

Mississippi Valley

1682

From 1699 to 1763, the future state of Mississippi was a part of the French colony of Louisiana. During these years, the French explored the region, and attempted unsuccessfully to establish settlements and military outposts, engage in political and economic relations with local Native Americans, and to establish a profitable economy.

French control of the area began in 1682, when Rene-Robert, Cavalier de La Salle, claimed the entire Mississippi River Basin for France during his voyage down the Mississippi River. He named the region "Louisiana" in honor of French King Louis. .and did, over time establish several forts along the Upper Mississippi Valley. None of them seem to have survived.

Seventeen years later, the French government chose Pierre LeMoyne, Sieur d'Iberville. to lead an expedition to colonize Louisiana. His brother, Jean-Baptiste LeMoyne, Sieur d'Bienville, arrived with him.

Iberville's ships arrived on the Gulf Coast in January 1699. He went ashore February 13, 1699, at present-day Ocean Springs. He moved quickly to form friendships of the local Biloxi, learning from them of a river to the west which he believed to be the Mississippi, earlier explored by LaSalle. He confirmed this by going there, and obtaining a letter left by LaSalle's trusted assistant, Henri de Tonti, from the local people in the mid 1680s.

Iberville returned to the coast and ordered the construction of a fort on the eastern side of Biloxi Bay in April 1699, naming it Maurepas in honor of the French Minister of Marine and Colonies. It was the first European settlement in Mississippi and the first capital of the French colony of Louisiana. Throughout the remainder of 1699, the fort served as a base of operations for further exploration of the area.

Conditions for the French garrison steadily worsened and threatened to undermine the colonization effort. The intense heat killed crops, fresh water became scarce, illness spread, and boredom destroyed discipline. Only the aid of the local Biloxis helped sustain the French. To be closer

to France's ally Spain in the event of hostilities with England, the struggling settlement at Fort Maurepas was relocated east to Mobile in 1701, eventually moving to New Orleans in 1722 as the new capital of Louisiana. The Mississippi Gulf Coast would never again figure prominently in French plans for development of the region.

The French were concerned by England's first foray into the area in late 1699 when Bienville encountered an English ship on the Mississippi at a spot now known as "English Turn." By bluffing, Bienville managed to convince them that the French had firm military control of the river, thus temporarily halting English colonization in the region.

Establishing itself along the Mississippi River and producing revenue remained as priorities for France throughout the early 1700s. Enticing immigrants to Mississippi proved to be a tremendous challenge to both the colonial government and private officials. Initially, a steady flow of immigrants came to the colony in hopes of securing a better life, or perhaps making a quick fortune in the undeveloped region. But, as time went on and word of the colony's poor situation spread, immigration slowed significantly. The French government also sent unmarried French women to Louisiana as potential wives for male settlers; unfortunately, their arrival did not achieve the result the government had hoped. Only a few small, widely scattered settlements comprised Mississippi throughout its period of French control.

Of particular interest during this time was a site on a high bluff overlooking the Mississippi and featuring a large area of fertile soil. The French constructed Fort Rosalie there in 1716, hoping a prosperous settlement might develop nearby. In this they were correct, as the settlement eventually became Natchez.

In an attempt to establish a stable agricultural economy, the colonists were encouraged to grow crops such as tobacco, indigo, and rice. The French also assisted in developing the deerskin trade, which became the colony's single most profitable economic enterprise. Still, the colony cost France much more than it gained. To remedy the situation, France decided to bring in a private company that could develop its economy while simultaneously solidifying French control of the region. Two attempts were made, one in 1712, and one in about 1719: both failed.

Perhaps the most significant development during the private colony years was the introduction of slavery, implemented to assist with a wide variety of types of labor, especially agricultural projects. Their population increased rapidly, rising from 3,400 in 1731 to about 6,000 in 1763, leading to the establishment of one of the most notorious legal codes in history, the *Code Noir*, or “black code.”

It was the strained relations with the local American Indian tribe, the Natchez, that ultimately led to Fort Rosalie’s temporary demise. The French treated the Natchez harshly and abused their hospitality. On the morning of November 28, 1729, the Natchez attacked the fort, killing approximately three hundred people and taking many women, children, and slaves’ captive. A smaller garrison further north, near present-day Vicksburg, was also attacked by Natchez allies, the Yazoo. The French quickly retaliated, and within two years had virtually destroyed the Natchez tribe. The French eventually repaired and re-garrisoned the fort, but the settlement at Natchez languished until well after it was no longer part of the French empire.

Issues with the local American Indians occurred again in the 1730s, when Great Britain established the new colony of Georgia, and proclaimed that its boundaries extended all the way to the Mississippi River. British traders soon made alliances with Native Americans, including the warlike Chickasaws. Using the excuse of the Chickasaws refusing to hand over Natchez refugees, the French launched two attacks in 1736, in coordination with the Choctaws, in the area around what is now Tupelo; both were bloody defeats. A few years later, Bienville tried again. The Chickasaws believed this force was too strong for them and in 1740 signed a treaty that was favorable to the French. Despite the agreement, the Chickasaws remained a threat to the French throughout their control of the region.

In the end, all the angst and conflict came to naught. In the 1763 Treaty of Paris, ending the French and Indian war, France gave up all its holdings on the continent to England, but they did have the last laugh regarding the Louisiana Territory; the English only got half of it. France signed a secret treaty with Spain giving them all the French possessions west of the Mississippi River, including New Orleans, which controlled the mouth of Mississippi River into the Gulf. France was delighted to cede Louisiana to Spain, considering the financial drain and headaches that the region had given them over the years.

Thus ended the French era in Mississippi, leaving behind several important points of interest. It was the first serious attempt by a European power to colonize the Gulf South region, with all of the implied power struggles with England; it initiated over a century of negotiation and conflict between European immigrants and the area's native populations; and maybe the most impactful of all was the development of the institution of slavery, which would define much of its early history.

Adapted from: *A Failed Enterprise: The French Colonial Period in Mississippi*, by J. Michael Bunn and Clay Williams / September 2007