

Descriptions of the Environment and Early Settlement of New Orleans

Excerpt from the Jesuit Relations

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[Note: 1 league equals approximately 3 miles]

The mouth of the Mississippi lies on the 29th degree of north latitude. The King maintains a small garrison there, and also a Pilot to meet vessels and bring them into the river. The multitude of islands and of banks – not of sand, but of mud – which fill it, make its entrance very difficult for those who have never been there. The question is, to find the channel; and there is only one Pilot who is accustomed to the place and knows it thoroughly. Vessels experience difficulty in ascending the Mississippi. Besides the fact that the tide of the sea is not felt in it, it winds continuously; so that it is necessary either to tow, or to have at one's command wind from all points of the compass. From the twenty-ninth to the thirty-first degree of latitude, it did not seem to me wider than the Seine in front of Rouen, but it is infinitely deeper. As one ascends, it becomes wider, but is shallower in proportion. Its length from the North to the South is known to be more than seven hundred leagues. According to the reports of the latest travelers, its source – which is more than three hundred leagues to the North of Illinois – is formed by the discharge of some lakes and swamps....

It is only at fifteen leagues above the mouth of the Mississippi that one begins to see the first French settlements, as the land lower down is not habitable. They are situated on both sides of the river as far as the Town. The lands throughout this extent, which is fifteen leagues, are not at all occupied; many await new settlers. New Orleans, the Metropolis of Louisiana, is built on the east bank of the river; it is of medium size, and the streets are in straight lines; some of the houses are built of brick, and others of wood. It is inhabited by French, Negroes, and some Savages who are slaves; all these together do not, it seemed to me, number more than twelve hundred persons.

The climate, although infinitely more bearable than that of the islands, seems heavy to one who has recently landed. If the country were less densely wooded, especially on the side towards the sea, the wind coming thence would penetrate inland and greatly temper the heat. The soil is very good, and nearly all kind of vegetables grow very well in it. There are splendid orange-trees; the people cultivate indigo, maize in abundance, rice, potatoes, cotton, and tobacco. The vine might succeed there; at least I have seen some very good muscatel grapes. The climate is too hot for wheat. Buckwheat, millet, and oats grow very well. Poultry of all kinds are raised, and horned cattle have multiplied considerably. The forests are at present the chief and surest source of revenue of many habitants; they obtain from them great quantities of lumber for building purposes, which they manufacture easily and at slight expense in the sawmills, which several persons have erected.

You will observe that the land, thirty leagues below the Town and for nearly the same distance above it, is of peculiar formation. Throughout nearly the whole country, the bank of a river is the lowest spot; here, on the contrary, it is the highest. From the river to the beginning of

the Cypress forests, several arpents [approximately 5000 square meters] behind the settlements, there is a slope of as much as fifteen feet. Do you wish to irrigate your land? Dig a drain to the river, with a dyke at the end of the drain; and in a short time it will be covered with water. To work a mill, it is only necessary to have an opening to the river. The water flows through the Cypress forests to the sea. Care must be taken, however, not to abuse this facility anywhere; as the water could not always flow away easily, it would, in the end, inundate the settlements.

At New Orleans there is nothing scarcer than stones; you might give a *louis* [a French coin] to get one belonging to the country, and you would not find it; bricks made on the spot are substitute for it. Lime is made from shells, which are obtained at a distance of three or four leagues on the shores of lake Pontchartrain. Hills of shells are found there, – a singular thing for that region; they are also far inland, at a depth of two or three feet below the surface. The following articles are sent down to New Orleans from the upper country and adjacent territories: salt beef, tallow, tar, fur, bear's grease, and, from the Illinois especially, flour and pork. In this vicinity, and still more toward Mobile, grow in abundance the trees called "wax-trees," because means have been found to extract from their seeds a wax, which, if properly prepared, would be almost equal to French wax. If the use of this wax could be introduced into Europe, it would be a very considerable branch of trade for the Colony. You will see, by all these details, that some trade can be carried on at New Orleans. In former years, when eight to ten ships entered the Mississippi, that was considered a great number; this year over forty entered, mostly from Martinique and San Domingo; they came to load cargoes chiefly of timber and bricks, to rebuild the houses destroyed by two fires, which are said to have been caused in those two islands by fire from Heaven.

Ascending the river, one finds French settlements above as well as below New Orleans. The most notable establishment is a small German Colony, ten leagues above it. La Pointe coupée is thirty-five leagues from the German settlement. A palisaded fort has been built there, in which a small garrison is maintained. There are sixty residences, spread over an extent of five or six leagues, along the west bank of the river. Fifty leagues from the point coupée are the Natchez. We now have there only a garrison, – which is kept imprisoned, as it were, in a fort, through the fear of the Chicachats [Chickasaw] and other Savage enemies. Formerly there were at that place about sixty dwellings, and a Savage nation of considerable numbers called the Natchez, who were greatly attached to us and rendered us great services. The tyranny which a French Commandant undertook to exercise over them drove them to extremities. One day they killed all the French, excepting a few who sought safety in flight. One of our Fathers, who was descending the Mississippi and was asked to tarry there and say Mass on Sunday, was included in the massacre. Since that time the blow has been avenged by the almost total destruction of the Natchez Nation; only a few remain scattered among the Chicachats and Chérais [Cherokee], where they live precariously and almost as slaves.

At la Pointe coupée, and still more at Natchez, excellent tobacco is grown. If, instead of obtaining from strangers the tobacco that is consumed in France, we obtained it here, we would get a better quality, and save the money that goes out of the Kingdom for that product; and the colony would be settled.

One hundred leagues above the Natchez are the Arkansas, a savage Nation of about four hundred warriors. We have near them a fort with a garrison, where the convoys ascending to the Illinois stop to rest. There were some settlers there but in the month of May, 1748, the Chicachats, our irreconcilable foes, aided by some other barbarians, suddenly attacked the post; they killed several persons and carried off thirteen into captivity. The rest escaped into the fort,

in which there were at the time only a dozen soldiers. They made an attempt to attack it, but no sooner had they lost two of their people than they retreated. Their Drummer was a French deserter from the Arkansas garrison itself.

The distance from the Arkansas to the Illinois is estimated at nearly one hundred and fifty leagues. Throughout all that extent of the country, not a single hamlet exists. Nevertheless, in order to secure our possession of it, it would be very advisable that we should have a good fort on the Ouabache [Wabash], the only place by which the English can enter into the Mississippi.