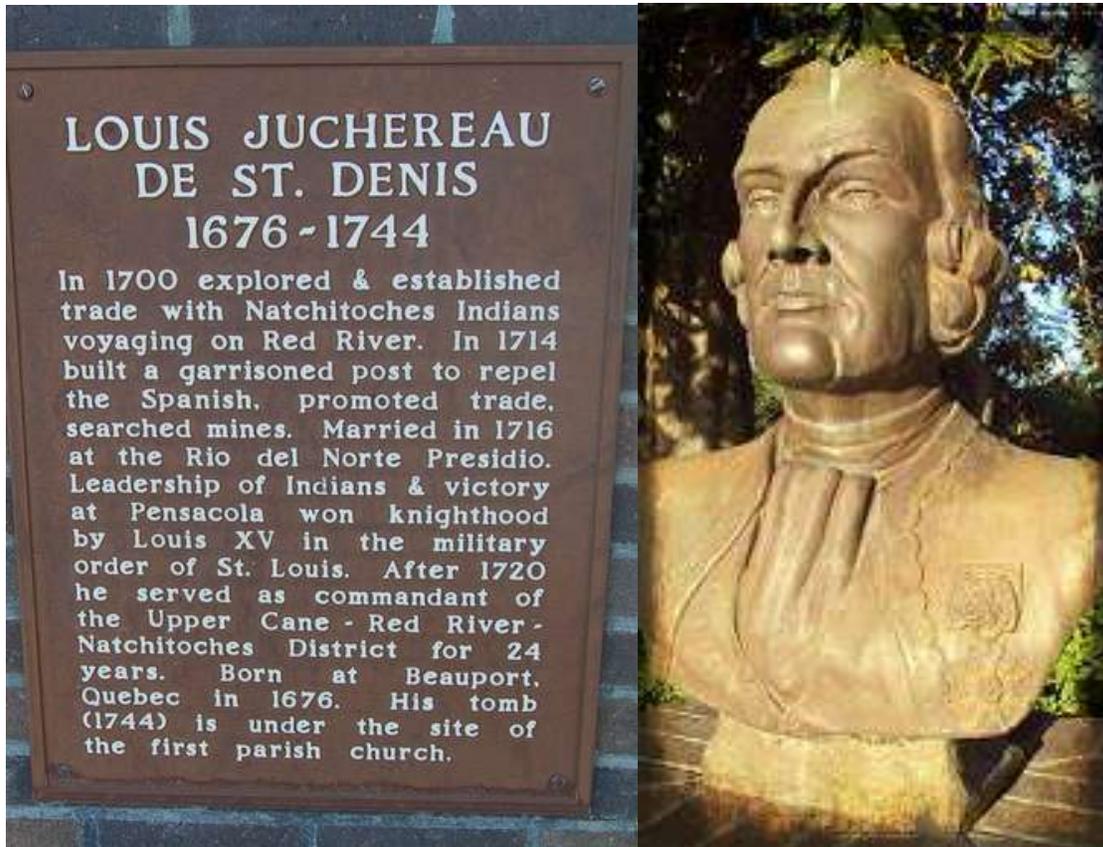


## Fort de la Boulaye Was First

Many people are unaware that New Orleans is not the oldest city in Louisiana. The small city of Natchitoches, established in 1714 by French explorer and trader Louis Juchereau de St. Denis as part of French Louisiana, is in fact the oldest permanent European settlement within the borders of the 1803 Louisiana Purchase.



*Historical marker and bust of Juchereau de St. Denis in Natchitoches*

“Permanent” is the operative word here, for the earliest European settlement in present-day Louisiana was Fort de la Boulaye. The actual site was declared a National Historic Landmark back in 1960 to commemorate French colonization of the area. The state of Louisiana had earlier (in 1950) erected an historical marker, which read:

### *FORT de la BOULAYE*

*First white settlement in present-day Louisiana, erected by Bienville in 1699 on this spot (then the bank of the Mississippi), prevented Britain's seizure of the Mississippi Valley.*

After Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne, Sieur de Bienville, bluffed the English and persuaded them to turn around at English Turn, his brother Iberville ordered him to establish a settlement along the Mississippi River at the first solid ground he could find. Fifty miles upriver, Bienville did just that. Bienville and his men founded *Fort du Mississippi*, begun in 1699 and completed in 1700, in what is now Plaquemines Parish, Louisiana, on a low ridge a little more than one kilometer from the shore of the river, on the east bank, and about twenty kilometers south of the future city of New Orleans. It was essentially a wood stockade with a two story 28-foot square log blockhouse manned by six cannon and a garrison of 18 men, designed to protect the region from attacks and incursions by the Spanish from the west and English from the east.

The fort was renamed Fort de la Boulaye, taking its name from a small village in the *Saône-et-Loire* department in the region of *Bourgogne* (Burgundy) in eastern France. La Boulaye has a present-day population of approximately 120 persons. Bienville was first put in charge of the fort, but it would later be under the command of Louis Juchereau de St. Denis before he established the settlement at Natchitoches.



*Eglise Sainte Madeleine in La Boulaye, Saône-et-Loire, Bourgogne, France*

Named after the indigenous Native American people, Natchitoches endured as a vital colonial outpost during the French, Spanish and American periods in Louisiana history. This strategic outpost on the Red River was established in order to prevent the Spanish in Mexico from advancing farther into French Louisiana.

In the case of Fort de la Boulaye, Iberville described it in a letter. Constructed of long, squared cypress logs, the settlement consisted of a half dozen buildings, which was surrounded by a moat. It also included a cemetery. As for the fort's location, it was an extremely poor choice.



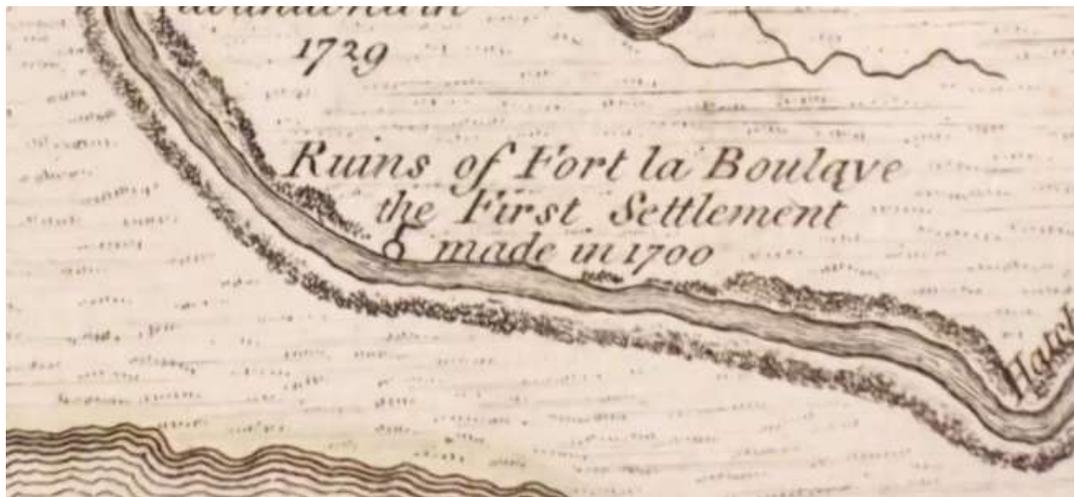
*Site of Fort de la Boulaye today, about one mile north of the small community of Phoenix, Plaquemines Parish, Louisiana*

The fort was abandoned in 1707 when the Caddoan Indian tribe, increasingly hostile to the presence of encroaching soldiers, forced the French at Fort de la Boulaye to leave the fort and go to the French settlement of Biloxi. Only St. Denis, friend of the Caddo, was allowed to continue occupying the fort and operated it as a trading post until 1711. Flooding of the site was also a problem. From time to time, garrisons of French troops visited the fort. In 1714, St. Denis was

given a new assignment, to defend the western boundaries of New France. It was with that goal that Natchitoches was founded.

In the early years of the 20th century, the exact location of Fort de la Boulaye had been largely forgotten. But in 1923, when landowner State Senator Joseph Gravolet was dredging a canal on his property, he excavated some massive hand-hewn cypress timbers - 92 of them in all. They represented what remained of the fort's foundation. All of the timbers were burned, except for two short sections. And a single cannonball was recovered in 1936.

In 2016, Plaquemines Parish historian James Madere revealed that the State's old historical marker had been largely hidden away beneath a stairwell in an abandoned building ten years previously. He made the decision that it was time to return the marker to the landowners so it could be accurately placed on the original site.



Today, under a dense cover of trees and brush and located on a low ridge surrounded by reclaimed marshland, no above-ground evidence of the fort is readily apparent. The settlement site lies nearly one mile east of the present channel of the Mississippi River, and is bisected by the Gravolet canal, mentioned earlier. The historical marker has been positioned on the site, but access is not without difficulty.

Yet that is where New Orleans' founder, Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne, Sieur de Bienville, under orders from his brother Iberville, erected the first European settlement in what is now Louisiana - almost two decades before New Orleans.



*Historical marker now back at the site of the "Old Fort"*

## **NED HÉMARD**

New Orleans Nostalgia  
"Fort de la Boulaye Was First"  
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