

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

The Colbert Report

It didn't take long for Stephen Colbert, the "fake" senior correspondent on Comedy Central's "The Daily Show with Jon Stewart" to become a "fake" pundit with his own popular show. But this humorist (who yearned to be "an attractive vessel through which the river of truth can flow") would be thrilled with the river of facts that follows.

The French explorer René Robert Cavalier, Sieur de La Salle, and his men descended from the Great Lakes, making a stop on March 31, 1682, at *Maheoula*, a Tangipahoa Indian settlement. According to Henri de Tonti's account of this village as being twenty leagues from the western channel of the mouth of the Mississippi, it must have been close to the present location of New Orleans.

On April 9, 1682, La Salle and Tonti (at a point not far downstream) erected a cross with a column bearing the arms of France and an inscription claiming the territory in the name of "*Louis Le Grand, Roi de France et Navarre*". According to notary for the expedition, Jacques de Metairie, their party "chanted the *Te Deum*, the *Exaudiat*, the *Domine Salvum fac Regem*" and "after a salute of fire-arms" cried out "*Vive le Roi*". In a strange twist, Metairie was actually there before New Orleans.

La Salle and Tonti claimed the entire Mississippi River Valley for France. They called the vast new land they discovered *La Louisiane* for the Sun King, and named the huge "Father of Waters" the *Colbert River* for Jean-Baptiste Colbert.

It had other names, like *Misi-zibi* and *Gichi-zibi* (Ojibwe for "great river" and "big river"), *Missi Sepe* (Algonquin for "great river"), and *Messipi* (Father Claude Allouez's account). Variations included (according to historian Charles L. "Pie" Dufour) *Meschacébe*, *Malbanchia* and the unfortunate *Michipissy*. The Spanish called it the *Río del Espíritu Santo* ("River of the Holy Spirit") and later *Palizada* for the mud formations at its mouth. French explorers Louis Joliet and

Jacques Marquette knew it by the Sioux name *Ne Tongo* (also "big river"). Father Marquette proposed *River of the Immaculate Conception*. But why the *Colbert River*?

Jean-Baptiste Colbert (1619-1683) served Louis XIV as France's Minister of Finance and Minister of the Marine. Under the *ancien régime*, he was one of the Secretaries of State entrusted with control of the French Navy and France's colonies overseas. He came into the king's favor upon the death of Cardinal Mazarin in 1661 by uncovering the location of some of Mazarin's hidden assets. He advanced even further by exposing Nicolas Fouquet as the most rampant of royal embezzlers. Colbert went from the position of Superintendent of Buildings in 1664 to Controller-General of Finances the following year. He became head of the Navy in 1669 and gained appointments as Minister of Commerce, of the Colonies and of the Palace. He gained control of every department short of War.

Colbert was a most capable and ingenious minister, doubling France's revenue in ten years. He worked relentlessly to improve French manufacturing and to create a favorable trade balance. He was a proponent of mercantilism by deftly managing imports and exports through the use of subsidies and tariffs. He worked on internal improvements and strengthened foreign markets through the French East India Company. Minister Colbert even founded a French merchant marine.

But despite his hard work, Louis managed to spend much more than Colbert could save. The Palace of Versailles is reputed to have cost two full years of revenues, and years of extravagant wars also took their toll. And all the king's mistresses, they had their needs.

Colbert's policies, however, kept industry firmly in the hands a certain privileged *bourgeoisie*, greatly discouraging improvement, and the lower classes suffered. His tariffs protected commerce with draconian restrictions. Some 16,000 small entrepreneurs were executed for simply importing or manufacturing cotton cloth in violation of French law.

Aside from these harsh measures, Colbert took a deep interest in literature, science and art. The master of a fine and valuable library, he founded the Academy of Sciences, the Paris Observatory, the French Academy at Rome (and at Soissons, Nimes, Arles and other towns) and the Academies of Inscriptions and Medals, of Architecture and of Music. He reorganized the Academy of Painting and Sculpture and endowed the *Louvre* with countless works of art. To dramatists like Molière and Racine he offered pensions.

As for the Sun King's enormous national debt, (according to John Chase) "Colbert recommended bankruptcy, and died." It wasn't a

comfortable death. Kidney stones were causing him considerable stomach pain and writhing agony. Bedridden, he died four days after his sixty-ninth birthday. Colbert's son and namesake (Jean-Baptiste Antoine Colbert, Marquis de Seignelay) succeeded his father as Secretary of the Navy (from 1683-1690), while his other son Jacques-Nicolas became Archbishop of Rouen.

After Seignelay's stint as Minister of the Marine, Louis Phélypeaux, Comte de Pontchartrain, Comte de Maurepas, took over that post. He was Chancellor of France (1699-1714) and Controller-General of Finances (*Contrôleur général des finances*) under Louis XIV just like Colbert. He didn't rate a river, but Lake Pontchartrain and Lake Maurepas are each named for him.

From 1848-1956, six ships of the French Navy (from a steam corvette to a missile cruiser) were named for Colbert. The Native American name *Mississippi* for New Orleans' "big river" prevailed over *Colbert*, but local folk have honored the workaholic finance minister with a Colbert Street out in Lakeview not far from his big spending king, Louis XIV.

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