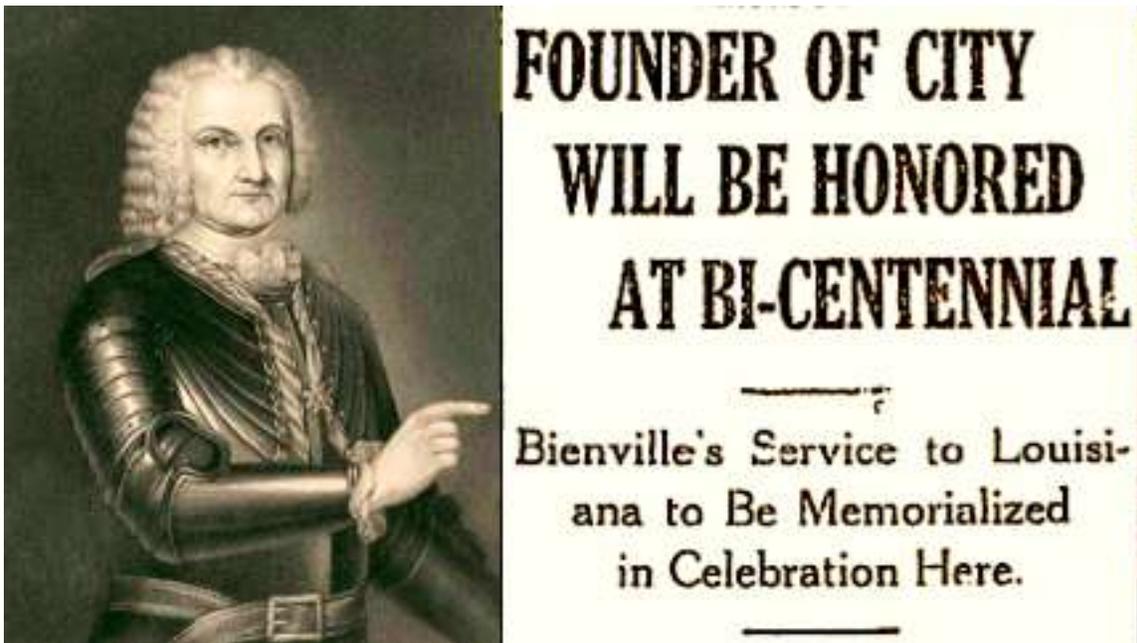


The Bienville Bi-Centennial

As New Orleans prepares for its historic tri-centennial celebration, I thought it might be of interest to explore just what happened a century ago, when New Orleans was eagerly making plans for its 200th anniversary of the founding of the Crescent City. Not everything went according to plan.

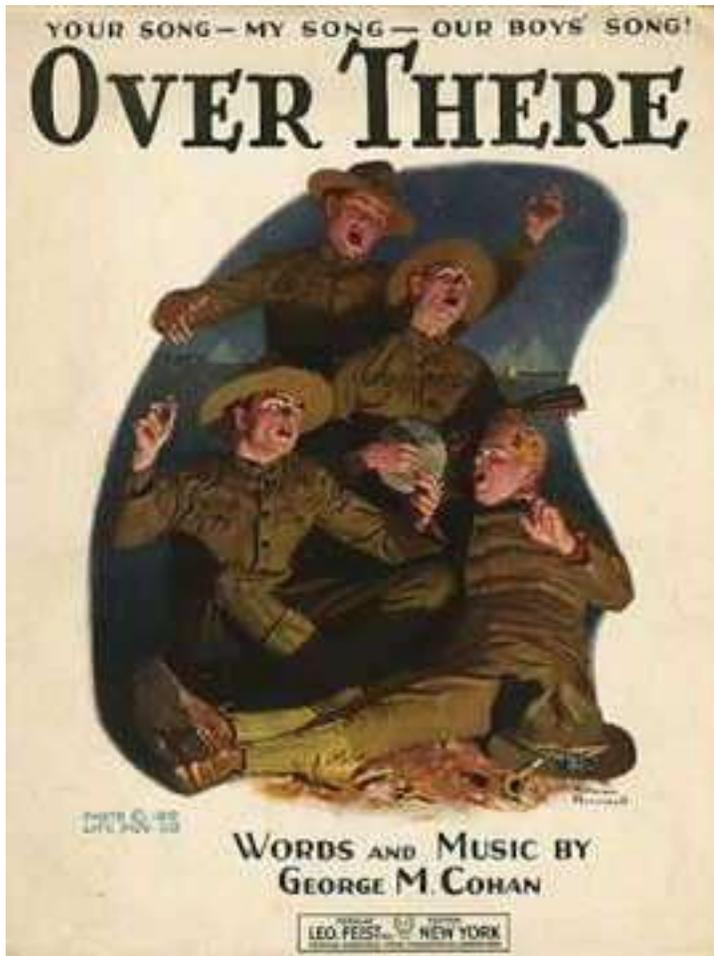
On April 1, 1917, the *Times-Picayune* announced that the upcoming bi-centennial would be a "belated tribute" to the city's founder, Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne, Sieur de Bienville. "When he was a power," the paper stated, "he made it capital of half the world, ... the center of international trade, and its fame was the toast of princes."



Times-Picayune, April 1, 1917

Bienville was to be the central focus of this novel commemoration, with a program formulated largely by the recommendations of Thomas Payne Thompson, eminent civic leader, authority on Louisiana history and chairman of the executive committee. A "cornerstone of a statue to the genius of the spirit of the metropolis" was to be laid at City Park. "Bienville was single-minded in his purpose and his foresight was prophetic," the paper continued, and "The Louisiana of that formative period was an unchartered fairyland of opportunity."

Like all fairylands, there were challenges along the way, and soon the bi-centennial celebration itself was going to face dark clouds ahead. The very next day after the above announcement, on April 2, 1917, President Woodrow Wilson appeared before Congress and called for a declaration of war against Germany. Four days after that, his request was granted and Americans – many from New Orleans – would be going “Over There.”



Americans enter World War I, April 6, 1917

Beginning on October 24 and 25, 1917, there was a bi-centennial celebration across the submarine patrolled Atlantic in France at the Sorbonne lecture hall at the University of Paris. André Lafargue, president of *l'Union Francais*, *L'Athenee Louisianais* and past editor of *L'Abeille de la Nouvelle Orléans* (The New Orleans Bee), a French daily newspaper, represented the city in Paris for the festivities. Other members of the New Orleans delegation were Paul Villeré, great-grandson of Governor Jacques Philippe Villeré, who was governor of

Louisiana when New Orleans experienced its first centennial, as well as T. P. Thompson and H. Generes Dufour. The impressive ceremonies were held before an enthusiastic and well-attended assembly. "The *Marseillaise*," "The Star Spangled Banner" and "Dixie" were sung by Mme. Vallandri and Abby Richardson of the *Paris Opera Comique*, draped artistically in red, white and blue, colors of both France and the United States.

Meanwhile, back in the states:

Because of World War I, Mardi Gras parades were cancelled in 1918, the bi-centennial year, but according to *The New Orleans States*, on October 11, 1917, "a limited carnival proclamation will permit promiscuous masking, Feb. 10 and Feb. 11." Just how "promiscuous" the masking could be, the paper did not elaborate.

The other bi-centennial events were planned for February 9th, 10th and 11th of 1918. Those dates were chosen because, according to historical records, "Bienville brought soldiers, nobles, traders and scholars with him on the brigantine Neptune when he landed as governor at the head of Hospital Street February 9, 1718, creating a cosmopolitan community which has possessed that distinctive characteristic ever since." So explained the *Picayune* on April 1, 1917; and Hospital Street is today Governor Nicholls Street.



"*Veüe et Perspective de la Nouvelle Orléans*," 1726, Jean-Pierre Lassus

The February event schedule was as follows:

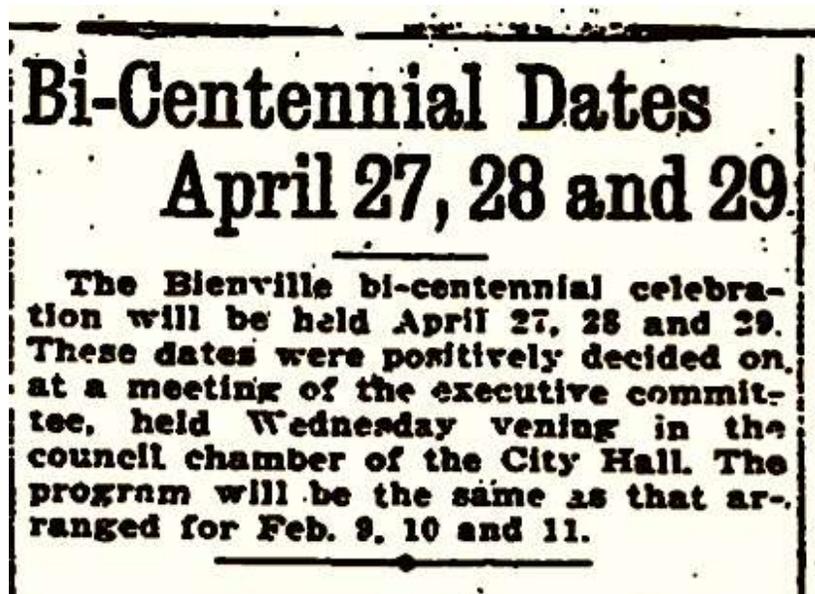
Saturday, February 9th was to begin with a 200 gun salute with cathedral chimes to ring every two hours. There was to be a reception in Mayor Martin Behrman's parlor, a military procession and drill with founding ceremonies at the *Place d'Armes* (Jackson Square). Featured

addresses would be made by the mayor, as well as by Governor Ruffin Pleasant. After other speeches, lyric poems and fireworks at the head of Canal Street, the "proclamation of limited Carnival freedom" was to be issued.

The next day, Sunday, February 10th was to be a formal re-opening of the St. Louis Cathedral with blessing. After a military high mass, there was to be an open-air oration by Archbishop Touchet. The mass was to be celebrated by Cardinal Gibbons with the benediction by the Archbishop of Québec. A special river ride was planned for the special guests.

Monday, February 11th was scheduled as the "re-dedication of City Park as Bienville Park," reported *The New Orleans States*, "with President Wilson" delivering an address on the "unveiling of new name gate." The distinguished French Ambassador to the United States, Jean Jules Jusserand, was also to be on hand for the memorable event.

Almost all of these planned activities had to be postponed until April because of the war and because the renovation of the Cathedral would not be ready until April.



Bi-Centennial Dates
April 27, 28 and 29.

The Bienville bi-centennial celebration will be held April 27, 28 and 29. These dates were positively decided on at a meeting of the executive committee, held Wednesday evening in the council chamber of the City Hall. The program will be the same as that arranged for Feb. 9, 10 and 11.

And then in March 1918 an article in the *Times-Picayune* announced that the "celebration set for the latter part of April was postponed until after the war." But as the end of 1918 approached, new plans were announced in the *Picayune* on December 13, 1918, that "December 20 was the day that rightfully should have been celebrated all along. The

city may have been thought of as early as February, 1718," said the paper, "but December 20, 1718, was the day on which the actual founding took place."

Actually, Bienville had this location in mind for some time. Native Americans had revealed the spot on the Mississippi River where a natural bayou (later called Bayou St. John) provided relatively easy access between the River and Lake Pontchartrain and the Gulf Coast. A short portage completed the journey.

It was announced that for the December celebration, the mayor, the governor, the French Consul, D. H. Theard and U. Marinoni, Jr., were to be among the speakers at the Cabildo, with Archbishop Shaw delivering the invocation. "The Coming of Bienville," an original poem was to be read by Mrs. Lilita Lever Young and the musical features were to be under the direction of Mrs. Christian Schertz. President Wilson was never able to attend the bi-centennial celebrations, nor did Ambassador Jusserand, and the "Bienville Park" naming ceremony never took place as originally envisioned.

Eventually an "Historical Pageant" was staged at the Fair Grounds in April 1920, including 5,000 public school children covering two centuries of Louisiana history. According to an article in the *Times-Picayune*, it including "marches, music and tableaux," and the following figures were represented: "Bienville, the founder of the city; Delatour, who laid it off; Governors Chateaugue, Ulloa ... O'Reilly, Claiborne and Villere ... Lafreniere the patriot, Pere Antoine, Bishop Dubourg, Lafitte the pirate, and all the many races, white, red and black that gathered at the mouth of the Mississippi during the last two centuries."

Just when was the city founded, February 9, 1718, December 20, 1718 or May 7, 1718 (the oft-quoted yet undocumented date listed as the city's founding date in Wikipedia)? Here's what we do know: Bienville and his men began clearing the land between mid-March 1718, and by the end of May the "city" had a few meager palmetto huts. It was named *La Nouvelle Orléans* in honor of the French Regent, Philippe, Duc d'Orléans, whose title came from the French city of Orléans.

The *New Orleans Item* reported on April 28, 1918, that the city of Orléans in France, home of Joan of Arc, the Maid of Orléans, had written a very nice letter of birthday greetings to its younger counterpart. The Mayor of Orléans, Monsieur Fernand Rabier, informed the city of New Orleans that it was his city's sincere intention

to send a representative to New Orleans' bi-centennial, but couldn't because of the war.

**Granny Orleans, Home of
Joan of Arc, Sends Best
Birthday Wishes To N. O.**

Granny Orléans wishes New Orleans a Happy 200th Birthday

When war conditions necessitated abandoning so many big plans for the bi-centennial, simple programs were substituted by the city and the Louisiana Historical Society.

One of the few plans that was implemented was the striking and distribution of commemorative bronze medals in honor of the bi-centennial anniversary of the city to a few prominent officials and to universities and historical societies of the United States and Canada. Noted Louisiana historian Grace King headed up the medal committee, composed of Charles Hamilton and artist Ellsworth Woodward (the medal's designer).

The other, and most lasting, result of the city's bi-centennial was the city's municipal flag. A Citizen's Flag Committee held a competition to come up with just the right representative banner, and almost 400 people offered their designs. The winning crimson, white, and blue flag emblazoned with three gold *fleurs-de-lis* combined one entrant's suggested color scheme with decorative elements from another. Engraver Bernard Barry came up with the color choices. The *fleurs-de-lis* design, symbolic of the city's French heritage, was the proposal by Gustave Couret. Gold medals were presented to these two men who shared the honor of designing the official flag. Chairman of the flag committee was W. J. Waguespack.

The flag was approved by the City Council in January and was hoisted over City Hall (Gallier Hall) on February 9, 1918.

France, who witnessed the city's birth in colonial times, and the United States were allies in a great World War, back then in 1918. And that war certainly did disrupt the best laid plans of the New Orleans citizenry to celebrate its 200th birthday.



New Orleans' official flag flies proudly from a French Quarter balcony

NED HÉMARD

New Orleans Nostalgia
"The Bienville Bi-Centennial"
Ned Hémard
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