

# The Surveyor Pirate of the Caribbean

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## ABSTRACT

*It appears that in the early days of the settlement of New Orleans, Louisiana, USA, a career change from the profession of land surveying and architecture meant venturing into the more lucrative, albeit less legal, undertaking of a privateer, which is actually a more polite word for pirate! Land surveyor and architect, Barthelemy Lafon, who had hailed from France, built up an impressive portfolio of land surveys combined with an equally extensive corpus of buildings attributed to his designs. Who knows what influenced this locally reputable pillar of the community to join with fellow Frenchmen, the notorious brothers Jean and Pierre Lafitte, the enigmatic pair who had a spurious agreement with the English and US overlords to sack Spanish vessels (and any others which ventured into their territorial waters?) and skirted with a death penalty to loot these hapless captains. It was indeed ironic that this duo of treacherous characters avoided execution by rendering courageous support to US General Andrew Jackson in conquering a much larger English force in the Battle of New Orleans in 1815, virtually being the last concerted effort by the homeland to suppress the rebellion of their northern American colonies on US ground. This paper presents an excellent sample of surveys and edifices attributed to Lafon, along with tales of some of his raids of piracy.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Barthelemy Lafon, New Orleans surveyor, architect, pirate.*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Spanish explorer Hernando de Soto discovered the body of the Mississippi River between 1541-42, but it was not until the Frenchman Robert Cavalier (Figure 1), Sieur de la Salle, erected a cross in 1682 at its mouth that the territory was formally claimed in the name of the French Sun King, Louis XIV, for whom Louisiana is named (State of Louisiana, 2023). In 1718, New Orleans was founded, being named after Phillipe Duc D'Orleans, younger son of King Louis XIII, with the oldest cathedral in the US, St. Louis Cathedral, being erected in that same year. It was destroyed in the 1788 fire to be rebuilt in 1794. Adjacent to this holy establishment was placed the Cabildo, the Governor's residence, in which the later mentioned treaty was signed in 1803. In 1762, the succeeding King Louis XV ceded all of Louisiana west of the Mississippi to his cousin, Charles III of Spain, with the Treaty of Paris formally confirming this transfer in 1763 (Chamberlain and Farber, 2014).

In the final years of Spanish administration from the great fire of 1788 to 1803, the enactment of Spanish building codes resulted in the erection of Spanish colonial style architecture, particularly in the ironically named French Quarter, such exteriors requiring stucco and tiled roofs including customary patios and long iron balconies as were found in the haciendas of southern Spain. Even after the formal transferral of the Louisiana territories to the US in 1803, the elite Creole planter-merchant class dominated commerce and the social life of the burgeoning community for a substantial period from that event (Chamberlain and Farber, 2014).



Figure 1: French explorer Robert Cavalier who claimed the Mississippi River in the name of Sun King Louis XIV to later give the name of Louisiana to the whole territory.

When the 3<sup>rd</sup> US President, Thomas Jefferson (also District Surveyor for Albemarle County), signed the Louisiana Purchase Treaty on 30 April 1803, the continental land mass of the United States of America was to be doubled, adding to its original 13 states all of the recently acquired French territory west of the Mississippi River (Figure 2). This amazing real estate transfer cost the US Treasury a mere US\$15 million, which, even in modern terms, was more like a ‘fire sale’ than a market value transaction. 530 million acres (828,000 square miles) of land was obtained for 3 cents an acre in what is the largest land acquisition in US history (State of Louisiana, 2023). The final hand-over of the lands from Napoleon Bonaparte took place on 20 December later that year.



Figure 2: Coloured green is the area of land purchased by the US government from France by the Louisiana Purchase Treaty, which was signed on 30 April 1803 for US\$15 million – US President Thomas Jefferson on the left and Napoleon Bonaparte on the right (Rawat, 2018).

Immediately, at the mouth of the mighty Mississippi River, and to the east, lay the new area later to be the State of Louisiana. Much of the occupied land had Spanish tenants, who had inhabited the farms during the Spanish occupation, which preceded the French ownership by about 40 years. In what could be described as the greatest land gazumping in world history, France’s fanatical self-proclaimed ‘Emperor’ hoodwinked the cash-strapped Spanish authorities by calling in a debt owed, so that he could then swiftly pass on the extensive territories west of the Mississippi to finance his failing battle against the English in arenas of conflict on the other side of the planet.

It was a commensurate land swindle and double deal, but the new states of America were unperturbed as they quickly absorbed the ownership of these neighbouring lands into their vastly expanded dominion. Although held under the Spanish flag, New Orleans had a culture identifying with the many French settlers who had migrated from their homeland with their descendants emerging as a white Creole merchant/planter class mainly conversing in a dialect of French origin.

## 2 LAFON'S EARLY YEARS IN NORTH AMERICA

Born in 1769 (the same year as Napoleon Bonaparte!) in the old town of Villepinte in the Departement de l'Aude, Province of Languedoc, in France, along the Canal-de-Midi which connects the Mediterranean to the Atlantic (Cultural Landscape Foundation, 2023), Barthelemy Lafon (Figure 3) spent his first 20 years under the Ancien Regime with Bourbon kings reigning over a nation where the privileged families enjoyed an elite lifestyle. However, with his coming of age in 1789 came the Storming of the Bastille on 14 July 1789, which started the French Revolution. This uprising meant upheaval and often death to the Bourgeoisie, so he fled the threat of the guillotine never to return to his birthland.

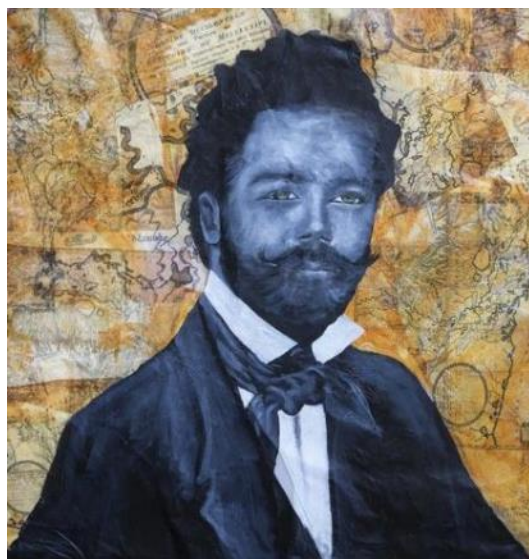


Figure 3: Portrait of Barthelemy Lafon by Jessica Strahan (2018).

Possibly passing through the spheres of French influence in St. Domingue or Haiti, he may have travelled through Cuba, but whichever route he took he made his way to the 'French' Louisiana Territory sometime around 1789-90. The sparsely populated lands are said to have reminded him of his rustic origins in rural France, and despite Spanish dominion over the territory since 1763, French was still the prevailing tongue together with compulsory Catholicism for all residents. Thus, it must have seemed like divine providence when Napoleon cut the deal to take the lands from Spain, then just as expediently disposed of all of the territory to the young US establishment in 1803 (see Figure A1 in Appendix A).

Shortly after his arrival in his new home, Lafon established an iron foundry in the lower area of Canal Street and a "brick plantation" in 1801 (see Figure A2 in Appendix A). The need for his architectural services must have been in strong demand, particularly in the sphere of public works repair projects. He prepared plans for the restoration of the city gaol in 1794 due to its damage from the fire of 1788. Four years later, he was called as an expert to assess the repair



works on the Presbytere and Cabildo, which was the residence of the Governor. During the period from 1797 to 1799, he brought about improvements to the covered gutters of the city, while in 1802 he reconstructed the riverfront levees. For these intervening 13 years, Lafon was in the right place at the wrong time because a terrible fire had destroyed much of New Orleans in 1788, which could only be considered a wrong time!

However, for the newly arrived French architect/surveyor it was the perfect time to join an economy craving new designs for lost residences or restoration plans for partly damaged structures worth saving. His expertise in hydraulic engineering was also keenly employed to build and repair those levees damaged by flooding, which was a constant threat and still is to this day. He was such a busy man that he engaged another French-born surveyor, Jean Baptiste Pene, to assist him. He also employed scribes to prepare many of his survey “warrants”. His survey duties comprised verifying land grants and land purchases, along with establishing precise borderlines between extensive rural French long lots (which meant plantation properties along the Mississippi or the numerous nearby bayous) or measuring boundary lines of the narrow urban lots in New Orleans city. Every inch was important with his services called upon to also evaluate the land for its potential usage (Edwards and Fandrich, 2018, p.1-2).

His first private commission is probably in 1794 for a dwelling for Mademoiselle Jeanne Macarty at the intersection of Conti and Decatur Streets in a typical colonial New Orleans design with a brick ground level containing stores, then a half-timber colombage second floor with plastered formal rooms and wood-panelled chimney breasts. Some other significant townhouses of the late Spanish colonial era accredited to Lafon by stylistic comparison are such works as the Barthelemy Bosque House at number 616 Chartres Street (c. 1795), a later 1790s residence for Vincent Rilleaux at 343 Royal Street along with another 3-storey premise at number 634 in the same street (Figure 4), and a c. 1795 building called Joseph Reynes House on a corner allotment at Chartres and Toulouse Streets. In 1797, he was engaged to build a larger similar home for the merchant Jean Baptiste Riviere at the corner of Bienville and Decatur Streets, made taller by adding an entresol as well as including more elegant features like carved mantles, a rose window and pediment with a sculpture. He is also credited with the 1799 De La Torre House, standing at 707 Dumaine Street, New Orleans (see Figure 4) (Masson, 2012).

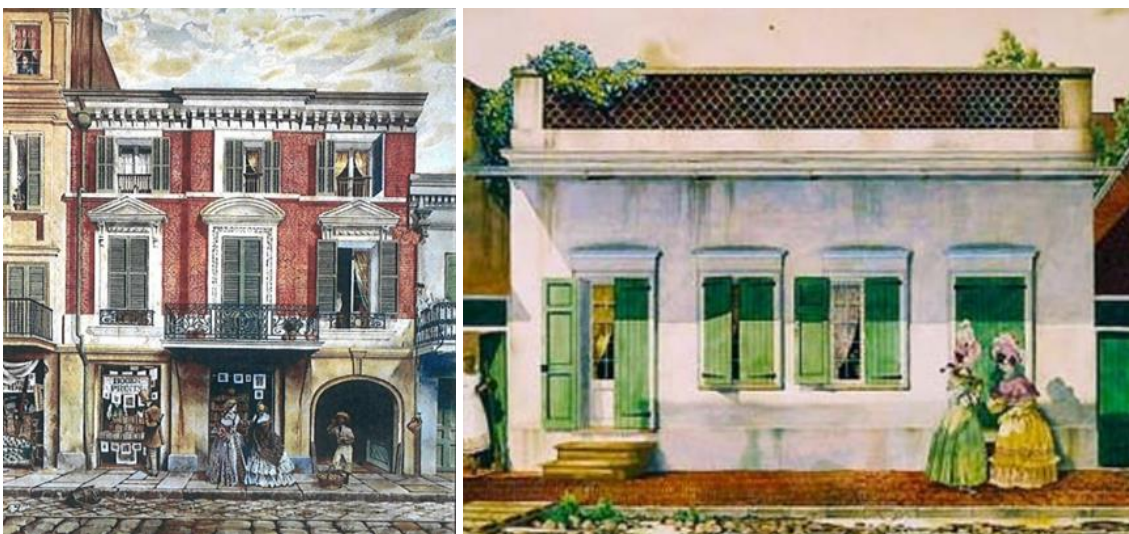


Figure 4: (Left) Lafon designed 1795 house at 634 Royal Street, and (right) the 1799 De La Torre House at 707 Dumaine Street, New Orleans.

### 3 IN THE NEW ORLEANS SURVEYOR-GENERAL'S DEPARTMENT

As Masson (2012) put it, “Barthelemy Lafon enjoyed a long and diverse career in Louisiana as an architect, builder, engineer, surveyor, cartographer, town planner, land speculator, publisher and pirate.” Such a quotation demonstrates the wide spectrum of activities with which Lafon was associated, but it is quite an anomalous finale which includes “and pirate”!

During his formative years in New Orleans, he carried out most reputable projects in town planning, building and mapping together with his many exploits in surveying, which create an image of a man fighting between two worlds of existence. In a Jekyll and Hyde parody, he performed the professional needs of his community to the fullest, but he was clearly torn away into a life of swashbuckling adventure in the dubious underworld of privateering, otherwise recognised as legalised piracy. As his life story unfolds, this darker side of his character will arise towards its finale. Nevertheless, his amazing professional performance belies his disreputable demise.

One of Lafon's early commissions included an 1803 survey of Galveston (now Galvez, LA, near Baton Rouge) for the Spanish along with maps and surveys of New Orleans. Having gained a solid reputation for his private surveying activities, and despite two bitter disputes relating to two of his architectural projects which may have sullied his name in this field, he was seconded to the Surveyor-General of Orleans County between 1804-09, duly appointed by Isaac T. Briggs, Surveyor-General of the lands South of Tennessee (Edwards and Fandrich, 2018, p.8). During his service with this department, he still carried on with designing buildings and creating green subdivisions in some of the new suburbs.

Lafon's work as a surveyor was said to be “extraordinary”, both working for private clients and the administration as well as designing developments adopting the principles of European Garden City designs. His initially preferred style of map preparation was based on his Spanish Surveyor-General Carlos Trudeau's style (Figure 5), but he later began introducing his own features to the works, such as dual language plans (Figures 6-9). He completed work on one of the earliest and most accurate maps of Louisiana in 1805 called “*Carte Generale du Territoire d'Orleans Comorenant Aussi la Floride Occidentale et une Portion du Territoire du Mississippi*” (Figure 8). Some of his other plans include Mouths of the Mississippi (1810 & 1813 – see Appendix B), English Turn (1814), the Balise (1814), Port St. Jean (1814) and Fort Bower (undated) on Mobile Point. Another map of New Orleans in 1816 illustrated the rural areas with new suburbs created around the nearby plantations (see Figure B3 in Appendix B).

His elaborate designs were shown on plans for the Lower Garden District, which crossed five plantations (Soule, La Course, Annunciation, Nuns and Paris) to include all land up to Felicity Street. Being a connoisseur of the classics, he gave the streets the names of the nine muses in Greek mythology: Calliope, Clio, Erato, Thalia, Melpomene, Terpsichore, Euterpe, Polymnia and Urania. The sophistication of his plans bore tree-lined canals, fountains, churches, markets, a grand classical school, and even a coliseum. Most of these decorative inclusions never materialised, but his grid pattern for the street layout along with the parks and, of course, the street naming survived.



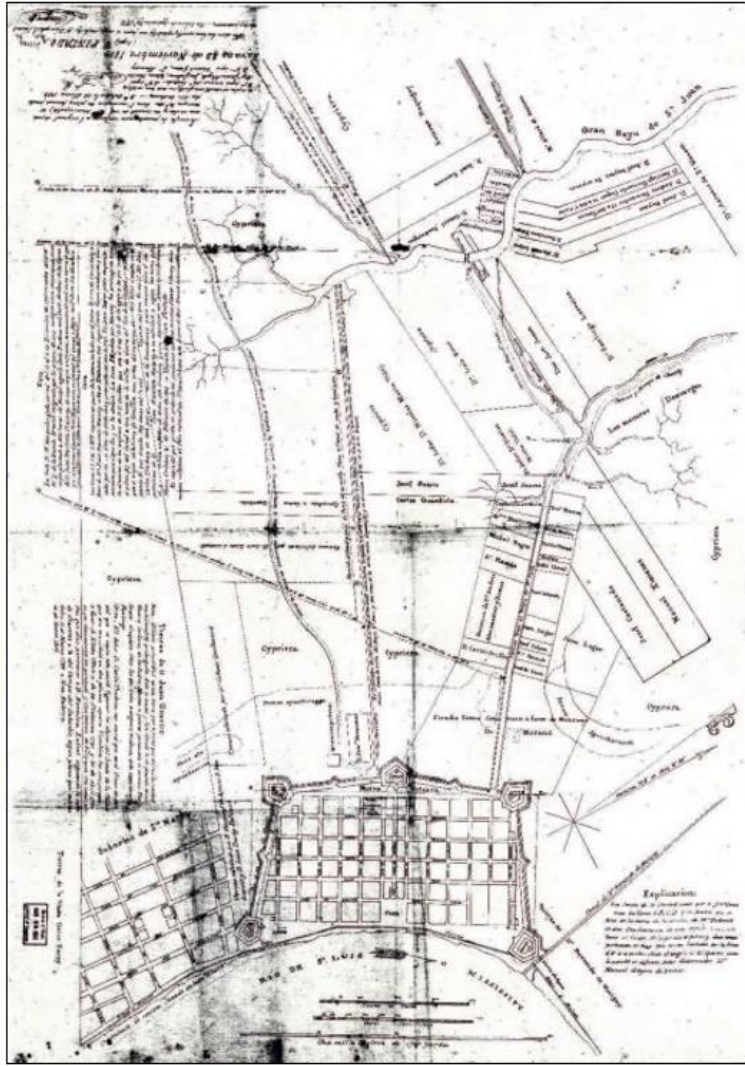


Figure 5: (Left) New Orleans Spanish Surveyor-General Carlos Trudeau (aka Charles Laveau), and (right) the 1802 map of New Orleans by Carlos Trudeau.



Figure 6: 1802 Lafon map of Lower Louisiana and Western Florida.

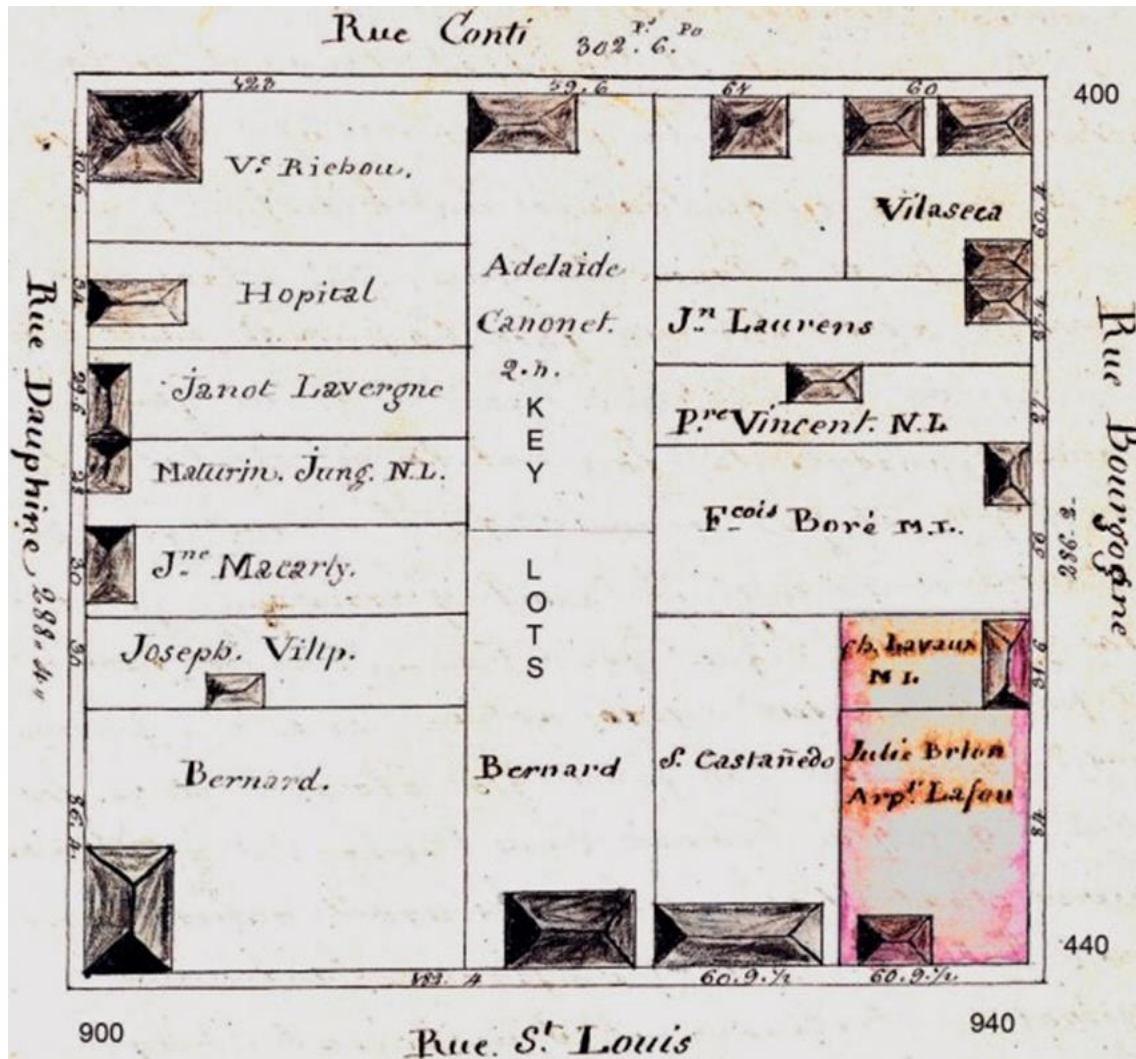


Figure 7: French Quarter Square 91, surveyed in September 1804 (Lafon Survey Book No. 3, p.46). The allotment shaded pink is the property acquired by Lafon at the time of this survey, it being where the house in which he died was located (Edwards and Fandrich, 2018, p.28).

In 1806 and 1807, he created influential subdivision plans of the Delord-Sarpy Plantation, enlarging Fauborg St. Mary to resurrect Fauborg Annunciation further up along the river. In keeping with European style trends and in departure from the grid street design, he featured circular designs with radiating streets and diagonal boulevards to provide vistas together with space for major public buildings. Sections of the Bywater and Bayou St. John neighbourhoods were designed by Lafon. Amongst his professional service consultancy were mapmaking, planning the town of Donaldson in 1806 as well as surveying and advising for upgrading the fortifications of New Orleans during the War of 1812 and the Battle of New Orleans in 1815, which saw the end of English aggression to subvert the young American colonies (Peoplepil, 2023). Lafon had been recruited as an engineer for the US Army, being a Captain in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment of the US Militia of the Territory of Orleans, preparing many maps for Governor Claiborne during the war.

Lafon was a man of diverse talents. In 1807, he published the first almanac of New Orleans, “*Calendrier de Commerce de la Nouvelle Orleans Pour l’Annee 1807*”, as well as “*Annuaire Louisianais Pour l’Annee 1809*” (Edwards and Fandrich, 2018, p.12). Lafon’s contribution to the redevelopment of New Orleans and the mapping of Louisiana was indeed “extraordinary”, but his participation in the two wars waged against the British on his home territory in 1812



and 1815 would seem to have been overlooked when US President Andrew Jackson evaluated his courageous and invaluable involvement in defeating a vastly superior (in number, at least?) British war machine.



Figure 8: One of the earliest and most accurate maps of Louisiana 1805 by Lafon – *Carte Generale du Territoire d'Orleans Comorenant Aussi la Floride Occidentale et une Portion du Territoire du Mississipi.*



Figure 9: Map of the land around Fort Petites Coquilles by Lafon, c. 1810 (Masson, 2012).



#### 4 LAFON DURING THE BRITISH WARS AND AS A PIRATE

Promoted to Major in the US Militia Engineers, Lafon was able to improve the defence capabilities at various forts around the territory, inclusive of Petite Coquilles in 1813 (Figure 10 and Figure B5 in Appendix B). Officially becoming the State of Louisiana in 1812, the US became embroiled in the War of 1812 against the militant British Navy who continually attacked American merchant ships, forcibly pressing their crews into their own naval service.

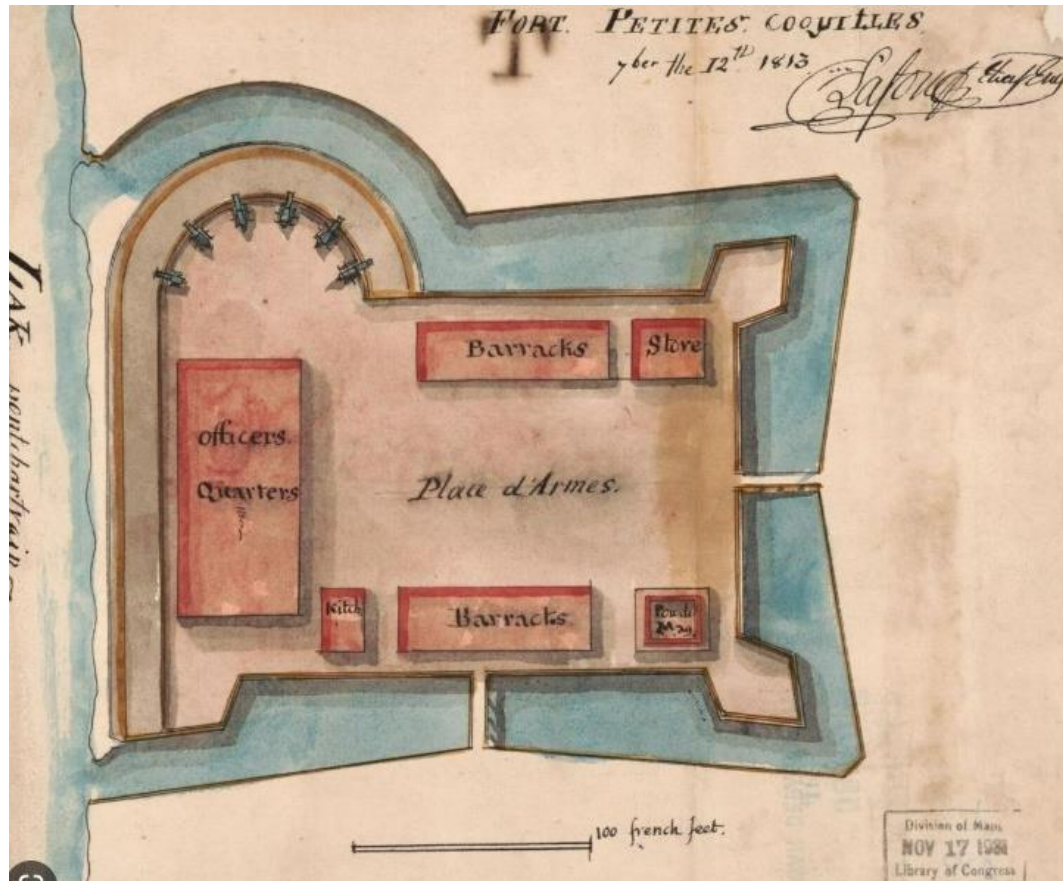


Figure 10: Lafon 1813 plan of fortifications at Petite Coquilles.

For years, Lafon had a close affiliation with the Laffite brothers, Jean and Pierre Laffite, who called themselves Baratarians privateers, operating from the island Barataria in the Gulf of Mexico (Figure 11). It is quite likely that Lafon had early acquaintances with the pirating brothers, possibly meeting in Bordeaux, France, before migrating across the Atlantic to America, or even cooperating during the Haitian rebellion when many French refugees from that country escaped to the eastern US. Whenever the first contact was made, there is no doubt that Lafon had been a close ally of the brothers for a number of years during which time he plied the seas in his own privateering ship *La Carmelita* upon which it is known that a number of liaisons between the three men ensued. In August 1813, Lafon had the use of a vessel named *La Misere*, which hijacked a prize called the *Cometa*. In 1814, Lafon participated in an operation leading to the capture of two Spanish vessels, which was followed by Lafon and others facing indictments for piracy (Guerin, 2010).

After the British had rid themselves of conflict against France, then forcing Napoleon into exile, they deployed their efforts into razing Washington DC, in August 1814. The principal target was then the capture of New Orleans to gain control of the Mississippi River waterway. Facing

a British force of around 9,000 troops, US President/General Andrew Jackson struck a deal with the leaders of the Baratarian pirate brigade of some 1,200 individuals, to pardon the recently captured Jean and Pierre Lafitte plus Lafon along with returning their vessels. Jackson's total force of some 5,200 men were able to incur substantial damage on their opponents, with the British losing three Major Generals (including Packenham) along with 2,033 soldiers, while only suffering less than 20 casualties (Edwards et al., 2019, p.61).

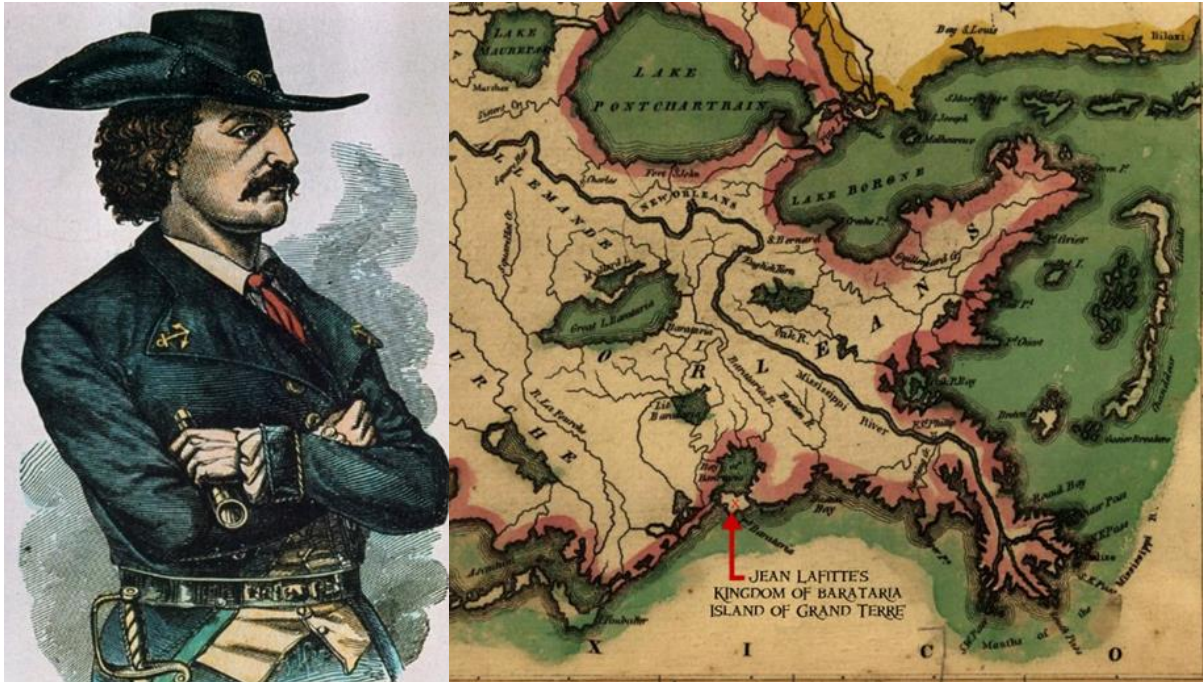


Figure 11: (Left) New Orleans privateer Jean Lafitte, and (right) locality map of the pirate island Barataria in the Gulf of Mexico which was the stronghold of the looting enterprise.

When the smoke cleared from this war-ending decisive rout, the back-stabbing US President Jackson reneged on his pledge and held onto the privateer ships and goods that had been confiscated on the earlier raid on the pirate stronghold of Grand Terre. Although released from prison, the two brothers and Lafon remained under close suspicion, and, while still under US assault, they eventually fled New Orleans completely (Edwards et al., 2019, p.62). The Lafitte brothers re-established themselves on the island of Galveston in Texas, for good, with Lafon joining them during their first two years of resettlement.

Before leaving the pirate stronghold in this new locality, Lafon still acted as a surveyor for the Spanish government, measuring and drafting the map "*Entrada de la Bahía de Galveston*". He also surveyed other regions in the southwest, at the same time acting as an official spy for the Spanish. Duplicity seemed to be the norm for these buccaneers of the high seas, as it is also firmly believed that Lafon and the Lafitte brothers acted as double agents, supplying espionage data to the US administration. The Mexican government in control of Texas at the time reacted very forcibly when the colony of Mexican patriots resident on the island conspired with the Lafitte brothers and Lafon to raid some Spanish ships flying the Mexican flag. After Lafon couriered a shipment of munitions to Galveston, his ship was seized on the high seas by agents of the Galveston "government" (Edwards et al., 2019, p.63).



## 5 BACK TO NEW ORLEANS IN 1818 AND FINAL DAYS

Having endured enough in Galveston, Lafon was back in New Orleans in 1818. His professional name in surveying and architecture had been irreparably soiled through his association with the notorious pirate brothers, his own privateering and the indictment for piracy handed down by the New Orleans District Attorney, John Dick, in February 1815. After this, he spent a short stint in gaol before he was finally acquitted (Edwards et al., 2019, p.62).

Lafon's choice of returning to New Orleans was more closely related to his desire to be back with his lifelong love, Modeste Foucher, who was a free woman of colour, and their four children (Edwards and Fandrich, 2018, p.11). With minimal success in his attempt to reinstate his professional career, Lafon attempted to sell all his possessions with an ultimate desire to return to his homeland where his father and brother still lived. Starved of work and destitute from Government Internal Revenue Department fines and costs in defence of the lawsuits demanding him to repay unpaid duties on the booty plundered from vessels which were the victims of his daring privateering, Lafon found himself in a whole world of despair. His halcyon days of brilliant chart making, skilled surveying and stylish architectural design had deserted him. His glorious dreams of sailing back to France with his coloured partner and children, so that they could marry and be free of the discrimination imposed upon them in the class-conscious New Orleans society, could not be further away from being realised.

Just when it could not go downhill any further, a yellow fever epidemic claimed him on 29 September 1820 at the modest age of 51 years. He died in his home at No. 934-36 St. Louis Street in square 91, originally purchased in 1804 from the estate of the wealthy woman of colour, Julie "Betsy" Brion (Figure 12, who was the mother of Modeste with Joseph Foucher) (Edwards and Fandrich, 2018, p.10). Lafon was buried in St. Louis Cemetery No. 1 (Figure 13 and Appendix C).

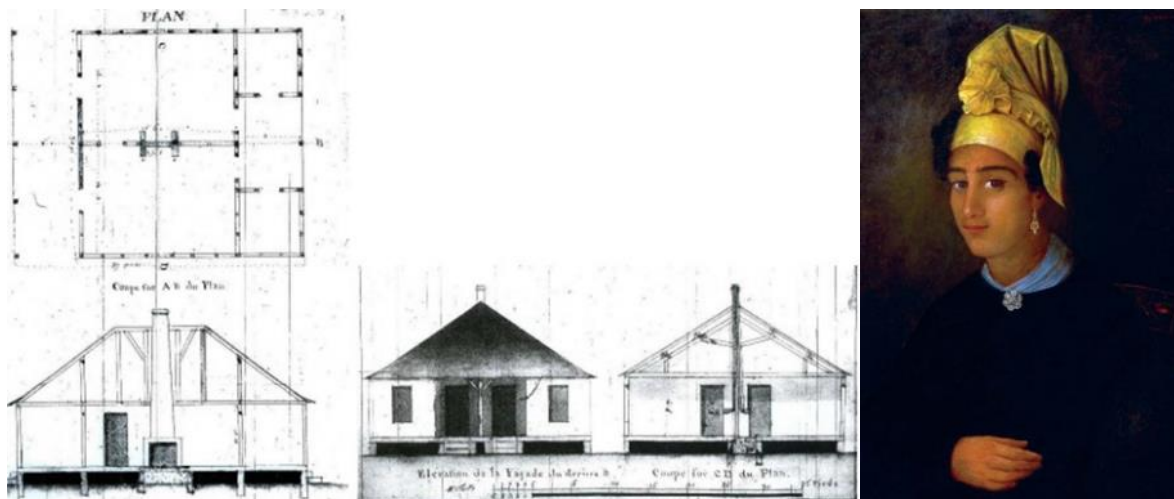


Figure 12: (Left) Lafon architectural plans for one of his homes at Chef Menteur built in 1806, and (right) 1837 portrait of Julie "Betsy" Brion, from whose estate he bought the land upon which he erected the house in which he passed away in 1820.



Figure 13: Barthelemy Lafon's vault in St. Louis Cemetery No.1 and its locality plan.

## 6 CONCLUDING REMARKS

The ultimate demise of Barthelemy Lafon from a man of distinction to a penniless pirate are a sorry tale of riches to rags, finally played out to the humiliation of his family members, making a fruitless most lengthy journey from France in pursuit of what was believed to be a vast estate of land holdings and other investments amounting to an Emperor's ransom. His father Pierre Lafon Snr. was in his mid-80s on the long trip across the Atlantic, but most tragically died not long after his arrival in 1822, stricken down by the same yellow fever, which had claimed his son. Next to take the prolonged trip was Lafon's older brother of 7 years, Pierre Lafon Jnr., accompanied by his 54-year-old wife Jeanne Victoire. After a mere few days, Jeanne had died of the same deadly disease, with her husband contracting the fatal fever to pass away in the following month on 19 October 1822 at the age of 60. The last one standing from the immediate family was the daughter of Pierre Jnr. and Jeanne, the spirited Jeanne Philippe Lafon, who was Lafon's niece. With the obligatory post-humous inventory of Lafon's estate the Court of Probates listing a large portfolio of real estate, over 50 field slaves and domestic servants, and a library of over 500 books, the extended journey over the water appeared to offer a mighty inheritance for the last member to risk death in the epidemic to claim her entitlement! Pursuing the battle for Lafon's estate to the Louisiana Supreme Court, she eventually won, only to hear the court pronounce that the entirety of Barthelemy Lafon's estate "was wholly insolvent and unable to pay the legacies and debts" (Edwards et al., 2019, p.66).

Thus, the fall of Barthelemy Lafon from reputable professional at the top echelon of the community, to which he made so many invaluable contributions both physically and financially, can only be the side effects of his strong allegiance to the notorious plundering Lafitte brothers, creating a rather unfavourable picture of his activities in the dubious exploits of privateering, the polite name for condoned piracy. Whatever image of disrepute may have been associated with Lafon in his later years, there can be no doubt that his excellence in surveying, mapping, engineering, architecture and town planning have survived him, as the brilliance of his European garden design suburbs, his many stylish and attractive buildings, practical restoration of roads and flood levees and superb maps of New Orleans and Louisiana stand in testimony to a complex character of early American history. He was a hero of the Wars



of 1812 and 1815, which saved his territory from British domination, and his practical solutions with a sharp mind can only be attributed to his professional training and experience as a land surveyor.

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## APPENDIX A: PLANS OF NEW ORLEANS

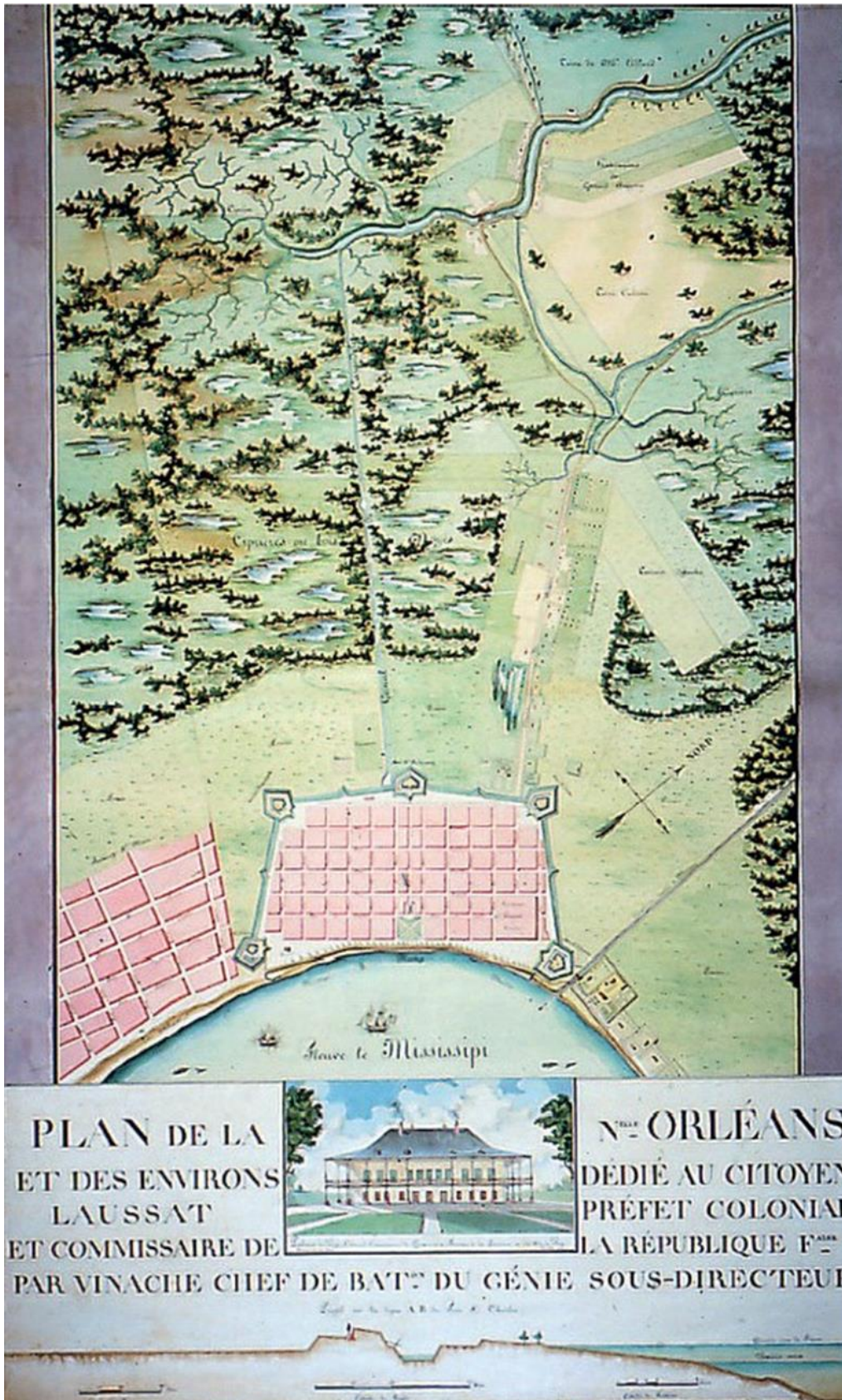


Figure A1: 1803 Vinache Plan De La Nouvelle Orleans in celebration of France's short reoccupation of the city before the Louisiana Purchase Treaty was completed.



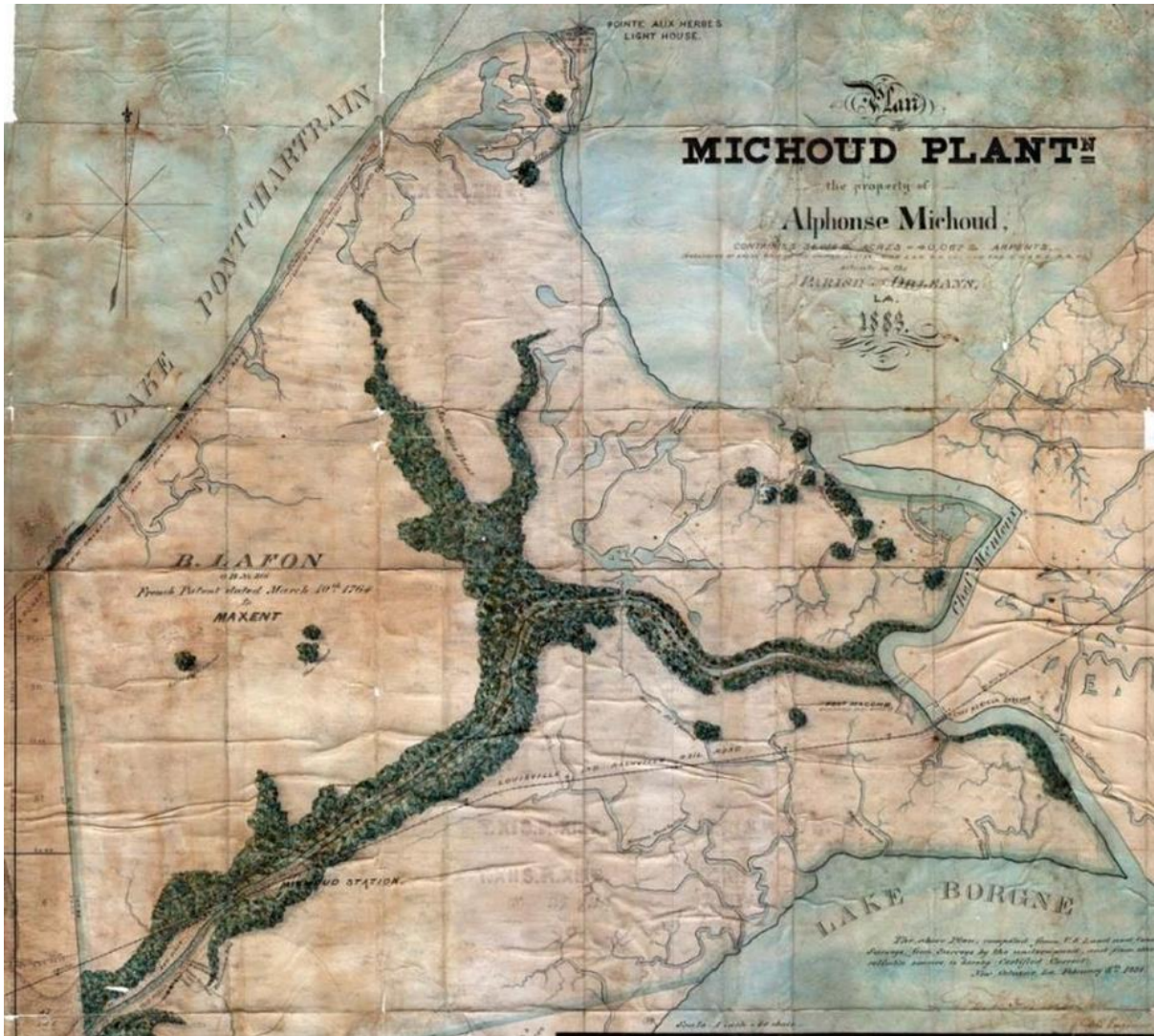


Figure A2: Plan of the easternmost section of New Orleans by George H. Grandjean titled “Michoud Plantation”, being the property of Alphonse Michoud comprising 36,056 acres. “B. Lafon” can be seen printed on the left portion of the plan. Barthélemy Lafon had gained ownership of this tract of land in 1801, which he used for what was said to be a “brick plantation”. He lost this holding to creditors in 1812.





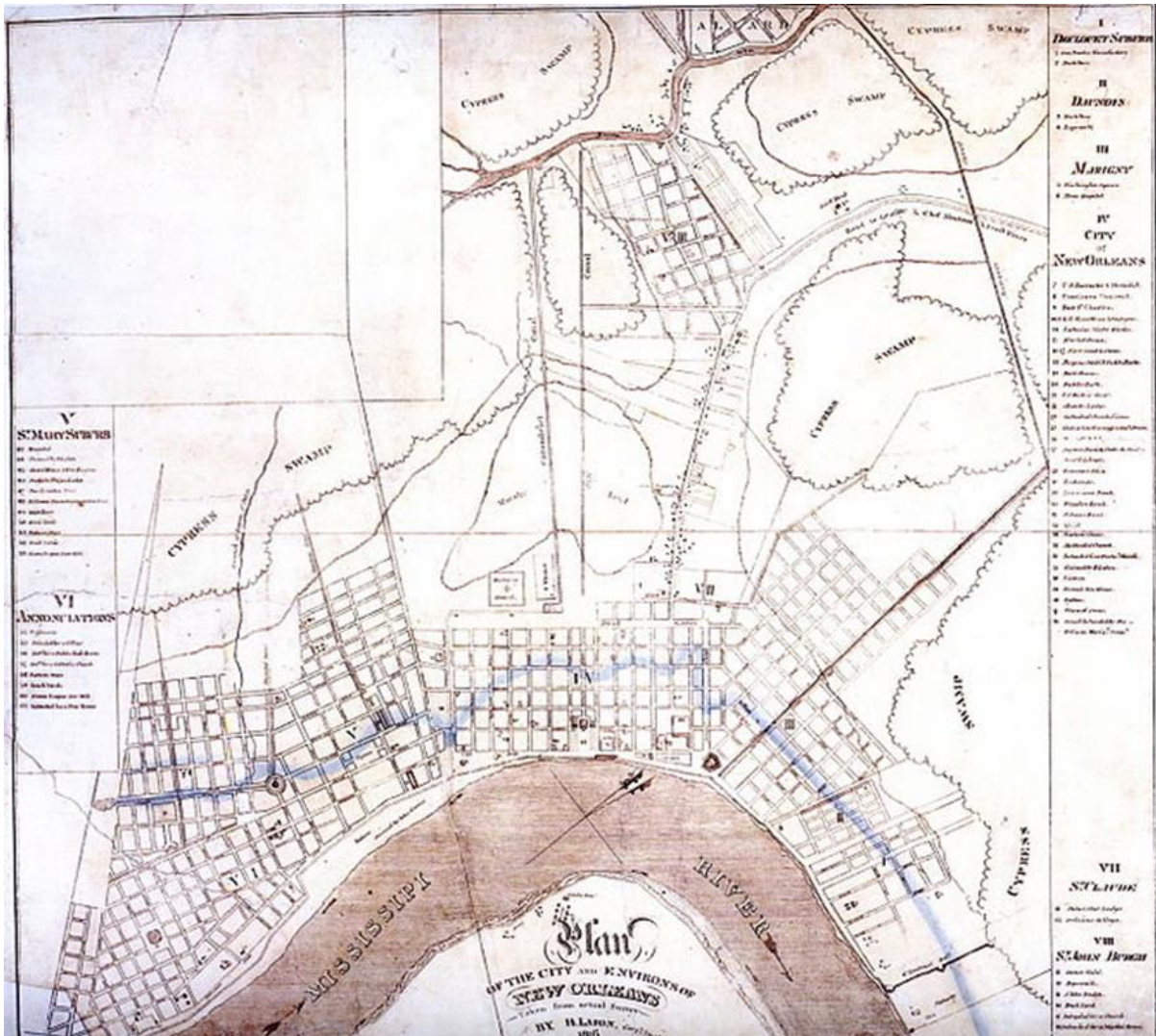


Figure B3: 1816 Lafon plan of the city and environs of New Orleans.



Figure B4: Perspective view of New Orleans and the Mississippi River from 1885.



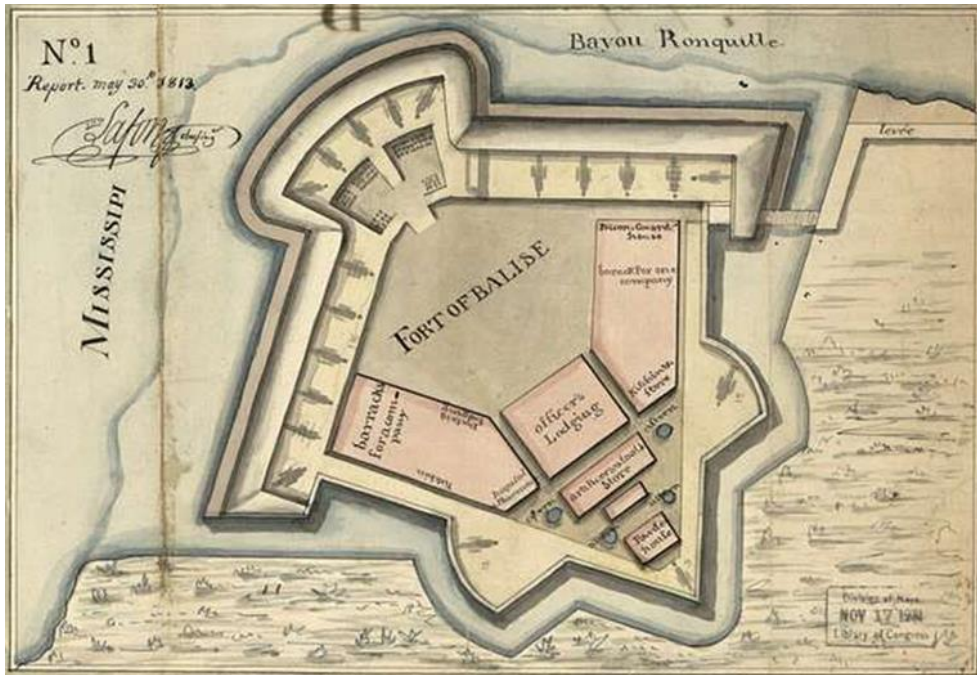


Figure B5: Lafon plan of Fort Balise, 30 May 1813.

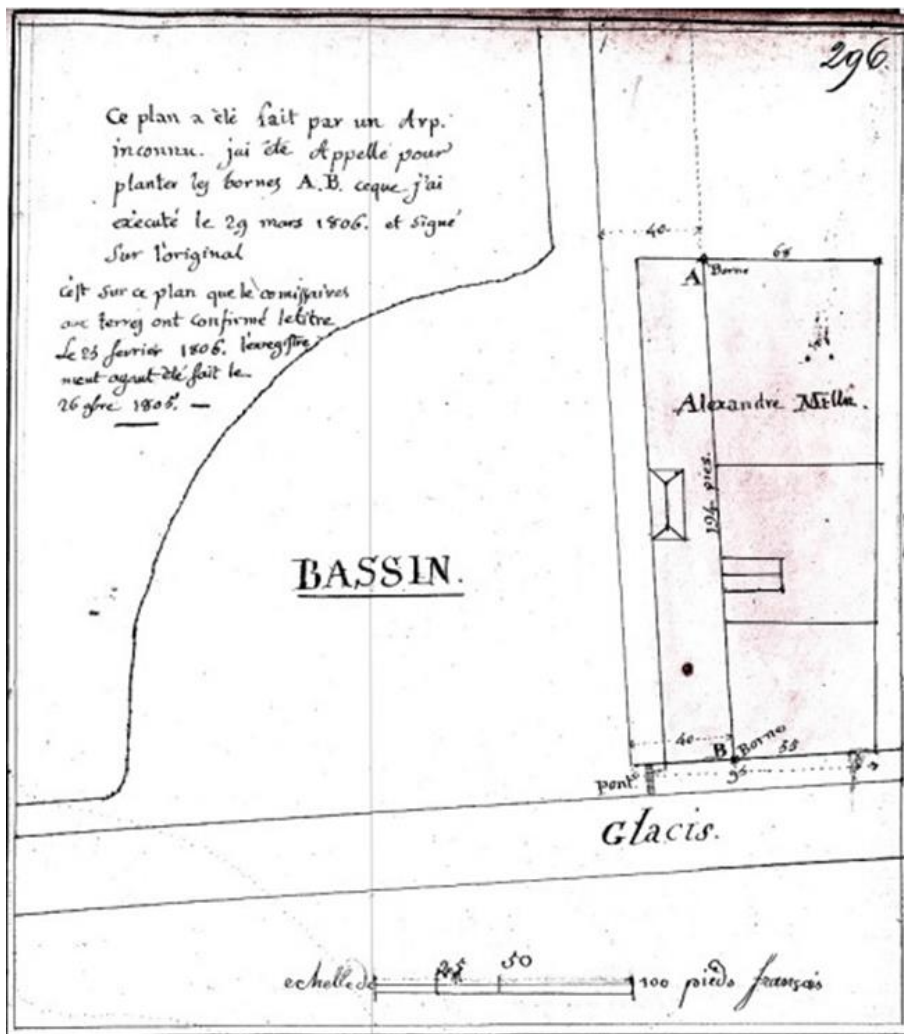


Figure B6: Lafon re-survey of the Carondolet Canal turning basin and land of A. Milne, 29 March 1806.



### APPENDIX C: NEW ORLEANS MAP WITH STREET NAMES AND SQUARE SECTION NUMBERS

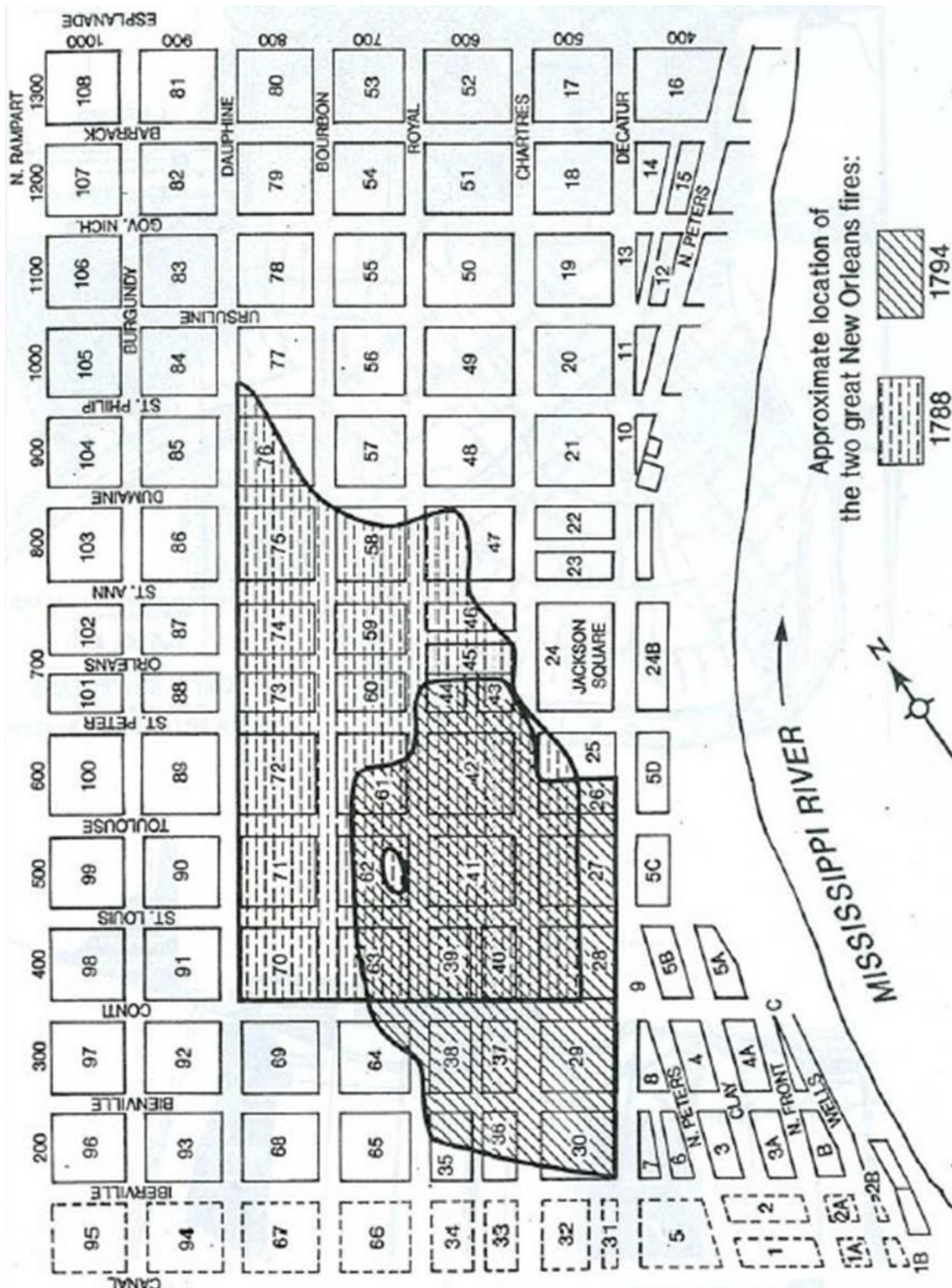


Figure C1: The street pattern of New Orleans City, showing street names and section numbers as allocated to the locality descriptions for identification of property, with square 91 being where the house in which Lafon died in 1820 is situated.