

Revisiting Early Filipino presence in Louisiana: Examining the Sources***1763: A historical fiction***

1763 was recognized in the 2009 House Congressional Record as the “date of the first permanent Filipino settlement in the United States in St. Malo Parrish, Louisiana.”¹ It was part of a resolution that officially designated October as Filipino American History Month in the United States. This date first appeared on July 31, 1977 in an article, “The Filipino ‘Cajuns,’” by Larry Bartlett in *Dixie*, a weekly Sunday popular magazine for the New Orleans newspaper, *Times-Picayune*.² This date was popularized via Marina Espina’s book, *Filipinos in Louisiana*, a collection of her published articles from 1976 to 1981. In the page xv (15) between her preface and first chapter, she quotes from Mr. Bartlett’s article:

The year was 1763, and the schooner had unloaded its cargo at the Spanish provincial capital of New Orleans. Then its crew of Filipino sailors jumped ship and fled into the nearby cypress swamp. The sailors had been forced into service in their Spanish-ruled homeland, and—like hundreds of their countrymen before them—had chosen to escape from the Spaniards’ oppression by disappearing into the wilderness of the New World.

Sadly this date was a literary fiction created by Mr. Bartlett to enhance the drama of the article for the reading public. This startling revelation came to light in 1999! A researcher based in the Philippine, Malcolm Churchill published an article, “Louisiana History and Early Filipino Settlement: Searching for the Story.” The article carefully details the inaccuracies in Mr. Bartlett’s article. He reveals that in telephonic interview with Ms. Espina on May 11, 1998, she “made the startling admission that the entire account of the Spanish ship and its Filipino crew is ‘fiction.’”³ She subsequently changed her date to 1765. Mr. Churchill in the same telephone interview asked her about 1765. She could not offer a source for that date also.⁴ However, Mr. Churchill located the

source of this date and he reveals that it was 1937 United Press International article by Harry W. Frantz. The article attributes “‘Manila Village’ as being home of Filipino seamen and fishermen on the lower Mississippi since 1765...the little town down the river from New Orleans, which furnished soldiers to Jackson for the defense of that city against the British...”⁵

The Spanish-American War and Louisiana’s Manilamen

A national spotlight on the lives of the early Filipinos living and working in and around New Orleans, Louisiana was first brought to bear by the writer, Lafcadio Hearn in 1883. He wrote an article for the news magazine, *Harper’s Weekly*, “St. Malo, A Lacustrine Village in Louisiana.”⁶ He placed the beginnings of this Filipino village at around 1843. Some 15 years later, the Spanish-American and later Philippine-American Wars would again bring their lives under national scrutiny through local and national press coverage. A sampling of some the headlines: *The Morning Astorian* (Astoria, OR), “The Filipinos of Louisiana. A Strange Little Race of People Who Are Comparatively Unknown. A Colony of the Marshes. The Settlement Originated Over Fifty Years Ago by Runaway Sailors From Manila.”⁷; *The Times-Picayune* (New Orleans, LA), “Manila Men Down at Shell Beach.”⁸; *Courier-Journal* (Louisville, KY), “The Queer Home of a Philippine Colony Down in Louisiana. Lived There Many Years. Have Heard of Dewey and Admire His Brave Deeds, Maintain the Customs of Their Country and Lead an Isolated and Peaceful Existence.”⁹; and the *Springfield Republican* (Springfield, MA), “Manila Men Among Us. Filipinos Here for a Century. Their Life in New Orleans. Views on Actions of United States.”¹⁰

Three news articles from this period reveal remarkable information about their origins, their lives, and their hopes for the Philippines back then. The most astounding was written by Sixto Lopez for the *Springfield Republican* and published on December 6, 1903. Sixto Lopez was originally part of the diplomatic delegation sent to the United States in September 1898 to gain recognition of the independent fledging Philippine Republic. He served as the delegation's secretary. The delegation's mission was a failure as the United States refused to formally meet them. When the Philippine-American War broke out on February 1899, members of the delegation fled the country. Sixto Lopez would return to the United States as a private citizen on October 1, 1900.¹¹



Figure 1: Sixto Lopez in 1904.¹²

He was sponsored during his stay by Boston-based anti-imperialist, Fiske Warren. While here, he toured all over the country speaking on the cause of the Philippines and also published numerous articles, opinion pieces, and letters to the editor in American dailies. During his stay in the United States, he became the representative of the Filipino desire for freedom and independence. Sixto Lopez remained outside the Philippines for a

number of years because United States authorities refused to allow his return because of his refusal to take an oath of allegiance to the United States.

In his *Springfield Republican* article, he writes that Filipinos have been in New Orleans for a century and one Augustin Feliciano fought with Jean Lafitte's Baratarians in the Battle of New Orleans:

The origin of the community, though it cannot claim the glamour of being "shrouded in mystery," is at least associated with the adventurous. *The first of these Manila-men to settle in America was one Augustin Feliciano, a Bicol, from the island of Catanduanes, southeast of Luzon, who, after having fought in the battle of Trafalgar as a petty officer on one of the Spanish ships of the line, retired from the navy of the Peninsula and set sail for New Orleans in 1807.* Fate, however, had decreed that his naval activities should, after a time, continue—though under a different flag. It was during a critical period of the Anglo-American War of 1812, actually in 1814-1815, that Jean Lafitte, having ceased to engage in what has been charitably termed "irregular trade," joined forces with those of America in the defense of New Orleans. The Baratarians—as Lafitte's followers were called—had just previously routed and dispersed by Commodore Patterson, and the newly reformed and forgiven "Privateer of the Gulf," being in need of additional men for the new enterprise, gladly accepted the services of *Augustin Feliciano, who thus gained the distinction of being the first Filipino to fight in the defense of the Stars and Stripes.* For this laudable act, presumable, the Bicol found welcome and favor among the southern citizens of the young republic, finally settling in New Orleans where he lived, it is said, to the remarkable age of 133 years.¹³ (Emphasis mine.)

This account places Filipino presence in New Orleans just after the United States acquired Louisiana from the France in 1803. Further research must be undertaken to look into the life of Augustin Feliciano to confirm Lopez's account.

Lopez notes the regional origins of the New Orleans Filipino community:

Suffice it to say, the Manila-men gradually increased, with new arrivals from the Orient and from heaven!—for, as has been said, they married and were given in marriage—until at the present time the community numbers about 2000—men, women and children. Of this number, 400 are actual natives of the Philippines, chiefly from the Visayan Islands; the remainder being American born. These 400—who do not claim any parallel relationship with New York's elite!—are made up of eight Tagals, five Bicol, five Ilocanos, two (converted) Moros, and about 380 Visayans. Notwithstanding the large preponderance of the latter. Tagal

is the common language of the community; though all of them can speak Spanish and English with varying degrees of proficiency, and most of them read the American newspapers.¹⁴

When Sixto Lopez visited them, his own presence among them sparked quite a commotion, “(i)ndeed I was an object of interest to them as being the first Filipino to arrive as a passenger!”¹⁵ Many white reporters noted that they had difficulty in gaining the Filipinos trust and talk with them. Because of his being Filipino and ability to speak with them in Tagalog or Spanish, Lopez is able to establish a better rapport than the white reporters.

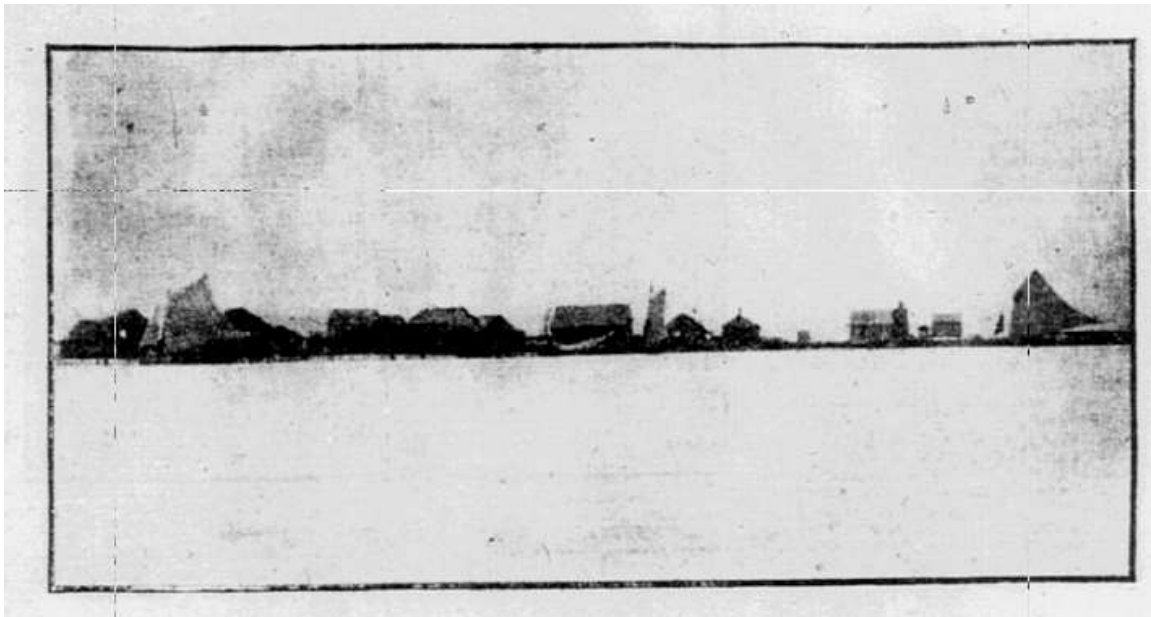


Figure 2: A Village of Manila-Men, One of the Islands in Baratavia.¹⁶

He notes that when the United States Civil War broke out, it would seem natural that being in and living in the South would lend them to joining the Confederacy, but

(t)o their lasting credit be it said, they joined and fought with the soldiers of the Union in order to free the slave, and some of the blood that helped to wash the stain of slavery from “Old Glory” was Filipino blood. A widow of one of these Filipinos still lives in New Orleans, and is the recipient of a small pension from the United States government.

He polled among them for their sympathies on the issue of independence for the Philippines and discovered the community on the whole desirous that the Philippines become a free and independent nation.



Figure 3: Juan Roxas, who may be said to be the leading man in the community, and whose characteristic self-restraint is evidenced in the familiar truism which he has chose, thus writes in English: The desire of liberty is the best evidence of ability of self-government. This commentary was among the ones recorded by Sixto Lopez into his manuscript album.¹⁷

Sixto Lopez compiled a manuscript album of some of the responses of the men from the community recorded in Spanish, Tagalog and English.



Figure 4: The Libertad, Cargo Boat Built by the Manila Men.¹⁸

He notes that they gave “practical expression to its opinions some time ago by sending funds to Hong Kong for the furtherance of Philippine independence.”¹⁹

An July 24, 1898 Times-Picayune article echoes this sentiment:

Wuna, the patriarch of the colony and the more intelligent member, recognized the name of Dewey. He seemed indeed to have heard more or less about the recent history of the land of his nativity, and said that he hoped it would be free.

“You do not like the Spaniard, then,” asked the reporter.

“Me like the Spaniard? Do I like the snake out there in the marsh? Me no like the Spanish. No one like the Spanish in the Manila, because they steal our money. They take our bread. No, no Manila like Spanish.”

“Well, when Dewey gets things fixed up over there, you’ll probably take a trip home, will you not,” asked the reporter.

“Too old, too old. My chest hurts. No, we will never see Manila again.”²⁰

An October 15, 1899 *Courier-Journal* article on Louisiana’s Filipino colony

sheds light on one of the early pioneers and his reasons for jumping ship:

These old fishermen have not seen their native land for many, many years. Most of them left it as sailors on Spanish vessels, and upon arriving here ran away and joined the colony of their countrymen. One very old man who claims to be the pioneer settler stated that he had been in the region for seventy-five years. When he was a boy he worked on a ship engaged in the slave trade. On board this ship he had made many trips to Africa, returning to this country with loads of negroes, who were sold to Southern planters. Tiring of that life, he ran away from the ship and took refuge in these marshes, where he still lives.²¹

He fled the horrors of serving aboard a white slave ship and made his new home in New Orleans around 1824. We can imagine other Filipinos serving aboard such vessels and also wanting to flee upon arriving at Southern ports like New Orleans.



Figure 5: A Concert on Clarkcheniere.²²

On a lighter note, the *Courier-Journal* observes the Filipino love for music and dancing:

They are an amusement loving people and exhibit particular fondness for music and dancing. From 12 to 2 o'clock in the afternoon the little white-winged fishing luggers come pouring in laden with the day's catch of fish, shrimp, oysters and crabs. Then the men disperse to various places arranged for dancing. Two of their number furnish music

from an old weather-beaten guitar and flute, and thus are passed the long, hot, dreamy afternoons in innocent pastime. It never gets too hot for Manila people to dance.²³

These news articles place Filipino presence in New Orleans not in 1763 or 1765, but just after the 1803 Louisiana Purchase, from around 1807 and on. Like Lafcadio Hearn in 1883, Sixto Lopez and the other reporters were there in person talking to the Filipino residents of this various communities. So we can be fairly confident of the dates on where to place the beginnings of the Filipino community in Louisiana. But we should be cautious with the 1807 date and Mr. Augustin Feliciano. Further historical research should be undertaken to verify his story as one of the earliest Filipinos in New Orleans and a fighter in the Battle of New Orleans under the command of Jean Lafitte.

On the occasion of Filipino American history month observed every October by Congressional proclamation, it is important to commemorate the presence and contributions of Filipinos in the Americas for centuries. In previous centuries, Filipinos were already serving in the galleons of the Spanish empire and today Filipinos still sail on the high seas as crews on ships of many nations. But celebrating and re-telling this history requires rigorous research and accuracy. To do less would be to discredit the very history in the Americas we purport to celebrate.

¹ H.R. 780, 111th Cong. (2009). Retrieved from <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CREC-2009-11-02/pdf/CREC-2009-11-02-pt1-PgH12172.pdf#page=1>

² Bartlett, Larry. "The Filipino 'Cajuns.'" *Dixie, Time-Picayune* (New Orleans, LA), July 31, 1977. The following is an excerpt from the article:

Pacing furiously on the quay, Capt. Ignacio Ruiz screamed demands and curses at the New Orleans militiamen while his schooner, Tigre del Mar, rocked at its moorings, empty and abandoned.

The year was 1763, and the schooner had unloaded its cargo at the Spanish provincial capital of New Orleans. Then its crew of Filipino sailors jumped ship and fled into the nearby cypress swamp. The sailors had been forced into service in their Spanish-ruled homeland, and—like hundreds of their countrymen before them—had chosen to escape from the Spaniards' oppression by disappearing into the wilderness of the New World.

³ Churchill, Malcolm. "Louisiana History and Early Filipino Settlement: Searching for the Story." *Bulletin of the American Historical Collection Foundation*, 27, no. 2 (1999): 28.

⁴ Churchill, Malcolm. "Louisiana History and Early Filipino Settlement: Searching for the Story." *Bulletin of the American Historical Collection Foundation*, 27, no. 2 (1999): 29. Earlier this year on May 21, 2014, Mitchell Yangson (Librarian for the Filipino American Center at the San Francisco Public Library) contacted Mr. Churchill to verify his original findings. Here is an excerpt of that email: "I had been frustrated by Marina Espina's book, which was what led me to begin researching the topic of Filipinos in Louisiana. Of course, one of my frustrations was the absence of any citations or sources for the alleged 1763 presence of Filipinos in Louisiana, and on one of our visits to New Orleans I telephoned Marina Espina to ask her for her sources. It was then that she acknowledged that the account of the Filipinos jumping ship in 1763 was fictitious. When she said she was then using a 1765 date instead of the 1763 date and I asked for sources for that date, she said of the 1765 date that she 'just kind of picked it up.'

⁵ Frantz, Harry W. "Filipinos Keep Quaint Colony in Bayou Land." *Anniston Star* (Anniston, AL), March 8, 1937, p. 15. Retrieved from Newspapers.com. See also, Frantz, Harry W. "Manila Village is Subject of Official Filipino Survey." *Tribune* (New Orleans, LA), March 14, 1937, p. 3. The article gives no source to 1765 founding date of Manila Village. This date is in error, as Manila Village was not established until 1882 by Jacinto Quintin de la Cruz. ("J.Q. de la Cruz, Manila Village's Founder, Buried," *The Times-Picayune*, January 15, 1936, p. 12. Retrieved from Newspapers.com). The Filipinos living and working in Manila Village could not have fought against the British in the Battle of New Orleans as Mr. Frantz would have them. The conflict occurred much earlier from December 23, 1814 through January 8, 1815.

⁶ Hearn, Lafcadio. "St. Malo, A Lacustrine Village in Louisiana," *Harper's Weekly* 27, no. 1371, March 31, 1883, pp. 195-199.

⁷ "The Filipinos of Louisiana, A Strange Little Race of People Who Are Comparatively Unknown. A Colony of the Marshes. The Settlement Originated Over Fifty Years Ago by Runaway Sailors From Manila." *The Morning Astorian*, (Astoria, OR), November 3, 1899, p. 6.

⁸ "Manila Men Down at Shell Beach." *The Times-Picayune* (New Orleans, LA), July 24, 1898, p. 15. [Newspapers.com]

⁹ "The Queer Home of a Philippine Colony. An Odd People Inhabiting the Gulf Islands Along the Coast of the State of Louisiana," *Courier-Journal* (Louisville, KY), October 15, 1899, p. 24. [Newspapers.com]

¹⁰ "Manila Men" Among Us. Filipinos Here For A Century. Their Life In New Orleans. Views On Action Of United States," *Springfield Republican* (Springfield, MA), December 6, 1903, p. 16. [Genealogybank.com]

¹¹ Eyot, Canning, and Jim Zwick. *The Story of the Lopez Family: A Page from the History of the War in the Philippines*. Manila, Philippines: Platypus Publishing, 2001.

¹² Eyot, Canning. *The Story of the Lopez Family: A Page from the History of the War in the Philippines*. Boston: James H. West Company, 1904.

¹³ "'Manila Men' Among Us. Filipinos Here For A Century. Their Life In New Orleans. Views On Action Of United States," *Springfield Republican* (Springfield, MA), December 6, 1903, p. 16. [Genealogybank.com]

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ "Manila Men Down at Shell Beach." *The Times-Picayune* (New Orleans, LA), July 24, 1898, p. 15. [Newspapers.com]

²¹ “The Queer Home of a Philippine Colony. An Odd People Inhabiting the Gulf Islands Along the Coast of the State of Louisiana,” *Courier-Journal* (Louisville, KY), October 15, 1899, p. 24. [Newspapers.com]

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.