

# LOST NEW ORLEANS

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## “A VILLAGE ON THE MISSISSIPPI”

All cities impose on nature, but it might be said that New Orleans doesn't just impose, it defies. Common sense had little to do with its founding, the swampy shores of the lower Mississippi being a most unwise choice as a city site. The highest point in New Orleans is fourteen feet above sea level, and in earlier times, nearly all the terrain was as soft as pudding. The climate is enervating, hurricanes are an annual hazard, and until the beginning of the twentieth century, the yellow-fever-bearing mosquito was a thriving local resident. Worst of all, the Mississippi is not only prone to devastating floods but were it not rigidly controlled by modern engineering techniques, it could shift its course and leave New Orleans stranded.

Thus this unique and dynamic city of a little over 1 million inhabitants exists despite many good reasons why it shouldn't. On land where the first settlers had difficulty in making even a log cabin stand up, there are now skyscrapers, expressways, and the Superdome. To support such mammoth structures, thousands of piles have to be driven through seventy feet (more or less) of muck in order to reach the Pleistocene compacted clay that underlies the entire area.

During the years of the city's most spectacular growth, 1830 to 1860, builders did not have the technological knowledge to construct a Superdome, but they did succeed in putting up houses, hotels, and public buildings that were among the finest in the United States. The water table was higher at that time than it is now; only a foot or two below the surface, the soil was more liquid than solid. By means of pumping, laying a grillage of crossed planks that could survive underwater, and using other improvised methods, architects and builders contrived to make their structures stand. But New Orleans's geographical situation - perhaps *predicament* is a better word - has always been a major factor in its history.

To understand New Orleans, one must begin with the river. The Mississippi is the city's whole *raison d'être*. The two have coexisted for more than two and a half centuries, sometimes with almost unbearable tension between them. For eons, the powerful waters of the river have brought silt and other debris from far to the north, building up a deltaic deposit which now extends from the vicinity of Cairo, Illinois, southward to the Gulf of Mexico. There are no rocks in or near New Orleans - only silt,

sand, and clay mixed with decomposed swamp vegetation to produce a rich, wet soil. The delta below Baton Rouge is crisscrossed with sluggish distributaries, known as bayous, whose geographical position is unstable. Every few hundred years, the great river has changed its own main course.

Before the city was founded in 1718, the inhabitants of this part of the world were seminomadic Indians. For at least 10,000 years they had been roaming here, leaving enormous middens of discarded shards and shells as evidence of their presence. If the river flooded one of their temporary villages, they simply took their few belongings and left, traveling through the alligator-infested bayous in dugout canoes.

In 1682, the French explorer René-Robert Cavelier, sieur de La Salle, led a small party down the Mississippi from what is now Illinois all the way to the Gulf. Near the river's mouth, La Salle put up a lead plaque, announcing that the owner of this part of the world was Louis XIV. He then made his way back up the river and returned to France from Canada. In honor of his king, he named the territory he had passed through La Louisiane and the river St. Louis. However, the Indian word *Mississippi*, said to mean "Father of Waters" or perhaps "Big River" or "Fish River" (authorities differ), was too splendid a word to be dropped from history and has managed to stay with us.

Back in Paris, La Salle had little difficulty in convincing King Louis and his ministers of the value of the new possession. Even the highly inaccurate maps at hand showed them the vast Mississippi Valley and its proximity to French possessions in Canada. They could also see the encroaching territories of rival European powers: the English ones along the Atlantic coast, the Dutch in New York, the Spanish in Florida and Mexico, and all three in the Caribbean. The fact that the Gulf end of La Louisiane was largely swamp, canebrake, alligators, and mosquitoes caused little concern to the power wielders sitting around a Paris conference table. If they stopped to picture the place at all, they probably envisioned a river mouth like that at Le Havre and other French ports, where a quiet stream flows into a deep clear harbor and the geography can be relied on to stay the same. Direct accounts were not enlightening, either, because on-the-scene reporters were ambitious for royal grants and commissions. One letter written in 1697 to the count de

Pontchartrain, minister of the Navy, described southern Louisiana as a rich, rolling country, and did not mention a word about swamps. However, even if the king and his advisors had known the unvarnished truth about the delta country, they would still have coveted it; they were sure that if France did not move in, England or Spain would.

The king sent La Salle back to Louisiana by sea, but the new expedition failed to find the mouth of the Mississippi and landed several hundred miles west of it. While attempting to reach the Mississippi overland, La Salle was killed by his own men. It was 1699 before another expedition was dispatched, this time under a Quebecois named Pierre Le Moyne, sieur d'Iberville, who was instructed to set up a military post. Iberville built a small fort near present-day Biloxi, Mississippi, and left it garrisoned with 100 men. When its commander died the next year, Iberville's twenty-one-year-old brother, the sieur de Bienville, succeeded him. Iberville died in 1706 in Havana of yellow fever - the disease that was to be the scourge of New Orleans. Young Bienville was to live on to stamp his name upon the early history of the city.

After a trial period, the little fort was moved to another site near present-day Mobile, and a handful of colonists struggled to make a home there. The French government sent livestock, tools, and marriageable girls. A few Canadian families arrived by way of the river. But France was now too preoccupied with a losing war against England to develop this tiny colony, and besides, after years of the excesses of Louis XIV, the royal exchequer was badly depleted. When the old king died in 1715, the country was close to bankruptcy.

Curiously enough, the future of French influence in Louisiana was ensured at this time not by a Frenchman but by a scheming Scottish gambler, John Law. Clever but reckless. Law arrived in Paris with a fortune won at the gaming tables and made his way into French court society. The duke of Orléans, regent for the child king Louis XV, was attracted by Law's plan for making the nation solvent. This scheme called for organizing a banking company that would sell stock against the anticipated proceeds of the development of Louisiana. Law was not much of an economist, but he was a brilliant public relations man.