

New Orleans History

Rene Cavalier Sieur de la Salle, a French explorer, was the first European to explore the lower Mississippi River and he claimed the entire river and its basin, a substantially larger plot than the modern state of Louisiana, for France. The immense area was named in honor of King Louis XIV and his wife Anne. Phillippe, Duc d'Orleans, then Regent of France, gave his name to New Orleans, but it was Sieur d'Iberville who founded the actual city some 20 years later. A port city uniting the Mississippi River with the Gulf of Mexico had long been a strategic dream, but the site's physical landscape, an improbable 15 feet below sea level, was a nightmare. Most of the lands surrounding the river were swamps, wetlands intermittently covered by water, and dense woody vegetation. In addition, malaria, spread by Louisiana's most prolific resident, the mosquito, presented a lethal risk to any worker.

It turned out to be a Scotsman, royal counselor John Law, who stimulated interest in France's newest colonial addition. Law mounted an 18th-century PR campaign complete with phony eyewitness accounts of gold-rich lands. When hopeful and oftentimes poor immigrants arrived and saw none of the promised gold prospects, they had little choice other than to stay and make the best of it. The deceived immigrants also found New Orleans a deadly place with its humid and unsanitary conditions. Those who died were buried in the swampy land, but residents soon discovered that coffins had the unpleasant propensity to pop out of the ground with every hard rain. Aboveground tombs and mausoleums were the only recourse. Most residents built houses in a square-like grid, now called the Vieux Carre (French Quarter), centered around an open area known as the Place d'Armes, today known as Jackson Square. The societal make-up of this Creole society was a mix of French aristocrats, merchants, farmers, soldiers, indentured servants, and both slaves and free people of color. It soon became fashionable for male Creole aristocrats to have black or mulatto mistresses. Children sired from these unions were often treated well and sometimes given valuable property and a European education. This generous attitude towards minorities set New Orleans apart from all other major North American colonial cities.

In the 1760s, New Orleans underwent its first major social transformation with the arrival of two new groups: the Acadians and the Spanish. The Acadian immigrants, or Cajuns, who were ousted from their native Nova Scotia by the British, traversed the entire United States and settled in the bayous west of New Orleans. The Spanish arrived in the city prodded by the transfer of the Louisiana Territory to Spanish King Charles III, royal cousin to King Louis XV of France. The Spanish reign however, was short and most notable for the building codes enacted to spare the Vieux Carre from the devastating fires that swept the city in 1788 and 1794. Much of the architecture of the area that has been attributed to the French, including rear courtyards and elaborate wrought iron balconies, is actually a Spanish contribution.

Despite the prosperity that developed during Spanish occupation, New Orleans remained predisposed to its French heritage. The city happily reunited with its original founders in 1800, when the Louisiana Territory was returned to France. However, the reunion was short-lived. War debts forced Napoleon to sell the territory to the United States for a mere \$15 million in the famous Louisiana Purchase of 1803. Louisiana later achieved statehood in 1812.

Once Louisiana was officially named an American state, American settlers and Irish and Italian immigrants rushed into the city of New Orleans. Rebuffed by the city's Creole society, the Americans settled upriver from the Vieux Carre in what are now the Central Business District and the Irish Channel. Skirmishes between the old and new residents occurred frequently. The dividing line, an empty canal, between the

French Quarter and the American sector, became known as "the neutral ground" and then, Canal Street.

In the years leading up to the Civil War, New Orleans became a prosperous port city. Cotton, tobacco, and sugarcane plantations produced goods at full throttle. Steamboats along the Mississippi transferred the goods to the rest of country. During this economically comfortable period, New Orleans developed its festive reputation. By 1823, costume balls commemorated Mardi Gras or "Fat Tuesday," the celebration that precedes Lent. Secret aristocratic groups, known as Mardi Gras Krewes, offered structure to the loose, sometimes violent, holiday season. In 1857, the first established Krewe, the Mystick Krewe of Comus, debuted a horse-drawn, decorated float, which soon became a prominent constituent of the annual festivities. Some years later, the Comus Krewe introduced the role of Mardi Gras Queen, bestowing the premier honor on Mildred Lee, daughter of Confederate General Robert E. Lee.

New Orleans, loyal to the Confederacy, fell quickly to Union forces in the early years of the Civil War. City morale suffered, but the French Quarter continued to thrive because of saloons, gambling parlors, and bordellos. The party atmosphere became somewhat regulated toward the turn of the century when alderman Sidney Story proposed setting up a red-light district along Basin Street, just to the north of the French Quarter. The district soon became known as Storyville. Resident entertainers there, most notably "King" Oliver and Jelly Roll Morton, would later contribute to the birth of the national musical art form known as jazz.

The beginning of the 20th century was a difficult period for New Orleans. A series of natural disasters, including a hurricane in 1915, a flu epidemic in 1918, and a flood in 1927, devastated the city. Legendary governor and beloved scoundrel Huey P. Long rescued the Crescent City with successful bids to the state legislature for the expansion of public works and services. Long's legally questionable, but ultimately successful methods also put a corrupt stamp on both city and state politics. The famous line, "Folks have a certain way of doing things 'round here," from the movie *The Big Easy*, is a fairly accurate assessment of the local bureaucratic mindset over the past century.

Oil, natural gas and tourism have become New Orleans' largest post-Depression industries. In 1969, the first Jazz Fest, a 10-day festival and one of the world's largest musical celebrations, attracted the biggest names in jazz and blues to its outdoor stages. The festival continues to draw impossibly large numbers of visitors to the city each year. The 1984 World's Fair Exhibit was a less successful commercial venture, but led to the development of the Warehouse District wharves.

In 2005, Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans causing one of the United States' most devastating natural disasters. Many of the city's levees were breached and over 80 percent of the city was covered in water. A forced evacuation saved many lives but over a thousand people were killed. Though the city was ravaged, the city is rebuilding and its spirit is stronger than ever.