

INTRODUCTION

Louisiana, a Spanish province from 1762 to 1803, enjoys a particularly rich archival legacy. The importance of that legacy has been recognized by successive generations of historians, archivists, and administrators. Antonio de Sedella, during his first tenure (1787–90) as pastor of the then parish church of St. Louis, undertook a project to recopy for security and posterity the essential records of the church. The decision proved invaluable when many of the documents were destroyed in the 1788 New Orleans fire. Pierre Clément Laussat, the French colonial prefect charged with the transfer of Louisiana from Spain to France and France to the United States, fought to preserve the integrity of the Spanish archives.

In 1846 Louisiana Secretary of State Charles E. A. Gayarré began an official project to organize, collect, and maintain colonial records. He subsequently secured funds so that blank paper could be purchased for the copying of Louisiana records in France and Spain. In 1850 Gayarré issued his *Report on Louisiana Archives in Spain* to the state legislature. While Gayarré's projects were not continued, other individuals came forth with new ideas that would eventually realize the value of Gayarré's vision. The Carnegie Institution played a major role, publishing William R. Shepherd's *Guide to the Materials for the United States in Spanish Archives (Simancas, the Archivo Histórico Nacional, and Seville)* (1907); Luis Marino Pérez's *Guide to the Materials from American History in Cuban Archives* (1907); Herbert Eugene Bolton's *Guide to Materials for the History of the United States in the Principal Archives of Mexico* (1913); and Roscoe R. Hill's *Descriptive Catalogue of the Documents Relating to the History of the United States in the Papeles Procedents de Cuba Deposited in the Archivo General de Indias* (1916).

Subsequent efforts to obtain a greater knowledge of United States and Louisiana materials in Spain ensured that interest in the material among Louisiana historians remained constant. Finally, a group of New Orleans civic leaders in the late 1950s urged Loyola University to begin a project to microfilm Louisiana documentation in the Archivo General de Indias. The archive permitted the project, a radical innovation in Spanish archival practice. Previously, copying an entire *legajo*, or bundle of documents, had been prohibited.

Authorities decided to begin the project with documents preserved in the section of the Archivo General de Indias known as Sección V, Gobierno, Audiencia de Santo Domingo. The decision to start with that documentation was simple: it lacked a published description. It was wisely decided that a catalogue would be developed to ensure access to the material. The resulting *Catalogo*

de Documentos del Archivo General de Indias (Sección V, Gobierno, Audiencia de Santo Domingo) Sobre la Época Española de Luisiana was published in 1968 on the 250th anniversary of the founding of New Orleans. Upon the completion of the guide, the material was microfilmed. Loyola University subsequently began a project to microfilm the Louisiana material described in Hill's *Papeles Procedents de Cuba*. Eventually, Loyola University was joined in that effort by Louisiana State University and The Historic New Orleans Collection.

It is vital to secure access to Louisiana material in Spanish archives. As Ernest J. Burrus, SJ, observed in his introduction to the 1968 catalogue:

Whereas Mexico, Columbia, Peru, Chile and most of the other Spanish American colonial units are still in possession of their state papers and other archival material, Louisiana gave up even the copies normally preserved at the source of issuance of the original correspondence and related documents.

Once it completed microfilming the “Cuban Papers” in the Archivo General de Indias, The Historic New Orleans Collection worked to secure microfilm copies of material preserved in institutions such as the Archivo General de Simancas, Archivo Histórico Nacional, Biblioteca Nacional de España, Biblioteca del Palacio Real, and other Spanish institutions, including at the Archivo General de Cuba.

Fortunately, in preparation for the 500th anniversary of Columbus’s epic 1492 voyage, institutions throughout the world increased their efforts to provide greater access to Spain’s archival treasures. In 1995 the Library of Congress published *The Hispanic World 1492–1898: A Guide to Photoreproduced Manuscripts from Spain in the Collections of the United States, Guam, and Puerto Rico* by Guadalupe Jimenez Codinach. More importantly, the Archivo General de Indias began a massive project to make documents available online. Now, twenty-five years later, the amount of material available online to researchers is staggering.

This electronic resource has been developed in an effort to continue to fulfill Gayarré’s vision of providing Louisiana access to the vast amount of locally relevant material housed in Spanish archives.

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director of the Archivo General de Indias, worked with The Historic New Orleans Collection to locate the most qualified individuals to undertake the project. His efforts resulted in the collaboration of Guadalupe Fernández Morente and Esther González Pérez. Subsequently, the translation of the original text was prepared by Trágora Traducciones, with additional guidance from Victoria Stapells.

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