

# History of French Quarter

*By John Magill*

Today the French Quarter of New Orleans is among the most instantly recognizable half-square miles in the world and is synonymous with the city as a whole. It is also commonly called the Vieux Carré – a term meaning “Old Square” in French, and coined around the 1890s when the Quarter was evolving into a tourist destination.

The French Quarter is located on the banks of the Mississippi River where New Orleans was established by the French in 1718. The site was selected not only because the riverfront is relatively high amid low-lying swampland, but because of its proximity to Lake Pontchartrain which, via Bayou St. John, provided a safer shortcut than the Mississippi for shipping.

Originally, buildings in the French Quarter were constructed of wood, which quickly decayed in damp surroundings. Today only one French colonial building remains – the ca. 1750 Ursuline Convent, now the Archive of the Catholic Archdiocese of New Orleans.

In 1762 Louisiana was transferred to Spain. During its forty year tenure under Spain, the previously struggling town became wealthy. Its river trade burgeoned, particularly from newly independent Americans living west of the Appalachian Mountains whose only accessible port was New Orleans.

In 1788, the mostly wooden French Quarter was destroyed by fire, followed by another smaller conflagration in 1794. Although French tastes remained strong, after the fires, Spanish authorities initiated new regulations to prevent the spread of fire. Spanish building codes included the use of protective plaster on exterior walls and fire retardant roofing, like slate and tile, which helped give the French Quarter a more Spanish appearance than French.



Here's a caption to explain this

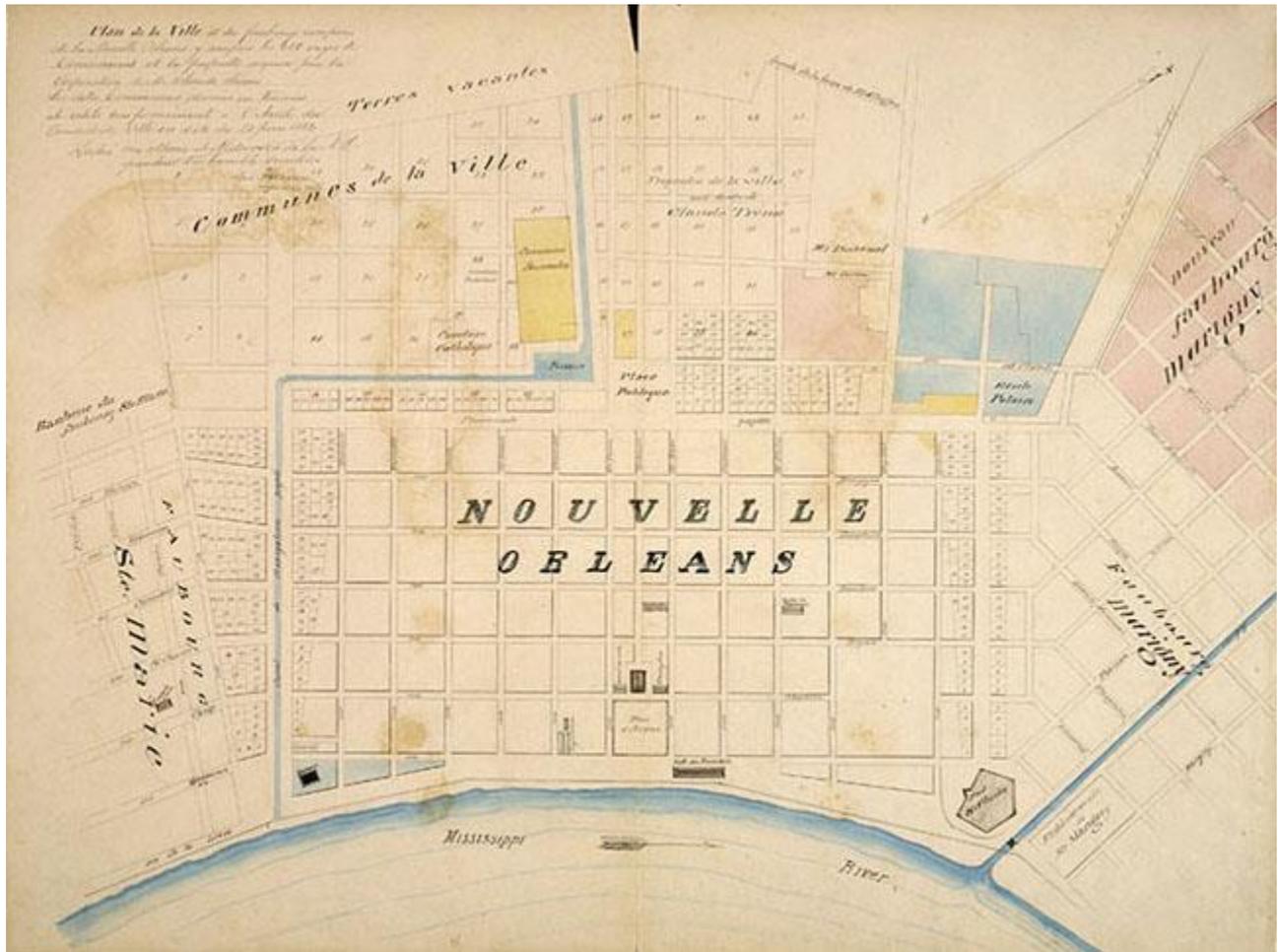
In the late 18th century substantial buildings like the Cabildo, Presbytere and St. Louis Cathedral were erected. They are clues to the city's prosperity along with a number of impressive mansions, such as those on Royal Street now occupied by Brennan's Restaurant and Waldhorn & Adler. The French Quarter also became more closely built and its distinctive courtyards began to form as properties were walled in. Hand-forged wrought iron was introduced in the 1790s, but it was expensive and limited to large, costly buildings. In the 1830s mass produced cast iron was introduced. Less costly than wrought iron and florid in design, it took Victorian New Orleans by storm and helped the French Quarter obtain its lacy appearance.



Here's an example of mass-produced cast iron

For about 70 years the French Quarter was all that existed of New Orleans, but as the city blossomed, suburbs sprang up when nearby plantations were subdivided by owners anxious to take advantage of the expanding real estate market. The first of these was Faubourg St. Mary carved from the Gravier Plantation in 1788. Beginning at Canal Street and extending upriver from the French Quarter, this is today's Central Business District. It was followed in 1806 by the Faubourg Marigny which was part of the plantation of Bernard de Marigny, one of the area's wealthiest

residents whose legendarily lavish lifestyle prompted him to subdivide and sell off sections of his plantation. The Marigny begins at Esplanade Avenue and extends down river as far as modern Press Street where one of the city's largest cotton presses was built in 1838. In 1810 Claude Tremé subdivided his plantation into Faubourg Tremé which lies just on the lakeside of the French Quarter, beginning at North Rampart.



Here's an early map

These three early suburbs were separated from the original city by the City Commons, the open land around the city (i.e., the French Quarter) which contained palisades and five small forts. As crown property at the time of the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, the City Commons became the possession of the United States Government until 1807 when it was given to the city with the stipulation that a navigation canal be dug on the property connecting the Mississippi River and Lake Pontchartrain. The City of New Orleans planned to build a wide canal on the upriver side of the French Quarter, but it never materialized. Instead, its proposed site became Canal Street. Traversing the downriver side of the Commons, Esplanade Avenue was established in 1810 and today forms the boundary between the French Quarter and Faubourg Marigny. That same year North Rampart Street was laid out along the northern portion of the Commons between the French Quarter and the Faubourg Tremé.

While Faubourg St. Mary may be the oldest suburb, initially it did not grow as quickly as Marigny or Tremé. From the start, the latter two Faubourgs proved to be popular residential areas especially for French Creoles moving from an increasingly overcrowded French Quarter. In many respects Marigny and Tremé were extensions of the French Quarter and, into the early 20th century, the three neighborhoods were often referred to as a single neighborhood with the original city as the “French Quarters.” The three displayed similar architectural styles such as multi-story Creole townhouses with businesses occupying ground floors and living quarters above. There were rows of single-story plastered and tile roofed Creole cottages – the mainstay of early-19th century working class New Orleans housing. Many Creole cottages even in the French Quarter were replaced in the late 19th century with the ubiquitous shotgun houses – by then the city’s principle working class housing.

In the early 19th century, Chartres and Royal Streets were the city’s chief business and shopping streets. Bourbon Street – named not for the beverage, but Louisiana’s 18th century French ruling family — was a splendid residential street. By the 1840s, major business was shifting to the American sector on the other side of Canal Street, and that street evolved into the city’s main shopping district. Around 1850, the area surrounding the Place d’Armes – renamed Jackson Square – was upgraded with construction of the Pontalba buildings, reconstruction of the St. Louis Cathedral, and additions to the Cabildo and Presbytere of mansard roofs and cupolas. The Square’s gardens were also redesigned for the erection of the Andrew Jackson Monument in 1857.

In spite of this, the French Quarter entered a long period of decline, as large houses were turned into rooming houses and even warehouses. Starting in the 1860s railroad tracks, warehouses and industries were built near the riverfront. Some wealthy Quarter residents relocated to Esplanade Avenue and North Rampart Street, both of which ranked among the most pleasant and attractive residential streets in the city. Today, while tree-lined Esplanade retains its elegant appearance, North Rampart became commercialized in the 20th century in its role as a main artery leading into the Faubourg St. Mary business district, now the Central Business District.

By the 20th century numerous Quarter buildings became derelict and crumbling prompting city boosters to consider the area an embarrassing slum that deserved wholesale demolition. Others felt differently, recognizing the French Quarter as irreplaceable and one of the Nation’s most significant concentrations of early buildings. Beginning in the 1910s and ’20s, there was a growing demand for protection of the Quarter, particularly as expanding gentrification brought new businesses and public improvements. In an attempt to encourage new construction, the massive Louisiana State Supreme Court building of 1911, located at 400 Royal Street, replaced an entire square block of older structures. Few followed. Unrealized projects included a large government Civic Center in the central Quarter in 1928 followed by a public housing project in 1936. Such plans were rendered moot when, in 1936, the Louisiana Constitution was amended to protect the architecture and tout ensemble of the Vieux Carré section of the French Quarter that is located between Iberville Street and Esplanade Avenue and to provide for the establishment of the Vieux Carre Commission.

Tourism has been an economic engine for New Orleans for decades and hotel construction and expansion has gone along with tourism hand in hand. Hotels have been part of the French Quarter since the early 19th century including the elegant 1830s St. Louis, demolished in 1916, that was located on the site where the Omni Royal Orleans Hotel was built in 1960. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s hotels continued to rise even to the detriment of the French Quarter's architecture which so many visitors come to see. This ended in the 1970s when a city ordinance halted both the construction of new hotels and expansion of existing hotels in the Vieux Carré section of the French Quarter. Since then new hotels have risen on the periphery of the Vieux Carré section of the French Quarter and in nearby neighborhoods. Along Canal Street hotels include towering skyscrapers and the re-adaptive use of two of the city's largest department store buildings, while smaller boutique hotels and bed and breakfasts can be found along the lake side of North Rampart Street and the down river side of Esplanade Avenue.

Once home to large extended families frequently living in tenements, the more gentrified French Quarter of today is composed mostly of single-family, duplexes and condominium residential units. With few apartment buildings and as a result of other factors, the Quarter's population has declined – from about 20,000 residents in the 1920s to about 4,000 residents now. During this time, the Quarter's nightlife evolved.

The area has long attracted numbers of locals and visitors to its world renowned night life. In the first decades of the 20th century there was the "Tango Belt" around Iberville Street where an array of dance halls, honky tonks, restaurants and theaters were located. Prohibition in the 1920s destroyed the Tango Belt, but at the same time a few clubs began turning Bourbon Street into a nightlife venue and by the end of Prohibition in 1933, Bourbon Street nightlife was replacing the Tango Belt. As a popular destination for World War II GIs, Bourbon Street was assured of becoming one of the most fabled – and well known – streets in the world.

\* Story courtesy of the [Historic New Orleans Collection](#).