



Bienville's Dilemma. New Orleans Between Site and Situation

Richard Campanella

Ever since its founding, New Orleans is the result of a delicate compromise between site and situation, a fragile balance of environmental risk and commercial and military advantage, up the mouth of the Mississippi river. It is this exceptional location, Richard Campanella shows, which allowed New Orleans to develop as one of the most important American cities despite recurring flooding.

Questionable geography, questionable future: 1718-1722¹

Skepticism prevailed among partisans and observers regarding the wisdom of Bienville's site selection for New Orleans.² Among the doubters was Father Pierre François Xavier de Charlevoix, the Jesuit traveler and author of *Histoire de la Nouvelle France*, who arrived to what he sardonically described as "this famous city of Nouvelle Orleans" in January 1722. Only a few weeks earlier, the Company of the Indies (successor to Law's Company of the West) officially designated New Orleans as capital of Louisiana, though word had not yet reached the struggling outpost.

New Orleans, according to Father Charlevoix, bore little semblance to a capital city. Not yet platted, the city comprised "a hundred barracks, placed in no very good order[;] a large ware-house built of timber[,] two or three houses which would be no ornament to a village in France; [and] one half of a sorry ware-house, formerly set apart for divine services."³ A recent census enumerated 283 white men and women (mostly French but some German and Swiss), 171 African slaves, and twenty-one Indian slaves living in New Orleans proper, with another 791 people of all castes nearby.⁴ "Imagine to yourself," Charlevoix wrote two weeks later,

two hundred persons...sent out to a build a city...who have settled on the banks of a great river, thinking upon nothing but upon putting themselves under cover from the injuries of the weather, and in the mean time waiting till a plan is laid out for them, and till they have built houses according to it.

That plan, under development by Adrien de Pauger and his superior, Chief Engineer Le Blond de la Tour, circulated locally and reached Charlevoix's hands. "Pauger...has just shown me a plan of this own invention; but it will not be so easy to put into execution, as it has been to draw [on] paper." Pauger's magnificent design for the capital – preserved in today's French Quarter –

1 Excerpt from the book *Bienville's Dilemma*, Center for Louisiana Studies, 2008.

2 Bienville was the governor of Louisiana He chose the site and founded New Orleans in 1718. Metropolitics editor's note.

3 Pierre François Xavier de Charlevoix, *Journal of a Voyage to North-America Undertaken by Order of the French King, Volume II* (London, 1761), p. 275-76.

4 Charles R. Maduett Jr., *The Census Tables for the French Colony of Louisiana from 1699 to 1732* (Baltimore, MD, 1972), p. 16-22.

reflected the high expectations that flowed from John Law's grandiose vision for Louisiana, even in the wake of the scheme's collapse in 1720.

Charlevoix harbored an ambivalence shared by many regarding New Orleans. At one point, he expounded on the outpost's potential, which he based

on the banks of a navigable river, at the distance of thirty three leagues from the sea, from which a vessel may come up in twenty-four hours; on the fertility of its soil; on the mildness and wholesomeness of the climate...; on the industry of the inhabitants; on its neighbourhood to Mexico, the Havana, the finest islands of America, and lastly, to the English colonies. Can there be any thing more requisite to render a city flourishing?⁵

Sixteen days in New Orleans changed Charlevoix's mind. "The country [around] New Orleans, has nothing very remarkable;" he wrote, "nor have I found the situation of this so very advantageous...." He then laid out the dubious advantages alleged by New Orleans' defenders:

The first is...a small river called *le Bayouc de Saint Jean*...which, at the end of two leagues, discharges itself into the lake Pontchartrain which has a communication with the sea, [for] trade between the capital Mobile and Biloxi, and with all the other posts we possess near the sea. The second is, that below the city the river makes a very great turning called *le détour aux Anglois* [English Turn], which is imagined would be of great advantage to prevent a surprize.⁶

Charlevoix dismissed both arguments, and was equally unimpressed with the marshy soils downriver from the city, whose "depth continues to diminish all the way to the sea." "I have nothing to add," he wrote dismissively, "about the present state of New Orleans."⁷

Charlevoix's conflicting feelings reflected a high-stakes debate that had raged across colonial Louisiana for years. Where should the capital of the colony – the Company's primary counter and port – be located? Suggestions ranged from as far east as Mobile and even Pensacola, to as far inland as Natchez and Natchitoches. The worthiest rival to Bienville's site was Bayou Manchac, the Mississippi River distributary south of Baton Rouge explored by Iberville two decades earlier. Manchac also boasted a shortcut to the Gulf Coast, and suffered few of the environmental problems of Bienville's site. Bienville himself, the eventual victor in the debate, expressed doubts years earlier in a February 1708 letter written to Minister Pontchartrain. "This last summer, I examined... all the lands in the vicinity of [the Mississippi] river. I did not find any at all that are not flooded in the spring." After calling for more agriculturists to settle the land, Bienville promised, "As soon as these settlers arrived at Lake Pontchartrain and at the Mississippi River they would be transported to the neighborhood of the Bayagoulas," a site located far upriver from the site he would eventually select for New Orleans. "*Those are the best lands in the world.*"⁸

Bienville's stance evolved over the years to favor strongly the French Quarter site. That he received substantial land concessions in that area probably influenced this advocacy. Bienville succeeded finally when the Company, apparently convinced of the strategic superiority of a river site over a coastal position and impressed with Pauger's new city plan, designated New Orleans as capital of Louisiana on December 23, 1721. "His Royal Highness having thought it advisable to make the principal establishment of the colony at New Orleans on the Mississippi River," beamed a satisfied Bienville to the Council, "we have accordingly transported here all the goods that were at Biloxi," the previous capital. He then lavished praise on his superiors: "It appears to me that a better

5 Pierre François Xavier de Charlevoix, *Journal of a Voyage to North-America Undertaken by Order of the French King, Volume II* (London, 1761), p. 276.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 289-90.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 271-73.

8 Letter, Bienville to Pontchartrain, February 25, 1708, *Mississippi Provincial Archives 1704-1743: French Dominion, Volume III*, eds. Dunbar Rowland and Albert Godfrey Sanders (Jackson, MS, 1932), p. 122.

decision could not have been made in view of the good quality of the soil along the river [and the] considerable advantage for...the unloading of the vessels.”⁹

That historic – and fateful – decision derived largely from rational and carefully weighted geographical reasons of accessibility, defendability, riverine position, arability, and natural resources, plus a lack of better alternatives. Here is Bienville in his own words on the siting of New Orleans:

[T]he capital city...is advantageously situated in the center of the French plantations, near enough to receive [their] assistance...and reciprocally to furnish the settlers with the things they need...from its warehouses. Bayou St. John which is behind the city is of such great convenience because of the communication which it affords with Lake Pontchartrain and consequently with the sea that it cannot be esteemed too highly.¹⁰

What Bienville failed to mention was that personal gain (he owned vast land holdings here and thus stood to benefit if the settlement progressed), bureaucratic inertia, momentum, and pure luck also played roles in the decision.

Ever since, second-guessing Bienville’s geographical wisdom in his handling of the siting dilemma has become a favorite topic of local punditry. Bienville himself never recorded open regret about his New Orleans decision, but occasionally betrayed second thoughts in words that would resonate with later generations of New Orleanians:

The river has been very high for three months and has overflowed in several places above New Orleans. It has destroyed several levees so that more than half of the lands of the inhabitants are submerged...This country is subject to such great vicissitude.... *Now there is too much drought, now too much rain. Besides the winds are so violent...*¹¹

When the surges of hurricanes Katrina and Rita submerged those lands in August-September 2005, observers worldwide pondered how a major city could have been founded on so precarious a site. Some saw no future for the metropolis, save for its relocation to higher ground. In essence, the circa-1700s debate of the French colonials about where to locate Louisiana’s primary city raged again – under very different circumstances, but with similar factors at play.

Indeed, this is a challenging site for a major city. Yet Bienville acted wisely in selecting it in 1718, because he knew what makes a city great is not its site, but its situation. “Site” refers to the city’s actual physical footing; “situation” means its regional context and how it connects with the world.

A strategic situation near the mouth of North America’s greatest river allowed French colonials to exploit and protect their vast Louisiana claim effectively from a single point.

Had Bienville located New Orleans farther upriver (such as at Bayou Manchac or Natchez), the city would have been too inconvenient for coastal traffic and unable to answer enemy incursions. In other words: good sites, but bad situations.

9 Like many employees on the heels of a workplace success, Bienville then asked for a promotion: “I entreat the Council very humbly to remember that I have thirty-three years of service in the navy twenty-five of which as commandant in this province, without having obtained any of those marks of distinction that are granted to persons who have been in an office for a long time...” Letter, Bienville to the Council, February 1, 1723, *Mississippi Provincial Archives 1704-1743: French Dominion, Volume III*, eds. Dunbar Rowland and Albert Godfrey Sanders (Jackson, MS, 1932), p. 343-44.

10 Memoir on Louisiana [by Bienville], 1726, *Mississippi Provincial Archives 1704-1743: French Dominion, Volume III*, eds. Dunbar Rowland and Albert Godfrey Sanders (Jackson, MS, 1932), p. 515-16.

11 Letter, Bienville and Salmon to Maurepas (emphasis added), March 20, 1734, *Mississippi Provincial Archives 1704-1743: French Dominion, Volume III*, eds. Dunbar Rowland and Albert Godfrey Sanders (Jackson, MS, 1932), p. 637-38.

Had he located it farther east, such as at Mobile or Biloxi, he would have relinquished the critical Mississippi River advantage and still suffered flooding problems. Ditto for locations to the west: bad sites, bad situations.

Had he located the city farther downriver, the site would have been that much more vulnerable and precarious. The site he finally selected, today's French Quarter, represented the best available site within a fantastic geographical situation. French observer François Marie Perrin Du Lac captured succinctly in 1807 the horns of Bienville's dilemma:

[T]here is not for a great distance a finer, more elevated, or healthier position [for New Orleans]. If higher, it would be too distant from the sea; if lower, subject to inundations."¹²

Bienville's wisdom became apparent around the time of Du Lac's visit, as New Orleans emerged as one of the most important cities in America. It was shown again after Hurricane Katrina, when the French Quarter and other historical areas all evaded flooding.

Why, then, is a major American city located in this problematic site? Because it made perfect, rational sense at the time of its founding – a time when man depended heavily on waterborne transportation, and when this particular site offered the best waterborne access to what proved to be the richest valley on earth.

German geographer Friedrich Ratzel contemplated New Orleans' site-versus-situation dilemma in his 1870s assessment of urban America. "New Orleans," he judged, "is just as poorly located as a city, or more precisely as a dwelling place, as it is excellently located as a commercial site." He then added: "*This last-mentioned advantage has made up for all disadvantages.*"¹³

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12 M. Perrin Du Lac, *Travels Through the Two Louisianas...in 1801, 1802, & 1803* (London, 1807), p. 87-88 plus asterisked footnote. Despite his appreciation for New Orleans' challenges, Du Lac was not particularly impressed with the city. "New Orleans," he wrote, "does not merit a favourable description..."

13 Friedrich Ratzel, *Sketches of Urban and Cultural Life in North America*, trans. and ed. Stewart A. Stehlin (New Brunswick and London, 1988 translation of 1876 publication), p. 196 (emphasis added).