1 Situation

An aerial perspective serves as a reminder of the intimate relationship between the Mississippi River and the greater New Orleans metropolitan area, viewed here in 1966 from a point above English Turn looking upriver. The river created New Orleans' terrain, sculpted its topography, deposited its rich soils, attracted natives and settlers to its banks, gave access to the interior and the rest of the world, provided water for both residents and industries, and has served as the foundation for its economy and the taproot of its unique culture.

by Sam R. Sutton, The Historic New Orleans Collection, accession no. 1984.166.2.889
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 inevitable 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 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.1

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)

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


6. Hunt, 218, and Lower Mississippi Res...
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, silt 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. 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 of 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. 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. 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) 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,” 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

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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.”


10. Spearing, 59-61.

11. Newton, 44-47.


13. See Newton, 44-45, for a discussion of square miles measures the general area
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. 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 odyssey across the wilderness of present-day Texas, possibly New Mexico and Arizona, and northern Mexico, arriving in the Pacific coastal settlement of Culiacán, Mexico in 1536. de Vaca’s great contribution was his account of the journey, published in 1542, which provided splendid detail.

14. “Memoir of M. Cavelier 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.

16. Ogg, 9-10; Rivera Novo and Martí.
17. Ogg, 16.

18
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.” 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 Rio 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. 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, 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,” 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 site 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, Leagues above the mouth of t disposition of the savages,” fer tunity to “harass the Spaniards France’s exertions in this region fortification would also serve Mexico, storing supplies, harb Louisiana. In selling the col port or two [here] would make of a settlement on the lower M vulnerable to attack from “as t post, established towards the lo 800 leagues from north to sout the sea through the mouth of t leagues.” La Salle’s concept Rouge, perhaps at the Bayou La Salle returned to France dently set out in 1684 with gr the mouth of the great river. V some historians, though La S labyrinth of the delta region of perate search for the river that Texas. Indeed, in the lower Mi foggy day can spell the differ North America’s greatest river.

The alternate hypothesis ca: the mouth of the Mississippi \ Spanish in Mexico. La Salle’s location of its lower channel a ers. In any case, the expedit mutinous crew members, and t

20. Ogg, 27-28, 44.
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 Tangibahoe (sic) village in Quinipissas territory, situated upon a portage that was probably associated with Bayou St. John.
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, 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. 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,” 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, 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.” 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.

France’s worries of foreign intervention were further exacerbated that same year by the publication in Utrecht of Father Louis Hennequin’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. 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.

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 Phélypeaux, Count de Pontchartrain, Moyne, sieur d’Iberville, a thir against the English in the recer site that can be defended with the phase-two consideration in actual site within the key geo.

**Enter the Le Moyne Brothers**

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

While seeking this importa gained crucial knowledg (ou ic plain, featuring names along Gulf Coast via the present Ponchartrain-Rigolets-Lake B Ponchartrain, marking the fut described this humble portage ers and the North American int

The Indian who accomp bay, where the Indian b 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 j and the Gulf of Mexico at the shortcuts would allow explore the Gulf Coast in less time, sl entirely, to the indigenous peop

After the explorations, Iberville survey, established in early Ap first tangible French effort to c

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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.”


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 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,” 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, and other perils and lost opportunities in delaying the French settlement of Louisiana.


38. Ibid., 15-20.


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, 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. Bienville probably selected this site because the Rivière aux Chênes provided a backdoor shortcut to the gulf and because the slight natural-levée 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 recorded in 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 downstream, 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 Mississipi.” 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.

48. Descendants of these families form
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.

4. 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.

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.


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
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.\textsuperscript{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 suppyes and communications.”\textsuperscript{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—strung 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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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. John\textsuperscript{54} 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 Metaire and Gentilly (Sauvage).\textsuperscript{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.
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,” but it would be up to the next regime of Louisiana mavens to finally seize the site.

**Founding of New Orleans, Phase I: 1717-18**

Those merceurs 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. 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, 1717—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.” 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; 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 Bonnau as a cashier “at the counter [office] which is to be established at New Orleans, on the St. Louis [Mississippi] River.” 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 to its present-day location. Perhaps he was carrying on the vision management of Louisiana, as English advancement in the Mi.

“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 t from Bayou St. John, at Mississippi with the La served only as warehouse this port is that ships of

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

Historian Marc de Villiers (mid-March and mid-April 1717) implies “founding”70 and there Bienville. However, Villiers di at pleasure anywhere between tified the city plan] drawn up ; Bienville’s report and the Com graphical debate ensued as to a wilderness of Louisiana. At st. New Orleans.

**Where to Site the Princ**

Controversy surrounded the site Mississippi Valley and coastal vantages, but no clearly superi worthwile debate emerged pu

61. Crozat, as quoted by Giraud, vol. 2, 42.
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 vacillating between 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.
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 by 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 single, log-strewn Bayou St. John portage (5b) to Bell Street (5d), then disembark St. Jean ridge toward the river, they, of Faubourg Tremé (8), North Rampart Street at the edge of the original city (9), what is now the French Quarter’s Governor Nicholls Street (10-11), a market (12-13) on the banks of the riverbank during the early years ma
a number of years by 1718 and therefore had advocates with something to lose by the rise of a new and inevitably competing city. 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 site—as the home for New Orleans, at times against strong opposition from partisans on the coast and Company directors in France.

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 first proposed a presence on the Mississippi River guarded the artery against foreign—namely English—penetration of I Louisiana and probably rivaled the competitive locale. 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 parallel to 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 provided a bedrock for settlement in the wilderness, now the author, 1996-2000

26. Davis, 55.
77. Le Page du Pratz, eyewitness to the early years of French Louisiana, described the attributes of the future New Orleans: “Bayou Road/Esplanade Ridge, rather than as 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.
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.97 Valued for its position on the busiest route98 between the gulf and the river, Bayou Manchac’s champions included the Company of the West, Bénard de La Harpe, Drouot de Valterre, 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”) 51 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 this site from the gulf was a major undertaking for a navigator.

3. **Natchez** The rugged landscape, where in 1716 Bienville and tenacious promoter was Marc à Natchez a general of the New Orleans Coure and once promoted that area to St. Catherine’s Creek and New Orleans.

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97. 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.
98. The Louisiana Historical Quarterly, 372.
91. As quoted by Villiers du Terrage, 184.
81. Bragg, 213, and Detro, 193.
82. Brasseaux, A Comparative View of Louisiana, 65.
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 Ind loosely translated as "rear entrance"), connecting Lake Pontchartrain and Lake Maurepas, 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. Ye Pass Manchac was a segment of a series of international colonial-era borders; it is now a parish line. *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 downstream, 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 Manchac. 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.

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.”

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) 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.

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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.

98. As quoted from *Le Nouveau Mercure*.
99. As quoted from *Relation de la Louisiane*.
100. As quoted by Villiers du Terrage, 223-24.
101. Father Charlevoix nevertheless does not the mouth of the river be defended! 102. In fact there was a waterway between the swamp, small and difficult to navigate; the interior to warrant the construction of (Lake Borgne Canal) in pursuit of the Orleans’ successful effort to do the same (the Violet Canal) has been used most *Alternative*, 55.
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. Photograph 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.

6. Other Sites

For a whi Pensacola, some Company directors port of Louisiana, Biloxi partis it bolstered the role of the coastal city. 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**
  
  English and Spanish exploration would have made it vulnerable.

- **Establishment**
  
  In a site and with rudiment sc

- **Avoidance of the Mississippi River sites during certain seasons**

Sites considered by the Company of the West (later Company of the Indies) and its various stakeholders for the capital included:

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 succeed with a grid-pattern street network.

2a. A strong contender to become Manchac shortcut intersected v

2b. In 1720, officials proposed Manchac shortcut intersected v

3a. Natchez (Fort Rosalie) in present-day Mississippi was favored by Marc Antoine Hubert, commissary general of Louisiana and a major landowner in the area.

3b. Natchez’s main advantage was elevation model of the Natchez twenty-five feet above mean sea level. These elevations are over 4a. Some suggested English trade of Mexico via a labyrinth of b

4b. Most attractive about English incoming ships slowed.

5. One commentator suggested one short distance from Lake Borgne, where Bayou Dupre transected the marshes bet

6.-10. Others advocated concentrating resources and power in the older coastal sites of Biloxi, Mobile and Dauphin Island, capitals of French Louisiana throughout the 1710s, and Natchitoches, founded inland in 1721. (In fact Biloxi became capital in 1719-22 but failed to attain commercial importance.) Mobile and Natchez were more than twenty-five miles away)

Soils

While good soil culture.

103. Villiers du Terrage, 180-81.

Sites Competing To Be the Premier City/Capital of French

1. French Quarter Site
2. Bayou Manchac Site
3. Natchez
4. English Tu
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.”

- **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, captured by the French, and returned to the Spanish after the Franco-Spanish War of 1719-22—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 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. Le Gac also mentions a sort of worm in the waters of Biloxi that apparently damaged ship hulls, and La Harpe claimed that “contrary winds” made Old Biloxi (Ocean Springs) an unfavorable port. 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”—while Natchez and Bayou Manchac may have been too 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) 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 Orleans to their particular corner of the land. Governor Bienville was practically the sole proponent on the Company board of the French Quarter site. “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 far as some others.” The otth encouraged the coalition of Mt business was threatened by riv New Orleans, and the “ma which the prestige of Biloxi at

During those years, pros an modern-day chamber of com hur’ on the riverside site in . houses were under way.” Th the Indians had not seen befor ments. The resilient Bienville champion of Natchez and ener the land lies higher and the he

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

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105. Villiers du Terrage, 192.
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.
111. Higginbotham, Fort Maurepas, 69-73.
112. Claiborne, 36-37, and Villiers du Terrage, 196.
113. Pratz, 53.
114. Villiers du Terrage, 186.
115. Chambers, 105.
116. As quoted by Villiers du Terrage, 117. Ibid., 182.
118. Ibid., 190.
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 Bayou Biloxi. Chief Engineer Le Blond de La Tour, a pro-Biloxi adversary of Bienville and the 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, 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 blacks (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. 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.” 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.” 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.” 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.” “The capital city must be at Manchac, where the high lands begin,” wrote one M. de Beauvais in another memoir. 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.
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 Manchue [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 Pensacola (Pensacola), L’Île aux Vaisseaux (Ship Island, near Biloxi), Biloxi (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.
Orleans that survives today as the French Quarter (Vieux Carré, or Old Square), one of the best-preserved colo-
nial city plans in America and a direct link between the modern metropolis and its earliest days in the wilder-
ness.

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.” Recalled one observer a few years later, “New-Orleans began to assume the appearance of a city,
and to increase in population, . . . in 1722.”

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 gov-
erned 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 city—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 predom-
ninate and those are what we seek to identify here. Many of these traits are now trivialized on postcards and
sterotyped 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 prevail-
"ing 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,” 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 mil-
lion tons of freight annually, behind only Houston and New York/New Jersey; when combined with other south

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 Viliers du Terrage, 246. Bienville served as colonial governor of Louisiana during 1701-
13, 1716-17, 1718-25, and 1733-43.
137. Ingraham, 96.

Second, there is the French colonial cultures, exceptions to and are apparent today in the p law legal system, and the socie
Third, there is the African islands, and emigration from th American ports, making New

Fourth, there is the immig Ireland, and other lands between Americans and Vietnamese toc
Fourth, there is the immig Ireland, and other lands between Americans and Vietnamese toc bly the oldest historically multi:
Spanish, African, and Caribbei interior South. “No city perhap of national manners, language,
Fifth, there is the religious and Catholicism influencesthe Cathedral, the Catholic school: pervasive and paradoxical atm

138. U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, W
139. Darby, 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.”

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”—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.

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.

From this isolated multicol from distant lands, emerged lo to dialect. The birth of jazz in t ed in the city due to its nexus p melodies from the Mississippi l tunes and martial music. The metaphor—and from it emerge Likewise, New Orleans’ Catholic by tradition but Yanks of cultures (from places as var Philadelphia) in a single geogr events and factors stem from t situation on the least-cost path cent that facilitates the harborsi Many large cities share sor perhaps for this reason, visitor places: Québec and Havana ac to another.

“[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 Missipi, 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)

“Officials Take to Air,” and “Dock Board Chooses Design”; and the Associated Press.

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

140. Ingraham, 147.
141. Hahn.
142. Errol Laborde, 47.
143. The references are to Oliver Evans and A. J. Liebling.
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, 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” flatboatmen 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. That geographical position may have imparted to New Orleans just the right mix of (1) coastal acclimatity to the mouth of the river, (2) rich agricultural soils; into a distinctive and great city comings have challenged engin

—Lewis, 27, for a “Catalogue of Difficulties” of New Orleans’ site.