

INTRODUCTION



The City and the Nation

This is a story about the rise of a great city; it is also a story about the making of a nation. These two stories happened together, and each influenced the other. Both the city and the nation, while maintaining their rootedness and connectedness to their past selves, grew into new things, unexpected and unplanned-for things previously unimagined in the human experience. This book is about how this happened and how it changed the lives of people.

New Orleans in 1795 had been an unimportant and relatively unsuccessful European colonial town for almost eighty years. After an initial period of rapid growth in the 1720s, mainly through forced importation of slave and indentured labor, its population had stagnated, reaching about eight thousand by the century's end. In 1820, by contrast, there were over twenty-seven thousand New Orleanians. The population had more than tripled in twenty years—and would more than triple again by 1840, as the city became the third largest in the United States. The city's geographic footprint in 1795 still covered only scattered portions of the walled rectangle originally laid out by the French in 1718. Twenty-five years later it had filled the rectangle and spilled outward, stretching four miles along the riverfront and pushing back into the cypress swamp. Beyond population and area, the city's economic and social shape had altered beyond recognition. In 1795 it was still mainly a military outpost, at least in the eyes of its Spanish rulers, subsidized at great expense for strategic purposes. Its Spanish governors were army commanders first and foremost; its most prominent citizens prized their titles as militia officers. By 1820 its military character was forgotten, its walls and fortifications literally dismantled. Now New Orleans was a commercial city at the center of an Atlantic trading economy, its wharves lined with sailing ships and steamboats, its levee crowded with bales of cotton and barrels of sugar, attracting immigration from the northern United States,

from France, Ireland, and Germany, as well as involuntary immigration by Africans from the Chesapeake region in a burgeoning overland domestic slave trade. Its most prominent inhabitants were wealthy civilian planters and merchants.¹

During this period of rapid social transformation, New Orleans was severed from its political connection to the Atlantic empires and attached to the expanding American republic. The political change took place, of course, quite suddenly—with the Louisiana Purchase of April 1803, and the formal cession of Louisiana to American forces that December. But more gradual developments also brought New Orleans closer to the United States and farther from European and Caribbean connections. The Treaty of San Lorenzo (1795), negotiated in Madrid by diplomat Thomas Pinckney, legalized the city's trade with western American settlers, who began to send flatboats down the Mississippi, laden with wool, pork, hemp, and flour, both for export and for local consumption. It strengthened ties with agricultural producers throughout the vast Mississippi watershed, especially those now moving in large numbers to the Ohio and Tennessee River valleys, in the present-day states of Kentucky, Tennessee, Ohio, Indiana, and even western Pennsylvania. By the time of the Purchase in 1803, New Orleans was a small but growing commercial town with links to the United States economy—both upriver to the western frontier and, via the coastal trade, to the eastern port cities of Philadelphia, New York, and Baltimore.²

Cultural changes took place gradually as well. The Purchase could not, for example, make a region of French-speaking Catholics into English-speaking Protestants. Nor could it suddenly implant values like egalitarianism and republican virtue into a frankly hierarchical, authoritarian colonial society. Culture, or, as it was more commonly expressed, “custom” or “tradition,” was the sphere in which Louisianians most typically resisted the connection to the United States. But they did not always resist change, or resist it unanimously; in some cases they even spearheaded the transformation. In many ways, attachment to the United States led to cultural changes not because Americans imposed them, and not in the ways that Americans wanted, but because some Louisianians, empowered by the republican system, imposed them on others.

All these transformations—which extended to political ideology, systems of slavery and racial order, the legal system, and constructions of

ethnic and national identity—amounted to a revolution. It was a revolution analogous in many ways to the American revolution that had severed the eastern states' colonial connection to Great Britain a generation earlier. It was a strange kind of revolution, involving neither military struggles nor popular mobilizations. And it originated from outside; as Thomas Paine told Louisianians in a hectoring letter in 1804, they were “arriving at freedom by the easiest means that any people ever enjoyed it.” But Paine underestimated the challenges to come. Social transformation may have been initiated or catalyzed from outside, but it would still have to be constructed and maintained from within by Louisianians themselves. To be sure, Americans—including both Americans in the federal government and Americans who moved to New Orleans and embroiled themselves in its struggles—had definite ideas about the sort of Louisiana they wanted to create. But they proved, for the most part, unable to impose their visions, and many of them despaired of ever being able to truly consider Louisiana part of a republican Union. This was because during the same period as New Orleans turned into a very different and new kind of city, the United States was turning into a very different and new kind of nation.³

A PEOPLE-POWERED EMPIRE

The Atlantic seaboard trading confederacy that had won its independence from Britain in 1783 and formed a “more perfect union” with the Constitution of 1787 was governed in the 1790s by an intermediate system—the Federalist system—forged in open emulation of the great European powers. The ideology of Federalism aimed to maintain the benefits and advantages of independence while guarding against the perceived threats of democratization—demagoguery, “leveling,” and social instability. In comparison with the pre-1776 colonial order it was indeed revolutionary. But in the context of broader developments in American society, Federalism was crumbling even during the years of its ascendancy. Postrevolutionary America was becoming demographically younger, moving geographically westward, and developing into a mobile, acquisitive, egalitarian society, its colonial tradition of deference yielding to aggressive popular resentment of aristocratic airs

and privileges. With Thomas Jefferson's victory in the election of 1800, and republican victories in congressional and state elections throughout America, these broad social changes cohered into a very different and now dominant political ideology. Jeffersonian republicans sought, broadly speaking, to govern through mutual consent rather than force; they shrunk the military, cut the debt, and abandoned many of the symbolic trappings of state authority.⁴

Yet paradoxically, they continued to expand what Jefferson and others referred to as America's "empire of liberty." Federalists had begun to do so in the 1790s, responding to western pressure by waging a series of Indian wars in the Northwest Territory that eventually opened the present states of Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois for white settlement. Then the Louisiana Purchase doubled the nation's size—under the auspices of a party that had just halved the nation's military and financial resources. Nor would the process of expansion stop there: a planter insurrection in West Florida brought that territory under the United States flag in 1811; the War of 1812 brought massive land grabs from Native Americans in both the Northwest and Southwest; the Transcontinental Treaty in 1819 gave the new republic clear title to all the Floridas. This vastly expanded geographic domain had been acquired more through diplomacy and purchase than war; and it would be governed, not by the "heroic" Federalist state, but by the antimilitarist republican regime. Instead of being ruled as colonial possessions (as some Federalists still advocated), the new regions would be put on a programmatic path outlined in the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, through two stages of territorial government, to eventual full incorporation in the American Union on an equal footing with the original states.⁵

Accompanying and making possible this political expansion was the demographic expansion and movement of the American people. Americans were rapidly multiplying and streaming across the Appalachians, first into the "Kentucky-Tennessee wedge," then into the Old Northwest, and eventually down to the Mississippi Territory and across the great river to upper Louisiana. The censuses of 1800 and especially 1810 clarified this movement and inscribed it into the national political order through apportionment in Congress. For Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, it was not military force but "people power" that was the true engine of American expansion. Westward-moving settlers,

in their view, would not only extend American sovereignty but carry a republican political culture with them: civil liberties, jury trials, the common law, representative institutions. Indians would be “civilized” and gradually assimilated into the dominant culture, or, if they proved recalcitrant, moved to the open West. Even slavery, which many (if far from all) Jeffersonians in 1800 considered a fading holdover from the colonial era, would wither away in the territories, where yeomen freeholders would predominate over slaveholding “aristocrats.” Mutual bonds of both affection and interest would attach the new parts of the “empire” to the old, much more firmly than forceful, authoritarian rule ever could, because they were, after all, simply organic descendants of the original republic.⁶

Although it had a long genealogy in English political thought, this was a radical, revolutionary governing philosophy, and in many ways a phenomenally successful one. Jeffersonians proved more effective nation- and empire-builders than Federalists because they sought to unleash rather than contain popular energies. In a revolutionary age when European empires faced regional rebellions and chronic crises of authority—and in sharp contrast to the America of the 1780s and ’90s, when western separatism had been a constant worry—the republican empire after 1800, held together by consent rather than coercion, was remarkably stable and united.⁷

THE PROBLEM WITH LOUISIANA

In Louisiana, however, the Jeffersonian mode of sovereignty ran into problems. To be sure, in parts of upper Louisiana, where Anglo-American settlers eventually outnumbered Indians and scattered French *coureurs de bois*, the empire of liberty could work much as it had in the Old Northwest. But in the lower Mississippi Valley, and above all in New Orleans, where this study is centered, the prospect was very different. Here a sizable white, European-descended population that was culturally different—in religion, language, legal system, social structure, and countless other ways—was already solidly established. There would be no thought of “removing” the thousands of French creoles and Acadians already planting cotton and sugar, organizing towns, and building

levees. Initially, Americans expected that massive Anglo immigration to lower Louisiana would overwhelm and absorb the Francophone populations, assimilating them much the same way native populations were to be assimilated; when this failed to occur spontaneously, Jefferson conceived a scheme to grant 160-acre tracts west of the Mississippi to thirty thousand American volunteers in exchange for two years military service, to ensure the territory's security, outnumber the Louisianians politically, and overpower them culturally. Only when this plan proved impossible did Jeffersonians finally accept the reality that their new territory would remain culturally foreign for the foreseeable future—and that, in this case, their decentered strategy of republican sovereignty would mean ceding power and autonomy to a people whose social customs and political mentality were distinctly unrepublican.⁸

For as Americans discovered when they began to arrive in the Crescent City, it was more than speaking French and celebrating Mass that made Louisianians different. There were few schools in New Orleans and hardly any in the rest of Louisiana; literacy rates were low, and the print sphere limited to a single newspaper. Justice was dispensed summarily, jury trials were unknown, and punishments were severe. On the other hand, military officers had the right to be tried in special *fuero* courts even for ordinary crimes. Popular political participation either formally or “out-of-doors” was nowhere to be seen, and representative institutions were nonexistent; the twelve seats on the Cabildo (or municipal government) could be bought, sold, or inherited but never elected. Social hierarchy was rigid; laborers could be caned by gentlemen in the street for the least provocation. Slavery was ubiquitous and, far from being under attack as it then was in parts of the United States, seen as a salutary and necessary part of the social order even by non-slaveholders. In these and many other ways, in fact, the society of lower Louisiana struck many newly arriving Americans as precisely the opposite of what a virtuous republican society should be.⁹

At the top of the creole social order was a powerful elite clique, composed of both planters and merchants, located mostly in and around New Orleans. They had consolidated their wealth and social power throughout the colonial period and had long been schooled, as I will show in chapters 1 and 2, in the arts of evading, confounding, and resisting the prerogatives of distant rulers in Paris and Madrid. Although

mostly (not entirely) descended from French ancestors, they had little or no sentimental attachment to France. (The “mother country” had not always treated them kindly during the colonial period, and French visitors steeped in theories of New World “degeneration” invariably treated creoles as their inferiors.) Toward the end of the Spanish period, sugar cultivation was pioneered in lower Louisiana, and many of the elite class greatly augmented their wealth through sugar planting. At the same time many became increasingly disenchanted with Spanish imperial corruption, inefficiency, and trade restrictions; many began to consider the possibility of greater prosperity under either a French Bonapartist or an American republican order. On the other hand, when the American takeover did finally come, many of the elite were appalled by the clumsy early missteps and insensitivities of the new regime. They were confused by their new governor’s undistinguished lack of military ostentation and worried about whether the new regime might make English the official language or impose the system of Anglo-American common law. Above all, they feared that the Americans might seek to ban or restrict slavery.¹⁰

This conservative class, militantly determined to retain their wealth and prerogatives, thus encountered an expanding republic that had just acquired a tenuous title to their home province and was eager to cultivate their loyalty and attachment. True, Jeffersonians would have preferred to foster a bond with *all* Louisianians, not just the planter-merchant oligarchy, but from the distance of Washington it was sometimes difficult to make such distinctions. The New Orleans elite entrenched themselves in key bastions of local power, especially the eventual City Council, made key alliances with prominent Americans in New Orleans, and assumed the prerogative of speaking for all Louisiana in petitions to Congress. They fought what they saw as the least desirable aspects of republican rule (the common law system, restrictions on slave imports, social egalitarianism) while accepting the elements they found beneficial (free trade, and local political positions in city and territorial government).¹¹

Complicating this struggle between local autonomy and national authority was a generation of ambitious arrivistes, many of them American but some also from Britain, Ireland, and France, who came to New Orleans starting in 1804. Most of these newcomers were young men, including many professionals: doctors, engineers, and above all lawyers.

They tended to bring egalitarian and cosmopolitan ideas with them, derived from the composite ideologies of the American and French revolutions, which brought them into collision with the conservative *ancien régime* elite. On the other hand, they also tended to bring yearning ambitions for wealth and social distinction that propelled them into alliances (and sometimes marriages) with prominent creoles. More than the often erratic federal government, these newcomers—who often consciously styled themselves as “Americans” even if they had been born in Britain or France—represented the American influence in New Orleans. Their presence ensured that alongside its aristocratic aspects, perpetuated by the elite creoles under republican rule, the New Orleans of 1820 would also share the bustling, commercial, individualistic character of northeastern American port cities.

THE MEANING OF “AMERICANIZATION”

But New Orleans, I argue, was not “Americanized,” and never could have been, if that word is understood to mean the imposition of some set of “American” characteristics from outside. Thomas Jefferson and other Americans indeed hoped to implant certain values and attitudes—about law, education, civic virtue, and self-government, for example—in the minds of their new Louisiana “brethren,” as a condition of incorporating the territory into the American republic. But the creole society of New Orleans was not to be so passively and unidirectionally sculpted. Instead, it was transformed, profoundly, through conflict—overlapping layers of conflict, between classes, ethnicities, and ideologies—as well as through compromises and accommodations in both directions, some explicit and written into law, some unspoken and evolving naturally over time. These conflicts and accommodations were never straightforward; social struggle rarely is. Individuals did not march in lockstep along paths dictated by their group identities or collective interests. Moreover, the complex, dynamic societies of both New Orleans and the United States were changing too fundamentally and rapidly throughout this period for any analysis that seeks to portray a static “American” culture encountering a static “creole” or “Louisiana” one to reach beyond a superficial level of understanding. If such a binary confrontation is the basic model, the

narrative can only be one of “resistance”—local Louisiana resistance to social and political Americanization.¹²

The truth is that Louisianians did not resist attachment to the American Union; they embraced it. Of course, embracing it meant embracing its adversarial, pluralistic political culture, which Louisianians also did, wholeheartedly; and so the embrace also necessarily meant constant, contentious struggle over the nature and terms of the attachment. This was why one prominent French-born Louisianian could condemn “the chains of tyranny and oppression” that characterized American rule and, a few lines later in the same speech, celebrate membership in the Union as “the height of political happiness.” Membership in the national community—in Thomas Jefferson’s imagined republican “family,” and in an “empire of liberty” held together by consent instead of coercion—did not mean surrendering Louisiana’s interests or shedding Louisianian characteristics. On the contrary, it intensified local, partial identities, whether of clan, region, race, or ethnicity. Paradoxically, then, the very process that made Louisianians “American” simultaneously made them, more consciously and explicitly, “Louisianian,” or “creole,” or “French,” depending on how they choose to define themselves (and these identities did not have to be mutually exclusive). In New Orleans in the 1830s (after the end of the present study), the politics of ethnic identity would intensify dramatically, and the city government would formally divide into “American” and “French” subdivisions; nothing could have been more typically “American.”¹³

When I speak of “the American transformation of New Orleans,” therefore, I am not speaking of a simple process of homogenization or assimilation, much less of an imposition of American norms on unwilling, resistant Louisiana creoles. Instead I am speaking of empowerment. Attachment to Jefferson’s empire empowered Louisianians, in ways unimaginable in the colonial era, to change and mold their society as they saw fit, to seek political power, to build fortunes—in short, as Jefferson would have put it, to pursue happiness. In time, democratic capitalism led not to the erasure but to the proliferation, commodification, and fetishization of group identities that characterize United States culture to this day, and in New Orleans, to the irresistible impulses towards personal, private, creative, social, spiritual, sexual, and romantic fulfillment that led to the city’s enduring reputation as the “Land of Dreams.”¹⁴

Unfortunately, the empowerment was not evenly distributed. The terms of attachment were negotiated, and its benefits enjoyed, by a small number of Louisianians—above all, by those who were white, wealthy, socially prominent, and politically connected. Many of these men were bent on “pursuing happiness” by enslaving other Louisianians, curtailing the rights of all nonwhites, and maintaining their own supremacy atop an unequal social hierarchy perpetuated from the colonial era. Jefferson’s empire did not invent slavery, racial repression, or social inequality and most certainly could never have imposed these things on reluctant New Orleanians; but by inordinately empowering local elites, it strengthened them. Democracy in Louisiana, egalitarian in theory, could mean much greater inequality in practice—and that, too, was quintessentially “American.”

WHY NEW ORLEANS?

A word is necessary about the geographic scope of this study. New Orleans will always be the central focus. But inevitably I will devote attention as well to Louisiana more broadly. The reason for this is that New Orleans and Louisiana are essentially inseparable. From the early eighteenth century, Louisiana was dominated by its capital to a degree that was unusual for North American colonies. New Orleans was the seat of Louisiana’s government, the heart of its social life, the hub of its economy, and the center of its river-based transportation network. Even the largest plantations in the colony were mostly located in and around New Orleans, or just upriver along what was called the German Coast. In the American period all this continued to hold true. The first Louisiana state constitution, in 1812, maintained the capital at New Orleans and gave the city inordinate representation in the state Assembly (these things would not change until the “Jacksonian” constitution of 1845). All the contentious legal and political battles of the territorial period were fought in the urban setting of New Orleans and became inextricably intertwined, as I will argue, with municipal controversies over the city’s growth and development. Ultimately it is impossible to consider New Orleans in any meaningful way without constantly keeping an eye on the various hinterlands to which it was organically related.

These include not only the region we now call Louisiana, which was known from 1803 to 1812 as the Orleans Territory, but, more narrowly, the sugar-producing plantation region of the lower Mississippi—and more broadly the vast Mississippi watershed comprising most of the North American interior from the western edge of the Appalachians to the eastern slopes of the Rockies.¹⁵

Why New Orleans? The simplest reason—and a good one—is that I have always been fascinated by cities. And New Orleans is inordinately interesting; possibly even, as road signs at the Orleans Parish limits immodestly proclaim, “America’s Most Interesting City.” The kaleidoscopic interrelations of multiple races and national groups, the city’s precarious geographical position, its status as taproot of multiple strands of American popular music, its rich past from the *Sieur de Bienville* to *Louis Armstrong* to *Moon Landrieu*, and its continuing cultural fertility make the creole city irresistible, not only for historians, geographers, urbanists, and musicologists but indeed for anyone interested in fellow human beings. It is, in the words of one of its most distinguished historians, “an unexpected gift that keeps on giving.” Since the destruction wrought by Hurricane Katrina in 2005, moreover, even as it has declined in size and population, New Orleans has increasingly attracted the attention of the rest of the country and the world. Its story resonates. Its past—every aspect—remains alive.¹⁶

In terms of history, though, more relevant than the fact that New Orleans fascinates us in the early twenty-first century is the fact that it was equally fascinating, perhaps more so, to people in 1803. The city’s racially and ethnically diverse creolizing society drew the attention of numerous travel writers around the turn of the nineteenth century. Its geographic position on the lower Mississippi convinced observers from across the Atlantic world that it was preprogrammed for prosperity—“destined by nature,” as one writer put it, “to become one of the principal cities of North America, and perhaps the most important place of commerce in the new world.” Above all, that same crucial location, controlling access to the vast North American interior, was seen as the strategic key to the continent. No one had a better understanding of New Orleans’s unique position at the center of imperial geopolitics than *Thomas Jefferson*, who paid close attention to developments there long before he became president and famously called the city the “one single spot, the possessor of

which is our natural and habitual enemy.” The diplomatic triumph of Robert R. Livingston and James Monroe, who purchased all of Louisiana from Napoleon Bonaparte in April 1803, makes it easy to forget that their instructions from the president only called for buying New Orleans and the nearby Gulf coast. But Jefferson was not alone: Spanish bureaucrats, Bonapartist officers, and English pamphleteers alike all started, in the late 1790s, to pay close attention to the little outpost between the Mississippi and Lake Pontchartrain. Then, after the Purchase, New Orleans became an object of fascination for ambitious young men, both in the United States and in Europe, looking for opportunity. Finally, in 1815, Andrew Jackson’s stunning victory over the British at Chalmette plantation became a symbol for jubilant Americans of their republic’s final and definitive declaration of independence from British domination.¹⁷

What was so powerfully interesting to early Americans, I reason, should also be interesting to historians of early America. However, by focusing on contemporary fascination, we also run a major risk: that in looking through the eyes of early Americans, we will overestimate New Orleans’s differences, exaggerate its uniqueness, and find ourselves chronicling a city that is exceptional, anomalous, *sui generis*; a city that is literally unparalleled, full of interest in its own right, but with little to tell us about the world beyond itself. In falling prey to this trap, we will be encouraged by New Orleans itself, which—in common with other great cities, nations, and cultures—tells lies about itself. These lies—myths, legends, folk tales—are not really pernicious; they can be powerful positive cultural expressions, reassuring markers of identity, creative keys to coexistence in a diverse society, and, not least, lucrative stimulants to tourism. But for historians: lies nevertheless. New Orleans exceptionalism is perpetuated and continuously renovated through movies, TV shows, plays, novels, travel writings, popular histories, tourist tchotchkes, and on the streets of the French Quarter; any visitor interested in the fabrication of historical legend should take a “history tour” from a local guide and witness the process in action.¹⁸

New Orleanians—and many scholars—will tell you that their city is fundamentally and deeply separate and different from the rest of the United States, for example, in its “Caribbean” or “Latin” culture. By the same token, nineteenth-century Americans also considered New Orleans unique, as a “tropical” site of decadence and degradation, and often

associated it with interracial sex and concubinage. Although none of these things are or were exactly untrue, nor are they the whole truth. I am skeptical of a New Orleans that is overly exoticized, and resistant to a New Orleans that is overly anomalous, not because I dismiss its uniqueness—*all* places, cities, and cultures are unique, after all—but because I find its threads of connection, attachment, and similarity to other places in the United States just as compelling as its differences. The study of early New Orleans has important things to teach us, not just about itself but also about the Jeffersonian republic it became such a crucial part of.

NEW ORLEANS AND JEFFERSON'S EMPIRE

First of all, the creole city should be returned to its place at the heart of the story of American territorial expansion.¹⁹ The early Jeffersonian plan for continental expansion—for the making of what was often called the “empire of liberty”—was a new and unprecedented experiment in decentered, consensual governance. Its contours developed formally, through the Land Ordinances of 1784 and 1785, the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, and the Constitution of 1788—and informally, through experience on the ground, confrontations both violent and friendly between European-descended Americans and Native Americans, diplomatic tensions with the Spanish borderlands, and early struggles with the threat of western separatism. Practically, it represented a creative approach to the problem of governing a vast geographic domain, sparsely inhabited by a mobile population; theoretically, it constituted a revolution in the concept of sovereignty. Instead of a Hobbesian, unitary, indivisible central sovereign—whether residing in a monarch, a government, or an abstraction called “the people”—there would be, in the words of Jefferson scholar Peter Onuf, “a hierarchy of legitimate authorities, grounded in the sovereignty of the people, ascending from village or ‘ward’ to an all-inclusive union of state-republics.”²⁰ Unlike the unitary, absolute centralized state, the reach of this quilt of multiple authorities could presumably be expanded infinitely through space—which was why Jefferson famously asked, in his second inaugural, two years after the Louisiana Purchase, “who can limit the extent to which the federative principle may operate effectively?”²¹

This vision implied a profound degree of power sharing between center and periphery. It also overturned the conventional wisdom that republican rule could only exist in limited geographical spaces such as city-states, an idea scorned by Jefferson ally John Breckinridge as “that old and hackneyed doctrine that a Republic ought not to be too extensive.” When Federalists argued that the Louisiana Purchase would weaken the Union, Breckinridge insisted that on the contrary, “the more extensive its dominion the more safe and durable it will be.” To its critics, this thinking was a recipe for overextension, instability, and the collapse of central authority; to its supporters, it was a miraculous breakthrough, made possible only by America’s providential oceanic barrier of protection and bounteous supply of land. Either way, it had a profound impact on the development of the early American nation. To force the United States of the Louisiana Purchase era into a generic typology of territorially expanding empires risks erasing the very real differences between the Jeffersonian mode of expansion and other more centralized, unidirectional strategies of imperial rule.²²

Many scholars have echoed Jefferson’s Federalist opponents in criticizing the flaws of the “empire of liberty,” attacking its optimistic naïveté, its failure to reject slavery, and its centrifugal tendency toward instability and disunion. Others have projected the 1840s aggressive expansionism of “manifest destiny” backward in time to the Jeffersonian period, diagnosing an imperialist or racist urge toward national aggrandizement as early as the Revolution.²³ To be sure, Jeffersonian-era expansion could be naïve, disorganized, and chaotic. Speculators reaped its benefits as often as settlers; Indians paid an inestimable price. But the ideology of the “empire of liberty” was sincere, profound, and revolutionary. Jefferson—and the dozens of Americans who traveled to New Orleans after 1803—did not seek to subjugate Louisianians, to exploit them, or in any way to aggrandize the nation at their expense, but to welcome them as “brethren” in a consensual union. This philosophy was adhered to even in spite of the considerable difficulties it entailed—especially by Governor William C. C. Claiborne, an earnest republican who repeatedly fended off calls for more “energetic,” forceful government, and who endured mockery for his plain, unassuming appearance and unwillingness to adopt a more martial, authoritarian bearing.²⁴

Linked to territorial expansion was the expansion of African slavery. The “peculiar institution” had existed undisturbed in North America for

almost two centuries before the Louisiana Purchase. But it had come under attack, from both sides of the Atlantic, after the American Revolution; the first two decades of American independence saw gradual abolition laws passed in most northern states, as well as an increase in voluntary manumissions, and calls for compensated abolition in Virginia and other slave states. Jefferson's Land Ordinance of 1784, barring slavery from the western territories, was symptomatic of its moment. After 1800, however, slavery had a dramatic resurgence, accelerating in new purchased Louisiana and spreading across what later became known as the "Black Belt" of western Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi. The eventual ban on the international slave trade was more than offset both by natural increase and by a burgeoning domestic slave trade that moved Africans from the soil-depleted Chesapeake area to the lower South's booming cotton and sugar regions. The nation's slave population, which had been under 700,000 in 1790, had surpassed 1.5 million by 1820—and the cotton boom was still only getting started.²⁵

Many scholars, emphasizing the dominance in early national politics of wealthy Virginia slaveholders like Washington, Jefferson, and Madison, have concluded that the American republic was fundamentally a "slaveholders' union" from its inception. Jefferson has come under particularly heavy censure, whether for his hypocrisy in penning the phrase "all men are created equal," his precocious racism in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, or his alleged sexual relationship with slave Sally Hemings. Political historians have portrayed Jeffersonian republicans as protectors of slaveholder interests and positioned the heart of early American antislavery, such as it was, with the Hamiltonian Federalists. Finally, this interpretation circles back to territorial expansion, with the spread of slavery after 1800 linked to the Louisiana Purchase and the alleged deliberate creation of an "empire for slavery."²⁶

I am convinced that this synthesis represents at best an exaggeration and at worst an inversion of the truth. It rests on simplistic assumptions about sectional interests and a naïve acceptance of partisan Federalist rhetoric at face value. Southern slaveholders viewed the Constitution not as a triumph for their interests but as the best bargain they could negotiate with a northern majority hostile to slavery. Jefferson himself advocated banning slavery in the Old Northwest and argued for gradual abolition in *Notes on the State of Virginia* (in conjunction with African colonization, admittedly, and alongside disturbing speculations on

black racial inferiority). In Congress, northern *and southern* Jeffersonians regularly voted against slaveholder interests. On the ground, western Jeffersonians linked slavery with “aristocracy” and saw its restriction as essential to a republican order—often in opposition to conservative Federalists like Timothy Pickering, who as secretary of state in 1798 fought to *allow* slavery in the newly formed Mississippi Territory.²⁷

The evidence of early New Orleans also points against the prevailing orthodoxy. Wealthy creole slaveholders there tended to see American newcomers as dangerously antislavery in their attitudes. In some cases this view was correct; in others it proved unjustified. The reality was that Americans circa 1803 were sharply divided on the question of slavery. But what is clear is that Louisiana, like the whole trans-Appalachian West, was emphatically *not* expected or intended to be an “empire for slavery.” Typical was one Virginian who in the wake of the Purchase predicted that under American rule Louisiana’s plantations would soon be worked by free white laborers—not slaves, whom he called “a disgraceful species of wealth acquired at the expense of justice and humanity.” Jefferson’s administration did not create slavery in the Mississippi Valley and had very little power to restrict its growth there. Louisiana planters, on the other hand, who only a few years before the American takeover had begun to enjoy rapidly accelerating profits from sugar and cotton cultivation, fought both Congress and Governor Claiborne for the right to import slaves and expand slavery.²⁸

Slavery in Louisiana, as elsewhere, was both a system of economic exploitation and a regime of racial control. Questions about slavery were inseparable from larger questions about the racial order, and early nineteenth-century white Louisianians, especially the New Orleans elite, spent inordinate amounts of time thinking, writing, and legislating about the “problem” of racial order. Here again my story calls into question a commonly accepted view—the view that a “new American racial order” was imposed in Louisiana, replacing colonial society’s racial diversity, tolerance, and permeability with a harsh system of black and white. This thesis is summed up in one recent history of the early republic, which claims that Americans were “used to a black-white, slave-free dichotomy,” felt threatened by the multiethnic and multiracial fluidity of creole Louisiana, and made it their mission “to bring this polyglot society and its permissive interracial mixing into line with the binary racial culture prevailing throughout the rest of America.”²⁹

In Louisiana scholarship, the idea of the “new American racial order” usually draws its inspiration from various iterations of the thesis developed by Frank Tannenbaum in his landmark study *Slave and Citizen: the Negro in the Americas* (1947), which argued that, mainly as a result of Catholicism’s insistence on slaves’ basic humanity, slavery was more humane and less brutal, and racism less virulent, in Latin American colonies than in the Protestant British Atlantic. This thesis can be critiqued, and has been by numerous scholars, but it is certainly true that in colonial Spanish Louisiana, slavery laws were less oppressive, emancipation was more common, and racial distinctions less rigidly policed than in the American period after about 1807. There is no question that that racial oppression did become harsher and more explicit under American rule.³⁰ My argument is not that the change did not occur, but that it makes little sense to frame it as a transition from a “Spanish” to an “American” system. In fact, similar changes were happening at the same time throughout the Atlantic world. Recent events, especially the lurid reports of black atrocities in the wars of the Haitian Revolution, provoked a counterrevolutionary backlash against the emancipationism of the 1790s that knew no national or cultural boundaries. And the truth is that American republicanism, far from imposing a culturally determined racial order, empowered local elites to design the race regimes *they* wanted—which, for white Louisianians, meant overturning Spanish paternalist laws they had long resisted (and often, in practice, subverted). In New Orleans this is borne out by the fact that, over and over, it was creoles who took the lead in pushing measures of stronger racial repression, at both the municipal and territorial levels. This culminated with the reactionary Black Code of 1806, Louisiana’s basic law of race and slavery through the antebellum period—passed as one of the initial acts of the territory’s first elected, creole-dominated legislature.³¹

Local interests repeatedly won out, in early New Orleans, on slavery, race, the law, and other questions. For the most part, the federal government was simply unable to impose its will. This makes Jefferson’s view of “consensual” empire look less like a conscious theory of republican expansion and more like a realistic recognition of the limits of federal power and a concession that the loyalties of distant populations could be secured only through allowing near-limitless local autonomy. The Louisiana story thus weighs against a recent scholarly tendency to see the early American republic as a “strong state,” and in favor of a much

older view that it is indeed best understood as a fragile, precarious entity, limited and circumscribed both by its own ideology and by practical circumstances.

What makes a state strong or weak? For Americans of the early republic, the template for the “strong” state was the one they had recently broken away from, the powerful British state so admired by Alexander Hamilton, so emulated by his Federalist allies, and so reviled by Jeffersonian republicans, characterized by a large government bureaucracy, a strong navy, a massive funded debt underwritten by the Bank of England, and high revenues collected through the excise tax. By all these metrics, the Jeffersonian state was not a strong one: it had no professional bureaucracy, possessed no navy to speak of, reduced spending to retire the Hamiltonian debt, and was unable to collect revenue through direct taxes (the 1790s Federalist attempts to institute a British-style excise tax having led to widespread resistance). Louisiana, if anywhere, should have been the place where the powerful hand of Washington made itself felt, since the federal government ruled there directly, with no state government between it and the people. But territorial rule, as we will see, was an endless series of proofs of federal powerlessness. The territorial government had chronic trouble finding willing and competent appointees. American officials brawled in public and were frequently mocked for slovenliness, drunkenness, and poor French. Slave rebellions were rumored, but the governor often seemed unable or unwilling to investigate them. Outlaw pirates and smugglers operated with impunity a day’s journey from New Orleans. Repeated attempts to establish a military presence in the lower Mississippi region ended in catastrophe. General James Wilkinson lamented that old women in New Orleans beheld the American regime and exclaimed “*quel triste gouvernement*.”³²

For this book, understanding the federal government’s fragility and powerlessness is more than an incidental concern. It explains why the allegiance and support of elite Louisianians was so vital, in an era of global war, for the nation’s survival. It is critical to understanding why the American regime could not have introduced any “American racial order,” and why slavery’s expansion in Louisiana ultimately could not be restricted. More broadly, it is central to understanding the “American transformation” of New Orleans—a transformation not imposed from

outside but negotiated, contentiously, by various competing groups of New Orleanians, by American arrivistes and new arrivals from across the Atlantic, and yes, even by James Madison and Thomas Jefferson, whose improvised vision of decentered republican empire created the arena for negotiation, the political space, in which local power and national authority could compete and the transformation could unfold.

None of this means I disagree with Jefferson's statement, in his first inaugural, that the United States had "the strongest Government on earth." He meant that a government that was *externally* weak would lead to a nation that was *internally* strong, and time, in many ways, proved him right. Paradoxically, the violent ethnic, social, and political enmities of early New Orleans would gradually weave durable strands of connection to the national government, along with an ideology of unionism that was all the more powerful for having to be consciously developed. The constant negotiations over the terms of attachment to the Union—negotiations that were often tense and hostile—ultimately strengthened the bond. The effect was lasting: even as late as the 1850s, when secessionism spread throughout the South, unionist sentiments in New Orleans remained powerful. And it was a figure who will play a major role in these pages—the "exiled" New Yorker Edward Livingston—whose twenty years of experience at the heart of the Crescent City's political battles equipped him to write, as Andrew Jackson's secretary of state, the Nullification Proclamation of 1832, one of the most profound and influential expressions of unionism in the history of the republic.³³

THE STORY TO COME

This book is organized in the most straightforward way I know: chronologically. In keeping with my sense that New Orleans's links to the United States were forged both before and after formal possession, I have written three chapters that take place before the American takeover of December 1803 and seven after, culminating with the achievement of Louisiana statehood in 1812. Chapter 1 considers the eighty-five-year history of colonial New Orleans, focusing on both the long development of the city's elite planter-merchant oligarchy and the rapid changes that accelerated after 1788, attaching the city to the United States, in

some ways, well before formal political incorporation. Chapter 2 surveys the city's economy, society, and culture in 1803, a year in which it was scrutinized carefully by observers from across the globe—especially from France and the United States, both of which, at different times, expected to take possession of Louisiana. Chapter 3 narrates the rapid events of 1803, which saw the city change rulers twice—first from Spain to France, then from France to the United States—through the eyes of Pierre Clément de Laussat, the French official appointed by Napoleon Bonaparte to administer Louisiana. Laussat's brief tenure in power had major consequences for the American period that followed; it also suggests outlines of what the Bonapartist regime might have looked like, had it not been preempted by the Louisiana Purchase.

Chapter 4 looks at the enterprising newcomers who began to arrive in New Orleans, from both the United States and across the ocean, soon after the American cession. I call this fascinating group the “generation of 1804”; selfish and ambitious, but simultaneously idealistic, they collectively constituted just as vital an element of the American impact on New Orleans as the formal legislation and orders that emanated from the federal government in Washington. At the heart of this discussion are parallel portraits of the two most important American newcomers of 1804: the Virginia-born appointed governor, William Charles Cole Claiborne, and the mercurial lawyer, politician, land speculator, and legal reformer Edward Livingston of New York.

Chapter 5 returns to the political narrative with Claiborne's trouble-filled first year in office as governor of the Orleans Territory—a year of personal tragedy and intense public difficulty for the young governor, as elite creole New Orleanians, joined by some Americans, including Livingston, struggled against the American system of provisional rule and even hoped to stop Claiborne's territorial government from going into operation. Chapter 6 explains how an appointed, American-dominated territorial government, over the protests of most elite creole New Orleanians, began forging what they saw as an enlightened republican regime in Louisiana—and also how the short-lived ban on the international slave trade fell victim to the determination of local planters to keep importing slaves. Chapter 7 surveys the intensification of tensions between creoles and Americans—an ethnic conflict that plays a major, often exaggerated role in Louisiana history—and then the relaxation of those

tensions as a number of key compromises were reached, especially on the racial order and the legal system. It distorts reality to view early New Orleans *only* through the lens of that conflict, I argue; but in 1805 and 1806 it became acute in the context of uncertainty over the permanence of American possession of Louisiana, racial anxieties, rumored slave rebellions, and destabilizing rumors of war with Spain.

Chapter 8 covers two key episodes that not only attracted the attention of the whole nation but reshaped and redefined political alliances in the Orleans Territory: Aaron Burr’s “conspiracy”—or, more precisely, the rumors of his conspiracy and their effects in New Orleans—and Edward Livingston’s attempts to purchase and develop the land called the *batture*, outside the levee just upriver from New Orleans. Chapter 9, finally, considers a rapid sequence of events culminating in Louisiana statehood: the arrival in 1809 of thousands of refugees from the former French colony of Saint Domingue, nearly doubling the city’s population and transforming its culture; the planter “revolution” of 1810 that led to American annexation of Spanish West Florida (and eventually to part of that territory’s incorporation in the state of Louisiana, as the so-called Florida Parishes); the massive “German Coast” slave uprising of January 1811; and the Constitutional Convention and debates over Louisiana statehood both there and in the U.S. Congress. Chapter 10 begins with Andrew Jackson’s stunning victory at the Battle of New Orleans in January 1815—the first point at which it became clear that the city was permanently and irrevocably American—and looks ahead to the transformations yet to come in the postwar and antebellum years.

This, then, is the story of how a colonial city was reimagined and transformed through its attachment to the Jeffersonian empire of liberty, growing with sudden vitality into something new and unexpected under the sun, paradoxically becoming more “American” by becoming more inimitably and indubitably “New Orleanian.” It is also self-consciously and intentionally that: a *story*. While the structural arc I have sketched here—rapid development, attachment to the republic, social transformation through conflict—will always be present in the background, the foreground, in the pages that follow, will be occupied by the people of early New Orleans. They will speak and behave in various ways, sometimes satisfyingly paralleling the greater story, sometimes stubbornly contradicting it. Their lives and stories were their own,

not made to exemplify my analytic points about expansion, slavery, race, and the American state.

Historians are wary about narrative, and for generally sound reasons. Their goal is to analyze, not to dramatize. Stories can easily overpower substance; messy historical understandings can be far less appealing than thrilling tensions and cathartic resolutions. There is always a pull, when managing a fascinating collection of characters, engaged in a fundamental series of conflicts, to portray heroes and villains, to sculpt triumphs and tragedies. But if one wants to analyze change over time—and this is emphatically a study of change over time—narrative is a powerful tool. The intangible things that are historians' everyday categories of analysis—class, gender, culture, ideology—are very real, but they have to be lived and experienced by individual people, and in the process of being lived and experienced they are constantly altered and reshaped. To speak only schematically, without regard to this process of alteration through lived experience, is to factor out the human origins of historical change. And to write the history of early New Orleans without regard to individual human lived experiences would be to eviscerate all its rich beauty, power, and soul.