State sings ‘Happy Birthday’ — to itself

Louisiana marks bicentennial today

The Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS — When officials from the United States arrived in newly acquired Louisiana in 1804 to consider the area for statehood, they found a bewildering landscape vastly different from the New England countryside that gave birth to the nation just a few decades earlier.

The federal group found a population made up almost entirely of French-speakers, a third of whom were free people of color.

The delegation was perplexed, said Connie Zeannah Atkinson, professor of U.S. history at the University of New Orleans.

“There was a feeling that citizens must speak English,” Atkinson said. “And they did not know what to do with such a large population of free people of color.”

In 1804, the area had only 35,932 known residents. Statehood required 60,000.

Eight years later, on the eve of the War of 1812, the population had grown and Louisiana became a state.

It celebrates its bicentennial today.

Under the Louisiana Purchase, negotiated with the French Emperor Napoleon in 1803, all citizens of France in the territory were to retain the rights and privileges they enjoyed before the purchase.

For the free blacks, who migrated heavily to the area from the Caribbean, that meant equal rights with whites. In the other 17 states, free blacks often didn’t enjoy such rights.

Free people of color even made up the bulk of the militia in the area, said Joe Stoltz, a doctoral candidate at Texas Christian University whose concentration is in Louisiana history.

“The federal government was trying to figure out what the rights of the free people of color would be,” Stoltz said. “The states already in the union had passed their own laws, but it was unclear what should be done with a new state coming in. And the existing states were opposed to sweeping rights they were granted by France.”

The rights of the free black

American settlers in what are now known as the Florida Parishes rebelled against Spanish authorities and set up a short-lived republic north and northwest of New Orleans. The United States quickly annexed the territory.

The 200th anniversary of statehood will be celebrated with a series of events around the state including concerts, musical festivals and fireworks.

A joint session of the state Legislature will mark the anniversary today with music from Cajun and New Orleans musicians including Zachary Richard, Deacon John, Jay Chevalier and Irma Thomas and other artists from the state.

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population were underminded as far larger numbers of white immigrants swarmed to the area, although they still retained more than counterparts in other areas.

What became the state of Louisiana was cobbled together from three land areas. There was the Isle of Orleans, a chunk of land on the east bank of the Mississippi River that included New Orleans and extended upriver until about midway to Baton Rouge, a hunk carved out of the remaining Louisiana Purchase and the annexation in 1810 of the Republic of West Florida.