

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Bienville, An Intimate Portrait

Which Louisiana governor had a serpent tattooed on his body, a personal assistant named "*Bon Temps*" and once had his eyes on a beautiful Cadillac? If you answered Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne, Sieur de Bienville, you'd be correct. But how, you may ask, can that be?

Jean Baptiste Le Moyne, Sieur de Bienville (February 23, 1680 – March 7, 1767), was the son of Charles Le Moyne (born near Dieppe) and Catherine Thierry Primot (born in Rouen, both cities in Normandy). Charles Le Moyne (once an indentured servant to the Jesuits) established his family in the settlement of Ville-Marie (present day Montréal) at an early age and fathered quite a large family.



Bienville, Founding Father of Louisiana

We know of Bienville, born in Montréal, Québec, Canada, as the founder of New Orleans, Louisiana, and co-founder of Mobile, Alabama. One of fourteen children and younger brother of explorer Pierre Le Moyne, Sieur d'Iberville, Bienville was an early governor of French Colonial Louisiana (serving multiple times during the years 1701-1743). He also boldly turned around an English ship at English Turn, in perhaps the most famous, yet consequential bluff, in Louisiana history. But what more do we know about this French-Canadian colonizer and founder of New Orleans?

After studying at the Sulpician Seminary in Montréal, he began his career at the very young age of twelve, entering the French Navy as a midshipman. He first served under the command of his older brother, Iberville, at Newfoundland and at Hudson Bay during the War of the Grand Alliance, also known as the Nine Years' War (1688 - 1697). It was a major war between King Louis XIV of France, and a European-wide coalition led by the Anglo-Dutch King William III and his allies. King William's War was the conflict's name in America, fought between English and French settlers and their respective Indian allies in colonial North America.

After that service, Bienville joined his brother in an expedition to the Gulf of Mexico, where in April 1699 (after discovering the Chandeleur Islands, Cat Island and Ship Island) the brothers established the first Louisiana settlement, Fort Maurepas, at present-day Ocean Springs, Mississippi. Iberville appointed Sauvolle de la Villanry governor, and Bienville as lieutenant and second in command.

Iberville departed, but (upon hearing of his younger brother's exploits with the British) commanded Bienville to establish a settlement upriver on the Mississippi. First called *Fort Mississippi* by Iberville, this fortification later became known as *Fort de la Boulaye*. Begun in 1699 or 1700, nothing remains today. Phoenix is the nearest village, about ten miles from the end of the road on the East bank in Plaquemines Parish, near *Pointe à la Hache*.

Sauvolle died in 1701, and Bienville ascended to the governorship of the new territory for the first of four terms. A mere 180 persons remained in the fledgling colony, the remainder having perished from disease and malnutrition. And there were Native Americans to contend with - and politics. Bienville would serve as governor for a total of thirty years.

Iberville also recommended that Bienville move the majority of the French settlers to a new settlement on the west side of the Mobile River, *Fort Louis de La Louisiane*, the site of Old Mobile from 1702-

1711 (after which it was moved to present-day Mobile). Bienville also created a nearby deep water port on Dauphin Island.

In 1712 (when the wealthy financier Antoine Crozat took charge of the Louisiana colony by royal appointment), Bienville hoped to become governor, but was passed over in favor of La Mothe-Cadillac. Antoine Laumet, dit de La Mothe, Sieur de Cadillac (March 5, 1658 – October 16, 1730) was the French explorer who in 1701 founded *Fort Pontchartrain du Détroit*, later to become the city of Detroit, which he was in command of until 1710.

Historian Peter Joseph Hamilton (1859 – 1927) has written on Bienville's "private life", revealing a "warm October day in 1713," with Bienville seated "on his front gallerie at Mobile writing a letter." We are told that Bienville is a "clean shaven man of thirty-three years" with his black servant near at hand. And yes, in fact, the servant's name (we are told) was "*Bon Temps*".



This 1713 letter, written by Bienville to his oldest brother, contained "mingled feelings" with regard "to that first Fort Louis, the beginning of the French settlement of the Mississippi Valley, the foundation of the State, Church, Family and of Industry in Louisiana." Also coming to mind was the year 1704 and the arrival of the ship *Pélican*, which delivered twenty-three French women to the colony, as well as yellow fever the passengers had picked up in Havana. His own brother, Iberville, had died of yellow fever in Havana some two years later.

In the letter, Bienville wrote that he "owed no debts" and talked about "the snarling Cadillac". But he also confided a deeper secret to his brother. Governor Cadillac, it seems, "had a grown daughter of great attractions" and that Bienville "had been for a year desirous of marrying her, if the Baron and his wife did not object, but he could do so only if the father was recalled," which Bienville "thought not unlikely, for he says he is himself in official favor again. 'The minister Pontchartrain' he says, 'continually gives me the holy water of the court.'"

Bienville never got his beautiful Cadillac, the Mademoiselle Marie-Madeleine de La Mothe. History does not record whether he ever proposed to her, although in his letter he "naively admits that he had not yet mentioned marriage to the lady." *The Dictionary of Canadian Biography* offers a different account: "According to Bienville, ... he

offended Cadillac by refusing to marry his daughter, Marie-Madeleine". We do know, however, that he remained a bachelor his entire life.

In 1716, Bienville established Fort Rosalie on the site of what was to become Natchez, Mississippi. Governor Cadillac did not last long in office due to mismanagement and not growing the colony. He was recalled to France in 1716. Bienville returned to office in 1717 with the title of commander general, while the Louisiana monopoly had gone to the John Law's Company of the West. Bienville had written to its directors in 1717 of the crescent location on the Mississippi River, and permission was granted to build a city. The following year, 1718, he founded the city of New Orleans adjacent to the trading route and *portage* between the Mississippi and Lake Pontchartrain via Bayou St. John. In 1721, Adrien Pauger drew up the plans for the rectangle now known as the French Quarter, or *Vieux Carré*. After moving into his new residence on the site of what is now the Custom House, Bienville named his new city *La Nouvelle-Orléans* to honor Philippe II, duc d'Orléans, France's Prince Regent. New Orleans became the capital of French Louisiana in August 1722, during Bienville's third term, and the cornerstone of French colonial trade and colonization.

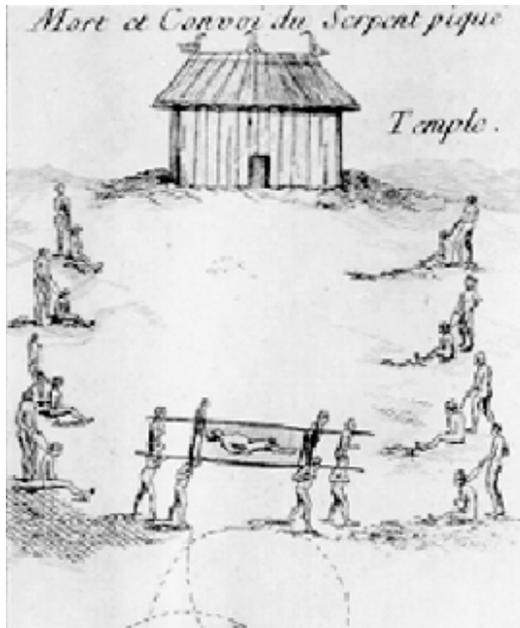
John Law's bubble burst, and Bienville was now on bad terms with the administrators of the Company of the Indies. In 1725 he was recalled to France (a country with which he was barely familiar). He left the colony in the command of Pierré Dugué de Boisbriant, succeeded by Étienne Périer. Bienville resumed his post as Governor of Louisiana in 1733. This final term in office would be one of conflict with the Indians, as relations with the Chickasaw tribe had deteriorated badly.

Dealing with the Native American tribes had always been Bienville's forte. He had earned the reputation of being knowledgeable of and communicating with the natives, and he even mastered their language (called *mobilien*). He was the only governor of a colony in New France to be able converse with the Indians without an interpreter. To solidify his personal rapport with the Natchez Indians, Bienville even had himself tattooed with a serpent, which coiled around his body.



The Indian tribes (in seeking trade with the Europeans) developed pro-English and pro-French factions among their villages. The Natchez

also developed these factions. The Great Sun and Tattooed Serpent leaders lived in the Grand Village of the Natchez and were generally friendly toward the French. Tattooed Serpent, the name of the Natchez war chief who died in 1725, was a great friend of the French. His funeral procession (shown below) was witnessed by naturalist, historian and ethnographer, Antoine-Simon Le Page du Pratz.



The Massacre at Fort Rosalie in 1729 was led by a more pro-English Natchez Indian faction, White Apple, which occurred after the death of Tattooed Serpent. Some 230 colonists were slaughtered overall.

After Bienville's return as governor in 1733, he began a policy of building fortifications and, in two campaigns, 1736 and 1739-1740, led expeditions against the Chickasaw Indians. Without ever achieving their defeat, Bienville entered into a peace treaty in April 1740. After that, Bienville requested to be relieved as governor.

While waiting for his replacement to arrive, Bienville helped establish Charity Hospital in New Orleans, endowed by a sailor named Jean Louis. He also administered relief after two hurricanes hit the Gulf Coast in the fall of 1740. Bienville retired when the new governor arrived in 1743, and he sailed back to Paris where he lived until his death in 1767. That did not keep him from protesting unsuccessfully against the ceding of his beloved Louisiana colony from France to Spain in the secret Treaty of Fontainebleau in 1762.

In Bienville's will he declared that he wished "to live and die in the bosom of the church, imploring the pity of God and of the Saviour and asking the protection of the Holy Virgin, the Mother of God, of Saint John the Baptist, his patron saint, and of all the other saints in Paradise." His brothers and sister were all dead, but he provided for their children handsomely.

Peter Joseph Hamilton wrote in *The Private Life of Jean Baptiste Le Moyne Sieur de Bienville* that Bienville's simple headstone in Paris "was not to outlive the Prussians and the Commune, and his only epitaph is the church record of his death and burial. If one seeks his monument, it is the great country which he colonized." It is Louisiana and the great cities he helped begin. To this man we all owe an immeasurable debt.

That being said, there is absolutely no truth to the story that Bienville's servant "*Bon Temps*" once told his master:

"This is how I roll, *Monsieur!*"

(resulting in the phrase "*Laissez Les Bon Temps Roulez*", or "Let the Good Times Roll".

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