

Bennett H. Wall and John C. Rodrigue, Editors
By Light Townsend Cummins • Judith Kelleher Schafer
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LOUISIANA A HISTORY

SIXTH EDITION



WILEY Blackwell

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Louisiana

A History

Sixth Edition

Edited by

Bennett H. Wall and John C. Rodrigue

By

Light Townsend Cummins

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Cover image: Shrimp boats line up on each side of a bayou to wait out a hurricane. Photo © William Albert Allard / National Geographic / Getty Images

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Map 1 Louisiana.



Map 2 The United States, with Louisiana highlighted.



Introduction

Although the history of each state is unique, Louisiana boasts one of the most fascinating of them all. From the thousands of years preceding European contact to the tragic events of Hurricane Katrina and the BP oil spill, Louisiana has a history that, whatever else one might say about it, has never been boring. The histories of few other states command attention as does Louisiana's; and among the states that make up the American South, perhaps only Virginia, South Carolina, and Texas have histories that rival Louisiana's in significance to U.S. history.

The history of Louisiana, colorful as it is, risks being reduced to cliché or caricature. Given the food, music, and other elements of its rich cultural heritage; the American Indians, Cajuns, Creoles, various African peoples, and other contributors to its complex racial and ethnic composition; politicians such as Huey and Earl Long and Edwin Edwards at the helm of a political system unparalleled for shenanigans and hijinks; and the *laissez les bons temps rouler* (let the good times roll) attitude of many of its residents, Louisiana elicits a grin as much as serious contemplation. The fact that Louisiana consistently ranks at or near the bottom of nearly every statistical measure of "quality of life" only adds to a tendency not to take the state seriously. Where else could motorists display bumper stickers urging voters - as was done during the 1991 gubernatorial campaign, and only half in jest - to "Vote for the Crook"?

And yet, as raucous as the state's history may seem, readers of this book will discover that Louisiana also attracts serious scholarly attention. It would not be an exaggeration to say that some of the most cutting-edge research

produced in all of American history involves Louisiana. Ground-breaking works on Indian-white relations during the colonial era; the origins, development, and expansion of racial slavery in the South; antebellum southern politics; the Civil War and the abolition of slavery; the accomplishments and failures of Reconstruction; the rise of the “Jim Crow” South and the origins of racial segregation and disfranchisement; the gains and shortcomings of the modern civil rights movement; and even the World War II era and the legacy of the Holocaust have employed Louisiana as their setting. The history of Louisiana can be studied in its own right, in order to help explain how the modern state came into being, but it can also be studied as a window onto the larger problems of U.S. and even world history.

Indeed, understanding Louisiana history requires a global perspective. College-level instructors who teach the survey course on the first half of U.S. history often grapple with the concept of a single nation emerging from several distinct parts but whose rise was not foreordained. The traditional story of the founding of the United States focuses on English immigrants landing on the Atlantic seaboard in the seventeenth century and spreading their culture westward, destroying native peoples in their wake. But the study of Louisiana better illustrates the complexities and contingencies of nation-building and makes clear that the United States was not born solely on the East Coast. In this respect, Louisiana and the lower Mississippi valley constituted just one of several points of European settlement that not only helped to form the United States but were also part of the larger European conquest of the western hemisphere. This expansion into the New World, moreover, was but part of an even larger process of European expansion into the rest of the inhabited world between the fifteenth and the eighteenth centuries.

Louisiana was therefore founded within the initial phase of what we today call “globalization” – shedding new light on a familiar story.

That said, local or state history customarily places the entity under study at the center of the universe. Louisianians are often criticized for their parochialism, but in truth theirs is no worse than that of anyone else. If anything, the advantages of examining Louisiana’s history outweigh the drawbacks. Louisianians are known to take great pride in their state, and this pride often translates into an interest in the state’s past, even among those who otherwise care little for history. Many students at colleges and universities in Louisiana take a Louisiana history class because of a genuine desire to know more about their home state, but they then find that the study of Louisiana history also shows how history works and how societies develop over time. Similarly, studying Louisiana history gives students a sense of history as an organic, dynamic discipline. Many people mistakenly believe the study of history involves nothing more than memorizing an endless parade of names, dates, places, and treaties. Not surprisingly, they think history is boring. The essence of history, however, is not merely knowing *when* certain events occurred but understanding *how* and *why* they occurred, while also placing them within an interpretive framework. In short, by studying Louisiana history we come to understand the larger historical process.

The study of Louisiana history can also demonstrate to students that past events did not just happen in the abstract. To the contrary, it can help them gain an appreciation for how events both within and outside Louisiana unfolded and for how the consequences of those events affect their own lives. Having taught Louisiana history for a number of years, I can attest to the many times students remarked to me that they hailed from a town or community I had mentioned, or that some family forebear

had participated in the events we discussed. Among my favorites were the young woman whose grandfather had agreed to allow the Louisiana civil rights attorney, A. P. Tureaud, to use his name as lead plaintiff in a school desegregation case and the young man whose great-grandfather was one of the "Round Robins" who helped Huey Long escape conviction during his 1929 impeachment trial. His family still possesses the gold pocket-watch Long gave to his great-grandfather in return. Yet even students who did not have such a direct connection often simply noted that Louisiana history had given them a better understanding of why things are the way they are in the state. Whereas courses on world history, western civilization, and even U.S. history can seem hopelessly remote, studying Louisiana history can help students appreciate history's immediacy.

As readers will also discover, the history of Louisiana is replete with violence, oppression, exploitation, and many other depressing topics. In this regard, Louisiana's record is no better or worse than that of any other people or place. More important, the goal of studying Louisiana history is not to make students feel either good or bad about Louisiana; it is not meant for students to celebrate their heritage or to make them ashamed of it. Instead, the goal is to achieve a rational, dispassionate understanding of the past and of how that past continues to shape the present. There will be no attempt in the pages that follow to whitewash Louisiana's historical record; neither will there be moral condemnation of people who lived in other times based on today's standards. Those who study history have an obligation to themselves and to their subjects to try to understand the past on its own terms. It is impossible to examine such topics as slavery, the African slave trade, racial oppression, or the slow, systematic destruction of Louisiana's American Indian populations without feeling a sense of moral outrage.

But such outrage, though unavoidable, is not the goal of history – understanding is. If we can gain some insight, however limited, into the world-views of both oppressors and oppressed, then we have learned something about the human condition.

Louisiana history therefore has much to offer. Fortunately, readers of the new, sixth, edition of this book can avail themselves of a single volume that encompasses the scope and complexity of Louisiana's endlessly fascinating history. The exemplary team of scholars who collaborated on previous editions of *Louisiana: A History* has been brought together again. Each author is renowned in Louisiana history and in the American historical profession in general, and together they make a formidable group. Light Townsend Cummins, author of Part I, is a widely published scholar who applies his keen insight and incisive wit to Louisiana's colonial period, from the state's prehistory through the Louisiana Purchase. Judith Kelleher Schafer, author of Part II and a prize-winning scholar of slavery in Louisiana and of Louisiana's legal history, brings her considerable erudition to the greater part of the nineteenth century, providing illuminating discussions on such ever-contentious topics as slavery, the Civil War, and the era of Reconstruction. Edward F. Haas, author of Part III and an accomplished historian of Louisiana and New Orleans politics, begins with what is sometimes referred to as Louisiana's "dark ages" (the years after Reconstruction), moves forward into the twentieth century, and concludes with a consideration of Huey Long and with what Haas appropriately calls "the struggle to catch up." Finally, Michael L. Kurtz, author of Part IV and also a highly respected and widely published scholar of recent U.S. history, examines Louisiana history since Huey Long, bringing the story right up to the present. A number of other general histories of Louisiana are available, but none

of them can boast of a group of authors so distinguished or so uniquely qualified to bring Louisiana's past to life.

There is also much that is new about the sixth edition of *Louisiana: A History*. Every chapter has been revised and updated, some fairly extensively, in order to incorporate the fresh and exciting research on Louisiana history that continues to appear. In his Part IV, Michael Kurtz has added an entirely new chapter – Chapter 19: “Louisiana in the New Millennium” – that covers the period since 2000. This chapter places more recent events in historical perspective and provides masterful accounts of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, the BP oil spill, and other developments that are still very much in the news. The suggested readings at the end of each of the book's four parts have also been significantly updated. One entirely new feature in this edition is the inclusion of timelines at the beginning of each chapter, noting the major events, episodes, and developments that occurred during the period in question. Instructors and students alike will no doubt find this a helpful and welcome addition.

One other important change should be noted. Since publication of the previous edition of this book, its former publisher, Harlan Davidson, Inc., was acquired by John Wiley & Sons, Inc., a prestigious and highly respected house with offices in the United States, the United Kingdom, and throughout the world. Harlan Davidson had been founded nearly forty years ago by the late Harlan Davidson, Sr., and it enjoyed a solid reputation as a publisher of high-quality history titles for the college-level market. Although the company always had been a family-run business, the acquisition by Wiley has provided an opportunity for the Harlan Davidson titles to reach a wider audience. Fortunately, the former publisher at Harlan Davidson, Andrew J. Davidson, is now a senior editor at Wiley, and so it is a pleasure to be able to maintain a professional

association and friendship with Andrew. The general editor and the authors of *Louisiana: A History* are pleased to be part of the Wiley family, and we see the publication of this new, sixth, edition of this book as the start of a long and fruitful relationship.

While there is much that is new about this book, it nonetheless rests on a solid foundation. Quite simply: it is the best one-volume history of Louisiana available. But perhaps the strongest endorsement comes from readers themselves. Many times students have mentioned to me how much they enjoyed reading *Louisiana: A History*. How often can *that* be said about a college-level textbook? As noted, Louisiana history is a serious undertaking. It is not all color and pizzazz. And yet, color and pizzazz are vital components of the Louisiana story. More than any other state history, the history of Louisiana requires not just a scholarly approach but an intuitive “feel.” Thanks to Professors Cummins, Schafer, Haas, and Kurtz, this book achieves that goal.

The combination of intuition and scholarly rigor that this book provides is essential to understanding Louisiana’s fundamental problem. How can a state boasting such immense potential suffer from such persistent and seemingly intractable problems? Why does Louisiana never seem to be able to “get its act together”? Why are the schools, roads, and other essential elements of public life substandard? Why is the political system so corrupt? Why is such a large proportion of the population unhealthy, impoverished, and poorly educated? Why do Louisianians put up with it? The overwhelming majority of the state’s people, of all racial and ethnic backgrounds, are honest, hard-working, and conscientious citizens who want a better life for themselves and their children. Louisiana may not realistically be able to aspire to the top of national quality-

of-life indicators, but there is no reason it should always rank at or near the bottom.

No doubt, the legacy of slavery, racial oppression, and the plantation economy that dominated Louisiana for so much of its early history created difficult obstacles. But other southern states have also faced such obstacles and have made great progress in surmounting them. Louisiana boasts many assets, including great scenic beauty and bounteous natural resources, and it is a wonderful place to live. Some observers have argued that the very things that make life in Louisiana so attractive – the food, music, fauna and flora, Mardi Gras, warmth of its people, successful collegiate sports teams, mild winters, and other diversions – are exactly what make its residents willing to tolerate the downside of Louisiana life. Whatever one feels about these issues – and reasonable people can always disagree – the first step toward addressing the challenges Louisiana faces is to understand the state's history. Every historical time period is unique, and yet many of the issues Louisianians face today have confronted previous generations.

Notwithstanding everything that is new in this edition, *Louisiana: A History* very much bears the mark of the man whose name still appears as general editor, Bennett H. Wall. Ben's passing ten years ago was a tremendous loss to the fields of Louisiana history and southern history and to the American historical profession as a whole. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Louisiana history and southern history – and their respective professional organizations, the Louisiana Historical Association and the Southern Historical Association – would not be what they are today without Ben's many years of dedication and commitment. It is only fitting that his name continues to appear as this book's general editor, since he was instrumental in bringing it to fruition in the first place and to keeping it alive and updated. I was honored when Andrew Davidson invited me for the

fifth edition to begin assuming the duties of general editor. I have taken a more active role in shaping this new, sixth, edition, and I thank Light, Judy, Ed, and Michael for graciously tolerating my meddling. But nobody can replace Ben Wall.

John C. Rodrigue

Part One

Light Townsend Cummins



CHAPTER ONE

Native Peoples and European Contact

- **8,000-10,000 years ago** Paleo-Amerindians first inhabit the future “Louisiana.”
- **8,500-4,000 years ago** Period of Meso-Amerindian culture.
- **1492** Christopher Columbus discovers New World.
- **1519** Pineda expedition maps entire Gulf of Mexico, including Louisiana coast.
- **1539-43** De Soto expedition explores future southeastern United States, including Mississippi River and Louisiana (De Soto dies May 1542).
- **1534** Jacques Cartier explores and claims St. Lawrence River (Canada) for France.
- **1608** Québec City founded.
- **1672-73** Marquette and Joliet explore Mississippi River and confirm it flows to Gulf of Mexico.
- **April 9, 1682** La Salle reaches mouth of Mississippi River and claims “Louisiana” for France.
- **1684-87** La Salle’s failed attempt to establish settlement near mouth of Mississippi River.

Perspectives on Colonial Louisiana History

Much of present-day Louisiana existed as a colony of France, and then Spain, before becoming part of the United States. In addition, other areas of the state were a colony of Great Britain. First settled by the French in the late 1690s, Louisiana became a Spanish possession in 1763, at the conclusion of the Seven Years War. The Louisiana Purchase of 1803 joined New Orleans and the lands west of the Mississippi River to the young United States. The United States assumed jurisdiction of the areas east of the river, now known as the "Florida parishes," during the War of 1812. The Pelican State, therefore, enjoys a colonial heritage that is French, Spanish, and English. For that reason, colonial Louisiana attracted a wide variety of French-, English-, and Spanish-speaking peoples along with the Native Americans who had long dwelled on its land. As an agricultural colonial province based on the production of cash crops such as sugar and cotton, the colony also attracted large numbers of unwilling immigrants from Africa. The African American influence also contributed in essential ways to its cultural development. Colonial Louisiana thus became a true "melting pot" of peoples, languages, customs, and cultures, which made it from the start a diverse place, a quality the state of Louisiana still retains. The existence of a major port at New Orleans also made colonial Louisiana a vital trade center, one in touch with world rhythms and markets from the time of the city's founding in 1718. The part it played in trade and commerce gave the Crescent City and its environs a cosmopolitan air. At the same time, the agricultural areas of the colony's interior and its remote rural hinterlands held pockets of insular, isolated communities. This dichotomy between urban and rural culture remains characteristic of the modern state.

As well, colonial Louisiana encompassed a far greater geographical area than does the state today. Louisiana

during the colonial era comprised almost half the interior of the present United States, from the Gulf of Mexico to French Canada. Most of this vast territory, however, was never settled by Europeans and remained the domain of Native peoples. The rich diversity of colonial Louisiana and its geographical extent have long attracted the interest of historians, not only because the history of the colony involves those of other present-day states - Alabama, Arkansas, Mississippi, Missouri, Tennessee, and parts of several others - but also because the history of colonial Louisiana touches on many central themes in the history of the nation, including the American Revolution, and the westward expansion of the United States. The historical studies written by historians of colonial Louisiana over the years, which tell the story of the province from diverse perspectives, bear this out. Some historians have written about the history of early Louisiana from the perspective of French colonial history, while others have considered it in the context of the Spanish New World empire. Both the French colonialists and Spanish Borderlanders, as the latter group is popularly known, see the colonial era of Louisiana from viewpoints outside of U.S. history. In addition, historians concerned with Native Americans and their history, along with those interested in African Americans and their contributions to our past, have also found colonial Louisiana a rich and significant place to study. Even historians of the environment flock to the study of early Louisiana, intrigued by its wetlands, numerous river and bayou systems, and varied uplands topography, factors that made - and still make - the state environmentally unique.

All of this gives the historical literature of colonial Louisiana a multicultural diversity and variety perhaps unequaled in telling the story of any other state in the nation. Many of the events that contribute to the history of colonial Louisiana did not, however, take place inside the