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The Good Friday Fire of 1788: Implications of a Disaster in Spanish Colonial New Orleans

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THE GOOD FRIDAY FIRE OF 1788: IMPLICATIONS OF A DISASTER IN SPANISH COLONIAL NEW ORLEANS

By

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I dedicate this to my mom and dad who left all that they had ever known to come to the United States so that their children could enjoy the freedom to think, write, and live as they wish.
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ABSTRACT

On Good Friday, March 21, 1788, the Spanish colonial city of New Orleans experienced a catastrophic fire that destroyed more than eight hundred fifty buildings, which at that time was over 80% of the city. Flames razed the residences of hundreds of individuals, along with warehouses of food, the parochial church, the presbytery, the government meeting house, the military barracks and arsenal, and the public jail. There was no fire department in place to assist the populace in stopping the incessant flames. Fire extinguishing materials, too, were scarce or nonexistent. As a result, much of the population was left homeless, and the colonial Spanish government, headed by Governor Esteban Miró, was confronted with the enormous task of rebuilding a Spanish capital over the ruins of a now desolate landscape.

The disaster, however, served as a catalyst for a series of changes that began to unfold almost immediately after the occurrence. Aside from the various measures put in place to aid and house the victims of the fire, city officials imposed a variety of regulations to help prevent such a disaster in the future, including for instance, safer building codes, night watchmen, and the implementation of new fire extinguishing tools. Also, because the fire destroyed food stores and warehouses of supplies, the Spanish government immediately reacted by sending a series of ships to the United States, thus loosening trade relations between the two powers. Moreover, as a result of the massive project of rebuilding that ensued under Spanish administration, some of New Orleans’ most distinctive and recognizable architectural characteristics began to emerge.

Undoubtedly then, this catastrophe was a significant event that merits further study – not only in light of New Orleans’ recent history with natural disasters, but also as it serves to illustrate the major social and economic changes that such devastation could effect in an 18th-century colonial capital.
INTRODUCTION

It is indeed self-evident that fire is one of the principal threats to man’s social and economic arrangements with its capacity to completely destroy both buildings and their contents in a relatively short time, leaving only scorched earth and charred remains. It is in cities and towns where the greatest damage can be done by fire, because of the concentration of buildings and the goods stores in and around them. That concentration makes it difficult to halt a fire once it has become established, with the blaze spreading from building to building, their fabric and contents providing ample fuel for the flames. But fire is also a menace to rural communities, for it can destroy houses, barns, stables and crops, both those harvested and in store and those standing in the fields, together with pasture, orchards and woodlands.

-- Stephen Porter

Growth and development in Louisiana progressed slowly under its first colonial phase of French administration. Even after France ceded the territory of West Louisiana and New Orleans to the Spanish through the Treaty of Fontainebleau in 1762, changes only gradually accelerated and remained unexceptional for decades. Indeed for years after the cession, inhabitants of the colony did not even know that they were no longer subjects of the French king. It was not until 1769 that Governor Alejandro O’Reilly replaced the French Superior Council in New Orleans with the Spanish Cabildo, partly as a response to the Riot of 1768 during which a small number of rebels attempted to reverse the cession and force the Spanish governor in the person of Antonio de Ulloa out of the colony. From this point forward, the Spanish were markedly present in Louisiana, and its capital began to grow at a faster pace than ever before.

Yet while the transition was to prove ultimately beneficial to New Orleans, even into the 1770s and 1780s the city did not appear noticeably different from its condition in the French period. Structures were still shoddy and made of wood or colombage, and construction and growth still accelerated slowly. However, when disaster struck New Orleans on Good Friday 1788, and 80% of it was reduced to ashes, the colonial capital began to emerge as the city that we recognize today. It took a catastrophic event for the colony to truly begin taking on the form and characteristics that have come to distinguish

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2 The popular colombage sur sole style of construction entailed the use of brick or mortar between heavy timber.
it, for it entailed the massive enterprise of rebuilding a Spanish colony over the ashes of the French one.

A great many changes thus came about as a result of this fire. Much of the Vieux Carré, or Old Square, that one sees today exists due in part to the conflagration and the major project of reconstruction that Spanish Governors Esteban Miró and (Francisco Luis Hector) Barón de Carondelet had to undertake in its wake. In addition, aside from the fire’s visible effects, several significant modifications took place in terms of contemporary diplomacy, trade regulations, and social structures. These constitute an important, but highly obscure chapter of Louisianan and thus Spanish and Atlantic history, that I have aimed to elucidate through this project.

After the fire, Governor Miró set to the work of aiding the displaced and began putting forth efforts to acquire the funds necessary to set reconstruction efforts in motion. He also defied Spanish commercial regulations by sending ships to American cities for provisions, which served as a first step at loosening Spanish restrictions on trade with the United States years before the Treaty of San Lorenzo (or Pinckney’s Treaty). The fire thus ultimately contributed to major modifications in trade relations between New Orleans and the rest of the Atlantic that proved beneficial to the Spanish capital.

Other major changes came about from this calamitous event. For example, prior to the conflagration, New Orleans, which basically consisted of the area we today recognize as the “French Quarter,” was made up of approximately 1,100 structures, mostly constructed of wood. Under Governor Carondelet, however, who assumed the position of governor after Miró and who acknowledged the extent of damage caused by the 1788 fire, new building regulations entailed that all buildings be constructed of brick thenceforward.

3 The Treaty of San Lorenzo, known also as the Treaty of Madrid, or more commonly, Pinckney’s Treaty, was signed on October 27, 1795. This treaty resolved border disputes between Spain and the United States, granted the U.S navigation on the Mississippi River, and allowed U.S. traders to deposit goods in New Orleans and to conduct commercial activity in the region. Thomas Pinckney (for the U.S.) and Don Manuel de Godoy (representing Spain) negotiated the treaty.

4 The fire consumed 856 of these.

commissaries of police, to oversee the use of newly purchased fire engines. Officials also procured fire buckets, thenceforth made readily available for use in the event that another fire threatened the city.6

Furthermore, as a result of the inferno that devastated the great majority of New Orleans, the Spanish colonial government was required to carry out the colossal project of rebuilding the capital. This resulted in some of the most distinctive architectural characteristics that we associate with the city today, including the open interior patios that served as both passageways and outdoor rooms, and the lacy wrought-iron balconies that decorate the exteriors of structures whose Spanish legacies seem too soon forgotten. The most recognizable edifices in New Orleans, in fact, such as the Spanish Cabildo and the Presbytere, were constructed after the Great Fire of 1788 razed those that previously stood in their place. Ultimately, this destructive fire proved to be more a birth, than the death of the city of New Orleans.

Yet, one cannot deny the persistent nature of French identity in New Orleans, even through its shifts from French to Spanish to American administration.7 In exploring the changes that the fire brought about, I cannot help but acknowledge the continuity, as well. It is true that as a result of the catastrophe on Good Friday 1788, the colonial government was to erect a Spanish colony over that of the French. However, some of the most noticeable structures, such as the Cathedral, Cabildo, and Presbytere, were erected on the very spots where the poorly maintained French ones once stood. The Plaza de Armas too, was of course the same square as the Place d’Armes. The Spanish simply Iberianized the original French name of the square, just as they did for the names of streets, which themselves remained from the French period. The colonial grid of New Orleans was likewise inherited from its French period.

However, while the French quite literally laid the foundations for the colonial city, it was the Spanish who most dramatically built upon it throughout the eighteenth

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6 Thomas O’Connor, ed., History of the Fire Department of New Orleans (New Orleans, 1895), 36.
7 Before the Louisiana Purchase, the Louisiana territory including New Orleans was, for a very short time, ceded back to France. Arrangements for this cession of the territory from Spain to France took place in 1800, but the formal transfer did not take place until November 1803 – less than one month before the formal transfer of the territory from France to the United States, which had been arranged earlier that year.
century. During the decades of Spanish occupation, the city developed not only within the colonial grid, but beyond it, with plantations spreading into surrounding areas. Hence, while French continuity in New Orleans after the cession to Spain, and even to the present day, is undeniable, the legacy of Spanish administration in the city is one of growth and advancement; and it is most noteworthy after the Great Fire of 1788.

Figure 1. “Plan de La Nouvelle Orleans” (1722) showing the colonial grid as it was intended, though for most of the French period and much of the Spanish, most of the streets depicted here were not actually inhabited or developed. In fact, one can see in this plan where structures stood at this time. Image courtesy of the Library of Congress: American Memory, Map Collections.
A Word On Historical Disaster Studies

It is important to examine how the Spanish government responded and how government administration, laws, and regulations changed in order to both deal with the effects of the fire, and prevent such accidents from occurring in the future. I aim here to help elucidate the richness of information that may be unearthed by examining the unfortunate occurrences of disasters in history. Exploring how societies have dealt with catastrophes in the past can serve as a great contribution to our lives today. Undoubtedly, there exists an increasing interest in disaster studies following events such as Katrina and
the recent Haiti earthquake. Essentially, by exploring how damage from these hazards might have been prevented in the past, we in the present might increasingly consider the roles that we play in lessening or exacerbating damage during what we refer to as “natural disasters.” Indeed, a recurring theme in disaster literature is that damage wrought by natural hazards is largely determined by economic interest and neglect on the part of local governments that fail, for instance, to enforce safer building codes, or to upkeep the levees protecting a city. In this literature, local authorities tend to exaggerate the uncontrollable nature of natural disasters, often through the media, so as to take blame off of themselves. Furthermore, and for our purposes, disaster studies can reveal the many changes that might result from reconstruction, relief, and prevention efforts that transpire following a catastrophe. This approach offers the historian a new tool for understanding historical events. A brief discussion on historical disaster studies will therefore help make clear the relevance and significance of such an approach to history.

In his introduction to *Natural Disasters and Cultural Responses*, Anthony Oliver-Smith briefly introduced both the complexity of defining “disaster,” and the relationship between disaster and human causation. He pointed out that a disaster involves two elements, namely a natural or man-made phenomenon and a human population. For example, a hurricane at sea is only a disaster when there are ships or human lives involved. Herein lay the foundations for the idea that humans determine the extent of damage caused by “natural phenomena” in so far as they choose where to settle, what materials they use to construct their towns, what institutions, if any, they form to protect them in the event of “disaster” (such as fire departments), and so on. Disasters thus tend to be defined on the basis of damage inflicted upon people and their environments, and a
concept of vulnerability considers those aspects of society that reduce or aggravate the impact of a hazard.\textsuperscript{11} Therefore, society is not a passive entity upon which disasters act. Instead, ideas of vulnerability are generated within a society in effect serving to socially construct that which is perceived as “disaster.”\textsuperscript{12} Accordingly, the idea of vulnerability may be used to better understand how race or socio-economic level may determine the level of damage a “natural” disaster inflicts. As a result, the concept has been applied to historical disaster studies of the eighteenth-century Atlantic world where the literature engages with colonial powers’ responses to disasters disturbing the subordinate populations. These studies have revealed the complex social dynamics of relationships between colonial power and subaltern population in times of crisis.\textsuperscript{13} For example, in his study of the eighteenth-century Lima, Quito, and Arequipa earthquakes, Charles Walker reveals that following each of these catastrophes, colonial authorities’ exploitation and racialist views of the “black, Indian, and multihued lower classes” were accentuated.\textsuperscript{14} Spanish officials were most concerned with their own profits, in effect disregarding natives’ vulnerabilities, and placing the labor of reconstruction and relief on their already overburdened backs.

Meanwhile, the experience of disaster in colonial Spanish New Orleans could not have been more different. Here, letters written by Governor Miró, as well as relief efforts immediately following the fire, demonstrate that Spanish administration in the colony in fact showed paternal care for the displaced. Officials’ concern with preventing emigration so as to keep population numbers up and develop the colony was mirrored by their unrelenting efforts to assist the affected population. Locals hailed Governor Miró

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{Garcia-Acosta2002} See also: Virginia García-Acosta, “Historical Disaster Research,” \textit{Catastrophe and Culture: The Anthropology of Disaster} (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 2002).
\end{thebibliography}
for personally handing out money and food from his own home regardless of class or creed, and for providing shelter for the city’s inhabitants. Hence, disaster studies may reveal not only underlying prejudices existent within a society, but also the more pronounced concerns or interests of the administrative government in place.

Exploring disasters in history can also help to trace how and to what extent information was disseminated after an event. By following how word traveled following a disaster, one may discover much earlier origins of modern-day global interconnectedness than might have otherwise been imagined. Accounts of catastrophic events arise out of geographic locations far removed from the origin of the event. More oft than not, a traveler who happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time served as a valuable eyewitness by writing letters home describing the experience. Such was the case after the Good Friday fire, when reports were disseminated to London, Philadelphia, Hampshire, and Lancaster within weeks of the disaster when ships arrived at ports with news of events.¹⁵

Moreover, as Alessa Johns pointed out in her introduction to Dreadful Visitations, if a disaster is defined as a physical phenomenon adversely affecting a community of humans, then the activities of that community before and after the incident, require investigation in order to determine the extent to which they delayed or aggravated the damage.¹⁶ As a result, the investigation of the eighteenth century on these terms unearths an early form of globalization that one would otherwise not think to apply to the eighteenth century world. Not only did increase in trade and colonial activity enable the transmission of information across the Atlantic, but the study of disasters in particular reveals a continuity over time and space as regards the people’s vulnerability, government response to, and impact of disasters. “While ‘globalization’ has been touted in the press as the new concept of the late twentieth century, a study of eighteenth-century disaster underscores the profound global interrelationships already in place two

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¹⁵ The fire even made it onto a list of top news stories: “Chronological Arrangement of Remarkable Events in 1788”, published in the London Chronicle on Jan. 1, 1789. The passage read, “A dreadful fire at New Orleans in Louisiana, by which 700 out of 900 houses were computed to be destroyed.” Dr. Will Slauter, e-mail message to author, February 7, 2009.

or three hundred years ago.”17 Hence, according to Johns, a comparative look at disasters in different corners of the Atlantic world can reveal parallels in societal characteristics that may have exacerbated the effects of a hazard.

Lastly, aside from unearthing questions about colonial social relationships, global communications, and about the roles that humans play in exacerbating or abating damage wreaked by natural hazards, the study of fires as disasters in particular, allows for additional questions to surface. For instance, if a major fire takes place beyond the edges of human communities, destroying acres of forest and animal habitats, but sparing all that is ours, is it a disaster? When fires ignite in the forests of California, we all watch news coverage of the flames inching closer and closer to people’s homes, as firefighters risk their lives to prevent the inferno from reaching nearby neighborhoods. But if these fires took place far enough from people that their homes were completely safe, would the media provide us with coverage of firefighters circulating above the fire in helicopters working to put it out? To come to the point, when a fire takes place in an urban setting, it most likely to become a “disaster.” The quote that introduces this section points out the various ways in which a fire could fundamentally disrupt people’s lives and environments. Its reference to goods stores is particularly notable, for it is applicable to the colonial setting in which the Good Friday fire took place. In fact, the passage essentially relates why the Great Fire of 1788 was indeed truly a disaster. And yet, the following quotation, by one of the world’s leading experts on fire, informs how the Great Fire of 1788 could have also been a rebirth:

…An ecology of fire exists for built landscapes as much as for natural or agrarian ones. The difference between them lies in the degree of control humans have. In principle, our control in cities is absolute. In principle, we can erect dwellings that won’t burn or if kindled won’t spread or if caused to spread can be contained by architectural firebreaks. In principle, better technology and stiffer social controls could prevent unwanted ignition altogether. In practice, of course, fire has proven unexpungible. Nor, finally, can cities afford to lose it. Even industrialization has only altered, not abolished, burning. Without combustion, the city would die.18

17 Ibid., xxii.
Indeed, I cannot help but to imagine what New Orleans might look like today if a fire as disastrous as that of 1788 had not taken place during the Spanish colonial period.

Existing Literature

The 1788 fire in New Orleans has received very little scholarly attention, partly because the period of Spanish occupation in general, lasting from 1763 to 1803, has not been widely covered by historians. Those who have acknowledged the occurrence of the fire have done so in only a few lines, usually not even finding it worth placing in the index. Nonetheless, scholarship that makes reference to the fire and acknowledges its importance at least to some degree does exist.

In the third volume of his exhaustive History of Louisiana, written in 1846, Charles Gayarré discussed the years of Spanish domination in Louisiana. It is in this section that the reader will find his description of the fire, and the representative example of the extent to which the fire is discussed in most of the texts that mention it, taken directly from a portion of the official account of the fire that Governor Miró wrote to the monarch in Spain. Gayarré related that the Friday occurred on March 21, 1788 – a Good Friday – at half past one in the afternoon. It began at the home of the military treasurer and destroyed 856 edifices, including merchant stores, inhabitants’ dwellings, the Cathedral, town hall, the watch house, the arsenal, and the prison. He further related that the buildings that were saved were those that fronted the river, as the strong southern wind that blew made useless all attempts at stopping the flames. He also made reference to Governor Miró's efforts to assist the displaced by supplying tents and rations of rice, and by sending three vessels to Philadelphia to procure necessary items. “$24,000 were remitted to [the Spanish minister, Gardoqui] for the purchase of three thousand barrels of flour. Miró sent the Court of Spain a detailed account of the losses occasioned by this
conflagration, and put them down at $2,595,561.”¹⁹ Such is the treatment of the 1788 fire in Gayarré’s multi-volume History of Louisiana. Most existing texts on Spanish Louisiana that actually mention the fire basically provide the same amount of information, or less. In fact, he did more than most by mentioning the ships that Miró sent to Philadelphia, though he did not explain how atypical, and illegal, the act actually was.

One of the few authors who have dedicated more than a few lines to the fire is Thomas O’Connor, the first chief engineer of the New Orleans Fire Department. In his 1895 text, The History of the Fire Department of New Orleans, he devoted roughly four pages to the event, though three of these are a translated transcription of over half of the official account of the fire written by Governor Miró. Aside from printing a portion of Miró’s letter, O’Connor provided about the same summary of information that Gayarré did. However, he paid special attention to the fact that at the time of the fire, New Orleans found itself ill-prepared for a disaster of that magnitude, for there existed no fire extinguishing materials, “…not a bucket, and certainly no organized preparation to even pass water in buckets to put out the fire where it burned, or to wet the roofs that stood in the path of fire.”²⁰ As I will show later, there is indication in some documents that New Orleans actually owned two fire engines at the time of the fire, but these were both burned. O’Connor seems not to be aware of these. Nonetheless, the author’s aim in this text was to discuss the history of the city’s fire department, which did not in fact exist in any form until 1829, after the Louisiana Purchase, when its early form as the volunteer based Firemen’s Charitable Association came into being. It is thus not surprising that he should dedicate such little space to the disaster of 1788.²¹

In his 1922 work, History of New Orleans, John Smith Kendall dedicated all of six sentences to the 1788 fire. In these, he mentioned that it destroyed 856 buildings

¹⁹ Archivo General de Indias (henceforward AGI), Audiencia de Santo Domingo (henceforward SD), legajo 2576, “Relacion de la perdida que cada Individuo ha padecido en el Incendio de esta Ciudad acaecido el 21 de Marzo del presente año….” no. 119, ff. 542, September 30, 1788.
²⁰ Thomas O’Connor, The History of the Fire Department of New Orleans (New Orleans, 1895), 36.
²¹ The New Orleans Fire Department formally came into existence in 1891, replacing the volunteer-based Firemen's Charitable Association.
including the cathedral and prison, and made reference to the scarcity of provisions that
struck the colony in the wake of the fire. Unlike Gayarré, Kendall pointed out that the
fire was followed by a move toward growth for, “The town suddenly outgrew its ancient
boundaries.”\(^{22}\) Still, he did not elaborate on neither the disaster itself, or on its
implications. Even the one and only text wholly devoted to the fire of 1788 gives only
limited information, most space being taken up by a transcription of the same document
by Miró. In 1937, Lauro De Rojas published an article in *The Louisiana Historical
Quarterly* titled, “The Great Fire of 1788 in New Orleans.”\(^{23}\) The twelve-page article is
essentially a collection of transcribed passages regarding the fire. It contains a
transcription of the passage in Gayarre’s text that deals with the fire, as well as a portion
of Governor Miró’s official account of the fire to King Charles III. The author
contributed comments to his selections, but by no means provided much primary research
or deeper analysis of the event. Nonetheless, it is the only text in existence that is wholly
dedicated to the disaster.

Of all the texts that mention the Good Friday fire, Caroline Burson’s is the most
thorough.\(^{24}\) In her biography of Don Esteban Miró in the years that he was governor of
New Orleans, Burson necessarily discussed the fire on the basis of Miró’s handling of the
disaster. In a few pages, she listed several major points surrounding the event, including
issues of funding, the need for a new cemetery a few months later, and the need for fire
pumps in the city. Burson shed light on the fire of 1788 more than any writer had before
of after the publication of her text. She recognized its historical significance inasmuch as
it was a major occurrence in the life of her subject. However, she merely touched on
points that deserved much more attention. Due to the biographical nature of her text,
there are a series of contemporary documents that she appears to have overlooked. As a
result, much was left out.

\(^{23}\) Lauro De Rojas, “The Great Fire of 1788 in New Orleans,” *The Louisiana Historical Quarterly* 20, no. 3
(July 1937).
\(^{24}\) Caroline Maude Burson, *The Stewardship of Don Esteban Miró, 1782-1792* (New Orleans: American
Printing Company, 1940).
A variety of other texts, both monographs and articles, point to the conflagration as one of consequence—an episode that initiated a series events and affected the course of colonial New Orleanian history. Yet, they limit the topic of the fire to a handful of lines at the most, basically only going as far as mentioning that it happened, and that it caused such and such event to take place. The details or actual narrative of the fire and its implications are completely left out, and “fire” is not even mentioned in the index. Some of these include Samuel Wilson Jr.’s survey of New Orleanian architecture, *The Vieux Carré, New Orleans: Its Plan, Its Growth, Its Architecture*, and John G. Clark’s economic history of New Orleans from 1718 to 1812. Even in this sweeping study on the city’s colonial economy, the many natural disasters that took place in the eighteenth century received little attention. Henry Castellanos’ *New Orleans as it Was: Episodes of Louisiana Life* offered brief mention of the fire. This author too, transcribed the same small portion of Miró’s official account that is transcribed elsewhere, basically letting it speak for itself. He did, however, include the famous plan of the city that shows the areas that were reduced to ashes (see figure 7). Meanwhile, Antonio Acosta Rodriguez’s limited treatment tells us that New Orleans’ economy at the time of the fire left it incapable of resolving the “grave situation provoked by the disaster.” Also, in a text titled, *Luisiana*, Paul Hoffman dedicated one paragraph to the disaster in which he narrated the cause of the fire; namely, the candles in Nuñez’s cabinet setting the city ablaze, and also made brief reference to the economic hardships that ensued.

One finds further treatment of the fire in Derek Noel Kerr’s study on crime and punishment in Spanish Louisiana, where he devoted a few sentences to the fire throughout the text. He pointed, for instance, to the fact that it was not a case of arson, that it affected the colony’s economy, and that it later prompted the Governor to initiate a

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patrol system for the city. Meanwhile, in his biography of Francisco Bouligny, Gilbert C. Din observed that a fire in 1788 destroyed 856 buildings, and pointed to the fact that it “accelerated contact with the United States,” but again, the reader is left intrigued, hoping to read more on a seemingly significant event that surfaces no more.

Similarly, in Din and Harkins’ excellent and much needed study on the New Orleans Cabildo government, there exists no record of the fire in the index. However, one could hardly write on such a subject without mentioning the fire at all, and so in a few lines, the authors necessarily made reference to the fact that it halted growth in the city at least through 1791. This near complete and essential study is not quite complete without a little more on natural disasters, including, of course, that of 1788. In Bounded Lives, Bounded Places, Kimberly Hanger also alludes to the fire a few times – enough times indeed, that it was placed in the index – but the nature of her subject did not entail elaboration on the event. The same extends to Gilbert C. Din’s, Spaniards, Planters, and Slaves, where the fire is given very little attention, but considering the topic, it is of significance that it is mentioned at all. Lastly, we encounter a non-academic text, written by a Spaniard whose goal it was to help remedy a lack of knowledge and appreciation of New Orleans’ Spanish period. Here too, one finds mention of the Good Friday Fire of 1788, but again, the reader is left intrigued, with nowhere to turn.

In sum, these many texts serve as a contribution to the rich history of colonial Louisiana in many ways, but none have allowed the fire to serve a very significant part of their narratives. As a result, they provide only a small part of the story. Through this project, I aim to address several historically relevant questions that will help to remedy

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33 Gilbert C. Din, Spaniards, Planters, and Slaves: The Spanish Regulation of Slavery in Louisiana, 1763-1803, (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1999).
the gap in the current scholarship. By allowing history to tell us how New Orleans and its government have dealt with catastrophes in the past, this project will serve as a significant contribution to Louisiana’s disaster literature, especially in light of the increasing awareness and interest in this area after Hurricane Katrina. I will thus look at New Orleans as it existed on the eve of the fire, and at the changes that took place after it. It is also important to examine how the Spanish government responded and how government administration, laws, or regulations changed in order to deal with the outcomes of the fire. The main focus of this project then is to uncover the many transformations that came about in the city of New Orleans in the wake of the fire – transformations that have been largely ignored by scholars and undocumented in a comprehensive format, although contemporary archival documents clearly point to the great significance of the event. My aims are to demonstrate that this fire was a more historically momentous event than can be measured by the attention it has received in scholarship, and to elucidate the richness of information that may be unearthed by exploring the occurrences of disasters in history.
CHAPTER ONE

NEW ORLEANS BEFORE THE FIRE

I dare say that one should not be deluded into believing that it is possible to establish the colony with persons who were incapable of discipline in France, especially since it is noted that a man who was an excellent subject becomes a mediocre subject in America and a mediocre subject becomes very bad. We do not know the reason for this deterioration...Regardless of the reason, the fact is certain. What can one expect from a bunch of vagabonds and wrongdoers in a country where it is harder to repress licentiousness than in Europe?

-- Anonymous writer on the “State of Louisiana” in 1720

The decades of French rule in the colonial city of New Orleans generally proved difficult for its inhabitants. According to contemporary documents, throughout the early decades of French rule, New Orleans ranged from a swampy marshland infested with strange creatures, to a hub for the morally lax - a corrupt, and notoriously maladministered capital. While conditions improved as the colony slowly developed, advancement itself was slow, and commercial and economic problems were generally manifest in the region. Despite its situation in the Gulf, the colony, which throughout the eighteenth century consisted of what we today call the Vieux Carré or French Quarter, was to prove a dismal failure to France in terms of both financial and diplomatic advantages. This was due in part to France’s own domestic preoccupations by way of economic problems, and later the Seven Year’s War, which exacerbated the neglect of her colony. Images of French colonial New Orleans thus depict a rather plain town, lined with threadbare wooden structures, not at all resembling the Vieux Carré we see today.


36 Contemporary descriptions of the state of New Orleans in the French period include the papers of Pierre François de Rigaud de Vaudreuil (published), Chevalier Jean Charles de Pradel de Lamase (Chevalier de Pradel Papers at Williams Research Center, New Orleans), and the Jesuit traveler, Pierre François Xavier de Charlevoix (published).

37 See figures 3 and 4.
In 1762, however, France was to cede the region south of Lake Pontchartrain in Louisiana, including New Orleans, to Spain. Eventually, the transition was to prove advantageous to the city, which was thenceforward increasingly restructured, reorganized, and developed to suit Spanish aspirations. In fact, although the Spanish were at first hesitant to occupy the Louisiana colony, they were increasingly clear in their objectives to lessen corruption, eliminate venality, augment the population, and make New Orleans’ advantageous location on the Gulf and the Mississippi work to their benefit.

Figure 3. “Veüe et Perspective de la Nouvelle Orleáns,” 1726, by Jean Pierre Lassus. Across the river, one can see the ville of New Orleans on the banks of the Mississippi. As late as the 1760s, upon the arrival of the Spanish, structures stood only on the four streets nearest to the river. The city was thus not too much larger than what we see here. Image courtesy of the Archives nationales d'outre-mer, Aix-en-Provence, France, FR CAOM 04DFC71A.
Nonetheless, progress was at first slow under the new administration. In terms of aesthetics, for example, the first twenty-five years of Spanish occupation still saw the unimpressive, architecturally weak town that the French had erected. It took a devastating event for the colony to truly begin taking on the form and characteristics that distinguish it today. I will now proceed to provide some background and introduce certain aspects of the city of New Orleans as it existed under French administration, thereby providing the foundation necessary to explore changes and transformations that took place upon the cession to Spain, with the objective of better illustrating the city as it was on the eve of the fire.
La Nouvelle-Orléans, established on the banks of the Mississippi River under the French fleurs-de-lys in 1718, was meant to serve as a metropolis within French possessions in the Americas. However, due to both New Orleans’ precarious position on the Gulf, and France’s own domestic and diplomatic problems, this was never realized. The region was regarded as a source of wealth in raw materials, an essential site for the guarantee of French power in the continent through a series of posts extending from the Great Lakes down to the Gulf, and an excellent location from which to enforce a state monopoly on smuggling with the Spanish colonies. New Orleans was to be the promising capital of New France - not the oft-neglected and disordered colony it was to be commonly described as throughout its forty-five years under French administration.\(^\text{38}\)

New Orleans became the capital of the colony in 1722 under the direction of both, Jean Baptiste le Moyne, Sieur de Bienville, and the Scottish financier, John Law. Through his ideally planned, yet ultimately unsuccessful Mississippi Company, Law, who promised to make both the state and the destitute noble alike rich once more, managed to be placed in charge of Louisiana by the regent, Philippe, Duc d’Orléans, after whom the colony was named. By exaggerating the wealth of Louisiana, Law initiated major speculation on the company’s shares, leading investors to advance large amounts of money in 1719 and early 1720 to ensure the future of Louisiana. However, the arrangement could not endure the abrupt drop in confidence that took place mid-1720 when stocks began to plunge from 15,000 livres a share to 500, causing the crash of Law’s company monopoly, which came to be known as the “Mississippi Bubble.”\(^\text{39}\)

After the bubble, Law ceased to be associated with the Company, which by 1721 was called the *Compagnie des Indes*. New Orleans was to remain under the direction of the Company, which controlled the entire French slave trade until 1731 when Louisiana was

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\(^\text{38}\) Dawdy, 3.

\(^\text{39}\) Ibid., 15.
While the Company of the Indies continued to function in its efforts toward colonization in Louisiana, it was never to enjoy a positive reputation again. Despite its ultimate failure, the Company may nonetheless be credited with helping to found the city of New Orleans, for it was through its efforts that the populating, city-planning, construction, and organization of the colony began to take place, but not without difficulty. Despite Law’s praise for the promising new colony, the French were reluctant to emigrate to New Orleans. “It was no use promising prospective emigrants that [the Company] would furnish them with horses, oxen, cows, pigs, sheep and hens, [and] furniture…[It was] useless to vaunt the eight hundred beautiful houses in New Orleans, existent only on paper. No one came forward.” It thus became apparent that the only remaining option for bringing inhabitants into the settlement, despite John Law’s hopes for an affluent colony populated with the wealthy and well to do, was through the forced emigration of France’s prisoners and prostitutes. Such a community was hardly predisposed for good government administration, and letters of Louisiana’s governors denote dissatisfaction with sects of the New Orleanean population up to the cession to Spain in 1763. This is not to say, however, that the population in New Orleans continued to be made up of criminals and vagabonds. Increasingly, the richness and diversity of the colony’s population began to take shape throughout the last two decades of French administration, particularly as Creole peoples from Africa and the Caribbean, and Cajun inhabitants of Acadian descent from Canada arrived in New Orleans.

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42 “…[T]he quality of the population sent, - a great number consisting of convicts, - forced a timely and earnest protest from Bienville…He wrote that hardly a man was sent that was fit for the most necessary work.” Grace Elizabeth King, *Jean Baptiste Le Moyne, Sieur de Bienville* (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1893), 234-235.
43 “Piquery, son of the King’s baker, was killed by a sentinel stationed at the end of the avenues of [New Orleans] where frequent robberies are generally committed by Negroes from whom there is no protection.” Pierre de Rigaud de Vaudreuil, *The Vaudreuil Papers*, ed. Bill Baron (New Orleans: Polyanthos, 1975), 276-277.
Orleans. Even so, the less than ideal demographics of the first inhabitants in its earlier years as a colony serve to demonstrate the origins of New Orleans’ notoriety for being an “untamed” colony, neglected by her mother country, and administered mainly through corruption and illegality.

Moreover, the economy in colonial New Orleans failed to show much strength in the first thirty years of formal French administration. After the Mississippi Bubble took place due to investors’ cynicism about Louisiana’s potential to yield major gains, the French crown’s interest in the colony waned, and New Orleanians were essentially left to fend for themselves. Until 1731, when the French crown regained control over Louisiana, the Company exerted total control over the colony’s economy, thereby exclusively managing all imports and exports. This system entailed that all nonlocal commodities be purchased from the Company at fixed prices, while all exports had to be shipped or sold through it. Outside of this monopoly, however, commerce took on a life of its own – one that would continue beyond the cession to Spain, though it was more restricted under the Spanish. There existed a contraband world of smuggling and illicit commerce carried out by maritime merchants who were adept at taking advantage of New Orleans’ advantageous geographic position. After the French crown gained control over Louisiana from the Mississippi Company in 1731, independent French merchants gained the right to trade in Louisiana so long as they worked out of authorized French ports, carried French cargoes, and obtained a license – regulations that France failed to enforce, thereby inadvertently tolerating the demand for contraband commerce around the colony.

The corrupt nature of trade and commerce emerging out of New Orleans essentially gave the colony a reputation for lacking valuable commodities, and having a low likelihood of repayment. It was also regarded as a dangerous destination for trade.

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43 Also, after 1723, prostitutes were no longer sent to the colony, though the reason for the halt evidently stemmed from the colony’s inability to care for their offspring. Hence the establishment of an Ursuline Convent that was to offer shelter to the children of prostitutes, open a school for French, Indian, and slave girls, and provide nurses for the Charity Hospital that was founded in 1736. The Ursuline Convent, too, thereby contributed to the eventual improvements in the population of New Orleans. Sarah Searight, “New Orleans Under French Rule,” History Today 19, no. 8 (August 1969), 547-548.

44 Dawdy, 103.

45 Dawdy, 103.
due in part to piracy, the high winds coming in from the Gulf, and the hot and humid climate that fostered mosquitoes and disease. Thus, while trade and commerce out of New Orleans slowly improved, especially into the 1730s when the city began trade with Spanish colonial ports, the colony proved a disappointment to France - “a drain on resources rather than the source of the raw materials that Europe expected its colonies to provide.”

In terms of architecture and aesthetics too, French colonial New Orleans was weak, and dully constructed. Most of the houses were crude one-story dwellings that resembled huts. They were often built on the ground and as a result were subject to damage or destruction from the floods, strong winds and heavy humidity so frequent in the region. In 1749, Governor Vaudreuil wrote to the French court, “New Orleans is in the same situation…[The] house of the ordonnateur is in ruins and others will be dangerous in strong winds.”

Even while architecture in the colony began to take on slightly more efficient forms through some use of brick and the creation of “galleries” or overhanging porches better suited to the hot Louisiana summer, by the 1750s, even the colonial seats of government had become dilapidated. One contemporary resident thought they should all be rebuilt. He wrote, “The church and the presbytere are falling in ruin and are no longer susceptible of repair. The Government House collapsed several years ago. The Intendance has been uninhabitable for a longtime. The two barracks buildings have collapsed, the hospital is not worth much more.”

France’s political abandonment of her colony in Louisiana was significantly apparent in the city of New Orleans, where arguably, the negligence was most felt. The mother country’s disregard caused lack of funding in the colony, left colonists to fend for themselves, allowed structures to fall into a state of decay and disrepair, caused smuggling and piracy to remain unchecked, and tolerated corruption, venality, and

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46 Searight, 549.
47 Din & Harkins, 2.
49 Quoted in Dawdy, 90; and in Wilson, 37.
governmental maladministration to run rampant. The papers of Governor Vaudreuil are filled with references to France’s neglect. The letters are basically records of constant shipment delays, lack of supplies and reserves, and the need for assistance from France.\textsuperscript{50}

The government in New Orleans was based on a Superior Council, which administered the affairs of the entire colony of Louisiana. Members of the Council included the governor, the \textit{procureur général}, the greffier or royal notary and clerk, and the \textit{commissaire-ordonnateur}, who oversaw the sessions, was also the \textit{premier conseiller}, and whose position was modeled after that of mainland France’s \textit{intendants}.\textsuperscript{51} Essentially, for most of New Orleans’ colonial French period, contemporary documents indicate dissatisfaction with local administration, and provide reports of corruption and abuse of venality in the colony. Governor Vadreuil’s administration, for example, “was notoriously corrupt.” His successor, Kerlerec, however, “corrected some of the abuses, particularly in the buying of offices and the distribution of provisions.”\textsuperscript{52} Nonetheless, the inhabitants themselves also gained a reputation for being unruly and living in scandalous conditions. While we know that the character of the population in New Orleans increasingly improved as the colony matured, it appears that clearing the city’s name was not an easy task. It likely did not help that policing and law enforcement in French colonial New Orleans was ad hoc, and markedly scarce.

Louisiana was just not important and so it languished…It can be argued that the French commitment in Louisiana was a mistake from the beginning. France was not powerful enough, nor was the power that she commanded flexible enough, to develop and defend Canada, Louisiana, the Antilles, and India while simultaneously pursuing diplomatic objectives in Europe. France lacked three basic elements: capitalists willing to venture surplus funds in underdeveloped regions, a navy adequate to her colonial pretensions, and a population willing to emigrate.\textsuperscript{53}

Consequently, due not only to disillusionment with a colony that was once expected to

\textsuperscript{50} \textit{The Vaudreuil Papers}, passim.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 194-195.
\textsuperscript{52} Searight, 547.
yield riches, but also to France’s own domestic and diplomatic problems, the city of New Orleans was in several ways left to manage itself with little intervention from the mother country.

**Transforming a Colony: The Cession to Spain and Spanish Administration**

The cession of West Louisiana and New Orleans to Spain took place through the Treaty of Fontainebleau in 1762, and was reinforced through the Treaty of Paris in 1763. Spain conceded to occupy Louisiana, after twice declining, and finally arrived in 1766.\(^{54}\) Judging by evidence discussed here, it is possible that King Louis XV of France felt compelled to cede the colony to his cousin King Charles III of Spain because it was simply not fulfilling the aims that France once had. This seems likely if it is true that the colony was at some point perceived by France to be a drain on resources rather than a source of profit as some have argued.\(^{55}\) Nonetheless, Spain hesitantly conceded and accepted this region of Louisiana seeing in it an advantageous location, and a chance to gain an upper hand in the Gulf against Britain. Spain was thus more conscious of the ways in which they could benefit from this new colony. By the 1770s, the region’s worth to Spain was apparent even to a Bourbon soldier who was later to write a memoir about his life in Louisiana. He wrote, “It is incontestable that the province of Louisiana, by its immensity, its situation, the fertility of its fields, the abundance of its woods, the ease of transporting everything by water, the richness of its mines, the character and customs of its inhabitants, the innumerable Indian nations which it encompasses, and the development it is capable of, is one of the most interesting provinces for the state.”\(^{56}\)

Spanish officials did not immediately begin to inhabit the colony, however, until 1766 when the first Spanish governor, Antonio de Ulloa, arrived. It was under Ulloa that the infamous Riot of 1768 took place in protest against Spanish occupation in Louisiana.

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\(^{54}\) Ibid., 43.

\(^{55}\) Searight, 549.

However, the Spanish took immediate action by sending a new governor in the person of Alejandro O’Reilly, who quickly quashed the riot, punished the guilty, and reestablished order in the city. The revolt in New Orleans was not exemplary of anti-Spanish activity elsewhere in the colony, for the transition within Louisiana upon the cession of the colony from France to Spain was actually relatively smooth.

Spanish New Orleans was under the administration of the Cabildo government, instituted by O’Reilly upon the termination of Louisiana’s Superior Council, and made up of one governor, six regidores (counselors), two alcaldes ordinarios (judges), an escribano (scribe), a mayordomo de propios (city treasurer), and a sindico procurador general (public advocate).\textsuperscript{57} Government administration saw significant improvements under the Spanish as the city’s new government sought to impose the regulations and adjustments necessary to improve conditions in the capital. Officials worked to lessen corruption in both government administration and commerce, and to lower crime by regulating drinking parlors, appointing police, and adding lights to the streets. New regulations also sought to increase city sanitation and encourage residents not to dispose of refuse in the streets (which was not easily achieved).\textsuperscript{58}

The population of New Orleans greatly increased after the cession to Spain as people began to flood the colony from various corners of the Atlantic. While it indeed grew slowly throughout the French period numbering at a total of about 2,500 people by the time of the cession, by 1785, about twenty years after the Spanish arrived, the population had increased by two-thirds. Yet, it was not until after the growth and reconstruction efforts that took place within years after the fire that the colony’s population for the first most perceptibly grew beyond the boundaries of its colonial grid.

The boost in population growth in the Spanish period preceding the fire can be partly explained by Spanish endeavors to foster the colony by promoting immigration. This entailed that they moderate many of the policies implemented by the French during their administration in Louisiana, including the infamous Code Noir. Some of the many

\textsuperscript{57} Din & Harkins., 57-68.
\textsuperscript{58} Din & Harkins, 17. Also, see below on Miró’s Banda de Buen Gobierno.
regulations imposed by the articles of the Code included for instance, that all Jews be expelled from the colony, that only the exercise of Catholicism be permitted, and that all slaves under the supervision of one who was not a Catholic be subject to confiscation.\textsuperscript{59} Soon after his arrival in the colony, Governor Alejandro O’Reilly replaced the French Code Noir with Spanish slave laws, much to the dismay of slave-owning planters who made several attempts throughout the period of Spanish occupation to restore the Code as it existed under the French.\textsuperscript{60} Under new Spanish slave laws, black slaves were now allowed to work for themselves on Sundays and holidays, and more individuals were able to purchase their freedom through the Spanish practice of coartación.\textsuperscript{61} As a result, the number of free blacks living in New Orleans greatly increased throughout the Spanish period. Under Spanish administration also, free blacks were, “economically active and enjoyed full freedom to arrange contracts, own and transfer property, and bring suit, even if it involved civil litigation against whites.”\textsuperscript{62} In fact, in the declaration of real and personal property losses collected by the Spanish government following the Good Friday fire, 72 out of 496 claims belonged to free blacks (51 of these were women!).\textsuperscript{63}

Spanish endeavors to increase the population and cultivate the colony also explain the government’s tolerance of Jews and Protestants in Louisiana. In contrast to popular ideas of Spanish conservatism and Catholicism, Spain was remarkably accepting of non-Catholics in Louisiana, and while in other Atlantic colonies, Spanish authorities may have perceived the subject population as inherently inferior upon arrival, here they were exceptionally tolerant of many of the already established habits and customs. While one may assume that this is due to the city’s predominantly European and Acadian population (as opposed to indigenous), we know that the most diverse conglomeration of peoples imaginable for an eighteenth-century city nonetheless populated New Orleans. Blacks

\textsuperscript{59} There terms were outlines under articles 1, 3, and 4, respectively.
\textsuperscript{60} Din & Harkins, 153. Also, Hanger, 25.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 12.
\textsuperscript{63} Hanger, 86.
both slave and free, Native-Americans, Creoles, Acadians, Protestants, Catholics, Jews, and Germans, Swiss, French, Catalans, Canary Islanders, Cubans, Mexicans, and other Latin Americans – all cohabitated in the colony. Spanish leniency in matters of religion in Louisiana may instead be partly be explained by both disconnection from the motherland, allowing more room for self-government by colonial officials, and a desire to be accepted by the diverse and mostly non-Spanish population. This tolerant behavior was in line with Spanish authorities’ approach to rule in Louisiana, as contemporary accounts often tell of the administrative government’s general desire to demonstrate acceptance of local ways established before their arrival in the Louisiana in order to increase population and cultivate the colony.

Indeed, such acceptance was most markedly manifest under Governor Miró. In fact, it was he that was responsible for putting a stop to mainland Spanish ecclesiastical authorities’ plans to establish an inquisition in New Orleans with the rector of Saint Louis Parish, Padre Antonio de Sedella, at its head. Sedella, who was appointed commissary of the Holy Office of the Inquisition for Louisiana three years earlier, attempted to initiate an inquisition in 1789, precisely when Governor Miró was concerned with increasing Protestant immigration to Louisiana. Sedella requested support from Miró for his inquisitorial plans, and Miró in turn responded by sending messengers to inform him that he had not obtained the proper right to carry out the inquisition. The governor then ordered the Fray’s arrest, and had him deported to his Capuchin monastery in Spain.

Efforts to improve the condition of New Orleans were most evident during Governor Miró’s administration. On June 2, 1786, he established his Banda de Buen Gobierno, or Edict of Good Government, through which he aimed to clean up and maintain the city, and regulate some aspects of colonial life in New Orleans. It contained thirty-four articles, the first three of which were to prohibit the selling of merchandise, traffic of carts, or work on Sabbaths and religious holidays except in cases of extreme necessity.

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64 In French, he is known as Père Antoine.
65 F.L. Gassler, “Père Antoine: Supreme Officer of the Holy Inquisition of Cartagena in Louisiana,” The Catholic Historical Review 8, no.1 (April 1922), 59. Although Sedella returned to the colony in 1793 cleared of charges, he was never to attempt an inquisition in Louisiana again.
necessity. Also, during divine services, shops were to remain closed, and Blacks were prohibited from holding dances in the public square on evenings when divine services were held. Interestingly, article 34 prohibited the immigration of slaves from the French and British Islands, and the verbal sales and transfers of slaves were forbidden. Other regulations issued through this edict included that dead animals be buried and no longer thrown in the streets, that no large assemblies gather without knowledge on the part of the government, and that animals be kept by families and no longer allowed to run at large. Gambling, the carrying of weapons, and duels were also henceforward banned, and in hopes of preventing fires, article 27 suggested that chimneys be cleaned each month without fail.

Despite Spanish plans and intentions to foster and better the colony however, changes were not immediately apparent. Although the shift in administration was to prove ultimately beneficial to the city of New Orleans, especially after the Fire of 1788, trade and commerce in New Orleans was slow to improve. Throughout the 1760s and 1770s, it greatly involved English traders, thus compelling the Spanish to impose new regulations to control the presence of foreign merchants in their ports, which was detrimental to Louisianan commerce.

Aesthetically, the New Orleans that the Spanish inhabited from the 1760s to the 1780s was not greatly altered. While dilapidated buildings were preserved under the Spanish, original structures were not all rebuilt from scratch. Those same freestanding, crude wooden buildings still stood. “The greater part of [these] were wooden one-story structures, roofed with shingles, all made of highly flammable cypress.” It is no wonder then, that on March 21, 1788, the flames of the fire spread as quickly and uncontrollably as they did. The entire city was a fire hazard – a disaster waiting to happen. Thus while the Spanish did Iberianize the street names of the city soon after

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66 Records and Deliberations of the Cabildo, Vol. 3, nos. 1, 2 June 1786, Banda de Buen Gobierno, Articles 1, 2 & 3, Louisiana Collection, New Orleans Public Library.
67 Records and Deliberations of the Cabildo, Vol. 3, nos. 1, 2 June 1786, Banda de Buen Gobierno, Louisiana Collection, New Orleans Public Library.
68 Clark., 167.
69 Din & Harkins, 3.
their arrival, and slowly introduced Spanish customs, language, and fashions into the colony, it took the catastrophic event of 1788 to actually restructure the majority of the city in a more characteristically Spanish style.

Figure 5. Sketch of the first Casa Capitular (Capitol House). The Cabildo met here until it was destroyed in the fire of 1788. (Restorative sketch by Henry J. Krotzer, Jr.) Image courtesy of Koch and Wilson Architects, New Orleans.
CHAPTER TWO

“REDUCED TO ASHES”: THE GOOD FRIDAY FIRE

The curtain of nightfall removed from before one’s eyes, if for only a moment, the dreadful spectacle that the wretched populace suffered; and yet, the worst moment came with sunrise, for it revealed, spread throughout the camp, the tearful abandon and utmost consternation of so many families that only hours earlier, enjoyed the most considerable and decent conveniences. Now their pallid countenances betrayed the inevitability of the ruin of a city transformed en less than five hours to a frightful arid desert – the product of seventy years of industry.

-- Governor Esteban Miró

The morning of March 21, 1788 began quietly. It was Good Friday, and all the markets were closed. The usual hustle and bustle on the streets near the Mississippi was replaced on this day by groups of people congregating in and around the Saint Louis parish church. Local stragglers could be seen loitering around the Plaza de Armas, or Place D’Armes as it was still referred to by many, which at this time consisted only of a large dirt clearing. Visitors to the city, too, could be seen meandering through the streets of the capital. No one could have imagined early in the day that the very church they assembled before, which had stood overlooking the Plaza since 1727, would be consumed by violent flames and reduced to ashes by sundown.

This morning there was no rain, nor was it very cold. There was however a strong southeasterly wind that blew incessantly through the afternoon and into the evening. While some local inhabitants wandered about on this blustery day, others remained at home. One such person was the Spanish Royal Treasurer, Don Vicente Jose Nuñez. A

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70 AGI, SD, 2544, Official Account of the Fire from Governor Miró to King Charles IV of Spain, no. 55, ff. 146-147. April 1, 1788. All translations are mine unless otherwise stated.
71 See figure 4.
72 The first church to stand at this site was a shoddy wooden structure that was erected by the French in 1718 at the establishment of New Orleans, or La Nouvelle-Orléans, two years before it was established as a parish (see figure 2). Construction for the larger church, completed in the aforementioned colombage sur sole style (brick and timber), began in 1725 and was completed in 1727. This is the church that was destroyed in the fire of 1788.
pious Catholic, Nuñez had resolved to observe the holy day at his home on 619 Chartres Street by lighting the candles on his prearranged holy altar assembled within a wooden cabinet.

Figure 6. View of the Place d’Armes in 1849, showing the Cabildo, St. Louis Cathedral, and the Presbytère, drawn by Gaston de Pontalba. Such was the appearance of the actual dirt clearing that was the Place throughout the colonial period, with the exception of course of the structures surrounding it, which were constructed following the Good Friday Fire of 1788. The Cathedral shown here was dedicated in 1792. There we see what the future “Jackson Square” looked like from 1791 until 1849 when a patroness by the name of Baroness Pontalba commenced funding for the beautification project of the Square. Later that same year, major renovations began on the Cathedral, the end result being the St. Louis Cathedral we see today. Image courtesy of the Williams Research Center, New Orleans, 2004.48, PC 14-8-A.

At approximately 1:30 in the afternoon, as the wax tapers burned, Nuñez, according to one report, went about attending to dinner, at which time the flames of the neglected candles were said to have either reached the drapes that hung nearby, or reached and ignited the ceiling, “from [whence] proceeded the destruction of the most regular, well-governed small city in the Western world,” as one eyewitness, an English traveler, described it. 73 This observer is our main source for the information regarding

73 Secondary sources that mention the fire tend to state that the tapers ignited drapery hanging nearby. However, it was an eyewitness who wrote of the fire to a friend in London and whose letter was subsequently published in the chronicle wrote that the tapers actually set fire to the ceiling. It is thus not
Nuñez’s piety being at fault for the devastation of the city. He wrote, “The havoc caused by this dreadful conflagration originated at the house of a zealous Catholic; who, not satisfied with worshipping God in his usual way, had a chapel, or altar, erected in his house…which he had illuminated with 50 or 60 wax tapers, as if his prayers could not ascend to heaven without them…” Interestingly, in his many letters to Spain regarding the fire, Governor Miró never mentioned the original cause of the fire involving an act of piety. While he necessarily reported that the fire ignited in Nuñez’s home, he left out the detail expressed in our eyewitness’ report. Thus either Nuñez’s position in the local Spanish government kept Miró from informing on his colleague, Miró did not find it worth mentioning, being himself a Catholic, or the English witness was simply misinformed. Either way, it seems quite possible that events occurred as our witness reported them, for every other detail in his letter matched perfectly with Miró’s official account of events, and there is no question that the fire indeed ignited in Nuñez’s home, from whence it spread through the rest of the city.

Nevertheless, the fire raged on for approximately five hours. The strong wind that blew southeast served to bolster the flames that so quickly and uncontrollably spread from one structure to the next until 80% of the capital city lay in heaps of ash, scorched wood, and the charred remnants of its residents’ possessions. According to some sources, because it was a holy holiday, bells were not rung at news of the fire; therefore people could not immediately react to extinguish the flames before they began to spread incessantly. Many in fact did not even know, until it was too late, to try to save their most important possessions from their homes before the fire drew near. Contemporary accounts of the event tell of the many victims who struggled against the flames to salvage as much of their property as possible, almost always in vain.

The eyewitness mentioned above, who provided our most detailed account of the fire after that of Governor Miró and Fray Antonio de Sedella, wrote a letter from New Orleans. 

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It should be mentioned that while cases of arson were known to take place in New Orleans, there was no doubt that the 1788 fire was a genuine accident. Williams Research Center (henceforward WRC) Colonial Louisiana Newspaper Collection, “Extract of a Letter from New Orleans Dated March 26,” The London Chronicle, August 19-21, 1788.

Ibid.
Orleans five days after the conflagration detailing the experience. The relevant portion of the letter was then printed in the London Chronicle in August of 1788. In it, the spectator wrote that, “the whole town was laid in ashes before eight o’ clock at night, excepting the front row, and two streets to the westward, which were preserved by the wind blowing strongly the whole time from the south and south-east.”75 He explained that the inhabitants lost everything that they possessed, and went on to describe scenes of distress, as did Miró in his account, where one reads of people “tearing their hair, and on the verge of distraction.”76

Figure 7. “Plan Showing the Boundaries of the Great Conflagration on the 21st of March, 1788.” This image roughly depicts the parts of New Orleans that were affected by the fire. The dark shading represents the settled parts of the city. However, having been drawn years after the disaster, it is not an accurate representation of the extent of damage. Image courtesy of the Library of Congress, Map Collections.

75 Ibid.
76 Ibid.
By the end of the day, the unrelenting flames had devastated “three parts of the four of this city.”77 New Orleans was a decimated capital, “reduced to a horrible skeleton.”78 Aside from hundreds of residences, some of the structures destroyed included all of the bakeries, commerce houses, the military barracks and arsenal, the public jail, warehouses of food, the parochial church, the Spanish Cabildo or municipal building, and the presbytery.79 Among those that were spared were the customs house, the tobacco stores, the royal hospital, and those other structures that were nearest to the riverfront.80 Notably, the Ursuline Convent too, was saved by its location two streets westward of the flames’ reach.81

In his official full account of the disaster to Spain, Governor Miró wrote that these structures were spared due to inhabitants’ successful efforts at cutting the advance of the fire. He wrote, “Amongst so much tribulation, our spirits were not broken: seeing that, in violation of natural order, the flames appeared to lessen despite the strong wind, we resolved ourselves to conserve the row of edifices on the riverfront, and we effectively succeeded in stopping the progress of the fire…with these operations, the customs house, the tobacco stores…were saved.”82 Meanwhile, in his letter to the Bishop of Cuba in which he detailed the event, Antonio de Sedella wrote that the flames stopped at about “twenty paces from the monastery,” either because there were no structures left to carry the flames, or because he ordered that roofs be moistened so as to slow their spreading.83 Thus, efforts to stop the incessant flames were a citywide endeavor. People reacted as best they could under the circumstances to save as much as possible.

77 University of Notre Dame Archives (henceforward UNDA), Records of the Diocese of Louisiana and the Floridas (henceforward Records), 1576-1790, Letter from Antonio de Sedella, Vicar and ecclesiastical judge of Louisiana, New Orleans, to Santiago Joseph de Hechavarria y Elguezua, Bishop of Cuba, Havana, Cuba, dated March 28, 1788. Note: All translations from archival documents are mine unless otherwise noted.
78 Ibid.
79 AGI, SD, 2544, Governor Miró to King Charles III of Spain, no. 18, April 4, 1788.
80 AGI, SD, 2544, no. 55, ff. 144.
81 The Ursuline Convent that we see today was completed in 1753, though the Academy was founded in 1727, and the first building erected in 1734. Having survived the fire, it is famously the only remaining French colonial structure pre-dating the cession to Spain in New Orleans.
82 AGI, SD, 2544, no. 55, ff. 144.
And yet, if the report found in some secondary sources is to be believed, they may have been able to save much more. While it does not seem to be based on any contemporary source that I have come across, there are several accounts indicating that because the fire took place on Good Friday, ecclesiastical authorities in New Orleans did not allow for the bells to be rung, even as the fire began to spread. This may be, for it is true that according to Catholic tradition, bells are never to be tolled on Good Friday or Holy Saturday. Also, if this was indeed the case, it is possible that it was not mentioned in contemporary accounts of the fire simply because it was a given that on this day, bells are not to be tolled. However, the fact remains that more concrete evidence for this information in the form of a contemporary source is unknown.

At any rate, driven by the strong wind, the fire progressed rapidly, and found fuel not only in the structures of New Orleans, but too in all the property housed within their walls. Amongst these were the countless books, papers, records, and archives kept in the colonial capital’s church and government buildings. Sacramental records, certifications of debts, of nobility, of property, and of limpieza de sangre, or purity of blood, were all engulfed by the conflagration. These were regarded as highly important to government and ecclesiastical officials who wrote of their extensive efforts to salvage as many of them as possible. Miró wrote of his efforts to save and protect property registers and other official documents. Antonio de Sedella wrote that all he was able to save were the holy vessels and part of the archives where the church registers and tribunal papers were stored, for the parish records that were evacuated and placed in the home of the Director of Tobacco were eventually destroyed by the fire, as well. Also, in the Territorial Papers of the United States, one finds the 1804 “Petition of Pedro

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85 AGI, SD, 2544, no. 55, ff. 145.
Pedesclaux,” public notary of New Orleans, to Thomas Jefferson, President of the United States, which reads:

When the two great conflagrations that destroyed almost the totality of the City of New Orleans, the first on the 21st of March 1788, the next on the 8th of December 1794, took place, these Same Archives, as well as all other documents, of every description belonging to the different provinces of these offices, were saved from a general destruction by his active and effectual exertions, at the expense of his personal, and Family Interests; which he sacrificed with real Alacrity to what his honor made him consider as his most immediate duty to preserve; every thing he then possessed becoming the prey of the Flames. That being then left without House, without property of any description, the emoluments of his different offices greatly reduced by the public Calamity, and his Wife, his Children, and himself almost destitute of every article of wearing apparel, Your petitioner, to provide for their, as well as for his own Subsistence, Solicited, and obtained from the Spanish administration, a permission or license, for Setting up at Public Auction for the Sale of Real as well as personal property; an establishment then unknown in the country…

Here we not only have a prime example of the importance that the salvaging of official documents as given, but also one illustration of the destitution that this fire left in its wake. As a result of the destruction of so many vital government records, new personal declarations based on testimonials of character and status were needed to take the place of the old documents.

As regards loss of life, according to Miró’s account, “If this unhappy event had taken place in the hours of the night, it rapid spreading might have occasioned the destruction of many lives,” but because the fire took place in the afternoon, most lives were thankfully spared. He reported the demise of one slave woman, and a number of lastimados, or sick persons, who were unable to escape the inferno. However, the very emphatic eyewitness accounts of the fire tell of widespread consternation and despondency – desperate scenes of mothers searching for their children, fathers and

88 Below, I briefly discuss the much smaller fire of December 1794 that Pedesclaux made reference to. While he refers to his efforts to salvage papers during both conflagrations, the one that caused the destruction of his own property was that of 1788, for that of 1794 affected much fewer homes, and destroyed mostly government buildings.
89 AGI, SD, 2544, no. 55, ff. 149.
husbands seeking the means to recover what the flames permitted. Their tears, sobs, and pallor announced the fatal truth of the ruins of a city transformed in less than five hours to a barren landscape. Thus, aside from homes, the flames also wreaked havoc on the hearts and spirits of the people of New Orleans.

At the time of the fire of 1788, the city had just recovered from two hurricanes, a bad winter that cost the colony a quarter of all the gains of the colony, and a bad indigo harvest occasioned from bad seeds. The fire thus came at the worst possible time. And yet, despite the dramatic rhetoric of the misery and dejection that took hold of the capital during and after the fire, and despite the fact that it took place on a Good Friday, there was not as much mention of God as one might expect. No records survive of sermons or of other religious happenings taking place following the event. This is not to say, however, that these did not take place. In fact, in his letter to the Bishop of Cuba, Sedella wrote that Don Andres Almonester offered him part of his house for use as a parish church from which Sedella could “offer spiritual aid,” since the portion of the city that remained, where the hospital and the Ursuline Convent stood, were too far away. We know then that there were religious services offered, and perhaps there were even individuals standing in the Plaza de Armas denouncing the evils of the capital as the cause for the Lord’s just retribution, but alas, records of such activities, we have not.

Why It Happened

Now one must ask why this tragic accident took place. “The built landscape is as much a fire environment as forests and fields…[a]fter all, crowding people together boosts the density of open fires, and cramming structures packs more fuels even closer. In brief, cities are and have always been fire places.” Certainly, in the case of New Orleans, the fire was an accident ready to happen. On Good Friday 1788, the city indeed

90 Ibid.
92 Pyne, 102.
made an efficient fireplace. By 1788, New Orleans had suffered from the effects of numerous floods, hurricanes, and epidemics, but never had it been almost completely wiped out by the destructive forces of a major fire.

As a result, not much care had been taken in its history to protect it against the dangers of a possible conflagration. First, the colonial capital was mostly constructed of wood. Little efforts had been made to put certain safety measures into practice to prevent a major fire. Despite the fact that throughout the late 1770s and 1780s, under the direction of both Governor Galvez, and Governor Miró, Cabildo officials proposed safer building codes and the purchase and safekeeping of leather buckets and ladders, these were seldom put to practice prior to 1788. On the eve of the fire, extinguishing equipment was either scarce or non-existent. In fact, according to accounts, almost no buckets were to be found during the several hours of frantic panic that took hold of the city, and not a single fire engine was in place to assist in the massive undertaking of extinguishing the uncontrollable flames that spread and raged into the evening. While contemporary documents do refer to two fire engines that existed in the city at the time of the event, the flames of the fire consumed both of these before they could be secured.

Furthermore, if it is true that the bells were not rung at first word of the fire, one cannot help but assume that many structures would have been saved if the conflagration were stopped before it advanced. Hence, there very much exists a human element in the causation of the Good Friday fire of 1788. The colonial government was partly at fault for not taking the necessary prevention measures of changing and enforcing the building codes of the city, for not rebuilding the many dilapidated wooden structures that already stood, and for failing to obtain and safeguard materials such as fire engines and buckets. Ecclesiastical authorities too, might have been partly at fault for not allowing the bells to be tolled, if indeed this was the case. Of course, Don Vicente Jose Nuñez is likewise at fault for carelessly lighting the tapered candles that proved to be the demise of his city.

93 For these records, see NOPL City Archives, Digest of the Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo, 1769-1803, book 1, passim; book 2, pages 52 & 60, & book 3, passim.
In sum, human causality played a significant role in the occurrence of the disaster of 1788, as in so many other cases of urban disasters throughout history and to this day.

In the end, the calamitous episode devastated eight hundred fifty six of about eleven hundred buildings. Much of the population was now homeless, and the Spanish government in place was left with the major task of aiding the victims, rebuilding the city, and funding the entire enterprise.
CHAPTER THREE
AFTER THE FIRE

The commerce of this colony has suffered a severe breakdown after the disaster that reduced to ashes the warehouses with all the goods in them, and the fortune of the colony’s individuals is dependent on its[commerce] restoration, not only for the good of this, the capital city, but the whole colony, for the whole of Louisiana is dependent to a great degree on the prosperity of the capital.

-- Juan Bienvenu

The catastrophic event that took place on Good Friday, March 21, 1788, immediately set off a series of events. Some of these arrangements, meant to deal with the more pressing problems of displacement and lack of provisions, resulted in short term changes. Others, however, such as the commercial activity openly, as opposed to clandestinely, initiated after the disaster, or the building codes eventually put into place as a reaction, were to have much more lingering effects in the city – effects that make up the long term implications of the fire. I will begin here with the activity that took place immediately after the event, when the colonial Spanish government and unaffected locals mobilized to house and feed the displaced. I will then explore the longer-term changes that came about as a result of the relief efforts.

Immediately After the Fire: Responses and Reactions

Immediately following the inferno, the local government, as well as those unaffected individuals, mobilized without delay to aid the victims of the fire and to begin the long and arduous task of reconstruction. Several contemporary accounts praised Miró and his relief efforts. His first endeavor was to distribute tents to those in need, and to “distribute rations of rice, on account of [his] majesty, presented to anyone who asked without distinction, which stood, though the number continue[d] to grow, at about seven hundred

94 AGI, SD, 2544, Letter from Juan Bienvenu to King Charles III of Spain, no. 57, ff. 165, April 3, 1788.
persons." In the three or four days after the fire, Miró himself not only handed out food, but also distributed more than 2,000 pesos out of his own pocket to the "most miserable." Thus, many of the displaced resided in tents, completely dependent on the local government for aid, while others found shelter with those whose homes were spared, and who Miró praised as "showing the most compassionate sentiments of hospitality."

The Governor also commended the "spirit of humanity that reigned amongst the neighbors of the province, [who] pledged generous donations for the reconstruction of the most essential structures." Amongst these was Joseph Vazquez Bahamonde, who collected a total of 760 pesos of donations in Baton Rouge for the poor of New Orleans who suffered from the fire. Don Samuel Steer, in spite of having lost two houses to the fire himself, also donated to the cause one hundred barrels of corn, sixty of English potatoes, and some barrels of beans that "he had the honor of placing at the disposition of Governor Miró to help remedy the deficiency of flour occasioned by the unexpected fire." Miró offered great praise to the actions of the colonel, Don Gilberto Antonio Maxènt, who having himself lost his warehouse, did not fail to offer assistance to the displaced. He took in and maintained a number of families in his home, and personally traveled to the post of Pointe Coupée to collect signatures from volunteers who subscribed to the aid of the needy. Religious authorities too, suppressed the collection

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95 AGI, SD, 2544, no. 55, ff. 147.
96 AGI, SD, 2545, Letter from Governor Miró to Don Antonio Valdes, no. 94, July 19, 1788.
97 Ibid.
98 Ibid.
99 AGI, Papeles de Cuba (henceforward PC), legajo 119, ff. 28, Letter from Bahamonde in Baton Rouge to Governor Miró in New Orleans, April 2, 1788.
100 AGI, PC, 119, ff. 22-23, no. 46, Letter from Bahamonde in Baton Rouge to Governor Miró in New Orleans, March 27, 1788.
of parochial dues. 102 Antonio de Sedella wrote that he advised ecclesiastics to refrain from receiving payment for any religious function, whatsoever. 103 There was no one, according to Miró, who did not take part in relieving the public calamity. Every individual had some form of shelter by the end of the first night of the fire.

In addition, Miró ordered victims to furnish detailed statements of loss to determine the total amount of damage, including private property, in order that he might request the funds from Spain. At the time that he wrote his official account of the fire, he estimated that the cost of damage to the structures alone was 1,080,000 pesos, not including furniture, and personal belongings. By September, once all declarations of loss had been collected, fire damage was calculated at 2,595,561 pesos. 104 It took several months to gather and tally all the losses since, immediately after the fire, many families evacuated the capital, many staying as far as eighteen leagues away. Therefore, because mail was suspended after the disaster, these families did not find out that they must declare their losses until weeks after the event. 105

Moreover, in anticipation of the inflation and corruption that might have ensued following the disaster and the desperate states in which the populace was found, Miró resolved to declare an edict on the day after the fire that prohibited the raising of prices

102 In perusing volume 4 (1784-1790) of the *Sacramental Records of the Roman Catholic Church of the Archdiocese of New Orleans*, compiled by Charles E. Nolan, one finds that while there was much sacramental activity before the fire (in January and February 1788), it appears to have slowed for about thirteen weeks following the fire. It then noticeably began to increase again in July and August of that year. A similar pattern exists with notarial records. Initially I considered the possibility that perhaps sacramental activity continued as usual, but records were simply not very well kept immediately after the fire. However, I then came across entries such as this: “Camacho, Josef (Francisco and Antonia Pena), b. Mar. 30, 1789 [1788], bn. Mar. 19, 1789 [1788], s. Eduardo Castel and Maria de los Santos Dias [De Los Santos Dias?] (SLC, B11, 74) [recorded in 1789 with marginal note by Fr. Antonio de Sedella: this baptism took place during the confusion consequent upon the great fire; died, Feb. 3, 1836].” Hence, record keeping was intact – indication that sacramental activity necessarily slowed for weeks after the fire, which comes as no surprise.


104 AGI, SD, 2576, “Relacion de la perdida que cada Individuo ha padecido en el Incendio de esta Ciudad acaecido el 21 de Marzo del presente año…,” 119, ff. 532-542, September 30, 1788.

105 AGI, SD, 2544, no. 55, ff. 149.

Legua referred to the distance that a person could travel in the period of one hour. 18 leagues were equal to about 100 kilometers or 62 miles.
for commodities. He declared that prices were to remain as they were before the catastrophe.\textsuperscript{106} Additionally, while he observed that in the months following the calamity, lenders were generally taking into consideration the hardship in the capital, Miró nonetheless advised that they either cancel the debts of those who suffered losses in the fire, or that they offer debtors more time to liquidate their debts as seemed appropriate.\textsuperscript{107}

Unsurprisingly, tents were not quite enough to house all of the displaced for more than a few weeks. As a result, on April 4, 1788, the Cabildo government ordered the building of as many barracks as possible, on account of his majesty, in order to temporarily house individual victims of the fire at no cost to them.\textsuperscript{108} These temporary living quarters, however, were quickly constructed in that part of the city nearest to the river and surrounding the Plaza, where much of the commercial activity took place. These barracks thus became a nuisance right away to those who were accustomed to working where these dwellings now stood. As a result, several inhabitants wrote a letter to the governor soon after the quarters were erected complaining that they should be moved right away. They protested that the barracks not only obstructed commercial areas off of which they subsist, but that they were also fire hazards, for they did not have chimneys. Furthermore, the barracks increased the possibility of flood and epidemics due to the trash that collected in the nearby wells, thus serving as festering grounds for plague in the summer.\textsuperscript{109}

Also, some documents unsurprisingly point to the occurrence of theft following the fire. One in particular, written by Joseph de Espeleta, Captain General of Louisiana, declared that in the course of the memorial services for Captain Don Manuel Lanzos, 550

\textsuperscript{106} AGI, SD, 2545, Letter from Miró to baylío Don Antonio Valdes, no. 94, July 19, 1788.
\textsuperscript{107} AGI, SD, 2553, Letter from Miró to Don Antonio Porlier, no. 10, June 1, 1788.
Also: AGI, PC, 119, Letter to Antonio Argote (from unknown sender), ff. 284-285, April 22, 1788.
\textsuperscript{108} AGI, SD, 2544, Document signed by Pedro Pedesclaux in which he documents the minutes of this Cabildo meeting, no. 167, April 4, 1788.
\textsuperscript{109} AGI, PC, 119, petition to Governor Miró, ff. 372-374, April 18, 1788.
These barracks were eventually removed.
pesos are to be discounted for the cost of the wardrobe that was stolen during the fire.\textsuperscript{110} For the colonial government in New Orleans, several difficulties like these arose from the already complex task of managing a disaster.\textsuperscript{111}

Nonetheless, with all of the challenges involved in coping with catastrophe, the general consensus was that the people were pleased with the relief efforts. In fact, a number of contemporary sources wrote in praise of Governor Miró’s actions. Among his most notable acts was his immediate reaction to send frigates to Philadelphia and New York for provisions. Moreover, his efforts to house the displaced, whether in tents, barracks, or in the homes of the unaffected, and his daily distribution of food and money earned him an exceptional reputation. Having served as witness to Miró’s care for the general population, “Many families asked that he be offered the Captaincy General of [the] province…[for] after many months, the city was rebuilt in a better manner than it had been before.”\textsuperscript{112} The aforementioned eyewitness whose letter was printed in the London Chronicle wrote of the local government:

The conduct of the Governor and Intendant, and other men high in office, deserves the greatest applause. The next morning a general order was given to prevent raising the price of provisions…Expresses were sent up and down the river, to order all planters to send their rice, corn, peas, etc…[to be] distributed among the poor. A council was called to see who would engage, and at what price, to import certain quantities of flour from Philadelphia, to prevent famine…fresh beef, rice, and flour were distributed without money and without price to the poor and distressed, who assembled in great numbers near the Governor’s house, where he, with his own hands, dealt out bags of money to those whom he thought the greatest objects of his charity.\textsuperscript{113}

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{\textit{AGI, SD, 2553, Document from the Captain General of Cuba and Louisiana and Governor of Havana, Josef de Espeleta, no. 40, ff. 51, November 14, 1788.}}
\footnote{\textit{Notarial documents filed in the months following the fire reveal a series of cases where individuals who lost property to the fire or to theft during the fire requested that they be cleared of debts for lost items. Thus, not only was theft an issue, but debt repayment significantly decreased in the months following the disaster. See, for instance: New Orleans Notarial Archives, “Notarial Acts of Fernando Rodriguez and Pedro Pedesclaux,” vol. 2, ff. 401-420, March 28-31, 1788.}}
\footnote{\textit{Records of the Archdiocese of New Orleans, Letter from Governor Miró to King Charles IV of Spain, August 1792.}}
\footnote{\textit{WRC, “The London Chronicle,” August 19-21, 1788, 184.}}
\end{footnotes}
In his own account of the fire, Antonio de Sedella wrote that the Governor was working hard to mitigate the distress of the capital and was distributing provisions with utmost promptness. Miró himself was aware of the peoples’ positive opinions of the government’s emergency response. In one of the letters where he discussed efforts to bring food into the colony and to maintain fair prices in the process, he wrote, “all of this results in that the public is extremely satisfied.” Indeed, the Governor’s swift reactions to shelter and feed the displaced, to prevent unlawful inflation, and further, to involve the Atlantic world in the assistance and provisioning of his capital city, made impressions on those who witnessed the relief efforts.

Trade and Commerce

One of Miró’s primary concerns was to prevent “the total emigration of these peoples, [and to] maintain their well-founded hopes that within two months, they will have acquired all that they might need.” As a result, due to the destruction of food stores, the Governor found it of “primary urgency” to send three vessels to Philadelphia, and three more to New York. Departing on the third day after the fire, these were to acquire the supplies, food, medicaments, “and other effects of primary necessity, at fair prices.” This was a bold move on Miró’s part, for the Spanish had closed the Mississippi to all but Spanish traders in 1784. Since then, trade with the new United States, and all other foreign commerce, was banned in Spanish colonies, from whence all

115 Ibid.
116 Significantly, while he failed to mention the following in his official account of the fire to the King, Miró also sent three ships to New York for rice and flour. Miró made no mention of this in any of his dispatches to the King that I have come across. However, news of the three ships set for New York from New Orleans reached the Governor of Havana, who then proceeded to inform the Crown. See: AGI, SD, 2667, Josef de Espeleta, Governor of Havana, to King Charles III of Spain, No.177, ff. 581, May 2, 1788.
117 AGI, SD, 2544, no. 55, ff. 147. The ships sent to Philadelphia departed in the third day after the fire, but the departure date of those sent to New York is less certain.
118 Din & Harkins, 198.
foreign merchants were immediately expelled. Although in 1787, the Spanish once again permitted foreign navigation on the Mississippi River, the Gulf of Mexico was still closed off. Miró, however, in his efforts to increase the population, was always hoping for an opportunity to open the Gulf to foreigners. Not only would this benefit the economy of New Orleans, but it would also help check the illicit commercial activity that always ebbed and flowed in the Gulf region, but never completely stopped. Thus, when the unfortunate disaster took place in 1788, Miró stumbled upon the circumstances necessary to open trade relations in Louisiana.

In his account of the fire to King Charles of Spain, Miró maintained that opinion amongst the populace was divided regarding the proper measures to take in terms of commercial activity. The victims of the fire desired that commerce be opened in the province so that “any foreign embarkation from any nation be admitted,” while the merchants of Louisiana requested of His Majesty that the inhabitants of the province be permitted “to bring cargoes from any European port with no distinction whatsoever.” Miró went on to observe that the former went against the constitution, while the latter would fail to give France preference as an ally of Spain. He wrote, “There is no doubt that either of these concessions would swiftly foment the colony, and would allow the reedification of this desolate capital; but this project would be wholly contrary to our constitution, as no vessel that displays a flag other than [that of the Spanish] is allowed to navigate the Gulf of Mexico...”  

Hence, Miró requested instead that for a period of three years, as was previously written in a royal decree from 1782, Louisianans be allowed to supply themselves from foreign embarkations. He also petitioned that Spanish ships be allowed to arrive directly from French ports with goods for New Orleans, which if all went as expected, could prevent the emigration of the colony’s inhabitants. Notably, he went on to write, “Your Excellency knows how valuable the population of Louisiana is; you know that on the conservation of these vassals depends the security of

119 Ibid.
the state, and that the very fiber of this colony is in turn dependent on its prosperity and happiness.”

It comes as no surprise then that in a letter written on the same date as his official account of the fire, Miró petitioned the king to pardon those persons who were accused of illicit commercial activity with Philadelphia, as they were only acting out of selflessness for the alleviation of the capital’s most dire situation. “In hopes of finding proper means to alleviate the public calamity with utmost brevity, having tried all other means of aid, and to prevent disorder, theft, and the ruin of the colony,” Spanish officials requested of the King that they be allowed to return 63,325 pesos to the merchants who conducted commercial relations with Philadelphia. Miró wrote that returning their rightful sums and freeing them from prison, as well as from the shame associated with incarceration, is justified under the circumstances related to the disaster, for “in any other situation, they would have been worthy of appropriate punishment.” However, if his majesty had known the general misfortune in the city, he would have hastened to forgive them and return their property in order to stir them back into commercial activity for the good of the colony, and to reanimate the hopes of colonists. Moreover and most importantly, Miró related to King Charles that the instant the public was calamity struck, and the populace was bereft of means to cover their nudity, the inmates immediately embarked

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120 Ibid.
121 AGI, SD, 2544, Governor Miró to King Charles III of Spain, no. 56, April 1, 1788. Also, AGI, SD, 2544, Governor Miró to King Charles III of Spain, no. 18, April 4, 1788.
122 AGI, SD, 2544, no. 56.
123 Ibid. See also: AGI, SD, 2544, Junta, ff. 160-162. In this document, a junta, or council meeting, was held in which various named individuals, including Antonio de Sedella representing the ecclesiastical body, presented a series of “points” of relevance following the conflagration. First, that three ships were sent to Philadelphia for provisions due to the desperate situation. Secondly, that dispatches were sent up and down the coast of the river so that farmers could send fruits and foodstuffs into New Orleans immediately. Thirdly, that commissaries will be appointed to inspect and count the burned buildings, and to estimate damage and capacity of the terrain. Fourthly, that the named individuals have donated barracks and homes for use by the “miserable individuals.” Amongst these was Andres Almonester who not only donated a house to Sedella from which he could conduct church services, and another for a decent family that lost theirs in the fire, but who also volunteered to rebuild the parochial church (see my section below on “The Intriguing Case of Almonester.”) Fifth, in reference to the “news offered by Garoquy,” this point asked that the prisoners be released, as they themselves were victims of the fire. It reads, “When our Catholic Monarch’s pity finds amongst the ashes and ruin of these buildings the blood and sweat of its loving vassals,” how could we then apply such a shameful punishment?
on voyages in search of aid. For these reasons, Miró pleaded that they be forgiven. Considering the fact that this proposal was opposed to the Spanish policy of forbidding trade with the United States and banning ships in the Gulf of Mexico that did not bear the Spanish flag, this was a diplomatically significant request indeed. Yet the King consented, and in 1791, the Governor presented a Royal Decree in which His Majesty granted a pardon to all prisoners accused of the crime of smuggling, and released their confiscated ships.\(^{124}\)

Although Miró used the fire as a pretext to request the pardon of the illicit traders and to request the opening of trade with foreign merchants, I must point attention to the fact that, contrary to Miró’s report, many of the merchants that were arrested had committed their crime prior to the fire. One witness to these events wrote, “Several mercantile people here, who some time ago had their vessels and cargoes seized in consequence of a trade with the American States, had, on account of this calamity, the proceeds restored, to the amount of 100,000 dollars.”\(^{125}\) In fact, in 1787, months before the conflagration, a procurador presented a petition to Spanish commissioners, including governor Miró, requesting that traders who had recently imported flour from the United States be pardoned due to the shortage of flour in the colony. The Commissioners agreed to request from His Majesty the pardon of the individuals, and to ask the King for permission to import flour from the nearest, most suitable places when necessary.\(^{126}\) However, it was not until after the disaster that the Spanish sovereign was finally presented with reason enough to pardon merchants who traded with the United States.

Indeed, illicit trade between New Orleans and the United States by way of Philadelphia had been taking place for some time before the disaster. Although the Spanish barred access to New Orleans via the Gulf of Mexico and the lower Mississippi, Philadelphian merchants nonetheless found ways of evading the restrictions and selling their merchandise in New Orleans. Since both the United States and Spanish Louisiana


had trade relations with Saint Domingue, American cargo could make its way into New Orleans via Saint Domingue disguised as French goods. In their dispatches to the court, the Spanish officials in New Orleans acknowledged that the amount of imports acquired from Philadelphia by this route was extensive. “Phineas Bond, the British consul at Philadelphia, reported to his government that in 1787 five hundred thousand dollars worth of specie was brought from Spanish America to that port alone. Some of this, just how much we cannot say, came from New Orleans.”

Illicit trade with Philadelphia was deemed necessary enough that it took place with the Governor’s unspoken, yet evident approval. The activity carried on through 1787 when news about the defiance reached the sovereign in Spain. Diego de Gardoqui, Spanish minister to the United States, was aware of the clandestine commercial trade that was taking place between Spanish Louisiana and the United States. While for some time, like other Louisiana officials, he simply ignored the goings on, for reasons unknown, he finally reported the activity to the King, who then ordered the arrests of all those involved along with the confiscation of their ships and merchandise. Trade with Philadelphia then ceased until 1788, when the Good Friday fire prompted the reinstatement of commerce with the United States, as well as the release of imprisoned crews and their

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128 “In spite of the apparent steadfastness of Spanish policy, it appears that Governor Miró had not issued a blanket refusal denying all ships entrance into Louisiana, because with the arrival of each ship from the Gulf a boat was dispatched to inform the governor.”
129 In his article on Mississippi River trade, Bruce Tyler attributes Gardoqui’s betrayal to jealousy over the fact that he himself was not profiting from the commerce, while Gayarré offers the possibility that perhaps Gardoqui was afraid of having “corrupt motives attributed to him.”

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ships. Miró worked to discontinue further Spanish attempts at obstructing commercial relations between the new United States and New Orleans. Later, in 1790, he again insisted that New Orleans be made a free port in order to populate the colony. These open trade relations eventually helped to stimulate population growth in the colonial capital.

La Trucha

Amongst those who aided New Orleans in the months following the disaster, France was most involved in relief efforts. Days after the fire, New Orleans’ colonial administration immediately set about tackling the problem of feeding and rebuilding the capital. They needed massive amounts of socorros, or relief – more so even than what was being collected from the local farmers and philanthropists. Thus, after sending ships to the United States for flour, rice, and materials, Spanish officials corresponded with French officials in Saint Domingue, informing them of the calamity on March 24th. France responded to New Orleans’ desperate situation without delay, ordering that one of the French monarch’s frigates, named La Truite, be provisioned and set to sail for New Orleans through Saint Domingue for the relief of the victims. “La Trucha,” (the Trout) as it was called in Spanish, not only carried over three hundred thousand pounds of supplies for the decimated colony, but also 26,284 pesos to be handed out to the victims according to need. The French stressed their eagerness to help, and made clear their lack of interest in anything except the alleviation of the decimated capital. One official,

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131 Antonio Acosta Rodríguez, La poblacion de Luisiana Española, 1763-1803 (Madrid: Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores, 1979), 242. “The growth of New Orleans was very much tied to the evolution of its commerce.”
132 AGI, SD, 2544, Letter from Governor Miró to Madrid, no. 120, September 30, 1788.
AGI, SD, 2577, no. 280, and no. 1, ff. 276-277, May 22, 1788.
AGI, SD, 2545, Letter from Miró to King Charles III of Spain, no. 90, ff. 282, July 10, 1788.
Vincent de Marbois, wrote from Port-au-Prince, “The letter with which your Excellency has honored us did not arrive in our hands until yesterday (May 21, 1788), this tardiness has caused us utmost distress. We will order with greatest diligence the loading of the articles and presume that the His Majesty’s ship may depart no later than eight or ten days after the date of this [letter].” Arriving on August 1, 1788, this frigate carried countless items into New Orleans, including wine, flour, aguardiente, salted meats, salt, gun powder, coffee, sugar, bullets, many types of tools, glass and tiles, soap, candles, oil, nails, fabrics, clothing, and a series of other dry goods. In order to appropriately determine how to go about distributing the relief funds, foods, and items imported on the frigate, the Spanish colonial government in New Orleans held a council meeting in which officials decided how much each family was to receive based on need.

Of course, French assistance entailed repayment, and various documents discuss the terms on which this was to take place. Essentially, the Crown ordered that funds for the repayment of France’s aid be delivered from Mexico into Saint Domingue, via Havana, Cuba. In a letter from Madrid to the Viceroy of Mexico, the Spanish royal government asked that the 306,775 pounds worth of materials from La Trucha be reimbursed immediately. Three months later, the Viceroy responded with a letter stating that said funds had been sent to Havana from whence they were to depart for Saint Domingue.

As it turns out, France’s aid was to help New Orleans for even longer than they may have anticipated. Years later, La Trucha was to assist the people of the colonial capital once again when in 1790, New Orleans’ commissioners requested that proceeds from the sale of the frigate’s merchandise be invested to build a new levee. They expressed that because of the numerous drains on the city treasury that resulted from the

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134 AGI, SD, 2577, Vincent de Marbois to official in New Orleans, May 22, 1788.
135 AGI, SD, 2577, no. 120, ff. 282, September 30, 1788. For list of items, see: AGI, SD, 2577, “Nota de los articulos que componen el cargamento de la Urca del Rey de Francia, ‘La Trucha,’ que dara vela...” no. 2, ff. 279, May 28, 1788.
136 AGI, SD, 2545, no. 90, ff. 283, July 10, 1788.
137 AGI, SD, 2577, ff. 313, December 22, 1788.
138 Ibid., ff. 322, March 27, 1789.
of 1788, the building of a new cemetery, and two recent breaks in the levee that in turn wreaked further damage, the remaining profits from the frigate would be best applied to the new embankment. Then again, in 1792, Governor Carondelet was to recommend that these proceeds be used to repair the streets and sidewalks of the city.\textsuperscript{139}

**The Intriguing Case of Don Andres Almonester**

Funding the enterprise, however, entailed more than just foreign aid and commerce. In order to embark on the colossal undertaking of rebuilding the colony, Spanish officials had to rely on the charity of local individuals who committed themselves to the reconstruction of the most important buildings. After the Good Friday fire, Don Andres Almonester y Roxas rose to the occasion. Almonester has gone down in history as the charitable patron of some of New Orleans’ most notable structures, including the Cabildo, the presbytere, St. Louis Cathedral, the Ursuline church, Charity Hospital, and the Lazarus leper hospital, which he generously funded out of his own pocket.\textsuperscript{140} He also, as previously mentioned, offered housing to Antonio de Sedella and a number of the displaced families after the fire.

Born in Seville, Almonester made his way to the colony of Louisiana in its first years under the Spanish. The exact date of his arrival seems unclear, but as early as 1770, we have record of his presence at a Cabildo meeting.\textsuperscript{141} Almonester built himself a fortune in New Orleans, where he both amassed several land investments, and held various official positions, including notary public, \textit{alférez real} (royal standard-bearer), which he purchased, and Colonel of the New Orleans Militia.\textsuperscript{142} He is generally remembered much as Miró described him in a letter where he related Almonester’s many


\textsuperscript{140} AGI, SD, 2553, no. 18, ff. 292, November 30, 1788.

\textsuperscript{141} Montero de Pedro, 94.

\textsuperscript{142} Din & Harkins, 29.
contributions and his admirable character. He related that because the fire destroyed so many homes, those sick persons who might have otherwise healed at home had to go to the hospital, which at that time was ill prepared to receive so many patients, for Almonester himself had only placed twenty four beds in it, this being the average number of patients at any one time. Consequently, because the number now exceeded three hundred, Almonester stepped in and offered to expand the hospital so that it could better accommodate all who needed treatment. All of his work in the city came out of his own pocket, and “his magnanimous and generous heart.”

This description stands in great contrast to the account that Miró’s successor, Baron de Carondelet, was to provide five years later, in 1794. In his relación to the King in Spain, Carondelet narrated numerous instances in which Almonester, despite having promised to fund the rebuilding of several structures around the city after the conflagration, hesitated as a result of not feeling that he was being sufficiently recognized for his charity. It appears that upon taking up his position as Governor in New Orleans, Carondelet found Almonester in possession of the regalias of the vice patronato real, or vice royal patronage, at which point he proceeded to remove these from his custody, as was his duty. Almonester, finding himself without the honors, ceased his contributions to the destitute in the Charity Hospital, as well as to the construction of the new parochial church. Accordingly, Carondelet requested 20,000 pesos, which he deemed sufficient to conclude work on the church, and work continued. Four months later however, Almonester once again began to see to the completion of the cathedral, “but by such poor measures, that one could not expect its completion in less than two years.”

Carondelet went on to relate that the populace was very displeased with Almonester. In particular, they felt “repugnance at having to serve under an individual that they had only ever known as a notary.” The governor stressed the inherent injustice of having endowed such an undeserving individual with the title of “colonel” simply for having spent

143 AGI, SD, 2553, no. 18, ff. 293, November 30, 1788.
144 AGI, SD 2563, no. 3, ff. 974, June 28, 1794.
145 Ibid., ff. 975.
146 Ibid., ff. 978.
150,000 pesos on the rebuilding of several structures, while those honorable officers who actually fought in the last war were given the lower title of “lieutenant.”\textsuperscript{147} The Governor maintained that military talent is a prerequisite in a leader, for only then could he manage the wills of his subalterns. Such talents as are necessary in a trusted leader entail studies in theory and in the arts, as well as valor, and superiority attained either through service or birth.\textsuperscript{148} “If the inhabitants of Louisiana do not trust their leaders, not one will offer to march; and forcing them, as is done in other parts, will prove highly perilous.”\textsuperscript{149} In sum, while it is true that Don Andres Almonester made major financial contributions to the city following the fire, he appears to have been a controversial figure. In fact, when referring to some of the buildings that Almonester’s funding had helped erect, James Pitot, the first American mayor of New Orleans, stated that they were the result of “the pretensions of a Spaniard who secured honors and blessings for himself by being rich.”\textsuperscript{150}

\textbf{When It Rains, It Pours: Fire, Flood, and Disease}

Even in the eighteenth century New Orleans was no stranger to natural disasters. 1788 in particular was not a good year for the city. To many, it must have appeared as though the gods were angry at the capital. Not only was the region still recuperating from the effects of a strong hurricane at the time that the fire erupted in 1788, but breaks in the levees and floodwalls were a constant problem, and the Mississippi River spilled into the streets of the colonial capital all too often.\textsuperscript{151} Earlier, in October 1788, Miró reported a series of misfortunes that contributed to the need for a new cemetery. He related that the epidemics that reigned in 1788 soon after the voracious fire, and the flood that afflicted the province, had wreaked such havoc on public health that the number of burials increased in the previous three months, due no doubt to the various calamities that

\textsuperscript{147} Ibid., ff. 977.
\textsuperscript{148} Ibid., ff. 978.
\textsuperscript{149} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{150} Montero de Pedro, 97.
\textsuperscript{151} For more on the hurricanes, see conclusion below.
had awoken the public’s attention. Further, the fetid vapors that emanated from the cemetery urged Miró to request funds from His Majesty for the creation of a new cemetery, which would contribute to the health and happiness of his loyal subjects. Doctors and surgeons in the city had declared it “indispensable and absolutely necessary” that a cemetery be started farther from the city in order to put an end to the epidemic, and therefore, to conserve the people’s health.

What is more, no sooner had the people begun to recover from the fire, than they found themselves in the midst of an epidemic brought about by a combination of poor conditions after the fire, and an overflow of the river that broke the floodwall and flooded the city. The New Orleans flood of 1788 inundated the three streets closest to the river for three full months, causing widespread illness and death. At that point, several inhabitants resolved to build a great floodwall, and Miró himself, along with numerous “negroes and mulattoes” physically contributed to the effort. However, when the waters rose again a year later, “the same misfortune took place.” Consequently, in 1790, a larger and stronger wall was proposed, but due to the drain on the royal treasury following these hardships, it was suggested that funds be taken from the proceeds of the French frigate. While these were, of course, meant for the victims of the fire, by 1790, it appeared that there were sufficient funds available, 29,407 pesos to be exact, to aid in this equally distressing situation. Thus, as the capital grew and developed, it became increasingly apparent that major modifications needed to take place to ensure that structures were more resistant to the region’s unforgiving natural environment.

**Long Term Implications**

On the eve of the fire, New Orleans was largely constructed of wood or *colombage*, which on Good Friday 1788, served only to fuel the flames that reduced the capital to

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152 UNDA, Records, 1576-1790, Letter from Governor Miró, to King Charles III of Spain, dated October 25, 1788.
153 Ibid. See also: AGI, SD, 2553, no. 17, November 30, 1788.
154 AGI, SD, 2555, no. 9, ff. 518, September 26, 1790.
ashes. As a result, in the months and years that followed the devastation, efforts were made to establish building regulations that restricted the use of wood and encouraged that of brick, or of cement covered timber frames with brick filling between posts. These were not always enforced, however, and in December 1794, another fire destroyed the better part of the structures surrounding the Plaza de Armas. This fire was significantly smaller, affecting about two hundred structures in the southwest quarter of the city and sparing the new cathedral. However, the buildings it did devastate were among the most expensive government buildings, thus making reconstruction cost almost half as much as it did upon the Great Fire of 1788. As a result, under Governor Carondelet, building regulations entailing that all buildings be constructed of brick were better enforced, and only roofs of tile or other fireproof materials were permitted. In fact, following this second fire in 1794, colonial officials took into consideration that New Orleans had recently suffered the effects of two fires, five hurricanes, and many floods, and petitioned the King for a loan of one million pesos for the owners of the structures destroyed by the fire, specifically so that they may build with brick.

Moreover, because flames razed most of the colonial capital entailing a rebuilding of the city under Spanish administration, New Orleans took on new architecturally Spanish characteristics. Some of these include the Andaluz-style inner courtyards and open patios that served as both external rooms and passageways, the pastel-colored exteriors, arched entryways, and the intricate iron grillwork balconies so distinctive to New Orleans today. Unsurprisingly, the typical Spanish architectural styles that emerged in the city after the fire may be found elsewhere in the Atlantic world. Cities

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that share some of New Orleans’ architectural characteristics include Ciudad Colonial in Santo Domingo, Cartagena in Colombia, and Old San Juan, Puerto Rico, where the colonial façades on streets such as Calle San Jose are especially reminiscent of the French Quarter. Spanish architectural influence extended even beyond the Quarter. “As late as 1859 the Spanish-plan Creole plantation house was still the most popular type of ‘big house’ built in wealthy and conservative St. Charles Parish, north of New Orleans.”

Figure 8. This photo of Calle San Jose in Old San Juan, Puerto Rico (circa 1915-1920s) depicts urban scenes and Spanish architectural characteristics reminiscent of New Orleans. Photo courtesy of Centro de Estudios Puertoriqueños, City University of New York.

It should be mentioned that several architectural characteristics have contributed to the city’s appearance since the eighteenth century, including Creole, French, and

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American townhouse styles, thus giving it a unique flavor, even amongst its Caribbean sisters. Some of the architectural characteristics in New Orleans that are less uniquely Spanish include the steeply-pitched, non-tiled roofs, side gables, and building façades set at the sidewalk. Nonetheless, it was in the later Spanish period, after both the Good Friday fire and that of 1794, that New Orleans began to see the appearance of the typically narrow, three-story brick buildings, referred to as Creole townhouses, set at property lines that replaced the previous free standing structures of the French period.\footnote{160} Notably however, many of New Orleans’ most prominent and recognizable structures, such as the Presbytère and the Spanish Cabildo, the location of today’s Louisiana State Museum, were erected over the ashes of previous buildings under the Spanish government, and through Spanish funding.\footnote{161} While most of the buildings that stand in the Vieux Carré today are not the same ones erected in the colonial period, construction in the quarter has since succeeded at maintaining the integrity of the city’s inherited Spanish colonial styles, even as it has been combined with newer architectural influences.

Also, after the conflagration city officials purchased fire engines, one of which came from Philadelphia, to be supervised by newly appointed Alcaldes de Carrio or commissaries of police, as well as fire buckets, which were thenceforward made readily available for use in case of emergency.\footnote{162} Because the two fire engines that existed at the

\footnote{160} For more on the Spanish Creole architecture, including in New Orleans, see: Jay D. Edwards, “The Origins of Creole Architecture,” \textit{Winterthur Portfolio} 29, no. 2/3 (Summer – Autumn, 1994). For more on New Orleans architecture in general, also see Samuel Wilson Jr.’s, \textit{The Vieux Carré}, cited above.

\footnote{161} The St. Louis Cathedral as it stands today was completed in 1852 after massive renovations by French architect, J.N.B. de Pouilly.

\footnote{162} NOPL City Archives, \textit{Digests of the Acts & Deliberations of the Cabildo}, book 3, volume II, page 21, April 18, 1788. Commissioners including Governor Miró, discussed means to guard against another fire. They asked for four pumps, 60 leather buckets, and two hooks with chains 15 feet long attached. On January 28, 1792, Governor Carondelet proposed that 300 ordinary leather buckets, 12 large and 12 medium ladders, and 16 hooks be purchased (see book 3, volume II, page 184). The list of petitions and regulations of this nature goes on.

In the \textit{Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo}, one finds records predating the fire in which officials discuss obtaining leather buckets, and the prohibition of building fires in houses that have no chimneys, as well as recommendations that ladders and buckets be kept in the Capitol House for better care, and that axes and hooks be made, but these were clearly not enforced, or taken very seriously, until after the Fire of 1788. This is evident in the accounts of the fire in which eyewitnesses complain of the lack of fire extinguishing materials available on March 21. See: NOPL City Archives, \textit{Digests of the Acts & Deliberations of the Cabildo}, book 1, page 61, April 19, 1771. Also, NOPL City Archives, \textit{Digests of the Acts & Deliberations
time of the fire were likewise set ablaze, city officials also made plans to construct a
separate house for the protection of the new fire engines.\textsuperscript{163} New Orleans also saw a new
patrol system of night watchmen or serenos, whose responsibility it was to preserve the
peace, keep the street lamps burning, and sound the general alarm in case of fire.\textsuperscript{164}

Other smaller, yet long-term changes took place after the fire of 1788. For
example, because the fire of 1788 destroyed the baptismal records of the city, Bishop
Cirilo of Barcelona declared that thenceforward, church documents were to be kept in a
new and safer location, namely, the closet in the sacristy. These were not to be removed
without direct permission from the bishop.\textsuperscript{165} Additionally, the improvements that came
with reconstruction were such that even the city markets were rebuilt and made more
efficient. In order to prevent the theft of meats, stalls in the new market were to be
constructed with a wooden ceiling over every stall, with heavy doors barred with iron.\textsuperscript{166}

Further, a Cabildo Deliberation from 1792 granted one local’s request for permission to
open a dance hall over the lot where the market destroyed in the fire previously stood.\textsuperscript{167}

In terms of population, the census of 1788 shows that New Orleans on the eve of
the fire consisted of about 5,300 people. This figure included Creoles, Germans,
Acadians, Canary Islanders, Swiss, Catalan merchants, Native-Americans, mulattoes and
blacks (both slave and free), and inhabitants from the Spanish possessions in the
Caribbean and Florida. Meanwhile, the census of 1791 shows a total of about 5,500.
Thus, the number remained about the same for some time after the fire, likely because
while people continued to trickle into the colony, many emigrated in the months
following the calamity, despite the Spanish government’s efforts to keep inhabitants from

\textsuperscript{163} UNDA, Records, 1576-1790, Letter from Bishop Cirilo of Barcelona to Ecclesiastical authorities in
New Orleans, January 12, 1790.
\textsuperscript{164} Kerr, 178.
\textsuperscript{165} Ibid., book 3, volume III, pages 49, 55, & 71, February 1, 1793.
\textsuperscript{166} NOPL City Archives, Digests of the Acts & Deliberations of the Cabildo, book 3, volume II, page 178,
January 13, 1792.
\textsuperscript{167} NOPL City Archives, Digests of the Acts & Deliberations of the Cabildo, book 3, volume II, page 196
March 2, 1792. Sadly for locals I imagine, the dance hall was turned into a rice storage facility four years
later.
leaving. However, reports of several contemporary residents and visitors to the city agree that by 1802 and 1803, the colony’s population stood between ten and twelve thousand, not including the additional thousands that now lived beyond the edges of the Vieux Carré. Censuses were not taken in the years between 1791 and 1803. However, it may be deduced that if indeed population growth slowed after the fire at least until 1791, for numbers to have reached as high as ten and twelve thousand by 1803, the population must have rapidly begun to increase throughout the 1790s. This growth coincided with both improved commercial relations with the United States, and with the beautification of New Orleans that resulted from improvements and reconstruction efforts following the catastrophe.

The conflagration of 1788 thus brought with it a new New Orleans on many levels. The city saw the development of new trade policies and fire prevention regulations, new building codes, and the novel implementation of watchmen and fire extinguishing tools. Also, major aspects of the distinctive New Orleans architectural style emerged. The Vieux Carré, generally as we know it today, grew from the ashes of the fire and stands to this day as a symbol of the city’s lively and resilient history.

168 Din & Harkins, 6-7. Several contemporary writers reported these figures: Berquin-Duvallon in Travels in Louisiana, François Marie Perrin du Lac in Travels Through the two Louisianas, C.C. Robin in Voyage to Louisiana, and American Consul in New Orleans, Daniel Clark. They all seem to agree on population numbers ranging from 10 to 12,000 in the first few years of the nineteenth century while New Orleans was still under Spanish administration.
CONCLUSION

In light of New Orleans’ recent history with natural disasters, it is appropriate and necessary that I add a few words on this topic. The southern region of Louisiana is no stranger to natural hazards. Even before the fire of 1788, New Orleans had already experienced epidemics, hurricanes, several floods due to breaks in the floodwall, and of course, fires. Surprisingly however, there has been very little work done on the city’s history with disasters before hurricane Katrina. For example, throughout the eighteenth century, the city experienced a series of strong hurricanes, including one on August 18, 1779 in which most of a Spanish fleet was sunk off the coast of Louisiana. Also in August 1780, New Orleans suffered the effects of a hurricane with winds allegedly reaching speeds of up to 160 miles per hour – a category five, in our modern day system of hurricane classifications. This storm caused severe damage, wreaking havoc on crops, and producing tornadoes and severe flooding.\(^\text{169}\) It is thus important to consider not only the ways in which “disasters” and their effects have been perceived by the people, but also, how they have actually served to shape the history of a region. There is increasingly more attention being paid to historical natural disasters, especially in Europe. In the United States, the field is essentially limited to disasters that took place more recently, and within the United States.

\(^{169}\) NOPL City Archives, Digest of the Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo, 1769-1803, book 2, pages 60 & 63, June 8, 1781, June 15, 1781 and July 13, 1781. The entry for June 8, 1781 reads that on this day, the Cabildo received word of the Spanish King’s response to the news of the hurricane. A later translation contained at the NOPL City Archives states: “His Majesty has suffered with fatherly love the terrible blow, which caused so much destruction among his loved subjects...” This may be the storm that Miró referred to when he wrote to the King that the fire came at a terrible time, for the people were still recovering from the effects of a hurricane.


In the end, this story tells of a colonial government apt at dealing with the effects of a disaster. Common contemporary perceptions of Miró’s immediate response, as well as his seemingly unprejudiced care for victims, appear to exist in interesting contrast to perceptions of more recent government responses to disaster. The narrative of the 1788 fire also tells of a city very much in transition. Before Good Friday 1788, the colonial capital was slowly undergoing a series of transformations, both structural and cultural. Upon the occurrence of the conflagration, however, these changes began to take place at a more rapid pace. The city not only began to take on the aesthetic form that we recognize today, but also began to expand in terms of size, population, and commercial relations faster than it ever had. In many ways, the fire served to bolster the growth of the city, as much as it served as an excuse to augment previously illegal commercial trade with the United States. This event is a more significant one that the attention it has been served in scholarship.

I would now like to conclude with some final thoughts on the nature of New Orleanian historical memory and identity. Since I started conducting research for this project, I have had many people ask what exactly I have been working on. On more than one occasion, when I briefly explained that I was looking at a disastrous fire that took place in New Orleans during its Spanish period, the response was something along the lines of, “New Orleans was Spanish at some point?” With all of the contributions made to the city by the Spanish after the fire, one cannot deny the constancy of French identity in New Orleans, due in part to the influx of French Creoles in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries – émigrés of Saint Domingue upon the Haitian Revolution.

Through all of the changes in administration, through the influx of peoples from all over the globe, through the evolving aesthetic of the city, and the conglomeration of cultures that have contributed to its unique flavor, it is the fleur-de-lis that is commonly used as a symbol of the city. We call the Quarter “French”, or the “Vieux Carré;” we seek out beignets, French onion soup, or a “sazerac,” made with absinthe. Also, one of the four death masks in the world allegedly belonging to Napoleon resides in the Spanish Cabildo which today houses the Louisiana State Museum. Yet, despite the fact that the
French and the Spanish administered New Orleans for roughly the same amount of time – about forty years each – it is not the Spanish legacy that one can easily spot in New Orleans.

As I discussed in the introduction, throughout the many changes brought about during the city’s Spanish period, even after the fire when everything was leveled and necessarily rebuilt, there yet exists a sense of continuity. The French laid out the plans for the city, named the streets, instilled their language, and in the process, deeply planted an identity that still very much resides in New Orleans. Thus, the history of the Good Friday Fire of 1788 reveals major contemporary changes, as much as it reveals an enduring sense of continuity.
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Cindy Ermus was born in Los Angeles, California, and was raised in Miami, Florida where her family moved when she was four. She graduated from G. Holmes Braddock Senior High School, and then went on to attend Florida International University. She graduated with honors in 2005 with two Bachelors degrees, in Psychology and History.

Cindy began her graduate career in the Department of History at Florida State University in 2007 with a McKnight Fellowship. She is also a member of the Institute on Napoleon and the French Revolution. She has presented papers at the Consortium on the Revolutionary Era and at the Florida Conference of Historians, and is a member of several academic honors societies and historical societies. Her dissertation research explores natural disasters in 18th-century contexts.