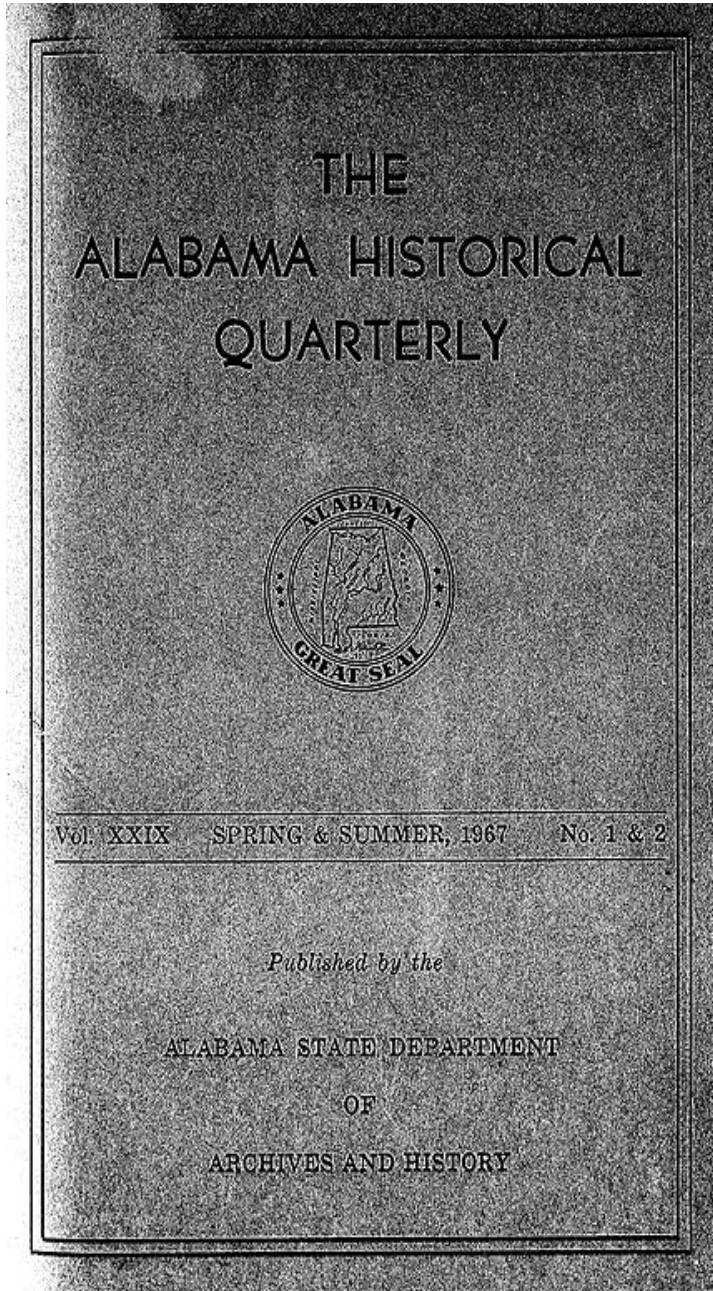


An Excerpt from:
The Alabama Historical Quarterly,
Spring & Summer, 1867 issue,
Pages 39-48, part 1 of 2 parts



DAUPHIN ISLAND'S CRITICAL YEARS: 1701-1722

By Jack D. L. Holmes

The nascent French settlements of the Gulf Coast preceded the establishment of New Orleans in 1718. One of the earliest historians of Louisiana, Antoine S. Le Page du Pratz, considered Mobile the "birthplace of French Louisiana" and Dauphin Island its cradle.⁽¹⁾ During the critical years from 1701 to 1722 the success or failure of French colonization in Mobile Bay and Dauphin Island would determine the future success or failure of French settlement in the lower Mississippi and Alabama Valleys.

In a sense the early history of the colony was closely connected with that of Pensacola. When the Spanish officials in New Spain (Mexico) learned of the expedition under Robert Cavalier, Sieur de la Salle (1643-1687), which first penetrated the Spanish lands of Texas in 1687, their reaction was to establish frontier posts to check French expansion to the west and to the south. Captain Andres de Pez sailed along the northern Gulf coast in 1689 and returned to recommend the fortification of Pensacola Bay before the French could settle there. The Spanish crown approved his suggestion in 1692, and the following year, Captain Pez and Carlos de Siguenza y Gongara, a cosmographer and mathematics professor at the University of Mexico, landed at Pensacola Bay and renamed it Santa Maria de Galve. Their requests for funds with which to build sound fortifications were not heeded until it was learned that the French had sent four ships to the Gulf of Mexico to establish a settlement. Thus, in the fall of 1698, Andres de Arriola arrived as first governor of Pensacola, and Jaime Franck, an engineer in the Spanish service, began construction of a small fort guarding the entrance of the bay. Fort Carlos

(1) S. LePage du Pratz, *Histoire de la Louisiane* (2 vols; Paris, 1758), I, 37-38.

thus gave Spain an initial advantage in the rivalry with France over settlement of the Gulf of Mexico's northern coast.⁽²⁾

Unfortunately for Spain, Pensacola never lived up to sanguine expectations. Only a handful of settlers could be induced to colonize the unhealthy site, and their only valuable product was the pine logs cut to serve as ship masts. The small garrison there was never able to check Indian attacks, and it was apparent that a strong effort by the French could drive the Spaniards from Pensacola.⁽³⁾

But the French did not contemplate an attack on Pensacola at this time. The first of four remarkable brothers whose names were closely associated with the establishment of French domination at Dauphin Island, Pierre LeMoyne Ecuyer, Seigneur d'Iberville, arrived at Pensacola in January, 1699 only to find that the Spaniards had fortified the area and had refused to allow the French to land. Iberville reluctantly sailed west along the Gulf Coast and on January 31, 1699, he anchored off Dauphin Island. A detachment of troops landed on the island where they discovered the skeletons of sixty-persons, and on February 3 Iberville named the island "Massacre" in the belief that an Indian battle had taken place there.⁽⁴⁾ The name did not remain long, however, and by 1711 it was called Dauphine Island in honor of the wife of the eldest son of the French Monarch. In the course of time the final "e" was dropped and the present spelling "Dauphin" became accepted.

(2) Pensacola—Reasons and Reality," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XXXVII (Jan.-Apr., 1959), 228-31; Stanley Faye, "Spanish Fortifications of Pensacola, 1698-1763," *ibid.*, XX (Oct., 1941), 151.

(3) William B. Griffen, "Spanish Pensacola, 1700-1763," *ibid.*, XXXVII (Jan.-Apr., 1959), 253; Charmion Clair Shelby, "International Rivalry in Northeastern New Spain, 1700-1725," (unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, History, University of Texas, 1935), 49. Cited hereafter as Shelby, "International Rivalry."

(4) LePage du Pratz., *Histoire de la Louisiane*, I, 37; Richebourg Gaillard McWilliams, *Dramatic History of Dauphin Island* (Mobile, 1954), 2-3; Josef Gabriel y Estenez, "Descripcion historica de la Luisiana," Sevilla, March 29, 1806, Biblioteca del Archive del Servicio Historico Militar (Madrid), Legajo 5-1-9-14> fol. 19, cited hereafter as ASHM. "Journal du voyage fait par d'Iberville . . . ," December 31, 1698-May 3, 1699, copy in the Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris, MSS., Fr., Nouv. Acq., Vol. 9310, fol. 17, cited hereafter as BNP, FNA.

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DAUPHIN ISLAND AND MOBILE BAY, 1717

Ydee on Plan du Chenal . . . May 16, 1717," *Bibliotheque Nationale* (Paris), *Collection d'Anville*, No. 8815.

"Carte Particuliere de la pointe de Vest de Visle Dauphine."

1718. Drawn by Sr. Broutin, Engineer of France, Source:

Bibliotheque Nationale (Paris). Copy furnished through courtesy of Henry Pilot of New Orleans.

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EASTERN TIP OF DAUPHIN ISLAND SHOWING ISLE AUX ESPAGNOLS AND POINT A GUILLORY
"Carte Particuliere de la pointe de Vest de l'Isle Dauphine."
1718. Drawn by Sr. Broutin, Engineer of France, Source: Bibliotheque Nationale (Paris). Copy furnished through courtesy of Henry Pilot of New Orleans.

After the 1717 hurricane, in which the island was divided into two sections, the eastern portion was referred to as Dauphin Island and the western portion as Petit Bois.

B Iberville sailed down the coast and established Fort Maurepas near present-day Biloxi, but the French continued their interest in Dauphin Island. Francois de la Rochefoucauld, Marquis de Surgeres, explored the island and recommended a settlement around the excellent harbor.⁽⁶⁾

Iberville received orders from Jerome Phelypeaux, Comte de Pontchartrain and Comte de Maurepas, that since the Spaniards had fortified Pensacola harbor, Iberville should attempt fortified posts at Mobile Bay.⁽⁷⁾

Ensign Sauvolle, who had commanded at Biloxi, explored the coast in 1701 and recommended establishing Dauphin Island as a harbor to serve a projected settlement at 27-Mile Bluff on Mobile Bay.⁽⁸⁾

On December 17, 1701, Iberville gave the necessary orders for the transfer of the young French colony from Biloxi to Dauphin Island and Mobile. Warehouses and barracks were constructed, and rude huts served to shelter the colonists who dragged their humble belongings to "the cradle" of French Louisiana.⁽⁹⁾

The years passed swiftly but in 1708 Iberville's brother, Jean-Baptiste LeMoyne de Bienville, happily reported that he was building a fort to protect the nascent settlement on Dauphin Island.⁽¹⁰⁾

(6) Richebourg Gaillard McWilliams (ed.), *Fleur de Lys and Calumet, Being the Penicaut Narrative of French Adventure in Louisiana* (Baton Rouge, 1953), 119.

(7) Marcel Giraud, *Histoire de la Louisiane Francaise* (3 vols.; Paris, 1953-1966), I, 21; Peter J. Hamilton, *Colonial Mobile* (Boston, 1897), 30-31.

(8) TPontchartrain to Iberville, Versailles, Aug. 3, 27, 1701, Archives Nationales, Paris, Archives de la Marine, B2 155; Shelby, "International Rivalry," 39. Hamilton, *Colonial Mobile*, 149.

(9) Nicolas de la Salle to M. Begon, Fort Louis, September 7, 1706, BNP, FNA, Vol. 9310, fol. 86. Roberto Gil Munilla, "Politica espanola en el Golfo mexicano, •expedicion.es motivadas por la entrada del Caballero La Salle (1685-1707), *Anuario de Estudios Americanos* (Sevilla), XII (1955), 467-611; Dunn, *Spanish and French Rivalry*, 185-215; LePage due Pratz, *Histoire de la Louisiane*, 38.

(10) Bienville to Begon, Fort Louis, Feb. 25, 1708; and d'Artaquiette to [Begon], Fort Louis, Feb. 26, 1708, BNP, FNA, Vol. 9310, fols. 107-9, 112.

The following year Captain LaVigne Voisin of St. Malo arrived to build a primitive stockade.⁽¹¹⁾ By 1710 there were twenty houses located at the eastern end of the island surrounding what was ambitiously called 'Fort Dauphin/' located some ten leagues south of Fort Louis at Mobile.⁽¹²⁾ Unfortunately, on September 9, 1710, an English privateer from Jamaica raided and pillaged the settlement and tortured the poor settlers in an effort to learn where their "mines" were located.⁽¹³⁾

By 1713 there were only ten families and sixteen settlers living in miserable shelters on the island. Many were Canadians who had taken trade goods on consignment but had pocketed the proceeds of the trade with the Indians and had fled to Dauphin Island. A contemporary description of the settlement by Governor Antoine de LaMothe Cadillac (1657-1730) is none too flattering:

"Dauphine Island, hitherto Massacre, is six leagues long. It is wooded with pines for about one league. It is scarcely one quarter of a league in width. For five leagues to the west it is simply nothing but a sandbank and white and shifting sand. To the north the sand island has a border of woods of various sorts.

"There are sixteen settlers both married and unmarried. The houses are situated on sand that the wind carries

(11) "McWilliams (ed.)/ *Fleur de Lys*, 119, 129*. Cf. Andrew McFarland Davis, "Canada and Louisiana," in Justin Winsor (ed.), *Narrative and Critical History of America* (8 vols.; Boston, 1887), V, 27, who says that the first settlement on Dauphin Island was not made until 1707 nor the first fortifications, until 1709.

(12) Bienville to Ministre, Port Dauphin, Oct. 27, 1711, and Memoire du Roi au Sr. de la Mothe Cadillac, Versailles, Dec. 18, 1712, BNP, FNA, Vol. 9310, fols. 158, 156; Giraud, *Histoire de la Louisiane*, I, 175. La Vigne Voison had also built a church for Dauphin Island: Hamilton, *Colonial Mobile*, 150. Cf. Bienville to Minister of Marine, Port Dauphine, Oct. 27, 1711, BNP, FNA, Vol. 9310, fol. 166, who says the church was built by Sieur de Remonville.

(13) Gabriel y Estenoz, "Descripcion historica de la Luisiana," ASHM, fol. 21; Dunbar Rowland and Albert G. Sanders (eds. & trans.), *Mississippi Provincial Archives, French Dominion* (3 vols.; Jackson, Mississippi, 1927-1932), II, 164. Cited hereafter as Rowland and Sanders (eds.), *Miss. Prov. Arch.* The raid is given as 1711 by most historians who follow Hamilton, *Colonial Mobile*, 149-50; and Davis, "Canada and Louisiana," in Winsor (ed.), *Narrative and Critical History*, V, 27.

along like dust; Four vessels can lie at anchor in the port or harbor. I should not like to swear that it will not some day be overwhelmed by some hurricane that might overrun the islet or the sandbanks that form it. Its pass, the canal or channel, is very narrow and is only as wide as the length of a large vessel . . .

"I have also seen a garden on Dauphine Island which had been described to me as a bit of terrestrial paradise. It is true that there are a dozen fig-trees that are very fine and that produce black figs. I saw three pear-trees of wild stock, three apple-trees of the same sort, a little plum-tree about three feet in height that had seven poor plums on it, about thirty feet of grape-vines with nine clusters of grapes in all, some of rotten or dry grapes and the rest somewhat ripe, about forty feet of French melons, a few pumpkins: that is the 'terrestrial paradise' of Mr. D'Artaguette and of several others, the Tomona' of Mr. De Remonville and the 'Fortunate Isles' of Mr. De Madeville and of Mr. Philippe; their memoranda and their relations are pure fables. They have spoken about what they have not seen at all and they have too readily believed what was told them . . .

"According to the proverb 'Bad country, bad people' one can say that they are a heap of the dregs of Canada, jailbirds without subordination for religion and for government, addicted to vice principally with the Indian women whom they prefer to French women . . ." (14)

The historian Francis Parkman also expressed a poor opinion of the ten to twelve families who cultivated the barren Dauphin Island soil, claiming they were lazy and "ruined by the extravagance of their wives. (15) Concerning the "extravagance," however, it is difficult to reconcile this appraisal with the poverty-stricken condition of these pioneer Alabamians!

(14) laMothe Cadillac to Pontchartrain, Fort Louis, Oct. 26, 1713, BNP, FNA, Vol. 9310, fols. 168 // . This quotation is taken from the translation in Rowland and Sanders (eds.), *Miss. Prov. Arch.*, II, 163-67.

^Francis Parkman, *A Half-Century of Conflict*, Part. VI, *France and England in North America* (2 vols.; Boston, 1899), I, 309.

The population was not always of the poorer variety, however, and the Canadian settler Jean-Baptiste Graveline owned one of the best constructed homes on Dauphin Island.⁽¹⁵⁾

After the destructive privateer's raid in 1710 many families fled to the safety of the mainland, but in 1711 several settlers proposed to return "in order to live by fishing," provided the King aid them.⁽¹⁶⁾

The most important royal contribution, in the opinion of the settlers and their leaders, lay in making Dauphin Island secure from the attacks of marauding privateers. Bienville in 1711 claimed that Dauphin Island was "the key to the country" and urged its fortification.⁽¹⁷⁾

Governor LaMothe Cadillac in 1713 agreed: "It is my opinion that in order to complete and put in good order the fort on Dauphin Island, building it of stone with the lodgings for the governor, the staff, the barracks for the officers and soldiers, a powder-magazine, the chapel, guardhouse, and the other magazines, it is necessary [to have] sixty thousand livres and to bring workmen from France for the inhabitants of the country ask for no less than two or three piastres per day."⁽¹⁸⁾

Unfortunately for the colony, the quarrel between LaMothe Cadillac and the *Commissaire - Ordonnateur* Jean - Baptiste DuBois DuClos hindered rapid work on the defenses. Cadillac complained that if a repetition of the privateer's raid of 1710 were to occur, DuClos would be to blame, for he had not even supplied Cadillac with the means to build adequate barracks for the troops stationed on the island.⁽¹⁹⁾

The Crown acted slowly, but by 1715 the two royal officers in Alabama were ordered to establish five posts in Louisiana, the most important of which was to be on Dauphin

⁽¹⁵⁾ Giraud, *Histoire de la Louisiane*, I, 175.

⁽¹⁶⁾ Parkman, *Half-Century of Conflict*, I, 312.

⁽¹⁷⁾ Bienville to Minister, Port Dauphine de la Louisiane, Oct. 27, 1711, BNP, FNA, Vol. 9310, fol. 158.

⁽¹⁸⁾ LaMothe Cadillac to Pontchartrain, Oct 26, 1713, Rowland and Sanders (eds.), *Miss. Prov. Arch.*, II, 194-95. The *piastre* was roughly one dollar.

⁽¹⁹⁾ Cadillac to Pontchartrain, Fort Louis, Sept 18, 1714, BNP, FNA, Vol. 9310, fol. 182.

Island, where the "governor, *commissaire - ordonnateur*, officers and seventy-five soldiers were to reside.⁽¹⁹⁾

The engineer Bajot drew up elaborate plans for a pentagonal stone fort in 1715, and the Council of Marine ordered another engineer named Artus to draw plans showing the terrain and suggestions for the emplacement and trenches.

The sandy nature of the terrain offered various obstacles and, with the exception of locally prevalent oyster shells for making lime, the stone and other building materials were difficult to obtain.

One engineer named LeMaire even suggested that they cut the stones for the fort's five "arrows" or angles in France and fill up the intervals with mortar and bricks manufactured in the new colony.⁽²⁰⁾

When the engineers and royal officials realized the expense of such a stone fort, they suggested instead a simple four-sided pine or cedar fort built of stakes, and during the closing months of 1717 or early 1718 a pine-stake stockade was constructed by Jean Michiele, Seigneur de Lepinay et de la Longueville.⁽²¹⁾ The warm, humid climate played havoc with such wooden fortifications, however, and by the time Charles Legac, secretary of the Council of Commerce for Dauphin Island, arrived in 1718 the wooden fort was already crumbling into ruin.

Fortifications were not the sole means of defending the island, but the status of the troops stationed there was little better than the sorry condition of the wooden forts. The Minister of the Marine hoped to station four companies of fifty men each in the young colony, but there were only 160 men there in August, 1715, and the following year death and

⁽¹⁹⁾ *Memoire* of king to Cadillac and DuClos, Dec. 21, 1715, *ibid.*, fol. 187. Giraud, *Histoire de la Louisiane*, II, 105-106; Bobe to Guillaume de L'Isle, Versailles, Jan. 8, 1715, "Curious Correspondence of de l'Isle the Geographer as to the Limits of Louisiana, etc." *Historical Magazine and Notes and Queries*, III (Aug., 1859) 232.

⁽²⁰⁾ Poirer and Hubert, "Inventaire . . .," Fort Louis, May 25, 1718, Archives Nationales, Paris, Archives des Colonies, Section C18, cited hereafter as AN, AC, C13, A: V; copy also in the Mississippi Provincial Archives, French Dominion, State Department of Archives and History, Jackson, Mississippi, VIII, 148-49; Giraud, *Histoire de la Louisiane*, II, 107; Hamilton, *Colonial Mobile*, 149. Giraud, *Histoire de la Louisiane*, II, 107.

⁽²¹⁾ *d.*, II, 98-99; Minutes of the Council of Marine, Louvre, Aug. 29, 1716,

desertion had reduced that figure to an inadequate 116. An additional four companies were to be recruited in France to serve in Louisiana, but between 1715 and 1716 only 114 of the proposed garrison could be raised, and most of these recruits were old men, captured deserters, felons and salt smugglers.(22)

Plans for stationing three companies at Dauphin Island in 1717 were likewise only partially successful.(23) The men were so unreliable and insubordinate that on one occasion Bienville was forced to order ducked two soldiers who had mutinied on the voyage to Louisiana! (24)

Logistics presented another problem because it was difficult to supply the small garrison on the island with fresh meat from the mainland due to the distance and the difficulty of locating barges to carry the goods. Even the Indians refused to come to the island to help in its defense until supplies were available. (25)

With only fourteen reed-covered huts offering little protection from the elements, let alone a potential enemy, it is easy to understand the prevalence of desertion. (26)

Fortunately for the nascent colony on Dauphin Island there was little to fear from the Spaniards in nearby Pensacola. They were having their own problems. The Alabama Indians repeatedly attacked the small Spanish garrison and carried off troops and even the chaplain! The Spanish governor requested and received aid from Bienville on various occasions.(27)

The friendly and mutually cooperative relations between the French at Dauphin Island and Mobile and the Spaniards at Pensacola, Havana, and Vera Cruz lasted almost two decades. In 1701 a combined Franco-Spanish naval squadron convoyed the treasure-laden Spanish *flota* in the West Indies, and in 1704, when the English attacked Pensacola, the French sent aid to the besieged garrison.

(22) Rowland and Sanders (eds.)? *Miss Prov. Arch.*, II, 216.

(23) *Memoire sur la Louisiana, 1717*, AN, AC, C13, V, 83-90.

(24) *Minutes of the Council of Marine*, Aug. 29, 1716, Rowland and Sanders (eds.), *Miss Prov. Arch.*, II, 216.

(25) DuClos to Pontchartrain, Dauphin Island, Dec. 25, 1715, *ibid.*, II, 206.

(26) Observations of LaMothe Cadillac, July 1, 1716, contained in the *Minutes of the Council of Marine*, Oct. 9, 1716, *ibid.*, II, 220.

(27) LaMothe Cadillac to Pontchartrain, Fort Louis, Oct. 26, 1713, *ibid.*, II, 173-74.

Narrative continued in the next section, pages 49-63

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