

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*

*By Ned Hémard*

### Ten Flags Over Louisiana

New Orleans and Louisiana have been pretty important throughout the years of American history. Thomas Jefferson (the Louisiana Purchaser) considered New Orleans the "one single spot ... through which the produce of three-eighths of our territory must pass to market." Napoleon Bonaparte (the Seller) said, "The nation that controls New Orleans and the mouth of the Mississippi will control the destiny of North America."

That's one of the reasons that so many New Orleanians were understandably irked by comments after Hurricane Katrina: "Why would anyone build there, below sea level?" or "Why should our tax dollars pay to help them?" Dennis Hastert, Speaker of the House at the time, expressed his doubts about federal funds toward rebuilding after the storm. The truth is that Katrina sent less of a flood surge into Lake Pontchartrain than previous hurricanes. It was levee failure that flooded the city, and (since the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has maintained that system since the Mississippi River Flood of 1927) the federal government was responsible. And then there are Louisiana's offshore oil leases which create billions of dollars in revenues for the federal government, more than adequate to restore wetlands and upgrade levee and flood control for South Louisiana to withstand category 5 storms. Yes, the state of Louisiana and its resources are vitally important to the nation, as is New Orleans as a major port and city. Perhaps, that is reason ten flags have flown over the Pelican State.

Why does so much of our national history center on the puritans in Massachusetts? Louisiana had far and away more geopolitical action going on. The Southern states were much fought over by vying nations. Texas had six flags. Our other neighbor to the east, Mississippi, had eight. Florida had five nations' flags flying, while some scholars insist sixteen or more flags flew over that state. Most were simply variations over time. But Louisiana had a strong ten!

Back when I was studying history at Tulane, my professor was the much loved historian and author, Charles "Pie" Dufour, who wrote our aptly titled textbook on Louisiana history: *Ten Flags in the Wind: The story of Louisiana*. As for the story of Louisiana's ten flags, let him begin the narrative:

"Ten flags have flown over Louisiana.



From Louisiana Secretary of State's *A Brief History of Louisiana*

The first standard bore the crenelated towers of Castile and the rampant lions of León and was carried through the wilderness by the relentless Spanish seekers of gold.

Then came the explorers of Louis XIV, who planted the lilies of the Sun King on the banks of the Mississippi. The white flag of Bourbon France, with its golden fleurs-de-lis, whipped for nearly seven decades in the breezes of the Gulf of Mexico before Louis XV bestowed Louisiana upon his cousin of Spain, Charles III."

Professor Dufour went on to briefly describe the remainder of the flags, the "thirty-four years Bourbon Spain's red and yellow banner with the arms of Castile and León flew over Louisiana" and the time "the flag of England floated over the bluffs of Baton Rouge". Spanish Governor Bernardo de Gálvez would drive the British out during the time of the American Revolutionary War. On November 30, 1803, the Spanish flag came down and the *tricolore* of the French Republic went up, but twenty days later the American flag was raised over the Place d'Armes

(now Jackson Square), "completing history's greatest real estate transaction, the Louisiana Purchase".

The seventh flag (from September-December 1810) was the Bonnie Blue Flag of West Florida "that bears a single star!" It was born when American settlers siezed Baton Rouge from the Spanish and came to an end when President James Madison annexed the Florida parishes "to the Territory of Orleans barely a month later".

In 1861, Louisiana seceded from the Union to become a sovereign and independent power. The state's standard was the Pelican flag, a blue banner with the mother pelican feeding its young. This was the traditional state flag, but a new flag replaced it after several weeks (one with "thirteen blue, white, and red stripes, with a lone yellow star in a red field").

In addition to Louisiana's two state flags, the Confederate flag flew over the state beginning in March 1861. But it is not the Confederate flag most people think of today, bearing the star-studded blue saltire of St. Andrew (the x-shaped St. Andrew's cross) on a red background. It was the "Stars and Bars", consisting of three broad stripes (red-white-red with a blue field with a circle of seven stars (the first states to secede)).

And now, a little more explanation on these ten historic flags. The Spaniards arrived in Louisiana more than a century and a half before LaSalle when Alonso Álvarez de Pineda commanded an expedition that sailed along the Gulf of Mexico coastline from Florida to Cabo Rojo, Mexico, in 1519. He and his men may have been the first Europeans to discover the Mississippi when they came upon the mouth of a great river. The Spanish flag at that time was the same as the one carried by Christopher Columbus when he first set foot in the New World. Since Spain had no truly national flag back then, the Castle (Castile) and Lion (León) flag of Isabella, Queen of Castile and León, and her husband, Ferdinand II of Aragon, was recognized as the flag of the country. Cabeza de Vaca and his three companions, remnants of the Pánfilo de Narváez expedition from Florida in 1528 traversed parts of Louisiana and may also have seen the Mississippi. Spanish explorer Hernando de Soto reached the Mississippi River on May 8, 1541, and sailed twenty miles up the river. He crossed the mighty river near present-day Memphis, Tennessee. He and his men continued their travels westward through modern-day Arkansas, Oklahoma and Texas. He died a year later of a semi-tropical fever and was buried along the western banks of the great river (in either Louisiana or Arkansas), but all of these Spanish visitors were merely transient travelers. The French were more serious about staking a claim to territory.

Frenchman René-Robert Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle traveled from the Great Lakes down the Mississippi to the Gulf of Mexico. Arriving in

present-day Louisiana, he named the territory "*La Louisiane*" for the reigning French monarch, Louis XIV, on April 9, 1682. It was there near modern Venice, Louisiana, that La Salle buried an engraved plate and a cross on Louisiana soil, claiming the territory for France. This event was recorded by notary Jacques de la Métairie with La Salle's chief lieutenant Henri de Tonti witnessing this historic moment.



*La Salle annexes Louisiana in 1682 (from a Hart, Schaffner & Marx ad)*

Sadly, La Salle was soon after murdered by his own men.

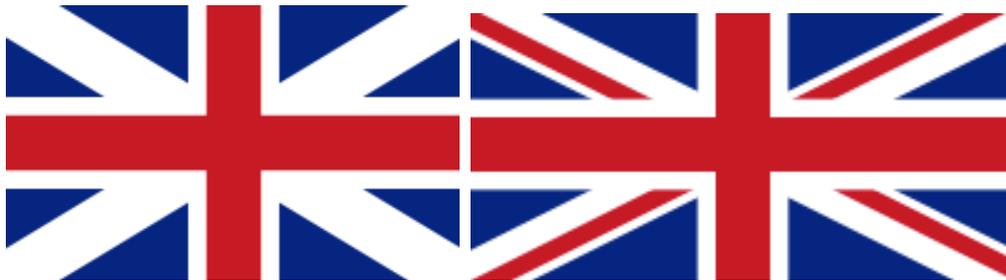
Pontchartrain, the French minister for naval affairs and colonies gave Iberville the task of relocating the mouth of the Mississippi, picking up where La Salle had left off, and to build a fort which would block the river to other nations. Iberville left France with four ships in October 1698. He reached the Mississippi in 1699, and for almost seven decades the white flag with golden lilies flew over *La Louisiane*. Iberville left Louisiana for the last time in April 1702, leaving it up to his brother Bienville to found New Orleans in 1718.

Spain would eventually gain possession of Louisiana, thanks to another geopolitical chain of events. In early 1762, Spain entered the Seven Years War with the objectives of invading Portugal and capturing

Jamaica (both failures). Portugal and Britain not only thwarted these offensive moves by Spain, but also captured the cities of Manila and Havana. Bourbon King Charles III of Spain wanted to keep fighting, but he was persuaded by the French leadership to cease. Spain had to cede Florida to Britain to get back Havana and Manila, somewhat repaid when Louisiana was given by France as a compensation for Spain's war losses.

Charles III had changed the design of the Spanish flag in 1759, because the flags of most European nations were predominantly white and they were habitually at war (causing much confusion at sea). He wanted a new flag that could be easily identified from a distance. The King chose a triband red-yellow-red, with the yellow band twice as large as the red bands. When Spanish Governor Alejandro O'Reilly established control of Louisiana for Spain in 1769, he employed this new design. This Spanish reign of Louisiana (after an initial rebellion) was an important one, witnessing many improvements in the city of New Orleans.

Incidentally, back when the flag of England flew over Baton Rouge, it was the Union Flag (flown by England from 1606-1801 and by Scotland from 1707-1801). When Bernardo de Gálvez drove the British out, the British flag looked like the flag on the left below:



The Union Jack, above on the right, dates from the Union of Great Britain (then England and Scotland) with Ireland in 1801. The present flag combines aspects of all three national flags: the red cross of Saint George combined with the saltire of St. Andrew (in the first flag) now has the red saltire of Saint Patrick's flag added to the (1801-present) flag.

Meanwhile, back in France the French Revolution began in 1789. There was radical social and political upheaval. Heads were rolling, and there was a new national flag for the French Republic, known in French as *drapeau tricolore*, *drapeau français*, and among the military, *les couleurs*). While the United States flag is the red, white and blue, in France the flag is the blue, white and red (in that order). Early in the Revolution, the Paris militia, which played an important role in the storming of the Bastille, wore a cockade of blue (for Saint Martin) and red (for Saint Denis), the city's traditional colors. According to the Marquis de Lafayette, the "ancient French color" of white was added to

create a tricolor, or national, cockade. This cockade was the basis of the *tricolore* flag, first used in 1790.

Although Lafayette identified the white stripe with the nation, some say it signifies the monarchy. Others say the three colors represent the three main estates of the *Ancien Régime*: blue first for the *bourgeoisie*, red last for the nobility with white in the middle for the clergy. Lafayette also denied that the flag contained any connection to the red-and-white livery of the *Duc d'Orléans*. However, this myth did provide a basis for Orleanists to adopt the *tricolore* as their own. Blue and red are associated with the Virgin Mary, France's patron saint, and were also the colors of Charlemagne's ensign and war cry, "*Montjoie*".

Soon Napoleon Bonaparte became the first emperor of France. One of his numerous ambitions was to build a colonial empire in North America. In 1800, Napoleon strong-armed the Spanish to sign the secret Treaty of San Ildefonso and transfer Louisiana back to France. When President Thomas Jefferson learned of this, he was very worried that the Mississippi River would be closed to American trade.

On October 15, 1802, Charles IV of Spain finally gave the order transferring Louisiana to France. But the Spanish governor in New Orleans was not aware of this. The following day he suddenly withdrew the right of deposit, which allowed American shippers to leave their goods at New Orleans while awaiting transfer onto seagoing vessels. Seeing their livelihood threatened, western traders demanded that the President take action.

Jefferson sent Robert Livingston to France to explore the possibility of purchasing New Orleans and West Florida. The fact that Napoleon suffered huge troop losses in Haiti to yellow fever and a slave rebellion created a situation where Bonaparte decided to sell all of Louisiana to the United States in what is known as the Louisiana Purchase. The Spanish flag came down and, for a short period of time, the *tricolore* waved. Then the American flag went up with its fifteen stars (the number of states at the time), as seen in the painting below.



*Place d'Armes, 1803: Tricolore down and American flag up*

The short-lived Bonnie Blue Flag flew over the independent nation of West Florida in 1810. It flies today over the courthouses in the Florida parishes of Louisiana. The story of the West Florida revolt was an inspiration to Texans who used the "Bonnie Blue" as a model for their "Lone Star" flag; and on June 25, 1849, Narciso López created the Cuban flag with the Bonnie Blue Flag as a model. He formed and mounted an unsuccessful Cuban invasion force in New Orleans. The "Bonnie Blue" also became an early unofficial flag of the Confederacy.

The song entitled "The Bonnie Blue Flag" was first performed in New Orleans in 1861 to riotous and thunderous applause. The "Band of Brothers" mentioned in the first line of the song is a reference to the St. Crispin's day speech in Shakespeare's play *Henry V*. The same is true for Stephen Ambrose's book *Band of Brothers*, the story of "Easy" Company (part of the 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 101st Airborne Division).



When Louisiana seceded from the Union in 1861, the pre-Confederate state first used its own state flag. Featuring a heraldic charge of a mother "pelican in her piety" wounding her breast to feed her young, the flag is also emblematic of Christian charity. It has been used by the state since its beginning, but not officially adopted by the Louisiana State Legislature until July 1, 1912. On the flag the mother pelican and her young are depicted above a ribbon with the state motto: "Union, Justice, and Confidence". The current version of the flag was adopted in 2006, revising the earlier design of 1912. An eighth-grader from Houma noticed that during the nineteenth century the state flag and seal featured three drops of blood on the pelican's chest. Later this tradition was haphazardly followed, but (after the student brought this to the attention of his state legislator) the issue was resolved in April 2006 with passage of House Bill 833/Act 92. The three drops of blood are back.

The follow-up Louisiana Secession flag was a modified version of the American flag. The thirteen stripes representing the thirteen original colonies of America repeat in blue, white and red, the colors of the French *tricolore*. A single gold star atop a field of red represents the colors of Spain, another major nation to have ruled Louisiana.

As for the Confederate flag first used in Louisiana, the "Stars and Bars" won out over three other leading competitors. One of the losers was the flag recognized today as the "rebel", "Dixie" or Confederate Battle Flag. That design was one of four flags voted on by the Provisional Congress of the Confederate States of America presented by a committee headed by South Carolinian William Porcher Miles. There were only three flag designs adopted, with later, minor variations that served as the official national flags of the Confederacy. The first "Stars and Bars" was inspired by Austria's national flag and flown from March 4, 1861, to May 1, 1863. It was the design of Prussian artist Nicola Marschall in Marion, Alabama. Additional evidence makes an equally strong case for Orren Randolph Smith of North Carolina as designer. The second Confederate flag is known as "the Stainless Banner", but it had too much of a white field. Major Arthur L. Rogers argued that the pure white field of the second flag could be mistaken as a flag of truce. His suggestions were the basis for the third and final official Confederate flag, "the Blood Stained Banner", adopted March 4, 1865. A large red vertical bar on the end made it less of a surrender flag.

At the First Battle of Manassas, Confederate Generals P. G. T. Beauregard and Joseph E. Johnston complained that the similarity between the Stars and Bars and the Stars and Stripes caused confusion on the battlefield. Porcher Miles said he couldn't get the Congress to make a change but suggested they use that losing entry as a battle flag. And that's what happened. The Army of Northern Virginia did use that familiar design (with the blue St. Andrew's cross studded with stars across a red field), but it was usually square. A rectangular version of this flag was flown by some units, especially the Army of Tennessee. Despite never having officially represented the Confederate States of America as its national flag, it is commonly referred to today as the "rebel flag" or the "Confederate Flag" and often incorrectly referred to as the "Stars and Bars". The real "Stars and Bars" you will recall consists of three broad stripes (red-white-red with a blue field in the upper left-hand corner containing a circle of seven stars).



*Ten flags on display in the Cabildo*

As with all good Louisiana stories, this one comes with lagniappe (or a little something extra). There is actually a part of Louisiana that was neutral, belonging to no nation, with no government, no laws, no rules and no flag. It existed from 1806-1819. It resulted from a border dispute between the United States and Spain over the western boundary of Louisiana. Was it the Sabine River as the United States claimed or a dry gulch named Arroyo Hondo, just west of Natchitoches, Louisiana? Until the Adams-Onís Treaty finally set the boundary at the Sabine River, all manner of thieves, cutthroats and other assorted criminals held sway in this Louisiana no man's land.

*Voilà*, ten fascinating flags in a most important state - plus an unlucky zone lasting thirteen years with no flag at all.

## **NED HÉMARD**

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