

COMMENTARY

AMERICA 250



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A depiction of a siege during Bernardo de Gálvez's Pensacola campaign in "American Revolution: The Augmented Exhibition," on display now at The Historic New Orleans Collection.

A place that embodies what America is about

French Quarter played key role in our nation's history – from the beginning

By Daniel Hammer

What are the most historic places in the United States, places that bring all Americans together, despite our differences, real and perceived, to experience something we bear in common? In other words, are there places best suited to reminding us that we are Americans? Places that allow us to celebrate both our commonalities and differences as we reflect on 250 years of nationhood?

Yes. Places like this do exist, and in fact, there is one right here in Louisiana. It is perhaps the greatest one of all: New Orleans' French Quarter. Don't let the name fool you. The French Quarter embodies the history and culture of this nation. Its story begins before our country's founding, but informs what America is today.

Early support

Centuries ago, Indigenous people from across the Mississippi Valley met each other and traded goods from as far away as Mexico and Canada in a place they called Bulbancha, Choctaw for "place of many tongues." Today that site is part of what we now call the French Quarter. In 1718, the Frenchman Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne, sieur de Bienville, established a new city for France's vast Louisiana colony at this same strategic location. Thanks to his Indigenous allies, he knew the site allowed access to both the Mississippi and the Gulf of Mexico via Bayou St. John and Lake Pontchartrain.

In 1776, when Great Britain's 13 American colonies declared independence, planning got underway in New Orleans that proved critical to the success of the American Revolution. Great Britain was Spain's greatest enemy, and just across Lake Pontchartrain from New Orleans was British West Florida, extending from Natchez and Baton Rouge east to Pensacola. From his seat in the Cabildo on what was then known as the Plaza de Armas, Louisiana's Spanish colonial governor, Bernardo de Gálvez, began plotting to attack the British. In a series of successful military campaigns between 1779 and 1781, Gálvez was able to force the British from the Mississippi River and the Gulf Coast.

These moves by the Spanish against the British, plotted in the

Cabildo, were part of a larger strategy to support the American Revolution by using the Gulf of Mexico and the Mississippi River to funnel money and supplies to the Continental Army. The Irish-born merchant Oliver Pollock acted as an American agent in New Orleans. From his French Quarter residence, in what today is the 500 block of Chartres Street, he served as one of the most important financiers of the war effort. Some historians credit him with the earliest use of the dollar symbol, claiming the "PF" notation he made throughout his ledgers, meaning "pesos fuertes," or strong pesos, evolved to become the U.S. dollar sign.

Expanding horizons

In 1803, officials gathered once again in the Cabildo and Jackson Square to complete the Louisiana Purchase, raising the American flag over this territory for the first time. A moment of supreme national and geopolitical significance, the Louisiana Purchase not only exponentially expanded the U.S. land mass, it positioned the new nation to seize dominion over parts of the Western Hemisphere that warring European powers had wrestled over for centuries.

In many ways, it propelled America toward becoming what it is today. Also, from this moment on, what happened in New Orleans did not just influence America, it was, itself, American history.

In 1862, New Orleans, the largest city in the rebellious Confederacy, surrendered to the United States' Union army without a fight.

Thanks to this, the French Quarter today looks much the same as it did then. The history of one building in particular stands out. In 1862, at 527 Conti St., Dr. Louis Charles Roudanez and Paul Trévi-gne published *L'Union*, the first Black-owned newspaper in the South, and, in 1865, they established the *New Orleans Tribune*, the first Black-owned daily newspaper in the United States.

In the pages of these newspapers, in both French and English, New Orleanians of color demanded liberty and equality. In many ways, the origins of the civil rights movement can be traced through this very building, which still stands on Conti Street.

As the nation rebuilt itself following the Civil War, New Orleans became a cultural nexus of extraordinary influence.

Through the 19th and 20th centuries, immigrants from all over the world brought their cultures — their languages, religions, foodways and music — to the city.

New culture is born

In the 19th century, they came from Haiti and Cuba; from Germany, Ireland and France; from China and the Philippines. In the 20th century, they came from Sicily, from Eastern Europe, from Vietnam, from Honduras. They joined an already diverse population, shaped by Indigenous peoples and earlier immigrants from France, Spain, Africa, Canada and the Caribbean.

Out of this diverse milieu, new foodways, musical styles and customs developed. The food Americans eat, the music we dance to, the way we say things would all be very different without New Orleans. And you don't have to take my word for it, just take a look at an Applebee's menu the next time you're on a road trip and ask yourself if they'd have all that blackened stuff if 416 Chartres Street had never been K-Paul's restaurant.

Living history

Just as the Mississippi River valley is the nation's topographic watershed, the French Quarter is the nation's cultural watershed. Strolling the French Quarter riverfront, walking its historic streets and admiring its beautiful old buildings, you can get something of a feel for it today.

To truly see it though, step into the French Quarter's unparalleled history museums. Here, our nation's history is revealed with thoughtful intention and in new and engaging ways. As we commemorate 250 years since the signing of the Declaration of Independence, we invite the millions of Americans who will visit New Orleans this year to visit our French Quarter museums to learn our nation's history. We, likewise, invite every Louisianan to come to French Quarter museums to reflect on our consequential role in American history and imagine our shared future.

Daniel Hammer is president and CEO of the Historic New Orleans Collection.

ABOUT THE IMAGE

The image above features a scene from "American Revolution," which made its United States debut at the Historic New Orleans Collection on March 20. This free, interactive experience utilizes 360-degree augmented reality to immerse visitors in 20 defining moments of the nation's founding, from the sparks of the Boston Tea Party to the victory at Yorktown.

Developed by leading historians and scholars, this exhibition celebrates the figures who shaped the United States and shares the Revolution in a fresh way that speaks to the hearts and minds of the American people today. The exhibition will serve as a focal point of the Louisiana America 250 commemorations and coincides with HNO's 60th anniversary.



ABOUT THE HNO

Over the last six decades, HNO has become a vital community institution, preserving the world's largest collection of materials related to New Orleans and the Gulf South. Located in the heart of the French Quarter, its campus spans 14 historic buildings which serve as a catalyst for dialogue and historical understanding.

"American Revolution" is produced and designed by Histoverly with promotional support from New Orleans & Company and Louisiana America 250. The exhibition offers a fresh, technologically driven way to explore the American story. Plan your visit at hnoc.org.

For more information on events near you commemorating America's 250th birthday, visit america250la.org

