Historian looks at 'moral climate'

Catholic priests stationed in Louisiana during French Colonial rule fought a losing battle to instill morals in the mainly military congregations that made up the state, according to a USL historian.

In an article entitled “The Moral Climate of French Colonial Louisiana, 1699-1763,” Dr. Carl Brasseaux, adjunct assistant professor of history and assistant director of the Center for Louisiana Studies, examines attempts by the Catholic Church to regulate morality in the unruly frontier territory.

Released in the 1986 winter issue of the “Official Journal of Louisiana History,” the article won the Presidents' Memorial Award. The award is given each year by the Louisiana Historical Association for the greatest contribution to Louisiana history.

Brasseaux previously won the award for his article, “The Administration of Slave Regulations in French Louisiana, 1724-1766.” It is the first time a USL historian has twice been honored for writing the best article in Louisiana history.

It is this example, the article states, that the French settlers followed upon arrival in Louisiana.

From here, the moral climate continued to decline at a much more rapid rate. The article enumerates widespread incidences of prostitution, lechery, gambling, public drunkenness and general crime.

“The sexual exploits of French military personnel in the field were apparently matched by those of the soldiers in the New Orleans garrison. Despite the government’s moralistic policies, royal physicians were compelled to open a hospital at New Orleans for victims of venereal diseases in the late 1730s.”

Brasseaux claims that the church, while not happy with the state of affairs, lacked the administrative machinery to improve the situation.

At that time in Louisiana, the church was chronically understaffed, was limited in the amount of influence it could exert and in some cases, the clergy did not set a very good example.

“The moral fiber of the priests themselves was often suspect, as seen in the child sired by Father St. Cosme and Father Beaubois’s attempts to seduce Governor Etine Perier’s pretty French-born domestique while administering the sacrament of confession,” the article says.

Brasseaux’s article notes that the trend began with Canadian settlers who abandoned their Catholic moral code for that of the Indians’ more permissive way of life.

“In fact, not only did these Canadians openly live ‘in debauchery’ with women of friendly tribes, but they also raided indiscriminately villages to ‘obtain slave concubines.’”