



## People and Power at the Cabildo

### The Cabildo: A History of People and Power in Louisiana – Post-video Activity

Watch the video at: [https://youtu.be/3ul\\_PT0lcho](https://youtu.be/3ul_PT0lcho)

### Readings, Research Prompt, and Discussion Questions

**Objective:** Students will learn the different ways that groups and individuals attempted to challenge laws or government power at the Cabildo in New Orleans. Through research and discussion, students will discover how people participate in similar types of civic engagement and social action today and will consider which methods they might use to engage with issues of importance to them.

**Louisiana Student Standard for Social Studies:** 7.1.1, 7.4.3, 7.10.2, 8.1.1, 8.2.6, 8.8.1, 8.8.2, C.5.2, C.5.3

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## Introduction

A government building has stood on the site of the Cabildo for nearly three hundred years. In the past, it was a place where the local government made and enforced laws. It was also a place where residents challenged those laws.

Many types of civic engagement, activism, and public demonstrations took place at the Cabildo or in the Place d’Armes, now known as Jackson Square. Residents used different methods to make their voices heard in the political process. For example, they wrote letters to the French Superior Council or *Cabildo* (Spanish town council), voted for city council members, or brought cases to court. Other times, residents gathered in protest, practiced civil disobedience, or used violence in attempts to influence the government. Groups often combined many different strategies to express their desires and beliefs to government officials.

## Activity summary

**Choose** one of the three following historic events that took place at the Cabildo or Place d’Armes.

**Read** to learn who was involved, what they were trying to achieve, the methods they used to influence the government, and the outcome.

**Answer** the questions about that example.

**Research** to find a similar example of that type of action in recent or current events.

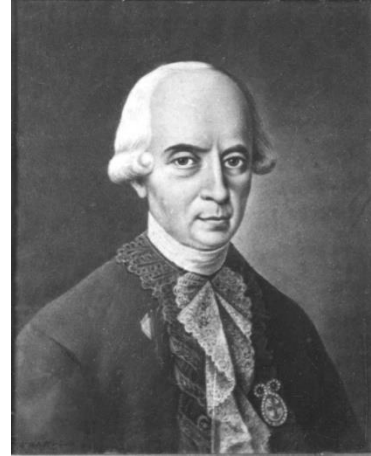
**Discuss** your answers, thoughts, and opinions with the class

# 1. Insurrection of 1768

## Petitions and protest

When France ceded Louisiana to Spain, many of the Louisiana colonists were unhappy. Many identified as French citizens. They feared the instability that could follow the change in power. They also resented the new Spanish trade restrictions.

Members of the French Creole elite led a diverse group of colonists including Acadians, German Coast farmers, and New Orleans residents in an attempt to oust the new Spanish governor, Antonio de Ulloa. The colonists wrote petitions to the French Superior Council in New Orleans, which still ruled under the governor. Then a large crowd demanding the end of Spanish rule gathered in the Place d'Armes in New Orleans for a public demonstration. The Superior Council voted to expel the governor from the colony. Governor Ulloa left for Havana, Cuba, on November 1, 1768, and the colonists celebrated their victory!



Governor Antonio de Ulloa (1765-1766). Drawing, crayon. 02058B

However, the Spanish crown sent a new governor in 1769 to control the rebellion. Governor Alejandro O'Reilly arrived in New Orleans with more than two thousand soldiers and twenty ships. He declared Spanish authority over Louisiana and executed five French leaders of the rebellion for treason. Governor O'Reilly removed the French Superior Council from power and established the *cabildo* (Spanish town council), which governed until 1803.

### Research and Discussion Questions

Answer these questions and be prepared to discuss with the rest of the class.

- How did the Louisiana colonists rebel against the Spanish government? What did they do?  
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- Were the colonists successful in their attempt to overthrow Spanish rule? Why do you think this outcome occurred?  
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- Research current and recent events! Find an example when petitions or public protest were used to encourage change. Describe the event, who was involved, and the outcomes.  
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- Do you think petitions and protests are appropriate ways to push for change? Why or why not? Explain whether you would use similar tactics to address an issue you care about and why.  
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## 2. Homer Plessy and the Citizens' Committee (1892)

### Civil disobedience and legal challenges

Homer Plessy was a Creole activist of African and European descent who challenged racial segregation. At the request of the Citizens' Committee, a civil rights group, Plessy sat in a "whites only" rail car in 1892. This was an act of civil disobedience. Civil disobedience is violating a law as a form of protest.

Plessy was arrested for violating the Separate Car Act and found guilty by Judge John Howard Ferguson. Plessy and his attorneys challenged the constitutionality of segregation laws at the Louisiana Supreme Court, which was located in the Cabildo. The court upheld the lower court's ruling that "separate but equal" facilities were constitutional.

The case *Plessy v. Ferguson* went before the U.S. Supreme Court in 1896. They upheld the Louisiana Supreme Court's decision, which discouraged future constitutional challenges to segregation laws. All southern states passed discriminatory racial segregation laws.



Sign: White Section, Municipal Auditorium, ca. 1950. Gift of the Cultural Center. 2000.044.6

In 1954, the civil rights organization the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) challenged school segregation through the case *Brown v. Board of Education*. At that time, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that racially segregated facilities were unconstitutional.

### Research and Discussion Questions

Answer these questions and be prepared to discuss with the rest of the class.

- How did Homer Plessy and the Citizens' Committee challenge segregation laws? What did they do?

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- Were Homer Plessy and the Citizens' Committee successful in their attempt to end racial segregation laws? Why do you think this outcome occurred?

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- Research current and recent events! Find an example of civil disobedience or a Supreme Court ruling that challenged a law or its implementation. Describe the event, who was involved, and the outcomes.

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- Do you think civil disobedience and legal challenges are appropriate ways to push for change? Why or why not? Explain whether you would use these tactics to address an issue you care about.

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### 3. Battles for the Cabildo (1873-1877)

#### Militia violence

Many former Confederates were angry about losing power after the American Civil War. Some formed groups that promoted white supremacy and contested the legitimacy of state and local elections. A few even tried to take over the Louisiana government by force.

In 1873, white residents opposed to racial integration and federal occupation during Reconstruction attacked the racially-integrated Metropolitan Police in Jackson Square. They attempted to take over the Cabildo and Arsenal, but failed. In 1874, a white supremacist militia called the Crescent City White League fought the Metropolitan Police in an armed conflict, known as the Battle of Liberty Place. Around thirty people died and many were injured. The White League occupied the Cabildo and the Arsenal until President Ulysses S. Grant sent federal troops to restore order. In 1876, after a disputed governor's race, a militia of three thousand white men captured the Cabildo. They overthrew the Metropolitan Police and occupied the Louisiana Supreme Court. Events on the national stage, including a contested presidential election, resulted in the removal of federal troops from Louisiana and effectively ended Reconstruction by 1877. This was followed by decades of racial segregation, the suppression of Black voters, and discrimination and violence against people of color.



*Louisiana the Dual State Government Seizure of the Supreme Court Building, at New Orleans by the State Militia, 1877.* Frank Leslie's Illustrated Magazine. Illustration, news, wood engraving. 1982.112.06

#### Research and Discussion Questions

Answer these questions and be prepared to discuss with the rest of the class.

- How did the White League try to gain control of the government? What did they do?  
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- Were the White League and similar groups successful in their attempts to change the government? Why do you think this outcome occurred?  
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- Research current and recent events! Find a movement or event where people used militias and violence to influence government. Describe the event, who was involved, and the outcomes.  
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- Do you think militias and violence are appropriate ways to push for change? Why or why not? Explain whether you would use similar tactics to address an issue you care about.  
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