

About Spanish Colonial Louisiana

SPAIN TAKES OVER

Spain gained control of the Louisiana colony under the Treaty of Fontainebleau in 1762. However, the Spanish crown was in no hurry to make changes. The population was incredibly diverse—French, Creole, German, Native American, and African (both free and enslaved)—but very few were Spanish, and the colony retained its Francophile culture. Moreover, French attempts to make any part of the colony a bustling center of trade had failed. Spain's primary motivation for acquiring the colony was simply to have a buffer against British expansion into their western territories.

Ulloa, First Spanish Governor

So slow was Spain to exert any amount of control over Louisiana that the first Spanish governor, Antonio de Ulloa, did not arrive there until 1766. When he did, he was distant, brought no military troops to enforce his rule, and never replaced the French flag in the *Place d'Armes* (modern-day Jackson Square) with a Spanish flag. Ulloa conducted the transfer of power ceremony in 1767, not in the city of New Orleans, but rather at a small outpost known as the *Balize*. Ulloa did not disband the Superior Council, which was sympathetic to the French. His actions alienated and confused the local population, who already perceived his authority as weak. Furthermore, he also implemented severe trade restrictions on a colony already suffering from economic hardship.

Creole Revolt of 1768

Ulloa made an enormous mistake by restricting trade. His decree put an end to all trade with anyone except the Spanish, including the slave trade. This would be disastrous for the wealthy planters in Louisiana, who relied not only on the slave trade to supply their labor force but also on the vast trade network outside of Spain to sell their crops. These wealthy planters, who identified with France and not Spain, began to stir up rebellion, bolstered by the continued confusion over Ulloa's legitimacy as governor due to his delay in taking the post.

Leaders of this rebellion were Denis-Nicolas Foucault, *commissaire-ordonnateur* (responsible for fiscal matters in Louisiana), and Nicolas Chauvin de Lafrénière, attorney general and leader of the Superior Council. They circulated a petition, which they then presented to the Superior Council, calling for Ulloa's removal from office and return to Spain. The council voted in favor. Ulloa, outnumbered and without military power, submitted to the demands.

O'Reilly and the Imposition of Spanish Rule

The Spanish crown did not much appreciate the people of its colony banishing the rightful governor. Spain treated the banishment of Ulloa as treason and dispatched Alejandro O'Reilly, an Irish-born general who fought for the Spanish crown, to put down the rebellion.

O'Reilly came prepared, leading more than two thousand troops and bringing twenty-four ships. He took New Orleans easily and arrested the leaders of the revolt. Trials were swift and punishments severe. Because he executed the leaders of the Creole revolt, he earned the nickname *Bloody O'Reilly*. However, O'Reilly had been sent to establish order, not wipe out the colony. All people except for these leaders were pardoned, even if they had signed the petition.

But O'Reilly had not been sent simply to end the rebellion. He had also been appointed governor by Charles III. An important task in enforcing Spanish rule in the colony was creating a legitimate Spanish government. To this end, O'Reilly did what Ulloa could not and dissolved the Superior Council—many members of which were now dead or in prison—and established the *cabildo*. This was a form of Spanish municipal government, similar to a town council, already widely used across Spanish colonies in the Americas. He also instituted what came to be called the Code O'Reilly, which was not a new set of laws; rather, it was a condensed set of Spanish laws already in use that he applied to New Orleans. He bolstered the safety of the colony by securing its defenses and building friendly relations with the Native Americans both in and near the city. To shore up the economy, the state of which had led to the rebellion in the first place, he put price controls on staple goods and reformed trade regulations. His work complete, O'Reilly left Louisiana in 1770.

THE PEOPLE OF SPANISH LOUISIANA

In addition to the people already in Louisiana when Spain took possession, new groups arrived.

People of Color

French colonial Louisiana's Code Noir had been more lenient than some European colonies' laws regarding people of color, but Spain's laws were even more lenient than those of their French predecessors, especially compared to their British neighbors in the Americas. Not only did slaveholders not need anyone's permission to free enslaved people, but enslaved people could seek their own manumission. Enslaved people were allowed to keep money and personal property. They could purchase their own freedom.

Free people of color could serve in the military, which had previously not been possible. In addition, they could own property, which had also been the case under French rule. The increasingly large population of free people of color set up businesses and worked in skilled trades, such as carpentry, tailoring, and construction. The two great fires that destroyed much of the city in 1788 and 1794 may have helped many enslaved people buy their freedom by providing a great deal of paid work to them.

However, the growth of the plantation system and cash crops of sugar and cotton necessitated more labor. During Spanish rule, there was a tenfold increase in the enslaved population, with as many as

twenty-nine thousand African adults and children being brought against their will to the colony. This influx also reinvigorated the cultural influences of the African population in the colony. African music, drumming, and languages were heard on rural plantations and in New Orleans.

Acadians

The Acadians were French colonists who had settled in the region between what is now New Brunswick and Nova Scotia in Canada. Occupation of this land became contentious as France and Britain battled for control of the region. In 1755, Britain demanded the Acadians pledge allegiance to the British king. When the Acadians refused, they were expelled.

The French-speaking residents of Louisiana welcomed the Acadians, who arrived there some twenty years later, just as Spain took possession of the colony. The Spanish government, in the rocky years of its early rule, did not resist the immigration of this new group. As word of a welcoming community spread to far-flung relatives, more Acadians made their way to Louisiana in subsequent years. These *Acadiens*, or *Cadiens* as they were sometimes called, later became known as the Cajuns.

Isleños

In the wake of the American Revolution, Spain sought to populate Louisiana with Spaniards. To accomplish this, Spain offered land and money to the inhabitants of the Canary Islands, which lie off the west coast of Africa and were then under Spanish rule. These immigrants became known as the Isleños.

In addition to bringing Spanish influence to the colony, the Isleños were meant to protect that influence. They were sent to several strategic sites, where they developed a unique culture. Unlike the original French colonists, the Isleños were not all men; rather, they were family groups that included children. This likely helped them become established in the region.

Haitians

The Haitian Revolution began in the early 1790s. At the time, what is now Haiti was a French colony called Saint Domingue. Deeply entrenched in the slave trade, Haiti was sharply divided across racial lines, with enslaved and free people of color kept apart from the wealthy white elites. The French Revolution was the spark that ignited the revolution in Haiti.

The French revolutionary government recognized Haitian free people of color, or *affranchis*, as citizens, but the white Haitians disregarded this acknowledgment. Fighting broke out that would last more than a decade. Ultimately, the *affranchis* and the enslaved people, led by Toussaint Louverture, were victorious, ousting the French and declaring Haiti an independent nation. It was the first ever successful revolution by an enslaved population.

Haitian immigrants, many of whom were refugees of the war, made their way to New Orleans. The appeal of the city was that much of the population spoke French (the language of Haiti), free people of color were recognized and had many rights, and a large population of free people of color already lived there.

THE GREAT FIRES

In the midst of this changing population, growth of agriculture and trade, and influx of immigrants, tragedy struck New Orleans not once but twice.

In 1788, a fire destroyed a huge portion of the city. Most structures were made of wood, and more than 850 buildings were completely destroyed, including the city's armory and town hall. The Louisianans began the task of rebuilding. However, in 1794, fire broke out in the same part of the city, this time destroying more than 212 buildings.

The fires left a lasting mark on New Orleans in that much of the surviving architecture is Spanish in design, including the famous Cabildo. The Cabildo, which is the building as well as the name of the Spanish colonial government, served as government offices from its construction, completed in 1799, until 1853, when it became home to the Louisiana Supreme Court.

PINCKNEY'S TREATY

Contributions of free people of color and immigrants from many places, along with improvements in technology, meant that Louisiana's production of raw materials and goods increased. However, trade was still stymied by restrictions, especially against the United States.

That changed in 1795. Spain had held out against trade with the United States. However, Spain was wary of the British, and the new United States could prove to be a powerful trading partner. When the United States sent John Jay as an envoy to London to negotiate trade with the British, Spain opened its own negotiations with American diplomat Thomas Pinckney. Spain and the United States soon signed the Treaty of San Lorenzo, also called Pinckney's Treaty. This treaty allowed Americans access to the Mississippi River and trade with all of Louisiana. This brought a great deal of new money to the colony and led to an increase in interactions between Louisianians and their American neighbors.

THE END OF SPANISH RULE

By 1800, despite Louisiana thriving, Spain had severely weakened as an empire. The Louisiana territory, despite its growing economy, was not providing substantial income for the kingdom.

French leader Napoleon Bonaparte was in the midst of a massive campaign in Europe. Having taken control of the French military and, by and large, its government, he had led the French in victories in Austria, Italy, and Egypt and intended to conquer much of the world for France. He had set his sights on French control of the Caribbean, and he pursued a deal. If Spain would return Louisiana to French control, along with six ships of war, Spain would gain the Italian region of Tuscany. Putting Louisiana in French control relieved Spain of the burden of holding off the Americans from its lands. To ensure this control continued, Spain made Napoleon promise not to sell, trade, or give away Louisiana to any other power.

Napoleon agreed, and the deal was finalized with the Treaty of San Ildefonso in 1800.

However, Napoleon's plans for the Caribbean centered on Saint Domingue. When the Haitian Revolution succeeded in ending French rule of the island, Napoleon's plans for control of the Caribbean fell apart. Louisiana then no longer served a purpose.

The Americans, meanwhile, coveted land they could expand into. President Thomas Jefferson saw an opportunity and offered France \$10 million for the city and port of New Orleans. Napoleon countered with an offer of \$15 million for the entire Louisiana territory. Despite the terms of the Treaty of San Ildefonso specifically prohibiting such a sale, France agreed. The Louisiana Purchase was finalized in 1803, making the Louisiana Territory part of the United States. European control of the territory had ended.