Story of Iberville opens symposium on colonial era

By KAT BERGERON
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BILoxi, Miss. (AP) — A day after Iberville's arrival on what is now the Mississippi Coast, he had his first direct encounter with a Native American.

He and his men had followed several Indians across Biloxi Bay, and the natives fled as soon as they touched land, leaving behind an old man too weak to walk.

The fears of the man, who must have thought he was doomed in the hands of these white-skinned strangers, were quickly allayed when Iberville built him shelter, a fire and fed him food. Not wanting to scare the old man, the explorers left him, with lots of gifts, to make a camp of their own.

This was the opening story heard by those attending Colonial Louisiana: A Tricentennial Symposium.

The gathering of the world's foremost French colonial scholars that began Wednesday will be topped off with a Sunday re-enactment at Fort Maurepas, the Ocean Springs replica of the first French post Iberville established in the Louisiana colony.

What happened to the old man could have spelled disaster for Iberville's plans to build that first post. In the night, grasses caught fire around the old Indian, and he was unable to flee. Although he died of burns the next day, Iberville's diplomacy in this new land averted retaliation.

"This did not prevent the Franco-Indian alliance," said Michael J. Foret, a history professor at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. "The Louisiana colony could never have survived without the small nations, the small Indian tribes."

Foret is one of 18 international scholars who are at the Grand Bayview Hotel for the symposium co-sponsored by University of Southern Mississippi and the Mississippi Historical Society. This is also the society's annual conference, at which statewide history awards are presented to teachers, societies and individuals. The scholars, who come from as far as France and Senegal and as near as Harvard University, were asked to make their talks bridge the gap between academia and the public's curiosity about the past. The lectures are free.

This week, about 150 listened to the morning sessions that dealt mostly with Indian relationships with the French, and more are expected today for the lectures on slavery and life in the colony.

"What an opportunity this is to have all these French colonial scholars in one place," said Ray Bellande, an Ocean Springs businessman and avid history researcher-reenactor.

"The talks have been wonderful, sort of like opening up the treasure chests of Iberville and his brother Bienville. I'm disappointed that there aren't more local people here today listening to these experts."

Only in recent years has the Louisiana colony, which included Mississippi and was much larger than the current state of Louisiana, received much scholarly attention, and history text books downplay Southeastern and Gulf settlement. Much of the country still thinks of England when they hear mention of colonial America.

Those who live in coastal Mississippi are receiving larger doses of French colonial history as the communities celebrate 300 years. On Feb. 13, 1699, Iberville first stepped foot on the mainland in Biloxi.

"The symposium brings to focus, within the yearlong Tricentennial celebration, a scholarly aspect that needs to be recognized among all the hoopla and fun of celebrating our 300 years," said Donald Dana of Long Beach, who is the historical society's president. "We need to recognize the contribution of Iberville, the French, the Canadians and the native Indians to the history of Mississippi."