

Re-Constructing and Celebrating the Louisiana Purchase in New Orleans

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THE FIRST LOUISIANA PURCHASE CELEBRATION started on and around the Mississippi river. On December 20, 1803, as soon as the American flag was hoisted at the center of the Place d'Armes and the French flag taken down, cannon shots were fired on the river by French and Spanish ships. Spectators were pressed against each other around the balconies of the Cabildo and they were also lined up along the levee. Two hundred years later, it is no surprise that the Mississippi should be once again the focal point of the Purchase Celebrations. The period leading up to statehood was marked by the arrival of the first steamboats. To commemorate both the Purchase and the centrifugal role played by the Mississippi in the westward movement, and as part of its new marketing policy, the now New-York owned and operated Delta Queen steamboat company recently organized steamboat races downriver in New Orleans and upriver in Saint Louis. In New Orleans, visitors and locals alike could then attend the projection of an Imax film narrating the Lewis and Clark expedition, a few steps away from the landing deck of the steamboats.

The argument of my paper is that the Louisiana Purchase may be construed both as a historical and geopolitical event and as an imagined "construction" in very much the same way Alfred Young recently envisioned the memory of the Boston Tea Party.¹ The memory of the Louisiana Purchase was constructed and re-constructed in various ways and at different moments: from the day of the retrocession to the 1904 universal exhibition held in Saint Louis with the construction of a replica of the Cabildo, from the 1953 sesquicentennial Mardi Gras parade and visit of President Eisenhower to today's various exhibitions, walking tours and public television programs, from the anti-celebrations and public demonstrations of "dissent" of Federalists that followed the Purchase to today's widespread rites of "assent" and general consensus, from the 1990's Broadway Musical, *The Louisiana Purchase*, to the forthcoming opera entitled *The Pontalba Affair* to be premiered next October.² The Louisiana Purchase is in many ways a *lieu de mémoire* being now revisited, represented and re-located among other founding celebrations of American nationalism.³ If in 1803 observers could note "the continual spread of nationalist practices to the very peripheries of the nation itself," namely to the Territory of Orleans and West Florida, today's observers may underscore, on the contrary, the centrality of the Louisiana Purchase area in the redefinition of the American nation.⁴

¹ Alfred F. Young, *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party. Memory and the American Revolution* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999). Read in particular the introduction. Alfred Young quotes David Thelen as saying that "memory, private and individual, as much as collective and cultural, is constructed, not reproduced. The second is that this construction is not made in isolation but in conversations with others that occur in the context of community, broader politics, and social dynamics," xiv. See David Thelen, Introduction to a special issue, "Memory and American History," *Journal of American History* 75 (1989): 1117-29.

² On the dichotomy "assent" / "dissent", see Sacvan Bercovitch. *The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America* (New York, 1993). On public memory, see Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York, 1991). By the same author, *A Season of Youth: The American Revolution and the Historical Imagination* (New York, 1978).

³ See Pierre Nora. *Les lieux de mémoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984, 1986, 1992).

⁴ David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fêtes. The Making of American Nationalism, 1776-1820* (Chapel Hill / London: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 286.

*Up and Down the Mississippi:
The Meanings of Celebration and the Construction of Public Memory*

No sooner was the Louisiana territory ceded to America that it was integrated into the tradition of nationalist celebrations, toasts and fêtes that emerged with and after the American Revolution in the Atlantic States. The period immediately leading to the Purchase, and the era immediately following it, opposed in person and in print Jeffersonian Republicans in favor of the transaction and Federalists who deemed the Purchase anticonstitutional and potentially destructive. At about the same time, leading planters in and around New Orleans petitioned Governor Laussat, the French Governor, about their fear and dissatisfaction concerning the news of a possible cession of the territory to America.⁵ A mere few days after the Purchase, the French-speaking newspaper, *Le Moniteur de la Louisiane*, published an elegiac epistle written by a “a young citizen” mourning the loss of a mother, France.⁶ In his letters, Governor Claiborne mentioned various squabbles between French and American Louisianans about which dances should come first at public balls.⁷ A general consensus seems now to have emerged, to such an extent that the politics of celebration have somewhat disappeared. It is at times difficult to tell the various Louisiana Purchase celebrations from mere tourist-oriented functions.

Not surprisingly, the celebrations of the Purchase include a wide set of memorabilia: bread and bun warmers representing the Purchase territory, pot-belly figurines of Thomas Jefferson, Napoleon and Louis XVI, lunch bags, medallions, silver book marks, maps, lapel pins, video tapes, paper weights, Mardi Gras beads and flags. Shops in the French Quarter usually selling coins and medals from the Civil War advertise “Louisiana Purchase era merchandise” though, as may be predicted, none of it is relevant to the Purchase itself. Recently, the *Gambit Weekly*, a liberal and art-oriented weekly free newspaper published an article reminding the reader of the importance of the Purchase, “learning more about the

⁵ Laussat Papers, items 407-8, Historic New Orleans Collection.

⁶ *Le Moniteur de la Louisiane*, January 4, 1804.

⁷ Rowland, Dunbar (ed.). *Official Letter Books of William C.C. Claiborne, 1801-1816*. 6 volumes. Jackson, 1917, I, 304-7, 323, 331 and II, 249. See also Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fêtes. The Making of American Nationalism, 1776-1820* (Chapel Hill / London: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), chapter 5. Regionalism, Nationalism, and the Geopolitics of Celebration, 246-294.

Louisiana Purchase can be a simple yet profound act of national pride at a time when many Americans are redefining the meaning of patriotism.”⁸

In 2001, the Louisiana Commemorative Coin Advisory Commission was set up by Governor Mike Foster. The United States Mint eventually developed the Louisiana quarter representing the Purchase territory, standing out from the rest of North America, a trumpet, musical notes and a pelican. The same year, a bill was introduced by Representative Charles Riddle to issue commemorative license plates. Lieutenant Governor Blanco remarked that “as these new license plates circulate the nation, they will remind people everywhere of Louisiana’s role in the enormous expansion of the United States. This contribution to American history should be the cause for many travelers to join us for our statewide celebration.”⁹ This quotation is emblematic of the general emphasis of almost all Louisiana Purchase celebrations: in a state where economy flounders, tourism has appeared to be the last resort, no matter what the celebration may be.

In 2002 Congress passed the Louisiana Purchase Bicentennial Commission Act introduced by Senator Mary Landrieux. The Commission encompasses all states carved out of the Louisiana Purchase area. On July 22, 2002, a report from the Committee on Resources of the House of Representatives justified the need for legislation in terms strongly reminiscent of O’Sullivan’s supposedly “Manifest Destiny,” “The Louisiana Purchase helped shape the American destiny. Commemoration of the Louisiana Purchase and the related opening of the West can enhance public understanding of the impact of the democratic westward expansion of American society.” The objectives of the commission are three-fold, “to *edify, publish, and display* the importance of the Louisiana Purchase to all Americans.” [my emphasis]¹⁰ Interestingly enough, “this bipartisan commission [was to be] partially modeled after the celebration of the American bicentennial—striving to be inclusive of Americans.”

It is unclear if the states north of Louisiana such as Arkansas or Missouri are today celebrating the bicentennial of the Louisiana Purchase or the bicentennial of the preparation of the Lewis and Clark expedition. As far as inclusiveness is concerned, the issue of slavery has been strangely and generally overlooked. In New Orleans in particular, the history of the last years of the Atlantic Slave Trade in the context of the Purchase has

⁸ *The Gambit Weekly*, February 4, 2003.

⁹ Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism, Baton Rouge, Press Release, November 1, 2001.

¹⁰ Report 107-599, House of Representatives, 107th Congress, 2d Session.

been left aside except in a few papers presented at conferences before scholarly audiences. Among few exceptions, the African American Congress at Tulane University recently included a map of the Louisiana Purchase in its program of events for Black History Month. For want of having a float especially dedicated to slaves and free people of color, the African American riders of last week's parade, called "King Arthur," had hoped to have a float testifying to the African heritage of Louisiana. Instead, public memory was restricted to the political heritage of Jefferson and Napoleon, to the arrival of the Ursulines and to the folklore of Pirate Jean Lafitte and misplaced Cajuns. Ironically enough, the "Cajun" float was mostly manned by people of African American descent or who considered themselves "Creoles of color"—descendants of "Acadians" were hardly to be seen.

A Typology of Celebrations

Celebrations of the Purchase abound in New Orleans ranging from plays written by local playwrights to operas, conferences and special exhibits. Local water companies and banks have advertised their services on television and in newspapers carefully using the argument of the Purchase. It seems that each local institution, with the notable exception of the Office of Special Events of the City of New Orleans, has contributed willingly or less willingly in celebrating aspects of the Purchase.

One may distinguish four categories of celebrations: the Purchase as backdrop or décor, the Purchase remembered through primary sources, the Purchase as interpreted in conferences and scholarly walking tours, and the Purchase as represented in street parades and popular political culture. Subcategories include different sets of opposites: academic / non academic, tourist-oriented / aimed at locals, elite / mass celebrations, political / apolitical celebrations.

The Louisiana Purchase as Décor: The Politics of Celebration

In a private interview, Robert Lyall, Director of the New Orleans Philharmonic Orchestra recently insisted on the fact that *The Pontalba Affair*, a new opera composed and written by Thea Musgrave, was first and foremost a million-dollar opera at the first performance of which candidates for governorship would be strongly represented. The story of the Purchase is to be found mainly in the first act of the opera, especially

scene four. According to Robert Lyall, the Purchase is to serve almost exclusively as the backdrop for the melodrama. History—in particular what he considers as a “real estate deal”—never moves audiences the way murder and love stories do. The grand finale of the first act is concomitant with the news of the Purchase. The action moves from a street gathering to a contrapuntal scene pitting against each other a stereotyped so-called “Creole” people, opposed to the Purchase, and the “Spanish and American” citizens exulting over the news. The opposition dissent / assent vanishes at the end of the scene in a dramatic and artificial celebratory way,

We will unite under one flag,
then a great future awaits us.
And we will take our place
Among the great peoples of the world.
We will leave in peace.
Let us celebrate.¹¹

At the beginning of February, the French Consulate organized classical music concerts in collaboration with the University of New Orleans. A theatre festival is also to begin soon. The Consulate has also helped finance several public functions, among which the Omohundro institute conference. The avowed objective of the French Consulate is not, however, the celebration of the Purchase per se, but an occasion to advertise French culture, in much the same way as the 1999 Francofête. No street theatre will take place as envisioned by the former French Consul.

Displaying the Louisiana Purchase

The Historic New Orleans Collection has three exhibits open to the public: the first exhibit “Napoleon’s Eyewitness: Pierre Clément Laussat in Louisiana, 1802-1814,” hinges around the papers of Governor Laussat, though the relevance – in terms of content and time frame – of some documents may be questioned. The second exhibit, entitled “Conflict, Controversy, and the Louisiana Purchase,” is a selection of newspaper cuttings from the Louisiana Purchase newspaper collection. Among the questions raised by the Federalist and Republican editorialists are the constitutionality of the Purchase, the importance of the cession for westward expansion and the role played by the Mississippi. The last and most important exhibition, in terms of targeted audience and documents, entitled “A Fusion of Nations, A Fusion of Cultures: Spain, France, the

¹¹ Thea Musgrave. Unpublished Libretto of *The Pontalba Affair*. Courtesy of the New Orleans Philharmonic Association.

United States and the Louisiana Purchase," presents manuscript documents, paintings and maps from the discovery of Louisiana to its retrocession. It may be wondered, at times, whether the exhibition is indeed more of an exhibition about the history of Colonial Louisiana or an exhibition dedicated to the Purchase itself. The January Historic Collection commemorative conference and walking tours proved successful but not popular in the broad sense of the term. In collaboration with selected K-12 teachers in Louisiana, a set of lesson plans and a video have been assembled and published by the Historic Collection. It is unclear however whether all pre-college students will have access to such materials.

A few miles north of the Mississippi, the New Orleans Museum of Art has also organized special events including a high-profile exhibition—chaired by Mrs. Laura Bush—of paintings, sculptures, decorative arts and Native American artifacts. The nearby Botanic Gardens will also celebrate the occasion by focusing on the plants of the Louisiana Purchase, on both sides of the Atlantic.

The Louisiana Purchase will also be displayed in the streets of New Orleans. Numerous walking tours have been prepared and scheduled by the organizers of the Omohundro conference by the Friends of the Cabildo and by the Louisiana State Museum.

Publishing the Louisiana Purchase

One of the landmark events of the bicentennial year has been the Baton Rouge Digitization Project entitled "From Diversity, Strength: A People's History of Louisiana, 1800-1815." The Louisiana State University Digital Library embarked last year in the digitization of thousands of documents from four different collections, the collections of Louisiana State University, the Tulane University Special Collections, the New Orleans Public Library and the Historic New Orleans Collection. The online exhibition will be organized in different themes including "American Nile: The River," "Native Americans and Explorations," and "The People of the Territory and State: A Frontier of Cultural Exchange and Adjustment." Also to be noted is the New Orleans Public Library special exhibition of primary documents from the collection of the Conseil de Ville, also available online. The exhibition, though restricted in its scope, is maybe the most "popular" event in that it reaches out to the mostly underprivileged African American population who lives around the public library.

At least two re-enactments will take place: a formal one with representatives of Spain, France and America and a more casual one

organized by the Louisiana Historical Society. Descendants of Laussat, Jefferson and Claiborne are particularly sought after as in the 2002 Tulane educational conference where a descendant of Thomas Jefferson dressed in faded clothes could be seen floating around the rooms.

Mardi Gras 2003 and the PBS film series

Five Mardi Gras parades have decided to “celebrate” and “remember” the Louisiana Purchase – three in the white-dominated suburbs of New Orleans and two in the City itself. The “Little Rascals Celebrate the Louisiana Purchase”. Excalibur’s theme is “Louisiana’s Buy Centennial. Emphasis on Thomas Jefferson, Lewis and Clark and Cajuns [again].” With more than a touch of historical short-cutting, the Gladiators have decided to celebrate “Gladiators 30 Years, Louisiana 200 Years.” Last week The King Arthur parade answered the question “What’s the Big Deal?—Louisiana 1699-1803.” On Mardi Gras day, the Rex parade will close the marching season with a “Bicentennial of the Louisiana Purchase.” The public aspect of the celebration will be echoed later this year with a special series on Louisiana history prepared by Public Broadcasting.

The Louisiana Purchase Timeline: A Multimedia Re-Construction

The Louisiana Purchase timeline, developed by the Deep South Regional Humanities Center at Tulane University in partnership with the University of Paris VII, has emerged as a collaborative work with ten different archives located in New Orleans and Baton Rouge, including the New Orleans Public Library, the Notarial Archives, the Archdiocese Archives, the Xavier University Special Collection, the Historic New Orleans Collection and the Louisiana State Museum. The Timeline is an effort to publicize rare primary documents and make them available to as wide an audience as possible. The Purchase is not simply considered as a backdrop but envisaged and re-constructed in terms of its origins and consequences. The Timeline is accompanied by a set of teaching resources, several animated fly-throughs developed by the Center of Bioenvironmental Research at Tulane University, and a special section giving readers the opportunity of reading newspapers from the Purchase era, notably *The Louisiana Gazette*. The project was elaborated with the

assumption that it should throw light on the process of nationalism that defined the Louisiana Purchase. More than one hundred documents were selected and digitized. Twenty or so scholars contributed in writing headnotes for each document, always keeping in mind the broader storyline. Contrary to the Baton Rouge Digitization Project, the documents were arranged not simply thematically but chrono-thematically into three sections: from 1790 to 1802 "The Stage of Things to Come: People and Places," from 1803 to 1804 "Re-Shaping the Atlantic World: Changing hands," and between 1805 and 1820 "The Old World Made New: Cultures in Conflict." It is thus not a mere juxtaposition of documents but an attempt to throw light on the cogs that led to the Purchase, always bearing in mind the context of the Atlantic World.

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