth of the river. The damage was such that Loubois believed that the fortifications “could easily be carried by an attacking force of only four gunboats.” Loubois also documented the aftermath of the storm, as chronicled by Gayarré: “there are many families reduced to such a state of destruction, that fathers, when they rise in the morning, do not know where they will get the food required by their children.” Gayarré noted that the damage would cost over 450,000 livres and that only one person in the colony had sufficient funds to begin reconstruction, one “Dubreuil,” “to whom it had been adjudicated for the sum of 297,382 livre 10 centimes.”¹¹