

1698: A PRELUDE TO LOUISIANA

Forests of odd-looking trees. Marshes and prairies of waving grasses. Water everywhere... lakes, bayous, a spectacular river, and soggy swamps. Insects galore. Half-naked Indians with strange customs. Strange foods. Unpredictable, unmerciful weather. LaSalle had passed through this landscape in 1682 and claimed it all for France. None of his countrymen, though, made it back until an expedition under the LeMoyne brothers of Canada arrived in 1699. This is the prelude to what they would find as they paddled and slogged through the land that would eventually become New Orleans. It was largely due to these very elements - good and bad – that the City of New Orleans is what it is today. Understanding the original inhabitants and the basic geography of this area is key to understanding how New Orleans came into existence in the first place, and why it is still such a dynamic and economically important city today.

The Native Americans

By 1650, Spain, Britain, and France had divvied up North America among themselves. No thought, of course, was given to the people who actually lived here. After all, they had no guns, were often migratory, living off the bounty of the earth in cooperation with the needs and requirements of the land. Besides, there were not a whole lot of them. To the European mind, therefore, the American continents were vast, empty lands upon which to plant their civilization. It appears that the French, as opposed to the other Powers, saw the natives as a bit more than half-naked savages. They were partners in trade, teachers about the land and its bounty, and a fertile population for the spread of the One, True, Catholic faith. This attitude was rooted in the Gallic approach to colonial policy. French strategy called for the creation of a balance to the economic and military advantages that Spanish and English colonies were providing to their countries. As the Englishmen and women settled in significant numbers along the coast and began to civilize the wilderness into what would become the USA, the French created some smaller settlements in the North, then began moving westward in sizable numbers. The *coureurs de bois* (literally, rovers of the forests), the *voyageurs* (travelers), and the Jesuits spread French Catholic influence among the Natives all along the rivers and lakes above the 40th Parallel (the line that slices North America in half longways, approx. at the latitude of St. Louis, MO). While the French were not exactly enlightened in their opinion of the Native Americans and still considered them to be savages, they generally treated them with respect. Since they were more interested in religious conversion, trade, and lining their pockets as opposed to settling down, the Frenchmen created a less intrusive presence than the English. These Gallic attitudes permeated the social and geographical matrix that became known as Louisiana.

If you ask the proverbial 'New Orleanian on the street today' about the local Indians who were here at the founding of the city in 1718, you will undoubtedly hear that the Houma, Choctaw, Tunica, Tchoupitoulas, and/or Natchez were here when the French arrived (if you get an answer at all). Several factors played into the creation of this local Indian lore, not the least being the white man's tendency to group all Native Americans together as one large homogeneous people. Beyond this, the fact that today, the Houma, the Tunica-Biloxi, and the Choctaw are all still viable groups living in South Louisiana makes it easy to assume that these were the groups who were here in 1718. In truth, all of these groups were present in colonial Louisiana before and after the founding of the city. But of the Indians who actually lived in the New Orleans area (listed below) none of these tribes or nations are counted. Much of the confusion arises because most of the people who did live in the area spoke dialects of the Choctaw language, known as Muskogean. Since these languages were pervasive in the New Orleans area, many of the Indians were simply called Choctaws by the Europeans. It must be stated clearly that while the local (New Orleans area) natives spoke versions of the Choctaw language, the Choctaw

Nation itself was located by all the original sources far to the north of the Ile d'Orleans. So the question becomes, who were the local New Orleans Indians in 1718?

Chitimacha? Acolapissa? Choctaw? Houma? Tchoupitoulas? The probable answer is all of them... and a few others as well. LaSalle, in 1682, called the local natives at the southern end of the great river the Quinapissa. These were the Indians whom Iberville sought to contact to unequivocally prove that he had come up the same river which LaSalle had come down. In his journals, Iberville names the natives he encountered upon his arrival in 1699. He notes that on his first voyage during the spring of 1699, the following groups were below the joining of the Red and the Mississippi Rivers; the Pascagoula, and the Bilocchy aka Biloxi (on the coast), the Bayougoula, Mougoulascha, Quinipissa, Mactoby, Chitimacha, Chaouacha, Ouascha, Houma, and the Tangipahoa (on or near the river). (Iberville, p. 40-65) By the end of March, 1699, Bienville and Iberville had come into possession of a letter left by Henri de Tonti with the Natives in 1685. This letter, as well as a book, and some empty bottles had been given to the Natives by Tonti before he returned to Canada. In the letter he calls the Natives the Quinipissa. The LeMoynes brothers knew the same Natives as the Bayougoula/ Mougoulascha. (Iberville, p. 89) On the river, the French appear to have dealt mainly with the Bayougoula group(s) during their early explorations, Iberville notes that the Quinapissa (read Bayougoula) had deserted a village on Bayou St. John some years before their arrival. (Iberville, p. 111) This same village was associated with the "Acolapissa" by du Pratz and St. Denis (see below). Prior to discovering the Tonti letter, Iberville further clarifies the identification of these groups as he records a discussion with the Bayougoula on March 14th. Within this conversation, Iberville learned that the Bayougoula, Mougoulascha, Quinipissa, Chaouacha, Ouascha, Chitimacha, and the Tangipahoa were almost certainly kinship groups. Group names and villages were constantly in flux, joining and splitting apart probably in response to local economic conditions. The dialogue revealed that the Tangipahoa group had been destroyed by a Houma raid and therefore the Quinipissa were thus reduced from seven to six villages (Iberville, p. 61). Raids such as these were common among the various Native groups and contributed to the population flux. Small tribal groups, like the Bayougoula, et. al. were prime candidates for slave raiding by more powerful neighbors, The Houma, the Natchez, and the Choctaw (proper) made many such raids that further decimated the populations, European diseases, against which the Indians were defenseless, were also part of this scenario, These factors, disease and raids, are most likely the cause of the disappearance or absorption of the Tchoupitoulas. Finally, we must consider the Chitimacha. The tribe holds (on their website) that they were the original inhabitants of New Orleans. The truth in this tradition adds strength to the above population outline. Today, the Chitimacha are located just to the west of Greater New Orleans, and very likely were part of the kinship groups who wandered the lower reaches of the Mississippi, Lake Pontchartrain, and Bayou Lafourche areas, now joining, now diffusing from their kinsfolk taking advantage of the abundant natural resources of the area (<http://www.chitimacha.gov/index.htm>).

Comparing and analyzing the colonial sources along with modern studies of archaeology, tribal histories, and Native Louisiana folklore, a picture emerges of nomadic groups who survived along the edges of the marsh and the various rivers and bayous that is the Gulf Coast of south Louisiana. It may be useful to compare their wanderings to the semi-nomadic lifestyle of the buffalo hunters of the same era on the North American Plains or even further afield to the mammoth hunters in the late Paleolithic and Mesolithic eras of Europe. In simple terms, all of these family groups and clan/tribes followed the migrating herds. Seasonal villages were built along the group's migratory cycle. People came and went with the seasons or with the flux in population. Different groups merged together and broke apart as climate conditions, landscapes, game populations, and human politics demanded. Unlike our neat Euro-American farmsteads, settlements, ranges, and ranches, which we claim and call our private property, the Native Louisianans lived in the best places they could find, given the moment. During the moments around 1718, one of those places was on or near the portage between the Mississippi and Bayou St. John.

One of Louisiana's earliest chroniclers, le Page du Pratz, settled at a spot on Bayou St. John in 1718. In the process of building his concession, he acquired a female Indian slave to keep house and cook (and, no doubt, to perform other wifely services). He writes that his lady is of the local "Chitimacha" tribe. He also goes on to record that the Chitimacha danced the calumet ceremony (smoked the peace pipe) with and for Bienville at the new settlement being built at New Orleans (Pratz & Fortier). Also, on Bayou St. John (near the southern line of today's City Park), another early settler, St. Denis, is said to have settled on land that was once an "Acolapissa" village (Phares, p. 39). The overall picture of the native population is clarified by the presence of another local bayou called the Tchoupitoulas, which connected to Bayou St. John from the west. Today, Metairie Road more or less traces its route, but in colonial times, it led to the country (settlements) of the Tchoupitoulas Indians. These people lived along the Mississippi in today's Jefferson Parish. Some sources say that the Tchoupitoulas had disappeared by the time the French arrived. However, there is evidence that they remained there well into the nineteenth century, Mr. Meloney Soniat, writing in the Louisiana Historical Quarterly in 1924, tells of childhood memories of the Tchoupitoulas on his grandfather's plantation-which was named after the Indians.

"The Indians of the Tchoupitoulas Village were gradually driven away by the white settlers and moved over the lake in the neighborhood of Mandeville, there joining other tribes. Every winter, however, some of them would come back and camp on a piece of ground called Terre Haute, in the rear of the Tchoupitoulas Plantation, where there was a large grove of magnolias. There the Indians would remain until Spring, when they would return to their village near Mandeville. These visits continued until the United States Government had the tribes removed to the Indian Reservation. I remember that, as a boy, I visited the Indians on several occasions at Terre Haute, and saw their huts, which were built of palmetto leaves. The reason given by the Indians for coming from over the lake, was that the winters were less rigorous on this side, but the real reason, no doubt, was that the older Indians who had inhabited the village of the Tchoupitoulas were drawn back to the neighborhood where they, in their youth, had been accustomed to hunt and fish without interference from the whites; then again their descendants also desired to visit the hunting grounds of their ancestors." (LHQ 1924; V7, #2, p.314 ff.)

To summarize the New Orleans "Indian Question" then, in the first twenty years of the eighteenth century, today's city and its metropolitan area were populated by several small groups or "tribes" of Natives mostly speaking dialects of Choctaw. The Quinipissa and/or the Acolapissa (probably one and the same) definitely lived on Bayou St. John before 1700. By 1718, the Bayougoula had absorbed the Mougoulascha; while the Chauouacha, and the Ouascha had either become extinct or been absorbed as well. The Tangipahoa and the Tchoupitoulas also were gone or had merged with the Bayougoula. Since all of these groups were related in one way or another, it is probable that the original New Orleans Indians can be called the Quinipissa Group with another kin group to the west called the Chitimacha. In the two decades between the founding of Louisiana (1699) and the building of New Orleans (1718), these groups had been reduced by warfare, slave raids, and disease. Regarding the other tribes of Louisiana, those not native to the New Orleans area but who remain in Louisiana today, some Choctaw had migrated south to the North Shore of Lake Pontchartrain during the French colonial period. The main body of the Choctaw nation remained in north central Mississippi, with the Creek immediately to their south and east and the Chickasaw east and north of both groups. The Tunica essentially stayed in their original homeland around the confluence of the Red and the Mississippi, later to be joined by their kinsmen, the Biloxi. The Houma moved west from the "baton rouge" on the Mississippi to lower Bayou LaFourche, where they live today.

The Houma, the Tunica-Biloxi, as well as the actual Choctaws, had been trading with the French at Biloxi and Mobile for nearly twenty years by the time New Orleans was established. The Indians of Louisiana and New Orleans were a crucial, if not essential, part of the French colonial experience. Indeed, it is safe to say that without the Native Americans along the lower Mississippi and the bayous, there would have been no French colonial Louisiana. Over the course of those first formative decades,

Bienville and other government officials sent their soldiers to winter among the Natives because they could not afford to feed them. Indian trade goods, especially deerskins and tobacco, formed a vital component of the exports to France during these years (Usner, *passim*). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the American Indian contribution to the emergent Creole culture must not be overlooked – the food. Beyond sheer survival, the Louisiana Natives provided the French settlers with some of the ingredients that would become essential to Creole cuisine. By far, the most famous is sassafras, or to be more precise, ground sassafras leaves. Called in Louisiana, *file'* or *gumbo file'* (pronounced *fee-lay*), the spice gives its particular flavor and thickening properties to Creole cuisine's signature dish, Gumbo, either seafood or poultry. Other culinary contributions include the vast array of game and varied ways to prepare it. They introduced the French to the "Three Sisters" of Native agriculture – corn, squash, and beans (including the red kidney beans) – and how to grow them together for the best yield. No Creole menu would be complete without the immeasurable varieties of Louisiana seafood. The placement of New Orleans, a virtual island between fresh, brackish, and salty sea water gave the Creoles, through the Indians, access to a huge selection of finfish, shellfish, and edible crustaceans. Another universal symbol of the Louisiana menu, the red crawfish, was the totem animal of the Houma Indians. {"1718: The Cookbook of the Petticoat Rebellion" provides a great selection of recipes and historical data and trivia on this fascinating and flavorful topic}.

Another well-established concept, generally accepted among scholars and the general public alike, holds that Native Americans are one with the lands they inhabit. Unlike the Euro-Americans who hold political power on the American continents today, there is an almost mystical bond between American geographical land-forms and the original Americans. The original Louisiana natives wandered the Gulf Coast between Mobile and the Mississippi Delta. One focus of these wanderings was shown to the LeMoyne brothers only two days after they had entered the great river from its mouth. A Bayougoula guide showed Iberville and Bienville a portage from the river to a bayou. That bayou, later called St. John, was a native shortcut from the Mississippi to the Gulf Coast. It was to become a crucial element in the establishment of New Orleans. In the seventeenth century, the local Natives made great use of Bayou St. John (called *Tchoupic* by the Indians) and its associated streams, the *Tchoupitoulas* and *Sauvage* bayous, to travel through the swamps between river and lake, and to fish and hunt along their banks. The bayous brought river and lake together, and the final tie that bound the region into one was the portage. What would those long-gone Indians – who showed Iberville and Bienville the portage from the river to the bayou, who helped the French survive, who understood the land and its properties – think of today's magic city that arose along that fateful passage?

Bayous, Lakes and Swamps

The lands and waters of the Ile d'Orleans defined the existence the first French settlers as well as that of the Native Americans. New Orleans is where it is for one main reason, the Bayou St. John. Today, the bayou is a picturesque waterway gracing Mid-City and gently winding north along City Park's eastern border to the Lake. In the late 1600's, however, it was a major thoroughfare for natives and settlers alike. Now a recreational spot, where one can find, on any given day, a few fishermen along its banks, or some rowing shells manned by teams of vigorous youths, and occasionally, a small boat or pirogue being used to pass a sunny afternoon. The Bayou starts (or ends) at the base of Jefferson Davis Parkway and Lafitte St., three blocks north of Canal Street. If one follows St. Louis and Lafitte Streets towards the French Quarter, one trails along a cement canal and the railroad tracks that mark the path of the Old Basin or (originally) the Carondelet Canal. A few blocks north of Lafitte St. is the present day corridor of Esplanade Ave. Hard by the avenue is a street with the wonderful name of the Grand Route St. John. The Grand Route crosses Esplanade twice; west to east (uptown to downtown) about four blocks from the bayou, and then back again (downtown to uptown) several blocks further south. After the second crossing, it becomes Bayou Road down to Claiborne Ave., where it merges and becomes

Gov. Nicholls through the Tremé fauberg and into the Quarter. These winding streets roughly mark the path of the Indian portage discovered by the Le Moyne brothers in 1699. There are many stories about this episode in the histories of New Orleans. Most of them relate that the brothers Le Moyne were shown the portage by a Choctaw a few days after their arrival at Pointe du Mardi Gras. In 1699, but as has been shown, the Choctaw country was far to the north of the river's mouth, and it seemed strange to this writer that such a far-away native would be around to use the portage. The mystery was settled by Ms. Edna Friberg in her 1980 work on colonial Bayou St. John (Freiberg, Edna B. Bayou St. John in Colonial Louisiana. 1980). Herein she makes it clear that Iberville's party had encountered a hunting party of Bayougoula Indians a few miles upstream from their first campsite at Bayou Mardi Gras. It was a guide from this party that “ led him (Iberville) six leagues above the campsite where the Native pointed out the river-end of a portage path which he said led back to where the French had anchored their ships (Ship Island)” (Ibid. p.13). The portage, about 2 miles long, became the *raison d’etre* (the main reason) for the City of New Orleans. It was a quick connection from the river to Lake Pontchartrain and then out to the Gulf. From Bienville’s point of view (he had taken over administration of the colony upon his brother’s early demise in 1706), the establishment of the city on the river was for the purpose of controlling the river and securing it against the British and Spanish colonial powers. However, the first high ground above the mouth of the river, and the logical place to put a city would be about 200 miles upriver, where Baton Rouge is today. In the viewpoint of French colonial policy, seeking control of the mouth of the river, this was much too far from the river’s mouth to exert any reasonable control. Bienville’s problem in establishing a post downriver from Baton Rouge was the land south of Bayou Manchac. Here was a natural levee along the river backed by swamps stretching as far as one can see, a spongy no-man’s land that was not fit to hold a post. Further complicating the placement of a suitable stronghold were the endless twists and turns of the river. At the present day town of White Castle, the Mississippi makes one of its incessant loops and essentially turns eastward for the rest of its route to the Gulf. Now, instead of an east bank and a west bank, the river in real terms has north and south banks (although, for simplicity’s sake, the banks retain the titles East and West). From here to the Gulf, the north side becomes a marsh between river and lake(s), especially as it comes closer to New Orleans. Behind the natural levee on the West Bank (the south side), the land is virtually all marsh down to the Gulf of Mexico. Through these natural levees, the river occasionally cut a channel to help distribute the flow from the huge river system into the delta lands and the Gulf. These “dis-tributaries” carried the sand, clay, and silt, the trees and other flotsam that built up the delta into what is today south Louisiana. These distributaries also give Louisiana another of its nicknames, “The Bayou State”. Below Baton Rouge, the Mississippi punched the crevasses which became the Bayous Manchac, LaFourche, Trepagnier, Tchoupitoulas, Seignette, Bienvenue, and Sauvage (as well as many others). Bayou Manchac connected the Mississippi to the Amite River and then on to Lake Maurepas. Bayou Lafourche, of course, created Louisiana between the Mississippi and the Atchafalaya Swamp. Trepagnier, west of New Orleans, and Bienvenue to the east drained the delta into Lakes Pontchartrain and Borgne. Seignette gave us Jefferson Parish. But it was the Tchoupitoulas/Sauvage Bayou that created the land that would become New Orleans.

Sometime during the age when Greece was creating Western Civilization and Paul and the other Apostles were laying the foundations of a great world religion, the Mississippi cut a crevasse at Cannes Brulee (near modern Kenner). Through the crevasse poured the flow that would cut a channel west to east and traverse modern Orleans Parish. What the French would call Bayous Tchoupitoulas and Sauvage ran along what is now the paths of Metairie and Gentilly Roads, creating the high ground of the like-named Ridges that gives a backbone and the east-west road-bed to the metropolitan area. These two bayous were in reality one long bayou distributing water from the Mississippi into Lake Pontchartrain. The land they (it) ran through was a long narrow stretch between the river and lake. There was, however, a peculiarity to this place. Here the river makes its famous crescent U- shape. Into the middle of this U, on either side of the Metairie-Gentilly Ridge would occasionally pour the waters

of the flooded Mississippi or a heavy rainstorm or a hurricane. Shallow, seasonal lakes would form on both sides of the ridge. These lakes and the resulting weakening of the ridge between them were the origin of Bayou St. John. As the ridge collapsed, water would course into the lowlands between the main bayou and the lake, eventually creating the channel that would get deeper as each rainy season passed. The low areas in the upper middle portion of the U would drain via this channel into the lake. One can see similar hydrographic effects today in Eastern New Orleans toward the terminus of Bayou Sauvage. By the time Iberville and Bienville arrived, the bayous around the Indian portage were three in number, although what they saw was really three branches of the same watercourse. The “three” bayous – Metairie (or Tchoupitoulas) Bayou, Gentilly (or Sauvage) Bayou, and Bayou St. John – met where today’s Metairie and Gentilly Ridges meet Bayou St. John today at the base of City Park. To speak of bayous running in any direction is a gross exaggeration. They only “run” when something – a river, a rainstorm, or a flood – is pushing them. But, for the sake of clarity, we can say that Bayou St. John ran north into Lake Pontchartrain. Bayou Metairie or Tchoupitoulas ran west to the Tchoupitoulas country on the river in Old Jefferson. Bayou Sauvage or Gentilly ran east into the swamp between river and lake and faded into Lake Pontchartrain somewhere before Chef Menteur Pass. Of the three, only one remains, St. John. The other two and their levees are now roads – Metairie and Gentilly respectively. In the seventeenth century, the local Natives made great use of these “three” waterways to travel through the swamps between river and lake, and to fish and hunt along their banks. The bayous brought river and lake together, and the final tie that bound the region into one was the portage. This was so important to their colonial efforts that the French authorities gave out eight land grants where the portage and the bayous merged. The farms, the houses, and a trading post at Bayou St. Jean were established in 1708, fully 10 years before the capital was authorized and begun. Before the city of New Orleans rose from the swampy ground, Iberville attempted a settlement some 18 miles up from the mouth of the river, but the marshy, sandy ground proved unstable and unworkable. Colonial authorities continued to search for a place to locate the capital settlement that would be able to control the traffic on the river, but Iberville died of a fever in 1706 in Havana without seeing it completed. It was Bienville who would finally choose the spot where the city would be built.