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**EL INTENDENTE, LOS COMERCIANTES Y EL
"COMERCIO LIBRE" EN LUISIANA 1778-1788**

BRIAN E. COUTTS

TRADUCIDO POR

ADOLFINA SIMPSON

Sitting amidst the destruction wrought by the second hurricane to strike New Orleans in less than a year, Martin Navarro, the Intendant of Louisiana, wrote a brilliant diagnosis of the larger malaise which beset the colony of Louisiana. He entitled it "Reflexiones sobre el estado actual de la Provincia de la Luisiana." In this remarkable document, he reviewed the entire history of trade and commerce in Louisiana, discussed the reasons for its current decadence and offered a recipe for the future commercial prosperity of the colony.¹

Navarro claimed that Louisiana's commerce was poor and was carried on in a manner most harmful and burdensome to the colony as well as the King. His remedy was a simple one, increased population and free trade for the colony. He argued that in the possession of a sovereign, whose laws were not opposed to a system of free trade, Louisiana would in a short time, be the most useful and best established provinces in America.²

While believing that an increased population and absolute free trade were the keys to the future prosperity of the colony, Navarro stressed that the last of these must come first. He added that a well-established trade was the chief lever for the increase of a population, and that delay in introducing it would inevitably lead to the decadence of the few people living there. A flourishing commerce, he felt, would attract a considerable number of immigrants from less desirable colonies. Self-interest, he claimed, and a chance to better one's fortunes, would attract people from the

most remote regions.

Turning to the theme of commerce, he protested that the province was suffering under the burden of too much protection. Despite heavy expenditures by the Crown and numerous edicts and regulations, the farmers were without tools and the merchants were without goods. What was needed was a trade that would furnish these necessary items and provide a market for the colony's exports.

Navarro ended his lengthy memorial by again asserting that a free trade would cause the province of Louisiana to flourish. It would restrain foreign nations, particularly the Americans, from absorbing the commercial advantages of the colony and it would encourage a growth in the population and thus further develop an effective human barrier between the Americans and the heartland of New Spain.³

Navarro forwarded his "Reflexiones" to the Crown along with a cover letter in which he apologized for any of its malcoordinated phrases. He added that the circumstances of war had not permitted sending it to Governor Bernardo de Galvez, then absent on war maneuvers. When no comment was promptly received from the Crown, Navarro forwarded a more exact plan by which his proposals for free and open trade could be put into effect.⁴

This second memorial he entitled "Circunstancias baxo las quales convendra establecer el comercio de la Provincia de la Luisiana." In it, Navarro made a series of fourteen

proposals for establishing a fair and equitable trade for the colony. As in his previous paper, he argued for a free and open trade with Europe and her colonies in the West Indies. Exports from Louisiana would be shipped directly to ports in France, with the sole exception of tobacco, whose export would only be permitted when surpluses not needed for new Spain were available.⁵

Navarro forwarded this second proposal, along with a cover letter, to First Minister José de Galvez on July 20, 1781. In his letter he argued strongly against limiting the trade to French ports alone. He based his opinion on the disastrous history of France's trade with Louisiana prior to 1763. Noting that Louisiana's commerce grew faster during the fifteen years after 1763, when free navigation of the Mississippi was permitted, than during the preceding thirty-five years of French domination, he felt it was illogical to believe that trade solely with the French would ever bring prosperity to the province.⁶

The addition of Pensacola to the province made it even more necessary, he stressed, to provide for a free and open trade, since the provision of trade goods for Indians was indispensable. Without it, he felt, the government would be forced to confine itself to providing annual gifts to the Indians which would absorb the greater part of the annual situado. Added to this was the inherent danger that if these goods failed to arrive on time, as was common with the situado, the peace of the province would

be placed in jeopardy. Failure to implement some of his proposals, Navarro concluded, would mean that Louisiana would remain like one of the ancient presidios of Florida.

While Navarro was penning memorials to the Crown, Gilberto de Maxent, the father-in-law of Governor Bernardo de Galvez, was in Madrid attempting to negotiate a personal contract with the crown for a monopoly of the Indian trade in Louisiana and West Florida. Maxent had a private audience with Jose de Galvez on October 4, 1781 at which time he made a series of proposals for the establishment of successful trade and commerce in Louisiana.⁷

Taking Maxent's and Navarro's views under advisement, Jose de Galvez began to formulate a new commercial policy for Louisiana. The result was entitled the "Real Cedula Concediendo Nuevas Gracias Para Fomento del Comercio de la Luisiana" and dated January 22, 1782. This commercial code formed the basis on which Louisiana trade and commerce was governed until 1794.⁸

The cedula was designed to amplify articles 48, 49, and 50 of the "Reglamento del Comercio Libre a Indias" of 1778. It granted a ten year grace period during which direct trade could be carried on between Louisiana and certain designated ports of France. It also provided for trade between Louisiana and the French West Indies, in cases of urgent necessity, leaving the Intendant to decide what "urgent" constituted. Free trade was granted between Louisiana and designated ports of Spain, while

trade with Havana and other Spanish possessions in the Americas was permitted upon payment of a very modest duty of 2%. For imports to Louisiana from France and for exports from Louisiana to France, equally modest duties of 6% were ordered. Finally, to collect and regulate these duties, the Crown proposed the establishment of an Administración de Reales Rentas for both New Orleans and Pensacola.

Three additional articles granted specific exemptions to Louisiana merchants to encourage agriculture and industry in the colony. A ten year grace period was established which allowed for the free importation of slaves. Merchants were likewise granted the privilege, for two years, of freely purchasing ships in foreign countries and returning them loaded with cargos to New Orleans or Pensacola. The cedula was to go into effect following the signing of a definitive treaty of peace between Spain and Great Britain.⁹

The remainder of this paper is devoted to an analysis of the impact of the cedula on Louisiana's trade and commerce both in terms of exports and imports, as well as in the creation of successful mercantile firms.

THE EXPORT TRADE

The economy of Louisiana in the 1780's was based almost exclusively on the export of agricultural and forest products together with furs, skins and pelts exchanged in trade with the Indians. Table 1 details the relative

value of the four key sectors of the export economy: indigo, tobacco, lumber and wood, and skins and pelts. The year 1784 has been chosen for emphasis since it is one of the few years in the 1780's for which detailed information is available for cargos shipped out of New Orleans. It is also the first year that the real impact of the Cedula of 1782 can be measured since many of the Cedula's provisions did not become effective until the ratification of the peace treaty between Spain and great Britain in 1783.

As can be seen, indigo was by far the leading export in value in 1784, followed by tobacco, lumber and pelts. These four sectors constituted seven-eighths of all exports shipped from New Orleans. The total value of the export trade was 313,594 pesos. This figure does not include the value of European goods reexported from New Orleans to Havana or other Caribbean ports, nor does it include the value of Campeche wood (dyewood) imported from New Spain for reexport to France.

Table 1 also suggests an almost total lack of manufactured goods for export. Almost all the principal exports were raw materials or unprocessed products. The only exceptions to this were a small quantity of processed leather soles for shoes and the semi-processed nature of some of the lumber products, in particular the sugar boxes. Between 1782 and 1788 only a few small industries were operating in Louisiana and these produced for home

consumption. Permits were granted for the establishment of a rope factory. A small snuff factory was operating in 1786 and a license, later denied by the Crown, was sought to establish a small brewery.¹⁰

Between 1784 and 1788 the value of all exports doubled to about 660,000 pesos. According to an estimate made by Navarro in 1789, the value of indigo rose to 325,000 pesos, tobacco to 85,000, lumber and wood products to 85,000 pesos and pelts to 115,000 pesos. However, other evidence seems to suggest that Navarro overestimated the value of indigo while underestimating the value of tobacco. Still, a hundred per cent growth in the value of exports in less than four years suggests the impact of the 1782 Cedula.¹¹

Table 2 illustrates the direction of the export trade between 1783 and 1785. The Cedula's greatest impact was on New Orleans-Santo Domingo trade. Santo Domingo served as the major market for the majority of lumber products and foodstuffs, with the exception of naval stores and sugar boxes which were shipped to Havana, Vera Cruz and Campeche. Despite the large number of vessels engaged in this trade, these ships were usually small balandras and goletas. The relative value of exports carried on board the 65 vessels sailing to the French West Indies in 1785 was less than the value of exports carried on the 5 to 7 ships sailing annually to France.

THE IMPORT TRADE

The Real Cedula of 1782 permitted the colonists of Louisiana a latitude of trade virtually unknown in the Spanish Empire. In addition to trade with Havana, authorized in 1770, and New Spain, authorized by the Reglamento of 1778, the Cedula conceded a direct trade with certain designated ports in France where Spanish Consuls resided. It also authorized trade on an emergency basis with the French West Indies. Finally, with special license, ships were permitted trade with other neutral or friendly ports, including Jamaica and London. To encourage the development of this trade the Cedula granted very liberal import duties of $2\frac{1}{2}\%$ on imports from Spain and Spanish America and 6% on imports from approved foreign ports. If the main interest of the Cedula was to provide an outlet for Louisiana's exports and source there for imports preferred by its colonists, it was an overwhelming success.¹²

The original "habilitated" ports in France were Bordeaux, Rouen and St. Malo, all having resident Spanish consuls. However, soon after the Cedula was published the Chamber of Commerce of La Rochelle petitioned Jose de Galvez to consider adding the port of La Rochelle. They noted that it was one of the leading ports of France and had a long history of trade with New Orleans during the French administration of the colony. Galvez approved their petition and advised Navarro of his decision to add that port to the list of ports permitted for the Louisiana trade.¹³

A similar request was received by the Crown from commercial interests in Le Havre. They protested that large ships loaded with cargo could not descend the Seine River from Rouen. Receiving support for their petition from the Spanish consul in Rouen, Galvez, by a royal order of July 4, 1785 designated the port of Le Havre as an acceptable port for the Louisiana trade.¹⁴

A year later a French vice-consul in Nantes wrote Galvez requesting "habilitation" for the port of Nantes. He noted that the location of this port was particularly appropriate for commerce since it was located on the Loire River, which was navigable for 115 leagues upriver. he felt it would be one of the most appropriate for direct trade with Louisiana and added that many residents of Louisiana were natives of Nantes. Galvez was persuaded by the strength and good sense of this petition and informed Navarro July 2, 1786 that he had decided to authorize a direct trade with the port of Nantes.¹⁵

The last change made in the "habilitated" ports authorized for direct trade with Louisiana was the elimination of Marseille by a royal edict of July 4, 1785. Thus by 1786 the French ports authorized for direct trade with Louisiana included Bordeaux, Le Havre, Rouen, La Rochelle, Nantes and St. Malo.¹⁶

By far and away the most important of these ports was Bordeaux. Between 1783 and 1786, as shown in Table 3, almost half of the ships arriving from France came from Bordeaux.

This was because Louisiana merchants enjoyed close commercial relations with French commercial houses there and because Bordeaux's rich agricultural hinterland provided an excellent source for the wines and foodstuffs preferred by Louisiana consumers. Trailing far behind were the ports of La Rochelle and Le Havre while trade with Nantes, Rouen and St. Malo was insignificant.

Just as important as the "habilitation" of French ports for the Louisiana trade was the permission granted to trade directly with the French West Indies. Authorized on an emergency basis in 1782 the Crown made the trade permanent by a royal order of April 7, 1785. As shown in Table 3, 224 ships entered New Orleans from the French West Indies between 1783 and 1786 with almost 200 of these coming from the two principal ports of French Santo Domingo, Guarico and Port-au-Prince. Many French goods from Marseilles as well as from other non-habilitated ports entered Louisiana indirectly through the French Caribbean.¹⁷

Louisiana merchants were also able to legally purchase goods from the United States from American merchants in Guarico. Large cargos of flour were regularly imported by enterprising New Orleans merchants since it was much cheaper than French flour or flour from Vera Cruz. Competition from American traders eventually had such an adverse impact on the sale of French flour that the French Crown ordered its importation to Santo Domingo prohibited in 1784. However, New Orleans merchants circumvented this restriction

by meeting American ships in the Bahama channel and transferring the cargos of flour to their ships before sailing to Guarico.¹⁸

The most serious handicap for the import trade, claimed Navarro was the prohibition against foreigners selling merchandise in Europe on credit to be paid for in the Indies. Strictly prohibited by the Recopilacion, Navarro felt this law impeded the expeditions for slaves. Without this limitation, he felt, merchants assured of the good faith of the colonists could employ their credit in friendly colonies, purchasing slaves on credit which could then be sold to Louisiana planters on favorable terms. The procedure would benefit the entire colony, he wrote, since the planters would obtain laborers on affordable terms, which would stimulate agriculture and thus provide more revenues for the royal coffers. Despite Navarro's persuasive argument, the restrictions on credit remained in force.¹⁹

Navarro suggested that Louisiana had a potential trade volume of 1,400,000 pesos, a figure he arrived at by adding the value of exports, 660,000 in 1788 to the situado and funds provided for the purchase of tobacco, 740,000 pesos in 1788. Twenty-five vessels were constantly employed in the general service of the province, he noted, to supply a population of 36,000 whites and slaves and more than 100,000 Indians. In addition, he reported that four ships arrived annually from France and two from London for trade

with Pensacola and Mobile. Finally, he claimed that 10 shipments of slaves were annually introduced into New Orleans from Jamaica. For these and other reasons he strongly disputed the contention made by some Spanish authorities, that the Louisiana trade was of little consequence.²⁰

While one might quibble with Navarro's economics, it is apparent that the Louisiana market was greater than is generally supposed. There were certainly good opportunities for enterprising merchants.

THE MERCHANTS

Any clear understanding of trade and commerce in the 1780's of necessity requires some discussion of the role played by enterprising Louisiana merchants. Despite the extravagant claims made by Diego de Gardoqui in 1790, that the Louisiana trade was entirely in the hands of foreigners, such was not the case. The liberal features of the 1782 Cedula encouraged the growth of numerous merchant companies in New Orleans. This was despite the difficult problems of a ruinous inflation, a depreciated currency and uncertain market conditions.

It is difficult to draw a composite sketch of the typical merchant or merchant company operating in Louisiana in the 1780's since some were French, some Spanish, some English, some recent immigrants and others members of old Creole families. If one could be drawn it would probably include a New Orleans wholesale merchant in partnership

with a Captain who owned a ship, probably a brigantine. The merchant would contribute most of the investment capital while the captain would provide his ship and his labor, with the profits divided equally between the two.

A few other observations can be made. None of the leading New Orleans merchants of the 1780's held a seat on the Cabildo. Whether this was through personal choice or the unavailability of seats is arguable. Certainly, money was not the problem since many of the merchants were far wealthier than most members of the Cabildo. The total domination of the Cabildo by planters for more than thirty years probably reflects its rather moribund nature. On the other hand, almost all the leading merchants served as officers in the New Orleans militia.

The tremendous expansion of trade as measured by the taxes on imports and exports between 1782 and 1788, from 86,636 reales to 500,000 reales, led to a proliferation of merchants and merchant companies operating out of New Orleans.²¹ Despite the almost total absence of company records for this period it is possible to highlight the activities of several of these from cargo and tax lists, notarial records, judicial records and other civil records. Table 4 describes the leading importers for 1784 and 1786 while Table 5 highlights the leading exporters in 1784. What follows is a profile of three of New Orleans' leading merchants in the mid-1780's.

JUAN BAPTISTA MACARTY

Macarty was one of the leading merchants in New Orleans in the 1780's and 1790's. Born in 1751, he was a native of that city, the son of a French colonial army officer, Barthelemy Daniel Macarty, who came to Louisiana with his brother, Jean Jacques Macarty, in 1732.²²

The family's fortunes seem to have prospered with the arrival of the Spanish for Juan secured a favorable marriage with the daughter of another prominent Creole family, Heloise Fazende. The couple purchased a house on a crossstreet adjacent to Calle Conti, five doors down from Intendant Martin Navarro. Macarty joined the New Orleans militia at a young age and served actively for the next twenty-five years, rising to the rank of captain.²³

Though it is uncertain when Macarty established himself as a merchant, by 1778 his business seems to have prospered for he owned a huge tract of land along the Mississippi River which he had purchased from M. Le Breton, plus six slaves. Favorable family connections may have helped since his sister, Marie Celeste Elenore, was married to Governor Esteban Miró.²⁴

By 1784 he was the leading importer of goods to New Orleans and one of the leading exporters of indigo to Bordeaux. He also exported lumber products to Havana and Guarico. He enjoyed good business contacts with Pecholier Brothers, a prominent mercantile firm of Bordeaux

to whom he regularly consigned his indigo and other cargos. As well, he regularly shipped sugar boxes to Havana on his two ships, the brigs Galvez and Hercules, along with rice, beans and meats.²⁵

Macarty was one of the first New Orleans merchants to develop contacts with American merchants in New York and Philadelphia. As early as 1784 he was doing business with Nicolas Low and Company of New York. In one joint venture he shipped a load of sugar boxes to Havana for sale there, then loaded a cargo of coffee, sugar and cacao for Philadelphia, which he consigned to Low and returned to New Orleans with a cargo of flour. Low and Company advanced funds in Philadelphia for repairs of his brig the Hercules, money Macarty repaid with remittances from Havana.²⁶

Macarty even tried to engage in direct trade with London in 1785, but on his return voyage his ship fell victim to an English corsair. Undaunted he turned his attentions to importing sugar from Havana in 1785. After a successful career he died in New Orleans, November 10, 1808. His success was no doubt due to his speculation in a wide variety of different products, close contacts with American and French merchants, and his willingness to experiment with different forms of trade.²⁷

PABLO SEGOND

Segond was born in Marseilles in 1744, the son of a prominent merchant family. He emigrated to New Orleans

in 1764 and established himself there as merchant soon after, probably as an agent for the family business in Marseilles.²⁸

By 1770 he was an established merchant, a fusilier in the New Orleans militia, and the owner of a house on Calle Dumaine. Soon after he contracted a favorable marriage with Marie Connand, the daughter of another merchant. They raised a family of eight children.²⁹

By the early 1780's Segond was one of New Orleans' most successful merchants, being the second leading importer and exporter of goods to and from New Orleans. A major shipper of pelts to Bordeaux, Segond also shipped cargos of shingles, wood, and lumber to Jamaica and lumber to Guarico. He even experimented with a shipment of tabasco peppers to Santo Domingo in 1785.³⁰

Much of Segond's business was done in connection with other members of his Marseilles family. His brother José was an established merchant in Bordeaux and a family relative was established in Guarico. It was in this connection that Segond became involved with the original contract of Gilberto de Maxent to ship Indian trade goods from Marseilles to New Orleans on board Segond's 200 ton vessel, the Falcon, in 1782. Since the shipment was made in conjunction with his brother, who was French, the question arose as to whether this trip fell within the bounds of the Cedula of 1782 which limited trade to Spanish or Louisiana merchants. Despite the fact that this shipment clearly violated

article one of the Cedula, it was authorized by José de Galvez. Intendant Navarro, however, was instructed not to give licenses for future trips between Marseilles and New Orleans.³¹

Navarro subsequently inquired if Segond should be given permission to continue other trading ventures in the Caribbean and to other designated ports in Europe. He felt that if Segond's brother, José, traded with the French West Indies, there was nothing to stop Pablo from obtaining cargos in French Santo Domingo and shipping them on to New Orleans. Despite these concerns, Galvez ordered Navarro on June 11, 1786 to permit Segond to continue trading, restricting him only against doing business directly with Marseilles. Even this ban was lifted temporarily in 1787 to allow Segond to recover goods left to him by his father and to return his children from Marseilles where they were being educated.³²

Segond sustained crippling losses in the great New Orleans fire of March, 1788 which destroyed his house, furnishings, and a warehouse containing goods valued at more than 190,000 pesos. Shortly thereafter he travelled to Spain to formally petition the crown for a loan of 100,000 pesos to help restore his business. He offered as security his patrimony in Marseilles, and claimed that he had received registered ships in Louisiana for more than twenty years and that in one of them contributed more than three-quarters of the taxes paid in Louisiana for that year.³³

It seems unlikely that Segond enjoyed any success in obtaining the loan. He does seem to have succeeded in reestablishing his merchant operations in 1790, though never at the level previously enjoyed. A letter from M. Orillard, a Nantes merchant, to Maby Desmontis, dated May 11, 1792, suggests the company's continued operation as Segond and Son. It directed Desmontis to arrange a small shipment of indigo, rice or logwood for France with arrangements to be made by Segond and Son and recommended as quick a turnover of affairs as possible because of the current favorable exchange rate and the unsettled political conditions in Europe.³⁴

REAUD AND FORTIER COMPANY

This was perhaps the most successful New Orleans mercantile firm in the decade of the 1780's. By 1786 they had established themselves as the leading merchants in New Orleans. The two original partners were Alexo Reaud and Miguel Fortier although other associates may have joined the company at a later date.

Little is known about Reaud, who seems to have been a native of France. By 1778 he was a wholesale merchant living on Calle Real next door to Andre Jung and Jean Nicolas Poupet, both merchants.³⁵

Fortier was the son of a distinguished Louisiana Creole family. His father, also called Miguel, was an early immigrant to Louisiana from St. Malo and acted as a master armorer for the French forces stationed in

Louisiana. His son, Miguel Jr., was born in New Orleans in 1750. By 1778 he had established himself as a successful merchant, married Marie Durel, and was the father of two children. A lieutenant in the New Orleans militia, he and his family lived on Calle St. Ursula with their six slaves.³⁶

The partnership between Reaud and Fortier was established soon after the proclamation of the Cedula of 1782 and they were already doing business in April of 1783 when a Reaud and Fortier ship, the Espirito Santo, left Bordeaux for New Orleans. High winds forced it to stop at Guarico before proceeding to the Balize, where the ship encountered violent storms and sustained heavy damages to its keel. The company purchased another vessel, the Hazard, from Santiago Dupuy on September 25, 1783. Dupuy had originally brought it from Bordeaux. The company also obtained a license from Navarro, on September 11, 1783, to bring another ship from France.³⁷

Despite the development of an early fleet, ahead of its competitors, the company was nearly bankrupted in 1784 when this last ship brought from France, the Thetis, foundered at the entrance to the Mississippi River on a voyage from Guarico with a cargo of French manufactures and slaves. Five slaves died and most of the cargo was damaged. In addition, the costs of repairs to the ship, provisions and care for the slaves, and rations for the crew, totalled 11,002 pesos.³⁸

This setback was only partially compensated for by high profits earned in shipping a cargo of indigo to Le Havre on January 28, 1784 and a cargo of wood, shingles and lumber to Guarico on board the frigate, San Miguel.³⁹

However, 1785 was a banner year for the company. In that year alone, the company shipped rice and barrel staves to Port-au-Prince on the Margarita, wood, rice and shingles to Guarico on the bilander Jupiter, pelts to Bordeaux on the recently repaired Thetis, a second shipment of pelts to Bordeaux on the brig Don Quixote, a second trip on the Margarita, this time to Guarico with a cargo of wood, lumber, and shingles, and three additional shipments of lumber, two to Guarico and one to Port-au-Prince.⁴⁰

Certainly by 1786, Reaud and Fortier Company had established itself as the leading merchant company of New Orleans. Their success in such a short time seems to have resulted from combining one or two shipments each year to France selling pelts and buying French manufactures for resale in New Orleans with numerous smaller and shorter shipments of lumber products to the French West Indies, where they found ready markets and a favorable exchange rate.

Jus how long the company continued its prosperous ways after 1788 is unknown. Fortier, at least, was an extremely wealthy man by 1802 when he was appointed to the French Municipal Council by Prefect Pierre Laussat. he died in 1819.⁴¹

CONCLUSION

In measuring the success of the provisions of the Real Cedula of 1782, two conclusions are possible. First, from a colonial standpoint, the Intendant's capable management of trade and commerce brought the first modest commercial prosperity to Louisiana since the transfer of the colony from France in 1763. This was accomplished by encouraging trade, accepting semi-clandestine operations in the constant search for new outlets for Louisiana's exports. By 1788, all of Louisiana's exports had found ready markets in France, England or the West Indies.

Second, from a metropolitan standpoint, the Louisiana ✓ experiment was an utter failure. Spain continued to absorb the administrative costs of a colony whose trade was almost exclusively with foreign nations and their colonies. The sole exception to this gloomy picture was the modest expansion of the merchant sector in New Orleans itself, whose limited prosperity was a ✓ direct result of the Crown's decision to allow Louisiana nationals to purchase vessels in foreign countries without duties or taxes.