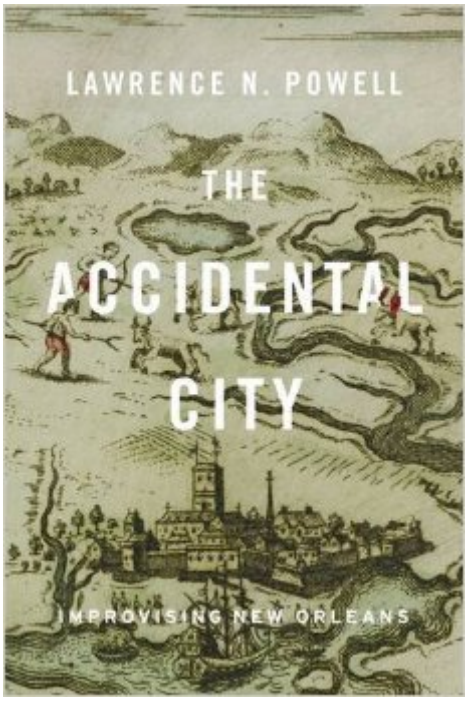
The Accidental City: Improvising New Orleans



Synopsis

America’s most beguiling metropolis started out as a snake-infested, hurricane-battered swamp. Through intense imperial rivalries and ambitious settlers who risked their lives to succeed in colonial America, the site became a crossroads for the Atlantic world. Powell gives us the full sweep of the city’s history from its founding through statehood.

Book Information

Paperback: 448 pages

Publisher: Harvard University Press; Reprint edition (October 14, 2013)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0674725905

ISBN-13: 978-0674725904

Product Dimensions: 1.2 x 6.2 x 9.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.5 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.3 out of 5 starsÂ Â See all reviewsÂ (43 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #48,559 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #84 inÂ Books > History > Americas > United States > Colonial Period #187 inÂ Books > History > Americas > United States > African Americans > Discrimination & Racism #212 inÂ Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Sociology > Race Relations

Customer Reviews

I visited New Orleans last week. It felt like no one could really tell me the nerdy, detailed history of the place. Tour guides glossed over details. Locals had great "local color" of recent decades, which is certainly valuable. But this book is the answer to a question that I think many have been asking. The women at the local bookstore told me, "We’ve needed this book for a while." I can’t wait to read the rest. Sitting down for another 50-70 page sitting now.Note: you need some resilience as an academic reader to get through this. It’s dense, and you need to be willing to let certain details fall by the wayside as you pick-up on the most important ones, constructing a narrative in your first reading. After that, go back and dig in deeper if you wish.

This is a book I didn’t want to put down, and now that I’ve finished it, I find myself returning to it. Powell is a good storyteller, and through all the muddy history of early New Orleans and the colony it was supposed to center, he keeps the reader firmly located in time and place. That is a difficult task, since understanding New Orleans in its colonial period requires situating it in the contexts of

French and Spanish colonial aspirations, Anglo-European rivalries, the Caribbean world of trade, African and Indian slavery, the rivalry between the French Canadian establishment (e.g., the Lemoyne brothers Bienville and Iberville) and the natives of France who make up the military, the Church, government bureaucracy, and the entrepreneurs. Yet Powell makes the job seem easy. His comprehension of the city along with his graceful writing style and lucid organization makes this book one of the best histories I've read in a long time. Devoid of the dreary academic jargon that impedes understanding, it is nevertheless the work of a scholar. of I recommend it to anyone who wants to understand how New Orleans became the city it is today and, to a large extent, how Louisiana became the state it is."The Accidental City" is not a simple linear history of the founding of New Orleans. In it, Powell seeks to identify the qualities that distinguish the city and to account for these in an interwoven complex history of geography, ethnicity, colonialism, class, geography, and the West Indian world of slavery. He does it both with flair and clarity.He begins with the iconic legend of English Turn, 15 miles downriver from the current French Quarter. Scouting possible sites for the city, nineteen-year-old Jean Baptiste LeMoyne, Sieur de Bienville, a lieutenant in the French Navy, encountered an armed British ship headed upriver to deposit a group of French Huguenots on the banks of the lower Mississippi. The teenaged Bienville, accompanied by five men in two canoes, apprised the British they were trespassing on French territory. Assuring a French force capable of compelling his departure was near at hand, Bienville ordered the captain to leave at once. The British ship turned and headed back into the Gulf of Mexico.Bienville's audacity alone would have marked him for leadership in a colony whose mother country would prove so inept in providing for it. But he was also a Canadian, a man of the New World, clever and pragmatic. He and his brother Iberville were among the French Canadians---trappers, traders, merchants---drawn to New Orleans by the prospect of making their fortunes in a city through which all commerce west of the Appalachians would have to pass and whose not-so-secret raison d'etre included giving France an edge in the smuggling trade that was part of the Caribbean and West Indian experience. A natural tension would always exist between the Canadians and the Europeans. That the Canadians had the upper hand in the beginning may be inferred from the fact that the site selected for the new port city was land Bienville owned, when a more logical site existed. Through their own and their children's marriages with Europeans, the Canadians developed more common cause in creating at least some semblance of order in the city, though in the end, their independence brought half a dozen to the gallows when Spain acquired the colony.The problem that both France and Spain found most troubling about New Orleans, however, was its lack of what they called order. And by order, they did not refer simply to the procedures of government or even to the shantytowns that

often plagued New Orleans. The intermingling of people from different classes and races and the disregard for traditional status that had underpinned European civilization for centuries disturbed the mother countries. And unlike the British, the French had not anticipated the need to assure the presence of sufficient women in the colony from its early days, so that sexual liasons between Europeans and native American and black Caribbean slave women had created what amounted to new categories, each with its own status, further confusing things in an already confused city. The number of free people of color and the city's dependence on the produce and game supplied by slaves from their own gardens on the river plantations gave the enslaved immense power. Nothing like Louisiana existed in Europe, and neither the monarchs nor their functionaries knew exactly what to do about it.Unorthodox and often unorganized as it was, however, Powell shows a city getting a grip on itself under Spanish rule when a new development completely changed the rules. With the development of the cotton gin, cotton replaced indigo and tobacco as economic staples and greatly increased the number of agricultural workers needed. New Orleans became one of the biggest slave markets in America, and the mass importation of African Negroes led to the diminishment of the power native enslaved blacks had enjoyed and offended traditions that regulated interactions between people of different ethnic and racial backgrounds almost so old as the city. The advent of Etienne de BorÃ©'s method of making sugar from the juice of cane increased the demand for even more slaves and created the most brutal working in America. The insurrections and terror that grew out of this new slavery changed Louisiana. In a world where slaves far outnumbered free whites, one had to question whether anyone had freedom.But perhaps what surprised me most in this book was the Mississippi River, which made New Orleans necessary to the French imperialists. Locating a city on the River was not simply a matter of finding a dry piece of land south of Baton Rouge, where original planners had sited the city, and near enough to the mouth of the river to fortify it against other claims. Europeans had never seen a delta such as that created by the Mississippi, one that spread out over such a vast area and that had numerous inlets that led to lakes or creeks or boggy bayous. LaSalle, who had discovered the Mississippi by coming down it, returned to France, where he was outfitted with men and materials to lay a human claim to it, could not locate the mouth of the river on his return trip and followed so many dead-end streams that his men, hungry and hopeless, put a bullet in his head in Texas. Powell captures perfectly the ways of the old river, the conditions it created which men must learn to navigate, from the everlasting moisture to the floods and hurricanes and mosquito-borne pestilences and the swamps which hid runaway slaves as well as well as the snakes and rats and insects with which residents of New Orleans would learn to live with considerable style.I grew up in Louisiana and have lived in the state all my

life except for college and graduate school. In those years, I missed its extravagance and audacity, its odd democracy and proud sense of exotic singularity. Only thirty miles from my home in the late 1980s a black woman donned Native American head gear and declared herself an empress, laid legal claim to most of Louisiana and a lot of Arkansas, ordered a fleet of Rolls Royce limos from a Florida dealer, and called a world peace conference in what amounted to her office in a neighborhood of Monroe, Louisiana. The U.N. sent a delegate, from Togo.A former governor once told a reporter "The feds will never find a jury that will convict me unless they find me in bed with a live boy or dead girl." (He was wrong about that). Voters in the congressional district where I grew up elected one of the Longs to congress after he had been declared mentally deranged and proved it in an extraordinary campaign. His older brother, Huey Long, had run roughshod over state law and the old South Louisiana aristocracy during the Depression in a way unmatched elsewhere and had brought public education, highways, and free school books to Louisiana north of Baton Rouge by sharing the state's money he took for himself with the population. His motto: "Every man a king."Reading Powell's fine book, I wondered if we might have been just like other states had New Orleans and environs been settled in a more rational, planned way and by a nation that provisioned its earliest settlers when they sailed off to a land with such monumental natural problems. Almost certainly we would have been. To those who want to know why, I heartily recommend "The Accidental City."

The knowledge of the first 100 years of New Orleans history is usually confined to a few well-known facts: it was founded by Bienville, owned by France, the French Quarter was burned and rebuilt by Spain who owned it at the time, then later transferred to the United States as part of the Louisiana Purchase.This wonderful book shines a light on those obscure years and makes this early history come to life with lively prose and stunningly beautiful passages. So interesting I didn't want it to end.I live in New Orleans, born and raised here. This detailed, well-crafted book is a delight to read, not a trudging chore as some history books are. If you really want to find out about why New Orleans is the way it is, and why it's here on the edge of a swamp, stuck on a ridge along one of the world's most powerful rivers this book is a must-read.

I wasn't sure I was going to post a review of City when I first got it. The author is a longtime friend. I wasn't so much worried about favoring the book too highly as that I might find parts of it objectionable and would find it difficult to tell my friend that.I needn't have worried. The book is excellent. The story it tells is a fascinating one, and especially relevant post-Katrina, with naysayers

second-guessing the merit in restoring a city so vulnerable to the elements as New Orleans is. One of the (many) things I admire about this book is Larry's passion for his city, a passion that doesn't compromise his ability to view its history objectively.! Good history doesn't have to be dry. It can be passionate as long as it's faithful to the record, and this book is.New Orleans's history was complicated from the start. The settlement shouldn't have been built where it was in the first place - on a site with limited commercial or agricultural merit, founded on unstable soil, and subject to heat, disease, floods, rain, and torrential hurricanes. There were more sensible places to found a city. It was founded -confirmed--where it was almost by trick.At every stage of its growth (up to 1814, where the story ends) there have been dramatic changes, volte-faces, as the city changed hands -first French, then Spanish, finally American. It had a society that was unique in the world, a tri-partite blend of white, African slave, and free men of color (gens de couleur libres). Some of the most interesting portions of this book deal with the tensions and accommodations made between blacks and whites in this culturally fertile frontier society.Throughout the book, Powell gracefully balances narrative and analysis. An added bonus is his sense of humor, which makes the narrative more human and actually more understandable at points. I liked the way Powell phrased this sentence, commenting on the rapidity with which passionately held positions changed face in the city. "Reopening the slave trade [post-1804] was one of those hypercontroversial subjects, until it no longer was." "Until it no longer was"! That's well said!The packaging of the book is worth noting. It is very handsomely packaged indeed, as are most books published by Harvard these days. The dust jacket is handsome, featuring a detail from an early map of the region. Everything about the book speaks of quality -starting, of course, with the text.

Spicer’s New Orleans Unfathomable City: A New Orleans Atlas Emeril’s New New Orleans Cooking New Orleans New Elegance The Historical Atlas of New York City, Third Edition: A Visual Celebration of 400 Years of New York City’s History The Historical Atlas of New York City: A Visual Celebration of 400 Years of New York City’s History Guide to Architecture of New Orleans, A New Orleans: Elegance and Decadence