

Settler Rebels and Patrimonial Sovereigns: The 1768 French Creole Revolt in Spanish Louisiana.

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Introduction

In the summer of 1769, only weeks before the arrival of Alejandro O'Reilly as the second Spanish governor of Louisiana, Nicholas Chauvin de La Frénière, the French Attorney General and head of the Superior Council at New Orleans, issued a statement regarding the arrival of O'Reilly.¹ La Frénière lauded the "patriotic hearts" of his fellow colonists, which "burn with a desire to display your courage in defence of your hearths." Although aware that any action taken against O'Reilly would be interpreted as an affront to the French Crown, La Frénière believed in the worthiness of his compatriots' cause: "France has just beheld with emotion your patriotic efforts; all Europe, admiring your firmness, has beheld with surprise your wise, and moderate conduct; all eyes are now upon you." Still, La Frénière urged caution: "Let us listen to the promises of his representative and endeavor to deserve their execution by a submissive and respectful conduct."² Complete silence fell over the crowd. No one knew what the future would bring. La Frénière's speech, although sanguine in its outlook, came just months after the colonies of Louisiana had revolted against the newly installed Spanish government.

During the previous fall of 1768, Louisiana had become a battleground for the articulations of rights, entitlements, and independence. Over a three-day period, French inhabitants and their German allies from in and around the city of New Orleans - equipped with a petition of some five hundred inhabitants ranging from elite plantation owners to small mercantile merchants - marched on the Spanish Louisiana capital and demanded the Spanish government's immediate removal. The settlers leveled several complaints against the first

¹ Though the date of the statement cannot be verified, it seems likely it would have been sometime between July 19 to the 25 as these were the dates that O'Reilly was at Balize awaiting to sail north up the Mississippi River to New Orleans.

² Speech by Nicholas Chauvin de La Frénière as quoted in Benjamin Franklin French, *Historical Memoirs of Louisiana: From the First Settlement of the colony to the departure of Governor O'Reilly in 1770 with Historical and Biographical Notes, Forming the Fifth of the Series of Historical Collections of Louisiana* (New York: Lamport, Blakeman & Law, 1853), 184-189.

Spanish Gov. Antonio de Ulloa and his regime, blaming Spanish authorities for the colony's economic crises, the interruption of the independent trade system to which many of the inhabitants had long been accustomed, and the displacement of their French counterparts from Acadia. Not having a significant enough military force to combat the rebels, Ulloa sailed out of New Orleans on the morning of November 1, 1768, never to set foot in the Crescent City again.

This clearly was not what imperial officials had in mind when the French ceded Louisiana to their Spanish allies in the wake of their loss to the British in the Seven Years' War only several years prior. Great Britain controlled the eastern portion of Louisiana, but with the Treaty of Paris in 1763, it ceded east Louisiana to the Spanish in exchange for Florida. The future of continental America was no longer a three-headed race. Only Great Britain and Spain were left. The Treaty of Paris was meant to restore the balance between the imperial powers, but it would prove to be the first straw that led to the United States' domination of the continent.

Although the French colonial days in North America were over on paper, the heritage, culture, and priorities of the people left behind remained. What took place during those cool, fall days along the Louisiana bayou in 1768 speaks to the longer history of French colonial activity in the Gulf South, as well as historical developments well beyond it. Significantly, the French insurrection happened during what historians David Armitage and Sanjay Subrahmanyam have described as an "era of world crisis," or, more commonly, the Age of Revolutions.³ Historians disagree on a start and end date for the era, but most agree that the Age of Revolutions fostered a similar set of basic principles worldwide based on Enlightenment ideas, notions of natural and popular sovereignty, secessionist attempts of independence from old imperial regimes, and the embrace of liberalized market relations. In many ways, the 1768 New Orleans revolt fits into this

³ David Armitage and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, ed. *The Age of Revolutions in Global Context, c. 1760-1840* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), xxiii.

historical paradigm by displaying all the central elements of the Age of Revolutions. As French language historian Jennifer Tsien states, “their [the French rebels’] actions and their written demands can be seen as a daring intermediary step between the political theory of the Enlightenment and the final overthrow of imperial monarchy that would occur later in the American, Haitian, and French revolutions.”⁴

Of course, as recent scholarship on the Age of Revolutions has demonstrated, Enlightenment ideas and natural rights rhetoric hardly existed in a historical vacuum. A close examination of the unique local conditions of French Louisiana during the eighteenth century - as well as the broader Gulf South context - allows us to better appreciate the articulations and motivations of the 1768 rebels. As this chapter reveals, harsh decrees, economic problems, opportunistic colonial subjects, and French political maneuvering played important roles in the origins of the revolt. But just as important, France had allowed the French Creoles - the majority population of the colony - and their German counterparts to establish a sense of freedom and autonomy from the earliest days of New Orleans in the 1710s. Thus, the development of settler-defined notions of sovereignty within French Louisiana also accounted for the intentions and actions of the rebels, who saw the transfer of Louisiana to Spain as an attack on their prerogatives of self-rule.

***“Privileged to Deal”*: The French in Louisiana**

France's colonial involvement in Louisiana began in 1682 with the expedition of René-Robert Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle, down the Mississippi River. With little imperial funding and minimal manpower, early French operations emphasized local trade, and by 1699 and the

⁴ Jennifer Tsien, *Rumors of Revolution: Song Sentiment, and Sedition in Colonial Louisiana* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2023), 86.

construction of Fort Maurepas at present-day Biloxi, Mississippi, Indigenous communities across the Lower Mississippi Valley had become well aware of France's mercantile trading practices. Notably, the French relied on local Indigenous communities, such as the Biloxis, Pascagoulas, Mochtobis, and Capinas, for trade and protection, even as imperial authorities proclaimed French dominion over the region. The Crown's goal was to extract furs, minerals, or crops from the Indigenous populations while also enlisting them to help fight against other European powers. Thus, the French demographic footprint remained small for much of the early history; by 1708, the population of colonial Louisiana numbered only 122 soldiers and sailors, 80 enslaved Indigenous people, and 77 settlers.⁵

Economic stress throughout the French empire during the eighteenth century meant that King Louis XIV regularly deprioritized funding for the colony. With the lack of funds, the inhabitants of Louisiana looked to Indigenous people for food, military protection, and commercial opportunity in the region. Settlers purchased deer, bear, and raccoon skins from Indigenous traders, which they then exchanged with French (and Spanish) merchants for products like sugar, wine, and wheat in ports and cities all across the Gulf South, the Caribbean, and Europe.⁶ Historian Daniel Usner categorizes these different engagements as markers of a "frontier exchange economy," where European settlers, Indigenous people, and enslaved and free

⁵ Dunbar Rowland and Albert Godfrey Sanders, eds., *Mississippi Provincial Archives: French Dominion*, I-III, ed. (Jackson, Miss., 1929-1932), 32; IV-V, ed. Rowland and Sanders, rev. and ed. Patricia Key Galloway (Baton Rouge, LA, 1984). Hereby, after quoted as MPAFD. Kathleen DuVal describes the relationship between Indigenous people and Europeans as a "us and them" relationship. Each side sought to control trade and diplomacy over one another. Livelihood depended on distinctions, so knowing who was English and French or who was Osage or Cherokee was extremely important. If one side quit receiving cooperation from the other, they made alliances with their enemies for trade and diplomacy. See Kathleen Duval, *The Native Ground: Indians and the Colonists in the Heart of the Continent* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006) 4.

⁶ French inhabitants had the luxury to trade with not only the French, but the Spanish and Americans as well. Merchants traveled to Pensacola, Mobile, Veracruz, Martinique, St. Domingo, Bordeaux and the British-American colonies. According to Duval, the French came with valuable European merchandise determined to form alliances with Indigenous people. Thus, they had more incentive than other European powers to learn and comply with native methods of relations and land use. See Duval, *The Native Ground*, 65.

Africans all interacted in particularized ways to their own benefit.⁷ As Max Flomen's chapter in this volume shows us, this frontier exchange economy also fostered collaboration and ideological synergy, and French officials had a constant fear of rebellious activities emerging from the Indigenous and Black populations in Louisiana.

Despite these fears, the free trade system with Indigenous and other Euro-American communities was a central component of the French Louisiana economy, with the fur trade as its foundation. As early as 1700, Pierre Le Moyne d'Iberville, French explorer and colonial administrator, believed that if the French developed a trading post in Louisiana, they could persuade Indigenous people to trade with them instead of the English, whom they had to travel hundreds of miles to reach. Iberville estimated that the trading post would bring in annually between 60,000 and 80,000 buffalo skins (worth four or five *livres* each), 150,000 deer skins (worth a total of 2,500,000 *livres*), and other peltry, such as bear, wolf, otter, lynx, and fox (worth at least 200,000 *livres*).⁸ In order to maintain positive relations with Indigenous groups, the French had to provide the gifts - or tribute - that certain groups desired. By the 1720s, deerskin became the predominant commodity in the fur trade. Between 1720 and 1780, the French exported 50,000 deer skins annually, and even towards the end of the French regime (between 1756 and 1760) merchants exported 620,000 pounds of skins.⁹ The unraveling of this robust trade system, which French merchants became accustomed to under French rule, would ultimately be one of the main issues of the 1768 rebellion.

New Orleans, founded in 1718, was the central hub of Louisiana. Initially, the Crown hoped to turn it into an agricultural center that would rival the British colonies in North America,

⁷ Daniel Usner, *Indians, Settlers, & Slaves in a Frontier Exchange Economy: The Lower Mississippi Valley Before 1783* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 6-7.

⁸ The Commerce of Louisiana During the French Regime, 1699-1763

⁹ Usner, *Indians, Settlers, & Slaves in a Frontier Exchange Economy*, 246-247.

but authorities also appreciated its strategic value at the mouth of the Mississippi River, where goods could flow from New France across the continental interior and toward the French Caribbean. Initially, the French Crown bestowed the governing rights of the colony to John Law, a Scottish banker and prolific gambler, and his Company of the West, with the intent to draw in plantation owners and Law's business. After little success during the first decade or so, however, the Company of the West transferred the governing rights of the colony back to France in 1731.¹⁰

With the crown controlling Louisiana once again, King Louis XV issued two decrees that opened Louisiana's trade "to all the ports privileged to deal with the French colonies, except for the beaver trade and the commerce in Negroes which remained in the hands of the Company of the Indies."¹¹ The majority of merchants arriving in New Orleans after 1731 came as agents of France and had the right to trade on their own account. These New Orleans merchants acted as middlemen between French merchants and planters, and most planters used New Orleans merchants to sell their goods in the Caribbean and European markets. One of the most successful merchants was J. B. Piemont. Piemont served as the principal agent for several shipowners out of the port of La Rochelle. In 1740, Piemont sold 25,000 livres worth of goods at Pointe Coupée while collecting 13,000 livres of tobacco for a French merchant named Sr. Bourguine out of La Rochelle.¹² Specifically, New Orleans merchants sold lumber, pitch, and tar in the French Caribbean and, in return, received sugar and rum. But they also frequently smuggled goods to the English in Mobile and Pensacola. France did not strictly regulate trade in the colony, and city

¹⁰ Joe Gray Taylor, *Louisiana* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1976), 4-13.

¹¹ Cécile Vidal, *Caribbean New Orleans: Empire, Race, and the Making of a Slave Society* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2019), 67.

¹² John Clark, *New Orleans, 1718-1812: An Economic History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1970), 94.

merchants made connections and trade agreements across the Gulf Coast into Mexico and the Caribbean.¹³

By the mid-1740s, Louisiana had become more directly connected to the French Caribbean and the islands of Santo Domingue and Martinique. The majority of news and correspondence in and out of the city arrived in the French Caribbean before arriving in New Orleans and France. By traveling to and from the Caribbean, New Orleans merchants became “agents of cross-cultural pollination,” collecting and spreading Enlightenment ideas that began to emerge in the writing of different travelers, like Le Page du Pratz. Although Pratz was not a merchant, he was a French engineer and explorer, and his *Histoire de la Louisiane* became one of the most read accounts about Louisiana during the eighteenth century. Philosophy, however, was not Louisiana’s only tie to the French Caribbean. Louisiana also became more associated with the slave-based plantation economy of the French Caribbean, what historian Cecile Vidal has called the “Saint-Domingue Model.”¹⁴ The African slave trade interested the likes of Iberville and many other Louisiana elites since the permanent settling of the territory in 1699. There were few enslaved Black individuals in Louisiana prior to 1719 when the first two ships arrived in the territory from Africa, but within two years, census recorders counted 680 enslaved Africans. Significantly, the majority of enslaved Black people in Louisiana arrived directly from Africa and all within a twelve-year period. Following 1731, only one ship arrived from Africa, in 1743.¹⁵

¹³ John Caughey, *Bernando de Gálvez in Louisiana, 1776-1783* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1934), 11; Clark, *New Orleans, 1718-1812*, 111.

¹⁴ Vidal, *Caribbean New Orleans*, 79-84.

¹⁵ Gwendolyn Mildred Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 57-58.

France's liberalized trade relations in Louisiana, nonetheless, did little to shift the imperial balance of power in North America. By the end of the Seven Years' War, France had failed financially and administratively across the Gulf South and ultimately decided to cede their Louisiana territory to their Spanish allies. Much of these failures were the Crown's own doing, as the French government was only concerned about Louisiana for strategic commercial and geopolitical purposes. With little direct supervision over the territory, the French inhabitants in territorial Louisiana thus were able to govern themselves rather independently for many years. By the 1760s, many of the colonists had come to believe that they were now entitled to that autonomy.

***“For the Benefit of Spain”*: The Spanish Arrival in Louisiana**

Although the French and Spanish began the territorial exchange in 1762 with the Treaty of Fontainebleau, the first Spanish officials did not arrive until years later.¹⁶ On the morning of March 5, 1766, Antonio de Ulloa y de la Torre-Giral, Bourbon King Carlos III's choice for Louisiana's first Spanish governor, finally reached the port of New Orleans on the *Volante*, a single, eighteen-cannon vessel. A Spanish official who arrived with Ulloa described the reception as "respectful but cold and somber, which announced only too clearly the dissatisfaction of the citizenry."¹⁷ At first glance, Ulloa seems like an odd choice to be the territory's first governor. The Louisiana territory stretched from the mouth of the Mississippi River to as far as northwest modern-day Montana. Although Ulloa was a Spanish naval captain,

¹⁶ The Treaty of Fontainebleau ceded all of Louisiana west of the Mississippi River and New Orleans to Spain. One year later, Spain exchanged Florida to the British for the eastern portion of Louisiana.

¹⁷ The name of the official is not mentioned by the statement that is quoted in Moore, *Revolt in Louisiana*, 1.

he was best known for his scientific research on platinum, and while Ulloa possessed a background in cartography, he had no background in exploration.¹⁸

Compounding the problem of Ulloa's inexperience in landed travel was the fact that Spain had taken so long to assume official control of Louisiana. Although Spain had only briefly fought in the Seven Years' War, they suffered heavy losses, and the war decimated most of Spain's Caribbean empire, which required immediate attention. Louisiana was thus a small blip on the colonial landscape for Spain, and Spanish authorities left French locals to continue to govern themselves prior to Ulloa's arrival. In particular, Jean Jacques Blaise d'Abbadie, the French Commissioner General and Marine Official served as the governor during the intervening period until he died, when Charles Philippe Aubry, the French military commander in Louisiana, replaced him.¹⁹

Grumbling about the impending arrival of Spanish officers began as early as January 1765, when several prominent members of the Louisiana parishes met and voiced their protests against the Spanish acquisition. In attendance was the Superior Council head, Nicholas Chauvin de La Frénière, who by 1765 had gained a reputation for his candor and outspokenness. The group sent Jean Milhet, the wealthiest merchant in New Orleans, to France to meet with Louis XV about the Spanish takeover, but he failed to secure a meeting with the King upon his arrival. By the time of his return to New Orleans, many French inhabitants were already pondering their fate. What would it mean to be French inhabitants under Spanish rule? How would their lives and communities change? And perhaps most important, what would the imperial transfer mean for their sense of local autonomy?²⁰

¹⁸ Moore, *Revolt in Louisiana*, 6-7.

¹⁹ Moore, *Revolt in Louisiana*, 40.

²⁰ Charles Gayarre, *French Domination II* (New York: Renfield Publishing Company, 1854), 180.

Initially, Spanish authorities tried to accommodate locals by keeping the French colonial laws intact rather than implementing their customary Laws of the Indies. Historians have considered this a concession to France for granting Spain the territory, but the decision also reflected the cold reality that Spain did not have the manpower to coerce legal submission.²¹ When Ulloa arrived in Louisiana, he only had a military force of ninety soldiers, while the interim Gov. Aubry commanded a French regiment of three hundred soldiers in Louisiana. King Carlos III and Ulloa believed that most French soldiers would serve willingly under the Spanish Crown, but many were war weary, having served past their enlistment date, some for as long as eight years. Thus, military austerity circumscribed the fortunes of the Spanish empire at the conclusion of the Seven Years' War.²² Just as important, many among the three-hundred-man force had no intentions of joining the Spanish military. The Spanish troops in Havana received thirty-five livres a month, but on Ullua's arrival in Louisiana, he decreased pay to seven livres a month to match the pay of the French soldiers in the territory.²³ This was undoubtedly an attempt to win over French soldiers and have them join the Spanish, but it only left Spanish soldiers discontented. Ulloa might have been more successful if he had raised the pay of the French soldiers to match that of the Spanish. Either way, Ulloa lacked soldiers, and on January 20, 1767, he issued a proclamation to clarify governance within the territory. Ulloa decided to keep the two governmental systems intact in Louisiana until he had more troops. Although Spain controlled

²¹ Moore, *Revolt in Louisiana*, 44.

²² Antonio de Ulloa to Don Antonio Buscareli, August 31, 1766, no.7, in *Dispatches of the Spanish Governors of Louisiana*, I, W.P.A. Survey of Federal Archives in Louisiana, Howard Memorial Library, Tulane University. Although the French soldiers outnumbered the Spanish, they often had a reputation for desertion, being unreliable, and insubordination. Former governor of French Louisiana, Etienne Boucher Périer de Salvert, once stated that "his soldiers fled at the first flash of an Indian gun" and that they "were so wretchedly bad, that they seemed to have been picked purposely for the colony and that it would be much better to trust negroes on the battlefield, and them as soldiers, were they not too valuable as property, because they, at least, were brave men." See Gayarre, *French Domination II*, 73.

²³ A Livre was the French colonial coinage. While I have not been able to find a comparison between the Livre and the Peso at the time, sources do tell us the amount that Spanish soldiers received in Livre currency. See Gayarre, *French Domination II*, 162.

the territory, Ulloa thought it was best for him to stay at Balize until the arrival of more Spanish forces since the French forces in New Orleans were unwilling to pledge their loyalty to Spain.²⁴ Both Aubry and Ulloa ruled under the laws and demands of the Spanish Crown. In honor of the moment, Ulloa raised the Spanish flag at Balize.

Political accommodations notwithstanding, Spain was committed to assimilating Louisiana into the same closed economic trade system the empire had applied to its other American colonies. It did not take long for the Crown to act in this regard. On May 6, 1766, Ulloa issued the first series of mercantile decrees, which authorized direct trade between Louisiana and the other Spanish Caribbean colonies, provided commodities such as grain and cattle came into the territory on Spanish ships from Caracas. To prevent smuggling, Spain manned ports in every colony where trading took place by two French commissioners who were allowed to purchase items. The two French commissioners at each location received a salary of 4,000 *livres* a year. There was also a duty of 5 percent on every export.²⁵

Despite closer trade relations with Spain, economic turmoil characterized Louisiana from the moment Spain received the territory post-Seven Years' War, and Ulloa knew more had to be done. Unfortunately for the French colonists, his solutions only seemed to have exacerbated their problems. On September 6, 1766, Ulloa authorized Aubry to issue a decree that was the first to truly hinder the free trade system to which French merchants had long been accustomed. French ships from Martinique and Saint Domingo were permitted into the colony and could bring in wine, flour, and other provisions as long as the vessel took lumber and other products back to the Spanish Caribbean colonies. Ships coming in from France had to acquire passports, and vessels

²⁴ Balize was a fortress that the French created in the 1720s at the mouth of the Mississippi River to help with shipping and commerce. Before any vessel reached New Orleans, they first had to stop at Balize. There were also navigators who helped ships navigate the Mississippi if they were unfamiliar with the water.

²⁵ Gayarre, *French Domination II*, 167.

had to stop at Balize, where boat captains would have to present their passports and an invoice of all items aboard the ships. If inspectors found products on the ships that were not on the invoice, they barred the ships from entering New Orleans and ports further north. The decree also set standard prices on wine and other goods entering the city, in addition to recalibrating the colony's currency to the Spanish peso. The final part of the decree stated that one-third of ships outgoing cargo had to be lumber and other products from the Louisiana colony.²⁶

While the Spanish presented the decree as an attempt to protect colonial inhabitants from paying monopolistic prices on certain products, the real aim was to prevent smuggling in and out of the territory. On September 8, two days following the decree, French merchants pleaded with the Superior Council not to issue the decree. Overseeing the petition was La Frénière, the head of the Superior Council. The merchants requested that the decree not be implemented until they could voice their opinion on the matter. A similar plea came from all the boat captains in the territory just a few days later. Although upset that the merchants went to La Frénière instead of him, Denis-Nicolas Foucault, who was the chief financial officer of Louisiana, sent a letter on behalf of the merchants and ship captains to the French ministry in Paris stating that "it has not been the intention of his majesty, [the French majesty] on making the cession, to strip, for the benefit of Spain, his loyal subjects of the privileges and exemptions which they had always enjoyed."²⁷ From the letter, it seems Foucault and the rest of the merchants believed that with Aubry acting as the head of the governing body in New Orleans, the French commercial customs would remain in effect throughout the territory. But conditions in New Orleans only had gotten worse by the spring of 1767, with prices on exportable commodities dropping to an all-time low.

²⁶ Mercantile Decree of Antonio De Ulloa issued on September 6, 1766, as quoted in Gayarre *French Domination II*, 168-169.

²⁷ Denis Nicholas Foucault to the French Ministry, September 29, 1766, as quoted in Gayarre, *French Domination II*, 170.

Also, as the colony no longer belonged to France, traders on the French-controlled islands in the Caribbean no longer had to give any special treatment to merchants and products coming from Louisiana.²⁸

Then on March 23, 1768, Ulloa implemented the harshest decree of his time in office, declaring that all vessels entering the port of New Orleans were to be "of Spanish construction and owned by Spaniards or naturalized citizens of the kingdoms and two-thirds of crew Spaniards or naturalized citizens."²⁹ Upon the arrival of products reaching Spanish ports, merchants had to pay a 4 percent import duty. The only way French merchants could sell their products in foreign markets was if there was an abundance of certain products in the Spanish territories. Yet, if this did happen, merchants had to pay a duty on the product. Thus, the March 23 decree effectively stripped French merchants of the free trade system that had existed in New Orleans from its founding, and instead of incorporating the French merchants into the Spanish imperial system, Ulloa alienated the merchants. Ulloa and the Spanish Crown failed to recognize how fragile Louisiana's entire economy was, especially in New Orleans.³⁰

Mercantile trade was not the only thing that worried the French inhabitants and local merchants. As stated above, Indigenous trade played a key role in the colony's economic stability and protection. With the arrival of the Spanish imminent, French inhabitants and even French officials feared that Spaniards' reputation among the surrounding Indigenous nations would discourage the Indigenous people of Louisiana from participating in their longstanding

²⁸ Moore, *Revolt in Louisiana*, 111.

²⁹ Moore, *Revolt in Louisiana*, 112.

³⁰ For decades, the amount of money in the city had always been a problem. Merchants often relied on paper money instead of coins or specie. In 1758, French Commissary-General of the Marine and Ordonnateur Vincent de Rochemore implemented a policy to recall all of the paper money in the territory, which was an estimated 1,995,000 French livres. However, due to the depletion of the bills and the bankrupt French government, no one in Louisiana ever received the money. In exchange for the paper money, the Spanish government only honored 75 percent of its value. Due to years of economic failures in the city and the fact that the Spanish were in a financial hole from the Seven Years' War, it became difficult for the Spanish government to govern the territory.

trade networks. As Aubry explained to the French Ministry in Paris, "all the nations of the continent know by hearsay about the cruelties which all Spaniards have practice elsewhere in America and detest them generally....[I]t is certain that if the Spaniards try to act in the same way in Louisiana all will be lost."³¹ Early on, Ulloa saw the advantages of adopting the French policy of gift giving in exchange for marketable goods, loyalty, and protection.

Yet during the winter of 1766-1767 Ulloa's thoughts began to change. Ulloa ordered Captain Francisco Riu y Morales to go on an expedition in Illinois country "to preserve the friendship and alliance of the Indians in the colony...for it is a great importance that traditional policy be maintained." Although Ulloa wanted "traditional policy" to be maintained, his orders to Captain Riu were anything but traditional, as three distinct orders violated the status quo in Louisiana. First, no person could trade among Indigenous people without first receiving a license signed by Ulloa. Second, traders could no longer sell brandy to Indigenous locals. Lastly, muskets, gunpowder, and ammunition could not be sold to Indigenous communities who had never bought them before, and Ulloa put new limits on the firearm trade with old partners.³² Under the French, traders had almost absolute liberty when it came to Indigenous commerce. These orders not only angered French traders; they also disrupted entrenched local interests and economic practices.

Compounding Spanish officials' problems was the recent arrival of displaced French colonists from Acadia. In 1710, during the War of Spanish Succession, the British captured Port Royal, and for the next half-century, the British crown struggled to rein in the Acadian people and subordinate them to British rule. During the Seven Years' War, the British began deporting

³¹ Phillip Aubry to the French Ministry, February 4, 1765, in Clarence Alvord and Clarence Carter ed. *The Critical Period, 1763-1765 Vol. 1* (Springfield: Illinois State Historical Library, 1915), 431-432.

³² Instrucción para la expedición a la parte de Yillinueses in Moore, *Revolt in Louisiana*, 93-94.

the French Acadians. While the British forced many to leave, some chose to leave and migrated to other parts of the French American empire.³³ In the summer of 1765, eight Acadian families arrived in New Orleans, followed by two hundred and sixteen more in November 1766. The Spanish government, however, estimated it would cost 15,500 *livres* to meet the Acadian families' needs wherever they were located, so officials figured they could turn the new expense into a strategic asset.³⁴ Ulloa thus sent them to Natchez, where he hoped to establish a Spanish presence on the eastern side of the Mississippi River.³⁵ Many Acadians never forgave the Spanish government for forcing them away from New Orleans and east to Natchez, but they had no recourse. The one entity that could have helped the Acadians, the Superior Council, had lost much of its power, and the disbarment of the Council in March 1767 became the tipping point for the revolt.

Established by a charter from the French Crown in 1714, the French Superior Council served as both the governing body and high court of France's Louisiana colony for half a century. In 1767, the Council consisted of nine members: the governor, commissary, attorney general, three regular councilors, and three assessors (assistant councilors). While the governor usually presided over the councils' meetings, Aubry, due to the fact that he was the acting military commander and the French governor, relinquished this duty to Denis-Nicolas Foucault. Even during Spanish occupation from 1763 to 1767, the Superior Council helped Aubry govern the territory. Ulloa never favored the Superior Council, as they always fought against his decrees, and in January 1767, he wrote a letter to Jerónimo Grimaldi, First Duke of Grimaldi, and the Spanish Minister of State, stating that the Spanish government should disband the Superior

³³ For more information on the British conquest of Acadia, see; John Grenier. *The Far Reaches of Empire: War in Nova Scotia, 1710-1760*. Norman: The University of Oklahoma Press, 2008.

³⁴ Aléc Fortier, *A History of Louisiana Volume I* (New York: Goupil & Co., of Paris, 1904), 153

³⁵ Moore, *Revolt in Louisiana*, 134.

Council. Ulloa argued that none of the councilors knew government or law. Ulloa noted that it "does not appear...that there is a necessity for a court of this species, since we do not have one in the Indies in places infinitely more important, such as Havana."³⁶ On March 22, 1767, in the form of a royal proclamation from the Spanish King, Ulloa announced that the Superior Council would cease to exist.

Clearly, by October 1768, French Creoles and Spanish officials were at an impasse. The French, especially merchants and landowners, did not respect Spanish authority. French inhabitants never wanted the Spanish to occupy Louisiana, and Ulloa and his government only prompted more hatred for the Spanish through his policies and territorial decisions. With Spanish assertions of power, many elite and middle-class French began discussing overthrowing the Spanish government.

The Rebel Cadre

To understand the events that took place in New Orleans from October 28 to November 1, 1768, a close look at the relationship of the main conspirators is warranted. Without a doubt, Nicolas Chauvin de La Frénière, Denis Nicholas Foucault, Pierre Hardi de Boisblanc, Balthasar Masan, Joseph Villeré, Pierre Marquis, Pierre Poupet, Joseph Petit, Pierre Caresse, Julien Jérôme Doucet, Jean Milhet, Joseph Milhet, and Jean-Baptise Noyan - the primary actors of the rebellion - were among the most influential members of French Creole society in Louisiana. Whether through blood relations or economic interests, these thirteen men all had some ties to each other, and all inhabited vital positions within colonial society. From serving on the Superior Council to

³⁶ Antonio de Ulloa to Jerónimo Grimaldi, January 1767, Leg. 2542 Audiencia de Santo Domingo, Louisiana Documents from the Archivo General de Indias microfilm, MF 7, Williams Research Center, The Historic New Orleans Collection. Ulloa did not see the reason for needing a Council as no other Spanish colony had one. He also thought that the members of the Council were nothing special and they were not properly educated for the roles that they had.

being some of the most significant merchants in New Orleans, these men were personally interested in seeing a successful coup d'état.

La Frénière's ancestors were among the original members of the colony. As part of the Iberville expedition, Jaques, Joseph, Nicolas, and Louis Chauvin settled along the Gulf Coast around modern-day Biloxi, Mississippi, in 1700. When Jean Baptiste le Moyne de Bienville founded New Orleans in 1718, he rewarded the brothers with some of the first land grants in the city. While economically tied, the Bienville and Chauvin families soon became legally connected through marriage, when, sometime after 1726, Nicholas Chauvin de La Frénière married Marguerite Le Seur, daughter of Charles Le Seur, and Marguerite Messier, Bienville's first cousin.³⁷ Another marriage between the families occurred in 1767, one year before the insurrection, when Catherine Chauvin de La Frénière, the granddaughter of Nicolas Chauvin, married Jean Baptiste Auguste Payen de Noyan, Bienville's grandnephew.

The marriage of Catherine Chauvin de La Frénière and Jean Baptiste Auguste Payen de Noyan was a momentous occasion for the French Creole elite, and many attended the wedding. According to the marriage records, those who signed as witnesses included Denis Nicholas Foucault, Phillip Aubry, Jean Milhet, Joseph Milhet, and, notably, Antonio de Ulloa. By the time of the wedding on December 13, 1767, tensions between the French inhabitants and the Spanish government were rising, with La Frénière and Ulloa clearly at odds with one another.³⁸ But because a La Frénière was to be wed, it would have been disrespectful for Ulloa not to come, and

³⁷ Gary Mills, "The Chauvin Brothers: Early Colonists of Louisiana," *Louisiana History* 15, no. 2 (Spring 1974): 125 ; Emilie Lumas, "Ties That Bind: The Family, Social, and Business Associations of the Insurrectionists of 1768," *Louisiana History* 47 no. 2 (Spring 2006): 190. While the date of the marriage is unknown, the baptisms of their children are in the Archdiocese of New Orleans Records. We can safely assume it was after 1726 because the census records do not show that they were married then. Also, Nicolas Chauvin de La Frénière is the father of Nicolas Chauvin de La Frénière. He named his son after him, but records do not indicate that he was a second or junior.

³⁸ Alice Forsyth, *Louisiana Marriage Contracts Vol.II: Abstracts from Records of the Superior Council of Louisiana 1728-1769* (New Orleans: Genealogical Research Society of New Orleans, 1989), 117.

Ulloa already had ruffled the feathers of the local French elite when he chose to marry his wife in Balize instead of New Orleans - and without any Frenchmen in attendance. Still, it is hard to imagine that any of these men knew what would come ten months after they all signed that marriage contract in the late fall of 1767.

Yet it was not just the notable French Creole elite who played a considerable role in the rebellion. Located roughly twenty-five miles north of New Orleans on the west bank of the Mississippi River was a settlement of German inhabitants who migrated to Louisiana in 1718 as part of John Law's recruiting process for bringing farmers and families into the city. Connected to the German Coast inhabitants was Karl Friedrich D'Arensbourg, the leader of the German Coast forces during the 1768 rebellion, who also happened to be the grandfather-in-law of Joseph Villerés. Alejandro O'Reilly later admitted that once he arrived in Louisiana in 1769, D'Arensbourg was known to be part of the rebellion, but due to his age and poor health, he was allowed to live out the rest of his life along the German Coast. Several other families along the German Coast also participated in the insurrection, such as the Dumanior family. Jean-Baptise Faucon Dumanior was the father of two daughters who married into the Noyan and Chauvin families.³⁹ Several of the connections also came from business relations. Balthasar Masan, Pierre Poupet, and Pierre Caresse were some of the wealthiest merchants in New Orleans and the entire Louisiana territory.

By 1768, New Orleans and its surrounding areas, such as the German Coast, were embedded in a plantation slavery economy. One of the most critical aspects to the German Coast inhabitants was the protection of the institution of slavery. The German Coast consisted of some of the most fertile soil in the Mississippi Valley, and from 1745 to 1763, the population grew

³⁹ Lumas, "Ties That Bind," 196; David Ker Texada, "The Administration of Alejandro O'Reilly as Governor of Louisiana, 1769-1770" (PhD diss., Louisiana State University, 1969), 124.

from about 100 colonists and 200 enslaved Africans to 2,966 colonists and 4,539 enslaved people. Once the Spanish arrived in 1766, their census reported 5,536 colonists and 5,940 enslaved Africans.⁴⁰ While we are uncertain about the number of enslaved individuals located on the German Coast during the time of the rebellion, the region's investment in slavery only would deepen as the decades rolled on, and in 1811, the largest slave revolt in the United States would take place along the Coast over three days in January. In 1768, fears of a Spanish-led mass emancipation program may not have motivated rebels, but Ulloa's meddling with slavery's profitability certainly frustrated many. In one of the central pamphlets that followed the rebellion, the insurrectionist described how Ulloa banned the importation of enslaved individuals in the colony and that his reasoning was "that we were bringing unfair competition to an English merchant from Jamaica who had sent M. Ulloa a boat in order to submit his own enterprise in the slave trade." The pamphlet described how the decision "Stripped the merchant of a valuable commodity and deprived the planter of the means to enrich himself."⁴¹

However, Ulloa did allow the importation of enslaved people into Louisiana, depending on their origins. One notable case where Ulloa intervened was when two slave traders by the names of Cadis and Leblanc imported enslaved Africans from Martinique, even though Ulloa banned the slave trade with the French Caribbean. Ulloa forced the two men to return some of the enslaved individuals that he deemed "to be the worst" of them. What makes this unique, especially in the history of the rebellion, is that the two men were agents of La Frénière, and he

⁴⁰ Gayarre, *French Domination* II, 28; Carl Brasseur, "The Administration of Slave Regulation in French Louisiana, 1724-1766," *Louisiana History* 21, no. 2 (Spring, 1980): 157; Gilbert Din, *Spaniards, Planters, and Slaves: The Spanish Regulation of Slavery in Louisiana, 1763-1803* (College Station: Texas A&M Press, 1999), 255.

⁴¹ *The Rebellion of 1768: Documents from the Favrot Family Papers and the Rosamonde E. and Emilie Kuntz Collection* ed. Wilbur E. Meneray, trans. Philippe Seiler, "Memoir from the Merchants and Inhabitants of Louisiana on the events of October 29, 1768" 15.

was set to make a profit from the venture.⁴² Ulloa also allowed a merchant named M. de la Chauzerie to bring in roughly four to five hundred enslaved people. The merchant, however, never arrived in New Orleans with the enslaved individuals.⁴³ Furthermore, while Ulloa did not make sweeping changes to Louisiana's system of chattel slavery, he acted in ways that upset the French and German inhabitants, such as allowing Spanish men to marry enslaved women and forbidding enslavers to whip enslaved people.⁴⁴

***“Giv[ing] an Account of His Conduct”*: The Expulsion of the Spanish Government**

On the night of October 27, 1768, the thirteen conspirators met at Balthasar Masan's house. They planned to hold a special session of the Superior Council on October 29 to prepare a petition to expel Ulloa and the Spanish government. That same night, supporters of the insurrection spiked the cannons at the Tchoupitoulas gate in the city.⁴⁵ The following morning, Aubry met with La Frénière and Foucault to try to convince them to stand down, but they refused. They told Aubry that Ulloa and the rest of the Spanish government needed to leave the territory. While Aubry protested their decision, he did nothing to stop them. Following their meeting, French and German militia units marched into New Orleans. For his safety, Ulloa retreated to the *Volante*, the same vessel that brought him to New Orleans just two and a half years prior. For Aubry, his hands were tied. If he engaged the militias, how would that look for him, especially if he still planned to return to France? If he did *not* engage, however, he would be

⁴² Din, *Spaniards, Planters, and Slaves*, 40.

⁴³ Antonio de Ulloa to Jerónimo Grimaldi, June 25, 1766, Leg. 2585, Audiencia de Santo Domingo, Louisiana Documents from the Archivo General de Indias microfilm, MF 7, Williams Research Center, The Historic New Orleans Collection.

⁴⁴ Moore, *Revolt in Louisiana*, 141.

⁴⁵ Gayarre, *History of Louisiana: The French Dominion*, 189.

forgoing his loyalty and duty as a military officer. In the end, Aubry sent twenty men to protect the *Volante* while he sent thirty other troops to guard the city center.⁴⁶

On the morning of October 29, the Superior Council met under armed protection and issued the *Decree of the Superior Council of the Province*, which laid out all the orders of the insurrectionists. The decree had five steps that the Council believed would improve the territory. The first described how the "privileges and exemptions" that the people of the territory enjoyed under French rule would continue under Spanish control. The second and third attacked the mercantile decrees of Ulloa. The council argued that French and American vessels should be able to receive passports from the Spanish to come into New Orleans to trade and buy products. Also, they argued that the Spanish government should allow French ships to enter and trade in French and American ports. Fourth, the Council claimed that the Spanish agreed to continue the free trade operations that had been in place since the colony's founding and that it was imperative that the Spanish honor the "freedom of trade with all the nations."⁴⁷ In the closing of the decree, the Council stated that Ulloa and the entire Spanish government had three days to leave the city and "go and give an account of his conduct to the Catholic majesty." The Council claimed that Ulloa "punished and oppressed" the French Creoles and that they had the authority of the French King to protect his people.⁴⁸

The decree effectively saw the end of the two-government system in Louisiana. There was to be no more compromise - and certainly no more Spanish imposition. While it is unknown exactly which member of the Council wrote the decree, it seems unlikely that it would have been

⁴⁶ Moore, *Revolt in Louisiana*, 152-154.

⁴⁷ *Decree of the Superior Council of the Province* as quoted in Gayarre, *History of Louisiana: The French Dominion*, 371.

⁴⁸ *Decree of the Superior Council of the Province* as quoted in Gayarre, *History of Louisiana: The French Dominion*, 378.

anyone other than La Frénière, because, by the time of the insurrection, he had gained a reputation as a charismatic orator and unabashed instigator. Of course, the Council did not have the legal authority to remove Ulloa from power, but the decree served as inspirational propaganda for the Council and the cause of insurrection.

La Frénière ordered militia members to deliver a copy of the decree to Ulloa. All that was left was to see if Ulloa would accept the order. The militia comprised nearly five hundred armed fighters, while the combined French and Spanish forces loyal to Ulloa barely numbered one hundred men. Several parties took place in the city as night fell on New Orleans. The marching in the streets turned into parades, the fervor eventually descending into drunkenness. Had Ulloa been equipped with the proper army in New Orleans, this would have been the chance to crush the rebellion without further escalation. Instead, on the morning of November 1, 1768, Ulloa sailed down the Mississippi River with members of the Spanish government bound for Havana, Cuba. Little did Ulloa know, but that would be the last time he would set his eyes on New Orleans. With the *Volante* needing some repairs, Ulloa sailed out on the *César*, a French frigate. The French Creoles got what they wanted. Louisiana was no longer under the reign of the "Catholic Majesty."

***“A Nation Returns to Its Natural State”*: Enlightened Justifications**

During the late eighteenth to the early nineteenth century, cultural, political, and economic transformations occurred worldwide. Historians define this era as the "Age of Revolutions," with the American, Haitian, and French Revolutions representing its three watershed moments.⁴⁹ All three events saw the overthrow of either colonial or monarchical

⁴⁹ Several books go into the importance of these three revolutions and place them in a larger imperial context. See Manuel Covo, *Entrepôt of Revolutions: Saint-Domingue, Commercial Sovereignty, and the French-*

governments and established ostensibly free, independent governments, and all drew from Enlightenment ideas and principles. With the connections of merchants and travelers, information and ideas flowed across the Atlantic in the eighteenth century from writers and philosophers such as John Locke, Emmerich von Vattel, and Charles Louis de Secondat, Baron de La Brède et de Montesquieu. The majority of the ideas centered around natural rights and the rights of man, the law of nations, and popular sovereignty. Rhetoric produced during the 1768 revolt makes it clear that the French Creole, German, and Acadian insurrectionists were a part of this revolutionary zeitgeist, if not somewhat ahead of the curve. Like the American, Haitian, and French Revolutions, the French Creole rebellion produced pamphlets and documents full of Enlightenment ideas explaining and justifying their cause.

Two weeks following Ulloa's departure, the Superior Council met and considered charges brought against Ulloa in the *Decree of the Superior Council of the Province*. On November 12, 1768, the Council published the *Très humbles représentations qu'adressent au roi notre très honoré et souverain seigneur les gens tenant son conseil supérieur à la Nouvelle Orléans* ("Very humble representations addressed to the king our very honored and sovereign lord the people holding his superior council in New Orleans"), a document that detailed the Council's twenty-one complaints against Ulloa. Most complaints revolved around the mercantile decrees and the forced migration of the Acadians out of New Orleans and to Natchez. When describing Ulloa, Piot de Launay, a member of the Council and the author of the document, stated that Ulloa was "charged with our hatred which he has so justly merited, cannot his nation reproach him for

American Alliance (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022); Nathan Per-Rosenthal, *The Age of Revolutions: And the Generations who Made It* (New York: Basic Books, 2024); David Armitage and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, ed. *The Age of Revolutions in Global Context, c. 1760-1840* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Gordon Brown, *Toussaint's Clause: The Founding Father and the Haitian Revolution* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005); Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004); Janet Polasky, *Revolutions Without Borders: The Call to Liberty in the Atlantic World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).

having failed in the implementation of Spanish policy, which, soft and insinuating in principle, becomes tyrannical when the yoke is imposed."⁵⁰ The document declared Ulloa a tyrant and that his policies ruined the mercantile economy in Louisiana. The *Très humbles représentations* was the first of several documents that came out that justified and explained the insurrection.

The second major document was the *Mémoire, des habitans et négocians de la Louisiane, sur l'évenement du 29 Octobre 1768* ("Memorandum of the Planters and Merchants of Louisiana, concerning the Event of October 29, 1768"). While the author of the *Mémoire* is unknown, following the return of the Spanish in October 1769, Alejandro O'Reilly, the second governor of Spanish Louisiana, charged Jérôme Doucet with writing it, but no one can say for certain that it was him. The *Mémoire* rationalized the insurrection by narrating events since the Spanish takeover in 1762. Significantly, one principal complaint that the *Mémoire* addressed was trade with Indigenous people, which, according to the authors, had been crippled by Spanish rule at the expense of the colony at large: "trade that is carried on with the savage natives is one of the principal branches of commerce, of which the interest is so closely united here with that of the cultivator that one is the spring of the other. The affection of the natives is kept up by frequent intercourse with the French, securing to them the results that necessarily follow from familiar acquaintance Public security at last, from which this trade with the barbarous nations that's around us has arisen and is preserved by it."⁵¹ As mentioned above, for decades, French inhabitants had relied upon Indigenous people, providing them gifts such as clothes and weapons in return for furs and military protection. Disruption of that Indian trade thus threatened the well-being of the entire colonial community. And this was on top of the general closed-mercantile

⁵⁰ *Très humbles représentations qu'adressent au roi notre très honoré et souverain seigneur les gens tenant son conseil supérieur à la Nouvelle Orléans* as quoted in Moore, *Revolt in Louisiana*, 167.

⁵¹ *Mémoire, des habitans et négocians de la Louisiane, sur l'évenement du 29 Octobre 1768* as quoted in Fortier, *A History of Louisiana Volume 1*, 181.

policies implemented by the Spanish, which attacked several industries, including the lumber and sugar trade.

Notably, the authors of the *Mémoire* were well aware of the larger context of their critique of the Spanish regime. Instead of addressing the *Mémoire* to either France or Spain, the writers addressed it "to the world," to all who "refuse any longer to listen to the cries of an oppressed people."⁵² This was a pointed rhetorical choice and evidence that the authors attempted to appeal to universal principles of morality and justice. But if their universal appeal failed, they still hoped to receive the benevolence of their king, "Louis the Well-beloved."⁵³ When describing Ulloa's mercantile decrees, the *Mémoire* states that "It was plunging the dagger by degrees, and the great blow has been struck by the decree."⁵⁴

The final sentences tied everything to the *Mémoire*'s opening appeal to "the world": "The Genoese, English, and Dutch merchants, witnesses of the revolution, will testify to the truth in their country. They will certify, in a much more certain manner, that our pavilion rose, without the Spanish frigate having received the least insult to its own; that M. Ulloa embarked with all the liberty possible and without any act on our part that appeared even improper."⁵⁵ Although the *Mémoire* addressed the French Creoles' desire to return the territory to France, their proclaimed loyalty was questionable. Following the refusal of the Crown to take the colony back, the insurrectionists sent two representatives to British West Florida to propose an independent

⁵² *Mémoire, des habitans et négocians de la Louisiane, sur l'évenement du 29 Octobre 1768* as quoted in Fortier, *A History of Louisiana Volume 1*, 177.

⁵³ *Mémoire, des habitans et négocians de la Louisiane, sur l'évenement du 29 Octobre 1768* as quoted in Fortier, *A History of Louisiana Volume 1*, 178-179.

⁵⁴ *Mémoire, des habitans et négocians de la Louisiane, sur l'évenement du 29 Octobre 1768* as quoted in Fortier, *A History of Louisiana Volume 1*, 184.

⁵⁵ *Mémoire, des habitans et négocians de la Louisiane, sur l'évenement du 29 Octobre 1768* as quoted in Fortier, *A History of Louisiana Volume 1*, 203. While it is uncertain what the author means by "The Genoese, English, and Dutch merchants, witnesses of the revolution, will testify to the truth in their country." It Probably has to do with the Spanish attitude towards these people and we know that The Dutch Act of Abjuration of 1581 saw the States General forgo their allegiance to King Philip of Spain.

colony with protection from the British until the French in Louisiana could gain a strong, new independent government.⁵⁶ The British, however, were dealing with the early stages of rebellion beginning in their North American colonies and had no interest in helping the French inhabitants.

The third central document concerning the rebellion was the *Manifeste des habitants, negociants et colons de la province de la Louisiane au sujet de la révolucion qui est arrivé e le 29 octobre 1768* (“Manifesto of the Planters, Merchants, and Colonists of the Province of Louisiana on the Subject of the Revolution That Took Place on October 29, 1768”). The *Manifeste* was perhaps the clearest articulation of the rebels’ appeal to the ideas and principles of the Enlightenment. In particular, the pamphlet claimed that Spain had violated the “law of nations.”⁵⁷ According to the *Manifeste*, the law of nations was the alliance between the state and its members within it, a bond that “cannot completely be deprived of it neither by force, nor by their own consent, nor by the imposition of sovereignty. In truth, several difficulties might suspend the exercise of this right, but when a nation returns to its natural state and to its original liberty, its ancient authority is reborn, and it enjoys once again the right of peoples.”⁵⁸ The author closed the *Manifeste* by arguing that the French in Louisiana had no obligation to render themselves subjects of Spanish rule; ultimately it was their choice to either select their next ruler or to govern themselves. To persuade their audience, the author of the *Manifeste* used works of philosophy and literature that were common during the Enlightenment stating, “In order to leave no doubt remaining about the truth of these principles which are going to be developed, it is necessary to say in advance that they are extracted from the writings of Grotius, Puffendorf,

⁵⁶ Marc de Villiers du Terrage, ed. Carl Brasseaux and Glenn Conrad, Trans. Hosea Phillips, *The Last Years of French Louisiana* (Hammond: University of Southwestern Louisiana. Center for Louisiana Studies, 1982), 328.

⁵⁷ Biagetti, “Enlightenment and Revolution, 81. For a full translated version of the *Manifeste* see; Wilbur Meneray, ed., *The Rebellion of 1768 in Louisiana and the Manifesto of the Inhabitants* (Jefferson Parish: Jefferson Parish Historical Commission, Jefferson Historical Series, 1997).

⁵⁸ Biagetti, “Enlightenment and Revolution, 82.

Wolff, etc. The works of these philosophers, whose productions do honor to the human mind, are the pure sources where we have drawn our maxims.”⁵⁹

It was a call for natural rights and the law of nature that the French Creoles addressed, one that was sent not to France but rather to colonies around the globe. In his famous *Second Treatise of Government*, John Locke argued that natural rights were defined by the laws of nature, stating that humans possessed the rights to “life, liberty, and estate.” Locke described the state of nature “obliges every one: And Reason, which is that Law, teaches all mankind, who will but consult it, that being equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his Life, Health, Liberty, or Possessions.”⁶⁰ According to Locke, individuals have the right to remove someone who infringes on their natural rights. For the French inhabitants in Louisiana, they felt that Ulloa and the Spanish government attacked their “life, liberty, and estate.” The writing of the *Manifeste* made that abundantly clear.

Another writer that influenced the rebels was Emmerich de Vattel and his *Droit des gens; ou, Principes de la loi naturelle appliqués à la conduite et aux affaires des nations et des souverains* (“The Law of Nations or the Principles of Natural Law Applied to the Conduct and to the Affairs of Nations and of Sovereigns”). Vattel defined the sovereign state as “every nation that governs itself, under what form soever, without dependence on any foreign power, is a

⁵⁹ Charles O’Neill, “The Louisiana Manifesto of 1768” *Political Science Reviewer* 19, (Spring, 1990): 256. The rebels were also influenced by Emmerich de Vattel and his famous *Droit des gens; ou, Principes de la loi naturelle appliqués à la conduite et aux affaires des nations et des souverains* (“*The Law of Nations or the Principles of Natural Law Applied to the Conduct and to the Affairs of Nations and of Sovereigns*”). Vattel defined the law of nations as “the law of sovereigns. It is principally for them and for their ministers that it ought to be written. All mankind are indeed interested in it; and, in a free country, the study of its maxims is a proper employment for every citizen: but it would be of little consequence to impart the knowledge of it only to private individuals, who are not called to the councils of nations, and who have no influence in directing the public measures.” The three men mentioned above all specialized in natural, international, and civil law. Grotius’ work came directly from the writings of Francisco de Vittoria and Jesuit philosophers Juan de Mariana, Roberto Bellarmino, and Francisco Suarez. Samuel von Pufendorf is best known for his fusion between international and civil law amongst nations. Christian Wolff is known for his writing on natural law.

⁶⁰ John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Lasslet, rev. ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 331.

Sovereign State. Its rights are naturally the same as those of any other state. Such are the moral persons who live together in natural society, subject to the law of nations. To give a nation a right to make an immediate figure in this grand society, it is sufficient that it be really sovereign and independent, that is, that it govern itself by its own authority and laws.” As far as the rebels were concerned, for ten months, Louisiana was a sovereign state without any imperial oversight.⁶¹

To an extent, the Louisiana rebels’ appeal “to the world” worked, especially as periodicals across colonial America picked up on and reproduced the rhetoric of the insurrectionists. Certainly, in the British mainland colonies, the Louisiana rebels’ calls for economic freedom and natural rights resonated as activists there ramped up their critique of British imperial control. On January 7, 1769, the *Providence Gazette* published a letter by one Captain Hammond, who was in New Orleans and learned about the insurrection. While the letter did not go into great detail about the insurrection itself, it did state that “the French inhabitants of the country part of that place, came into the city armed, where they were immediately joined by all their countrymen there, and acquainted their own governor that unless he sent away Don John de Ulloa, the Spanish governor, that they were determined to put him and all his troops to death for that they would not live under the Spanish yoke.”⁶²

Two days later, *The Boston Chronicle* also published the letter stating that the “French inhabitants” of New Orleans were unable to “live under the oppressive government of Don Ulloa” and that the “revolution was effected without bloodshed.”⁶³ In their accounts of the

⁶¹ Emmerich de Vattel, *The Law of Nations or the Principles of Natural Law Applied to the Conduct and to the Affairs of Nations and of Sovereigns*, trans. Joseph Chitty and Edward Duncan Ingraham (Philadelphia: T & J. W. Johnson & Company, 1856), 66.

⁶² *Providence Gazette*, January 7, 1769.

⁶³ *The Boston Chronicle*, January 9, 1769.

events, the *New Port Mercury* stated that they received “several reports” that the restrictions on trade were “excessively disagreeable and likely to be productive of some extraordinary revolutions.” The article then addressed the French inhabitants’ attempt to persuade the British to guide them while they developed into an independent country, declaring that they would “burn their houses, and remove their effects to the English side then subject themselves to the Spanish yoke.” By early 1769, papers in Providence, Boston, New York, Newport, Salem, and Savannah had printed accounts of the insurrection.⁶⁴ As we will see below, the Spanish used the literary rhetoric that developed during and after the insurrection as evidence of treason and conspiracy against the crown.

Clearly, the 1768 rebellion had ideological traction. As the ideas and principles of the Enlightenment traversed the Atlantic, from the European metropolises to the Americas and back, the Louisiana rebels positioned themselves squarely in the middle of that conversation. Historian David Armitage has argued that the “Declaration [of Independence] marked the birth of a new genre of political writing... It combined elements of what would become three distinguishable genres: a declaration of independence, a declaration of rights, and a manifesto.”⁶⁵ While we cannot say for certain that the authors and influencers of the Declaration of Independence read either of the documents, we do know that they all three, the *Mémoire*, *Manifeste* and the Declaration of Independence shared the same enlightened principles and virtues as well as similar complaints against both Spain and Great Britain.

“Reenter[ed] Upon Its Natural Right”: Settler Sovereignty and the 1768 Revolt

⁶⁴ *The New York Journal*, January 19, 1769; *Newport Mercury*, January 30, 1769; *Essex Gazette*, January 31, 1769; *Georgia Gazette*, May 24, 1769.

⁶⁵ David Armitage, *The Declaration of Independence: A Global History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 14.

That settlers within the British-American mainland colonies would gravitate toward the rhetoric of the Louisiana insurrectionists should not come as a surprise. Despite the British and French colonies' general historiographical segmentation, the settler societies of Louisiana and the British-American mainland shared much in common. As scholars of settler colonialism have noted, the word "settler" signifies someone who does not intend to return to their state of origin. Once a settler arrives in a new area, a process begins that often draws them away from a strict allegiance to the colonizing state - what some have termed "settler sovereignty." Lorenzo Veracini has explained this dynamic as well as anybody: "while settlers see themselves as founders of political orders, they also interpret their collective efforts in terms of an inherent sovereign claim that travels with them and is ultimately, if not immediately, autonomous from the colonizing metropole." Simply put, once a settler arrives in a new land, they not only carry with them the sense of the metropole, but also that the land in which they are traversing to is separate and different from the metropole. Once they arrive they claim sovereignty over the land and its natural resources.⁶⁶

According to Jeffery Ostler, some of the earliest moments historians can see the impulses behind settler sovereignty at work are with the Treaty of Paris in 1763 and 1763 Royal Proclamation.⁶⁷ Beginning in 1763, the British began enforcing taxes and duties on all imported and exported goods, which, in turn, upset merchants. With the 1763 Royal Proclamation, the British government stated that the colonists could not cross the Appalachian Mountains and settle on the newly acquired land from the French in their victory during the Seven Years' War. With the increasing imperial oversight, the colonists felt that the crown was violating their

⁶⁶ Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 53.

⁶⁷ Jeffery Ostler, "Locating Settler Colonialism in Early American History," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 76, no. 3 (July, 2019): 444.

autonomy, and twelve years later, a revolution erupted in the colony. From this perspective, the series of events in the British mainland colonies was strikingly similar to what unfolded in Louisiana during the 1760s.

Historians rarely point to French colonial America as a context for settler colonialism, but mid-eighteenth-century Louisiana offers a compelling case. The process of invasion and dispossession may not have been as pronounced in French Louisiana as in other colonial contexts, but French encroachments throughout the century certainly elbowed locals aside, disrupted established community relationships, and depleted the natural resources of the land.⁶⁸ Just as important, and as made evident by the 1768 rebellion, the French settlers of the region (and their Euro-American counterparts) translated their experiences of colonial expansion into a sense of both self-sufficiency and independent rule. The longer historical processes of “eluding... metropolitan planning..., distil[ing] new forms of organization, and... actively construct[ing] new elements of... social architecture” - which were occurring across French colonial America - were particularly acute in Louisiana, in part *because* the lower Mississippi valley colony was so peripheral to France’s imperial aims.⁶⁹ Decades of settler self-reproduction and merchant free-trading and smuggling, along with a growing enslaver-plantation economy,

⁶⁸ While historians such as Daniel Usner, Kathleen DuVal, and Sophie White have all shown how Indigenous communities in Louisiana were able to maintain their dominion alongside French and Spanish settlers, that did not mean that their lives and customs did not change or evolve with the arrival of French settlers. Indigenous people were assimilated into European trade customs, and with the rise of the plantation society in Louisiana, Indigenous people became engulfed in Euro-American slave systems. And although they did not lose all of their land, French settlers most certainly displaced or encroached on Indigenous land. Daniel Usner, *Indians, Settlers, & Slaves in a Frontier Exchange Economy: The Lower Mississippi Valley Before 1783* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992); Kathleen DuVal, *The Native Ground: Indians and the Colonists in the Heart of the Continent* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006); Sophie White, *Wild Frenchmen and Frenchified Indians: Material Culture and Race in Colonial Louisiana* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

⁶⁹ Gilles Paquet and Jean-Pierre Wallot, “Nouvelle-France/Québec/Canada: A World of Limited Identities” in *Colonial Identity in the Atlantic World, 1500-1800*, edited by Nicholas Canny and Anthony Pagden (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 97-98.

combined to create a Creole society within Louisiana, one that sustained a distinct community, culture, and - by the 1760s - government.

As Lisa Ford has argued, settler sovereignty historically also drew energy - and apparent legitimacy - from the encroaching upon Indigenous systems of governance. In other words, the subsuming of Native “crime” under colonial jurisdiction was just as important for the development of settler sovereignty as settler expansion onto Indigenous lands.⁷⁰ This had been underway in French Louisiana since the earliest days of New Orleans, when settlers brought complaints and judicial cases against free and enslaved Indigenous people to the Superior Council. Indeed, the 1728 case against the “savage slaves” Bontemps and Guillory, who were found guilty by the Superior Council of aggravated desertion and robbery, reveals the primacy of settler values and standards from the beginning of the colonial era.⁷¹ Just because they were not always successful or effective at it, the French settlers *wanted* to control the mobility, livelihood, and territories of Indigenous people, and they frequently tried to do so. Spain’s attempts to stymie those ambitions in the 1760s, were, therefore, an attack on important settler prerogatives - and deserving of special recognition in the *Memoire*.

With this in mind, the *Manifeste*’s claims to settler “natural rights” become more than convenient philosophizing or rhetorical flourish but, rather, appeals to their historical

⁷⁰ Lisa Ford, *Settler Sovereignty: Jurisdiction and Indigenous People in America and Australia, 1788-1836* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 30.

⁷¹ “Examination of Bontemps and Guillory Savage Slaves of Srs. Pellerin and Trudeau- Capital Sentence,” doc. 28/77 June 14, 1728, Found in the Workers Progress Administration Black Books of the Louisiana Colonial Judicial Records of the French Superior Council at The Louisiana Historical Center. Hereby after cited as WPABB. According to the testimony, Bontemps persuaded Guillory, who “states his age to be 15,” to run away from Sr. Trudeau “on the account of having to tend cattle.” Between June 7 and June 10, Pellerin and Trudeau both testified in the case. After hearing their testimony, on June 14, the Council interviewed Bontemps and Guillory one last time. Bontemp’s testimony revealed that he was a native of Natchez and that he ran away after stealing the money because of statements of Srs. de Boistlanc’s and du Manoir’s slaves, who had informed him that he would be hung for stealing.” Guillory stated that this was the second time he had run away, having attempted it the previous October, and that he was awaiting “punishment in preference to going back to Sr. Trudeau.” The Council found Bontemps guilty of aggravated desertion and robbery and Guillory guilty of desertion. The council ordered Bontemps to be “hanged and strangled” while Guillory was to be “flogged” and had to “attend Bontemps to the gallows.”

experiences in the territory. According to the *Manifeste*, once King Louis XV no longer claimed Louisiana, the territory “returned to itself, and it reenters upon its natural right, whereby, without its participation, one cannot trade either its liberty or its possession.” Because their initial sovereign ruler, France, had relinquished her authority, the authors reasoned, the people and their claims to the land could not be traded away without their permission. Instead, France’s surrender restored sovereignty to its “natural” possessors. The *Manifeste*, furthermore, asserted that “it is against the law of nature and of nations to expose men to the sad alternative either to recognize a power which they have not chosen for themselves or to strip themselves of their patrimonial goods, and to leave the place that saw them born.” The phrases used here are especially striking. “The place that saw them born” and “patrimonial goods” emphasized both rightful inheritance and supposed autochthony. In the rebels’ view, Spain had no natural right or authority to enter the territory; the settlers - those who were “born” upon the land and possessed of “patrimonial goods” - were the “natural” rulers. The settlers’ multi-generational experience of self-rule had made them, by 1768, patrimonial sovereigns.⁷²

***“Punish the Instigators”*: The Return of the Spanish**

For ten months, Louisiana was a de facto independent state, with the Superior Council governing the territory. During the ten months without an official Spanish presence in the colony, the Council heard and decided over three-hundred different cases ranging from complaints about bills of sale to suits against individuals, as well as lawsuits against enslaved people.⁷³ With the *Mémoire* circulating in France and Spain, the rebels waited for a response from the two imperial regimes. For the French, success in Louisiana had long been elusive, and

⁷² O’Neill, “The Louisiana Manifesto of 1768,” 279, 281.

⁷³ All the documents can be found online through the Louisiana Colonial Documents project at the Louisiana Historical Center. <https://louisianastatemuseum.org/louisiana-historical-center-colonial-documents>.

in the broader scheme of imperial rule, Louisiana simply acted as a middleman for New France and their Caribbean colonies. The French Crown first learned about the insurrection in January 1769 and entertained several ideas about how to respond, but one that gained great interest came from Comte Jean Baptiste d'Estaing, a French Naval officer who fought in the Seven Years' War. On March 10, 1769, d'Estaing wrote an account of the events that took place in Louisiana and shared his thoughts on how the French and Spanish should respond. D'Estaing suggested allowing Louisiana to exist as a semi-independent colony, where Louisiana would be responsible for domestic policy, but France and Spain would appoint commissioners to reside in New Orleans and direct foreign affairs. D'Estaing argued that this would rid the Spanish of the burden of governing a group of people who did not want to be under their rule while also serving as an ongoing buffer between the British-American colonies and northern Mexico. For France, it would allow them to avoid assuming financial and economic responsibility for the territory, which they could not afford following their losses in the Seven Years' War. D'Estaing also suggested that it would show the British-American colonies what it looked like to be free while also undermining the British empire.⁷⁴ Another idea presented to the Crown came from the naval officer, Marquis de Capellis. From the earliest days of colonization, the French wanted to control the whole island of Santo Domingo, and Capellis believed the insurrection gave France the opportunity to do just that. Capellis suggested that France recapture Louisiana and immediately return it to Spain in exchange for complete control over the island.⁷⁵

While several ideas presented the opportunity for France to regain control of Louisiana, the Crown ultimately decided not to act. On April 16, 1769, the Spanish king ordered Don

⁷⁴ Pierre Boule, "French Reactions to Louisiana Revolution of 1768," in John F. McDermott ed., *The French in the Mississippi Valley* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1965), 149.

⁷⁵ Boule, "French Reactions to Louisiana Revolution of 1768," in John F. McDermott ed., *The French in the Mississippi Valley*, 151.

Alejandro O'Reilly to gather a force for official occupation of the territory and to "make formal charges and punish according to the law the instigators and accomplices of the uprising which occurred in New Orleans."⁷⁶ On July 20, 1769, O'Reilly, an Irish immigrant who was second in command of the Spanish forces in Cuba during the Seven Years' War, left the Havana harbor with an army of 2,056 men, twenty-one ships with forty-six cannons, food and medical supplies, and 150,000 *pesos*. General O'Reilly chose the *Volante* as his flagship, which brought Ulloa to New Orleans in 1766 but had been in Havana since May 1769. One week later, on July 27, 1769, O'Reilly and his forces reached the outpost at Balize. Nicolas Chauvin de La Frénière, Pierre Marquis, and Joseph Milhet, three of the main conspirators of the insurrection, met O'Reilly there, and La Frénière quickly backpedaled: "The colony," he explained, "never had any intention of straying from the profound respect that it professes for the great monarch that Your Excellency represents."⁷⁷ Whether or not this would assuage the concerns of the Spanish government was yet to be determined. After the conversation, the three men left and returned to New Orleans, and on August 18, 1769, O'Reilly and his forces arrived in New Orleans. After formally taking control of Louisiana, O'Reilly ordered Aubry to report to him the events that took place ten months prior. Following their conversation, O'Reilly invited La Frénière, Pierre Hardi de Boisblanc, Balthasar Masan, Joseph Villeré, Pierre Marquis, Pierre Poupet, Joseph Petit, Pierre Caresse, Julien Jérôme Doucet, Jean Milhet, Joseph Milhet, and Jean-Baptise Noyan to his house where, upon their arrival, they were arrested and charged for the insurrection.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Letter from the Spanish King Charles III to Don Alexander O'Reilly, April 16, 1769, quoted in David Ker Texada, *Alejandro O'Reilly and the New Orleans Rebels* (Hammond: University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1970), 26.

⁷⁷ Quoted in Moore, *Revolt in Louisiana*, 196.

⁷⁸ Alejandro O'Reilly to Philip Aubry, August 19, 1769, Leg. 2542 Audiencia de Santo Domingo, Louisiana Documents from the Archivo General de Indias microfilm, MF 7, Williams Research Center, The Historic New Orleans Collection. Joseph Villeré was actually not present at O'Reilly's house. After receiving the invitation, Villeré died from causes that have still yet to be determined.

A few days following the arrests, the trial began. Alexander O'Reilly served as the judge, jury, and executioner. Aubry testified against the conspirators. He stated that he had learned of the insurrection four days prior to its beginning and informed Ulloa then. According to Aubry, Ulloa agreed to meet with the conspirators individually and hear out their complaints. Aubry then stated that the conspirators agreed to this, but when they arrived in New Orleans, they were armed with a militia. With only an army of one-hundred men, Ulloa had no choice but to leave for his own safety. Representing the Spanish in the trial was Felix Del Rey. Rey argued that all the men had committed treason and challenged the King's authority, which was punishable by death.⁷⁹

Following Aubry's statement, Rey began with an oral examination of the accused. Rey charged La Frénière with being the head of the rebellion and organizing the people against Ulloa and the Spanish government. La Frénière rejected the charges, stating that Ulloa left as a private citizen, not a governor. Rey accused Jean-Baptise Noyan of convincing the Superior Council to vote on the governor's ousting and persuading the Acadians to take up arms and march on New Orleans. Pierre Caresse faced charges of being the one who led the Acadians on their march into New Orleans. Rey then turned his attention to Joseph Milhet who he accused of inciting the merchants against Ulloa. Like La Frénière, all the men denounced the charges.

On October 24, 1769, almost a year to the day that the insurrection began, O'Reilly sentenced Nicolas Chauvin de La Frénière, Jean-Baptise Noyan, Pierre Caresse, Joseph Milhet, and Pierre Marquis to death. Pierre Hardi de Boisblanc, Balthasar Masan, and Jérôme Doucet received ten years in prison, and Pierre Poupet, Jean Milhet, and Pierre Hardi de Boisblanc received six years in prison. Due to his position as *commissaire-ordonateur* of French Louisiana,

⁷⁹ Moore, *Revolt in Louisiana*, 200-201.

O'Reilly ordered Denis Nicholas Foucault back to France, and the French government agreed to hold him in the Bastille where, after a three-day interrogation period, Foucault confessed to helping with the insurrection. The following day, Spanish soldiers armed their rifles and killed the five men sentenced to death by firing squad. A few months later, in January 1770, O'Reilly permitted Aubry to return to France. However, on his way home, his vessel sank at the mouth of the Garonne River, and he, like the convicted rebels, lost his life.⁸⁰

Conclusion

Planted into the ground of what is now the New Orleans Jazz Museum but was once the New Orleans United States Mint is a plaque that reads, "On Oct. 25, 1769, under Gen. O'Reilly, Spanish governor of Louisiana, were executed French patriots and martyrs: La Frénière, Marquis, Noyan, Caresse, Milhet; Villere having died previously." The Spirit of 76 Chapter of the Daughters of the Revolution dedicated the plaque to the event in 1955. There are two similar plaques located throughout the city. One is in Jackson Square, and the other is in La Frénière Park, the former home and plantation of Nicolas Chauvin de La Frénière. All three plaques have similar language, declaring the men as "patriots" and "martyrs."

As we have seen, the French insurrection of 1768 drew from principles similar to many of the rebellions that took place in what historians term the Age of Revolutions. In both Louisiana and the American colonies, the colonists were fed up with what they considered to be an abuse of power by both Spain and Great Britain. The French in particular allowed Louisiana and its inhabitants to live and govern themselves without hardly any intervention from the imperial government. Multiple generations of French settlers thus grew accustomed to self-rule and believed *their* colonizing of the land had endowed them with certain entitlements that could

⁸⁰ Moore, *Revolt in Louisiana*, 208-210.

not be stripped away so easily during an imperial transaction. After returning to Spain, Antonio de Ulloa wrote and recounted his version of the events that took place in New Orleans. In two sentences, Ulloa summed up how the French Creoles of Louisiana had come to view themselves: "It is necessary to point out that the inhabitants of that colony live in a kind of independence that is so general that when one is on his own property he looks upon himself as absolute lord, without subjection to nor obedience to the one in authority. From this is born the freedom which reigns among them to do whatever strikes their fancy, and they treat their superior, whom they recognize as such in name only, with little respect."⁸¹ Few contemporaries could have captured the rebels' sense of settler entitlement much better.

⁸¹ Don Antonio de Ulloa's Account of the 1768 Revolt as quoted in R. E. Chandler, "Ulloa's Account of the 1768 Revolt," *Louisiana History* 27, no. 4 (Autumn 1986): 411.