



Top: Jacques Villere was a Creole who was elected as the second governor of Louisiana. **Above:** Anglo American Thomas Bolling Robertson was the third governor of the state.

Lagniappe

The capitol building in Donaldsonville was 100 feet long and 15 feet wide.

Antebellum Politics

As you read, look for:

- the political conflicts between the Creoles and the Americans,
- the antebellum constitutions, and
- vocabulary terms **faction**, **compromise**, **suffrage**, and **depression**.

When Louisiana became part of the United States, the government in Washington appointed officials to govern the territory. Americans assumed most of the leadership positions formerly held by the French. When Louisiana became a state, these Americans were elected to state offices. A Creole leader once complained that Virginia would have to run out of sons before Louisiana could elect one of its own.

National party issues were not important in the developing state; every election focused on the Americans versus the Creoles. During the antebellum period, other political factions formed throughout the state. (A **faction** is a small group with common goals within a larger group.) For example, people outside New Orleans resented that city's influence on state politics. Cotton planters and sugar planters did not agree on the ways the government should help the economy. The conflict within New Orleans grew so strong that the city was split into three smaller cities for several years.

The settlers in North Louisiana believed the government was neglecting their area of the state. The population in the northern part of the state increased significantly between 1830 and 1840. More people should have meant more representatives. But the boundaries for the districts were not reapportioned (redrawn) even though the population had increased. The people in North Louisiana were not fairly represented.

A Clash of Cultures

Each faction struggled to gain political power. But the underlying conflict in the state was always between the Americans and the Creoles. From the time that the first governor was elected until just before the Civil War, these two factions selected the candidates for governor. Historians have concluded that the two sides had informally agreed to alternate between American and Creole governors.

The list started with the American William C. C. Claiborne. The second elected governor, Jacques Villere, was a Creole who worked out compromises between the two groups. In a **compromise**, each group gives way a little in its demands

in order to settle a disagreement. The next governor, Thomas Bolling Robertson, was an aggressive American who increased the conflicts. The two groups became caught in a power struggle, and the plan to alternate between American and Creole governors was abandoned.

The legislature reflected the same power struggles. Legislators spoke in either French or English, with translations immediately following. In one account, a legislator stood silently as he was being insulted by a colleague. When he heard the foreign words translated into his own language, he answered with rude comments.

The American legislators objected to meeting in New Orleans, the center of Creole power. In 1823, they tried to move the capital to the West Florida region, the Anglo stronghold. The Creoles blocked the move, and this argument almost started a riot. Fear of bloodshed forced the leaders on both sides to calm down.

The hostilities and tension between the two groups eased during the Marquis de Lafayette's visit to New Orleans in 1825. His French heritage and his heroic role in the American Revolution brought both Creoles and Americans out to cheer him. Huge crowds of people paraded and celebrated his arrival. City officials even remodeled the Cabildo for his temporary residence.

A New Capital

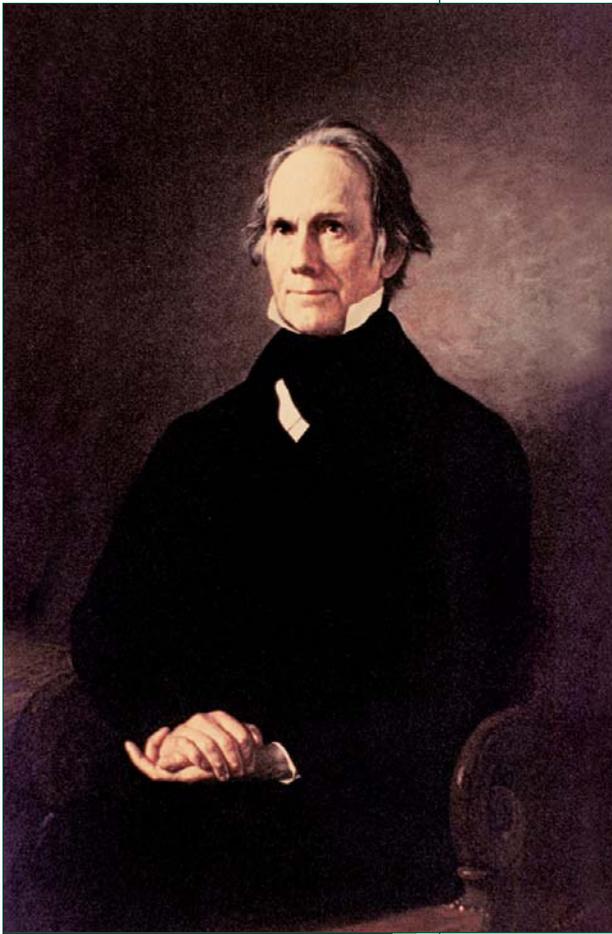
Governor Henry Johnson took advantage of this temporary peace and goodwill. He led the legislature to compromise about the capital, and Donaldsonville was selected as the new location. The capital was removed from New Orleans, which pleased the Americans. But Donaldsonville was still within the Creole sugar bowl along the Mississippi River.

Unfortunately, the compromise did not work out. The legislature met in Donaldsonville in 1830 for only one term, complaining that the town was just too small. By the next term, they had returned to New Orleans with its hotels, restaurants, and entertainments.

In 1849, the Americans succeeded in moving the capital to Baton Rouge. The cornerstone for the State Capitol in Baton Rouge was laid on November 3, 1847. The imposing building cost \$100,000 and took two years to build. A new technique—using cast iron instead of masonry supports—made the building stronger and less costly.



Above: In 1849, the capital was moved to Baton Rouge. James Dakin designed the Capitol building to look like a castle. It is now referred to as the Old State Capitol.



Above: Henry Clay of Kentucky was one of the leaders of the Whig Party. His stand on protective tariffs attracted many Louisianians, particularly the sugar planters, to the Whig party.

Other state capitols built in the same era copied the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C. Architect James Dakin designed the Louisiana Capitol to look more like a castle than a government building. The radical design shocked some and pleased others. Mark Twain ridiculed the building, calling it a “sham castle.” Others were impressed by the huge white building that overlooked the Mississippi River. This monument to the past still stands today.

Political Parties

Andrew Jackson’s campaign for president created Louisiana’s first, strong interest in national political parties. The people remembered the hero of the Battle of New Orleans and helped elect him president in 1828. The ideas of Jacksonian democracy appealed to many. Jackson distrusted the wealthy upper class and its control of the political system. The candidate of the “common man,” Jackson believed that all people had the right to participate in their government. Those who supported Jackson called themselves the Democratic-Republicans, which was later shortened to Democrats.

A government of the people demanded broader voting rights. Before the Jackson era, most states required that voters be property owners or taxpayers. But by 1828, many states had extended **suffrage** (the right to vote) to all white males over twenty-one years of age. The American newcomers in North Louisiana welcomed these ideas and joined the Democratic Party.

Not everyone agreed with Jackson, his policies, and his methods. The Whig Party was formed in the 1830s to oppose Jackson, and many Creoles became Whigs. Henry Clay of Kentucky was a leader of the Whigs. Among other issues, he supported protective tariffs to keep out foreign competition.

This issue soon attracted Louisiana sugar planters to the Whig Party. They needed protection against the lower prices of sugar from the West Indies. The sugar planters organized the Whig Party in Louisiana in 1834, with the party leaders coming from this wealthy and powerful group.

Alexander Porter was an early Louisiana Whig leader. He had left Ireland for political reasons and immigrated to the United States. Later, he became a prosperous sugar planter on Bayou Lafourche. Henry Clay visited Porter’s Oak Lawn Plantation to

Lagniappe

In 1851, the Whig Party of Louisiana held its convention in Donaldsonville. The party lost its support in Louisiana after the presidential election of 1852.

discuss Whig plans for the state. Later, increasing national conflicts over slavery killed the Whig Party. The many factions within the party could no longer compromise on that issue.

Increasing tensions in a growing country led to the formation of a new party about this time. Officially called the American Party, the party was opposed to immigrants and Catholics. Members soon became known as the “Know Nothings,” because they always answered “I know nothing” when asked about the secrets of their organization. The party blamed recent immigrants for problems in the United States such as unemployment and wage cuts and proposed that immigrants wait twenty-one years before they could become citizens. They also wanted elected offices to be limited to native-born Americans. The Know Nothings accused the Catholic Church of having too much influence, especially over newly arrived immigrants.

In Louisiana, the American Party focused more on the immigrants in New Orleans than on the Catholic Church. Louisiana’s large Catholic population would have made an American Party challenge against Catholics unwise. The Know Nothings blamed the immigrants for the increasing violence among workers in the growing port of New Orleans.

The party gained control of the New Orleans city government in 1854 and maintained that control until the Civil War. The Democratic newspaper accused the party of using “the gun and the Bowie knife” to achieve that control. Several riots occurred, and two Irish members of the New Orleans Police were killed.

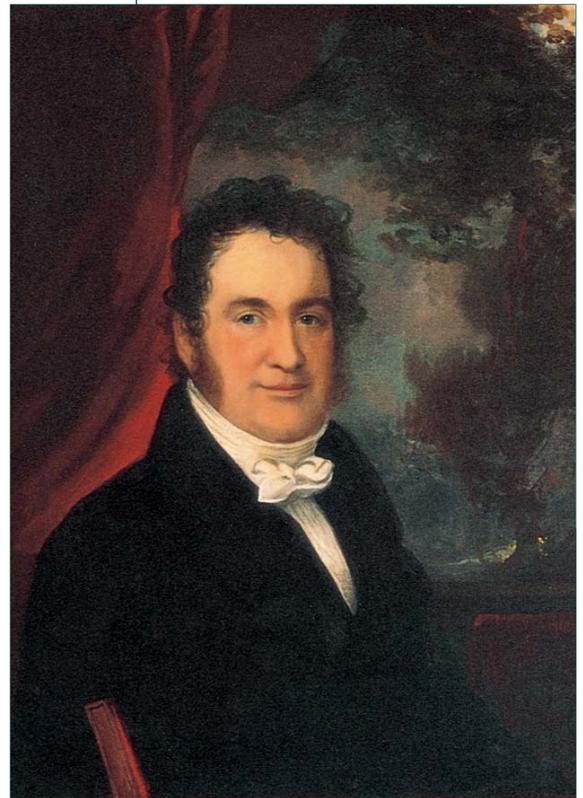
Strong opinions about politics did not always lead to violence. Political campaigning added to the social life and entertainment of the antebellum period. Crowds gathered to hear politicians’ long-winded speeches. One campaigner spoke for six hours. He gave his two-hour speech first in English, then in French, and finally in Spanish.

Barbecues attracted audiences for the lengthy speeches. One Whig barbecue held to celebrate a political victory was reportedly attended by six thousand people. The huge crowd was entertained by several bands. A celebration by Andrew Jackson’s New Orleans supporters included the barbecue of a bear.

A New Constitution

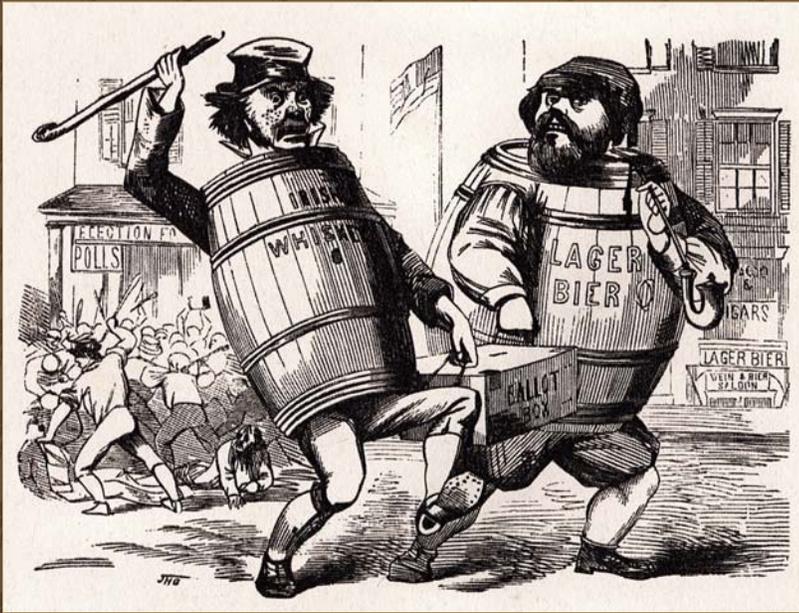
The growth of Jacksonian democracy eventually led to a new constitution for Louisiana. The first state constitution, written in 1812, limited voting rights and representation. An economic depression, called the Panic of 1837, showed that the state constitution needed economic and banking controls. (A **depression** is a severe, continued downturn in the economy where sales and prices drop, manufacturing decreases, businesses close, banks fail, and people lose their jobs.)

The constitution of 1845 was more democratic. Owning property was no longer a requirement for voting or holding office. However, the right to vote was still



Above: Judge Alexander Porter was an early leader of the Whig Party in the state. Henry Clay visited Porter’s Oak Lawn Plantation to discuss Whig plans for Louisiana.

The Art of Politics



This “Know Nothing” cartoon accuses Irish and German immigrants of stealing elections and running the big city political machines.

Lagniappe

The effects of the Panic of 1837 lasted until 1843.

limited to white males over twenty-one years of age. The biggest battle over this constitution repeated the same arguments heard when the U.S. Constitution was written. What was a fair way to decide representation?

Each faction wanted to have the most votes so it would control the legislature and have the political power. The New Orleans delegates wanted to count the number of voters to determine the number of legislators. The planters opposed that plan because they would be outnumbered by the city voters. The planters wanted to count the total population, including slaves. In a compromise, the two groups shared the power. Representation in the house of representatives was based on the number of registered voters; in the senate, it was based on the total population.

The constitution of 1845 never pleased many people. Some felt it was

still too undemocratic. Others complained that the banking regulations restricted economic growth. Because of these concerns, another constitution was written a few years later—in 1852.

Again, the major argument centered on representation. This time, the planters won and representation in both houses of the legislature was based on the total population, including slaves. The 1852 constitution loosened banking regulations to promote a growing economy. It allowed the state to help fund companies. This action led to state financing for canals, roads, and, most importantly, railroads.

Check for Understanding ✓

1. What were the two major political factions that existed in Louisiana during the antebellum period?
2. Name the three political parties that formed during the antebellum period.
3. Why was the Louisiana constitution rewritten in 1845?