

European Man in Louisiana

When we look at Louisiana today we see a modern, industrial state. We enjoy the comforts and luxuries of a modern society. This was not always the case. Our modern state had to be formed from a rugged wilderness. The early explorers and colonists endured many hardships in order to remain in what is present day Louisiana.

All too often a society has the tendency to simplify its history: this person explored this, that person settled there. It was not until the Challenger tragedy that we realized the price many of the earlier explorers and colonists paid so that we may be here today.

The early explorers sought the riches that gold and silver would bring. The Spanish had found great wealth in Mexico and continued to explore the area in hopes of finding more. Early Spanish explorers had explored the Gulf Coast as early as 1519. On May 8, 1541, after exploring much of the southeast United States, Hernando De Soto discovered the Mississippi along the Louisiana–Arkansas border (Figure 4.). De Soto and his men did not appreciate the significance of their find.

France had centered its exploration of the new world in the area of Canada. The French couriers de bois, or fur trappers and traders, found that the fur trade was as profitable as gold mining. Through their dealings with the Indians of the Ohio Valley they had heard of the “Great Water”, or the Mississippi River. The first Frenchman to explore the river was Father Marquette, a Jesuit priest, and Louis Joliet, a courier de bois. They explored the Mississippi as far south as the mouth of the Arkansas River. Because they feared the Spanish along the coastline, Marquette and Joliet returned to Canada. The first Frenchman to explore the Mississippi to its mouth was Rene Robert Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle. LaSalle’s expedition reached the mouth of the Mississippi River on April 9, 1682 (Figure 5.).

LaSalle failed on his return voyage as he attempted to find the mouth of the Mississippi through the Gulf of Mexico. It should be noted that LaSalle did not have the benefit of a GPS, modern maps, or navigational equipment and that the mouth of the river was not as clearly defined as it is today.

Following LaSalle’s failure, Count de Pontchartrain, the French Minister of Marine, sent the Le Moyne brothers (Pierre Le Moyne, Sieur d’Iberville, and Jean Baptiste Le Moyne, Sieur De Bienville) to explore and colonize the Louisiana territory. Iberville planned his expedition well. In September of 1698, he sailed from LaRochelle,



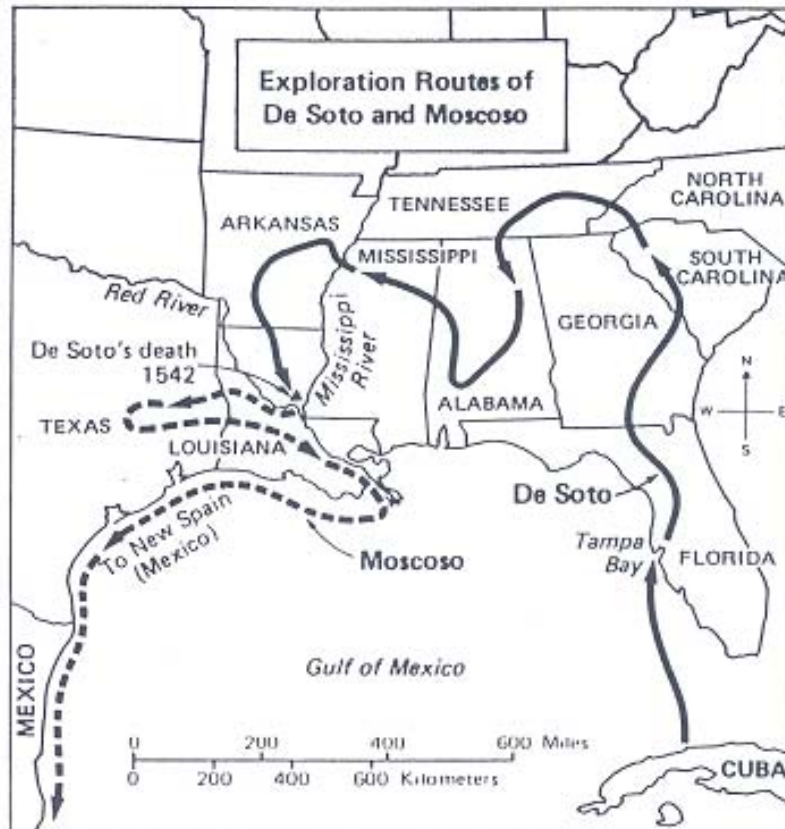


Figure 4. Routes of Hernando De Soto

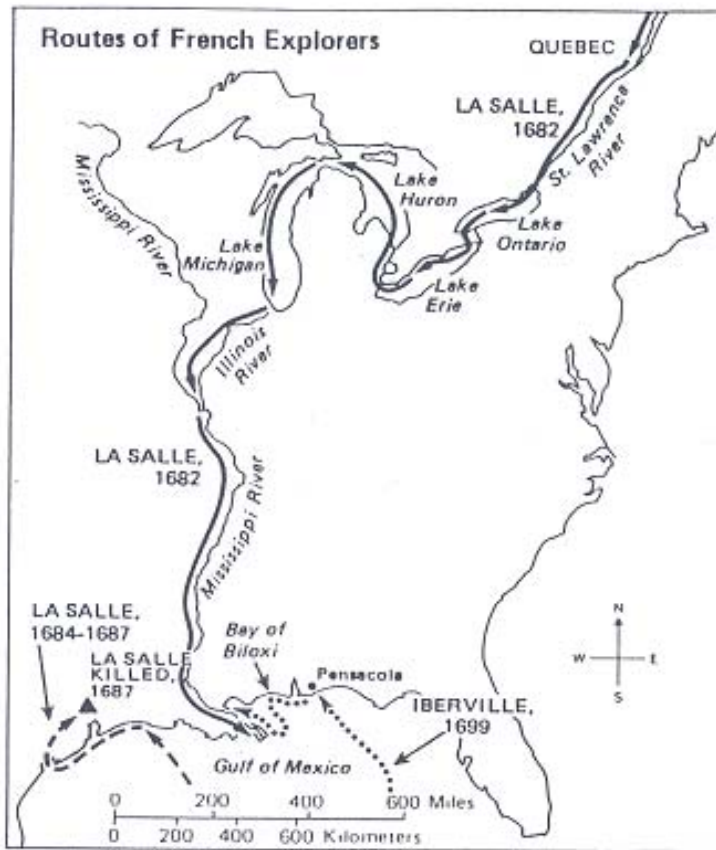


Figure 5. Routes of La Salle and Iberville.

France; on January 26, 1699 he arrived at Pensacola Bay, Florida. Iberville's strategy was to explore the Gulf Coast from small boats to find the mouth of the Mississippi. On March 2, 1699 Iberville discovered a strong flow of fresh water. As he explored up river and made contact with the Indians, he knew he had found the Mississippi River.

Iberville's early explorations of the region put him in contact with the Houmas Indians. These tribes used a red pole to mark the boundary of their village—the French referred to the area as Baton Rouge. Iberville returned to the base camp at Ship Island through the Amite River. Along the way he passed through and named Lake Maurepas for the son of Pontchartrain, and Lake Pontchartrain for the French Minister of Marine. Bienville traced the original route back down the river. Bienville encountered the Chitimacha Indians living on a fork of the Mississippi River. The area was later named La Fourche De Chitimacha; this was Bayou Lafourche.

Iberville's early maps of the Louisiana territory label the area from the Atchafalaya to Lake Pontchartrain as "Trembling Prairie". Today we refer to the floating marsh as "flotant". The distance from the Gulf of Mexico to a suitable site to build a colony in Louisiana caused Iberville to look to the Mississippi Gulf Coast where he built Fort Maurepas on Biloxi Bay.

The first attempt to build any type of settlement in Louisiana came in 1700 with Fort de La Boulaye about 50 miles from the mouth of the Mississippi in what is now Plaquemines Parish. The fort was inhabited for only a few years and then abandoned.

The first permanent French settlement in Louisiana came as a result of the efforts of St. Denis to establish trade with the Tejas Indians in Spanish Texas. St. Denis traveled up the Red River to the site of the Natchitoches Indian village along the Red River, where he built Fort St. Jean Baptiste de Natchitoches in 1714. In 1718 Bienville convinced the company of the Indies to build a city on the crescent in the river. The chief engineer Le Bland De La Tour objected to the site selection because it was below sea level and apt to flooding. Bienville named his city Nouvelle Orleans, or New Orleans. The city was nothing more than crude huts that were blown away several times by storms. Flooding was a regular event and the royal engineers finally recommended another site for the city. Bienville persisted, and Adrien de Pougier, the royal engineer, laid out the plans for a city. In 1721, about 470 people lived in what is now New Orleans. Bienville's site selection placed Louisiana's largest city at the state's lowest point of elevation—five feet below sea level.



In the early 1720's, German families settled upriver from New Orleans in an area that became known as the German Coast (i.e. St. Charles Parish and St. James Parish). Their farms helped feed the people of New Orleans. In the 1760's they were joined by the Acadians who had been exiled from Nova Scotia. Over several generations, Acadians, Germans, French and Spanish Creoles and other groups came together to produce Cajun culture. From the Mississippi River and the St. Landry and St. Martin areas, these Cajuns migrated southward along the bayous to the Gulf of Mexico.

