

# Stories of Mackinac Island, New Orleans Closely Intertwined

## A Look at History

BY FRANK STRAUS

### New Orleans



If you look closely at an American flag that is woven from cloth, the threads that mark each star and each stripe cross the entire field of the flag to join the stars and stripes together.

The stories of Mackinac Island and New Orleans are closely intertwined. Both cities – yes, Mackinac Island is incorporated as a city under the laws of Michigan – were first permanently settled in the early 1700s. New Orleans was started as a community of French fur traders, while Mackinac Island was founded as a community of Chippewa who gathered pelts and traded with French buyers at Colonial Michilimackinac, near Mackinaw City on the Michigan mainland.

Colonial Michilimackinac was founded about 1715 by soldiers who that fall came under the ultimate command of the Regent of France, the Duc d'Orleans; New Orleans was founded in 1718 by traders operating under letters patent issued by the same Duke, whose name was given to the new village. (France was operating under a regency at the time because the King of France had lived longer than his oldest son and his oldest grandson, and the heir to the throne was a baby great-grandson.)

The parallels continue. Mackinaw City and Mackinac Island were settled because of their positions close to the mouth of Lake Michigan; New

Orleans was settled where it was because of its position close to the mouth of the Mississippi River. New Orleans is surrounded by wetlands that were, in the 1700s, filled with fur-bearing animals; the Straits of Mackinac are surrounded by wetlands that were, in the 1700s, filled with furry beaver.

Mackinac Island switched from Chippewa to British in 1780-81, when Lt. Gov. Patrick Sinclair moved a small British occupation battalion from Mackinaw City to the Island as a more easily defended location during the American Revolution. During the same 1780-81 period, New Orleans was a key base of command for the Spanish allies of the Americans as they fought against Great Britain. New Orleans-based troops helped capture British outposts at Mobile and Pensacola, along the Gulf coast. These defeats in what are now Alabama and Florida helped persuade the British government to give up all of the future United States east of the Mississippi River, including Mackinac Island, in the Treaty of Paris in 1783. The Straits of Mackinac area was included in this treaty even though no American force had succeeded in reaching Mackinac Island.

Following the conclusion of the American Revolution, the Americans took over nominal sovereignty of the Straits of Mackinac area. However, British-based Canadian fur traders continued to exert economic control over the region and maintained close ties with local Indian tribes. As a result, when war between the two English-speaking nations broke out again in 1812, a tiny British force quickly recaptured Mackinac Island and held it for the rest of the War of 1812. However, the Battle of New Orleans, in which American frontiersmen bloodily defeated the British in January 1815, helped persuade London to give up its dreams of turning the new American nation into an eco-

economic satellite of Britain. This Louisiana battle played a key role in Mackinac Island history, as the departure of the British fur traders left a gap that was filled by John Jacob Astor's American Fur Company. The American Fur Company buildings on Mackinac Island's Market Street, many built in the

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Eventually the fur trade declined and was replaced throughout North America. In New Orleans, a new slave-based economy grew, while Mackinac Island took up fishing and port activities. Both of these new sources of prosperity would be temporary. Mackinac Island's position as a key port on the Great Lakes was badly damaged and eventually destroyed by improved transportation up and down the Mississippi River. Canals in Illinois, beginning in the 1840s, made it easier for set-

tlers in the growing American Midwest to ship their goods up and down the river than to ship these goods through the Great Lakes. During the years before the American Civil War, in the 1850s, New Orleans was one of the wealthiest cities in the United States, and silver coins circulating throughout North America bore the "O" mint mark for New Orleans. The New Orleans mint, adjacent to the French Quarter, was until 2005 one of the most historic buildings in the American South.

Following the Civil War, Louisiana took on new life as a cultural center for America. Its music inspired men and women on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line. Mackinac Island hotels hired New Orleans-trained or inspired jazzmen to play gigs for summer tourists. For many, the cheerful "New Orleans sound" seemed to symbolize summer throughout the United States. Grand Hotel has for many years held a Jazz Festival during the Labor Day weekend on Mackinac Island. Many New Orleans legends have played this festival.

Today New Orleans lies prostrate as a result of tragic events that will be familiar to everyone who reads this column. Many readers may wish to make a donation to the charity of their choice for hurricane relief to the homeless people of this historic American city.

## Battles, Bravery, and Berries at Round Island in 1812


Beware of temptation, and especially beware of raspberries. Such was the lesson learned by one unfortunate French soldier during the War of 1812, according to "Mackinac Region" author James Van Fleet in his 1882 account.

While Mackinac Island was involved in two military engagements during the war, Round Island was also seeing some action. In the opening

days of the war, the British captured Fort Mackinac by surprising the small garrison from the heights above, now the site of Fort Holmes. When Americans tried to recapture the Island several years later, they put a landing party ashore at Round Island, hoping to plant an artillery battery there. Their activities were soon discovered by the British, who sent a large party of Indians across. The Americans quickly retreated from the oncoming attack, though clearly there wasn't a sense of urgency.

The confrontation took place in August, and Round Island was covered in ripe raspberries. Several of the men loitered, picking raspberries as they retreated. One of them was captured by the Indians and taken back across the passage to Fort Mackinac.

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