

Algiers at 300: The Early Years

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Published in the *New Orleans Advocate*, March 10, 2019, page 1.

Three hundred years ago, French colonials established an encampment directly across the Mississippi from the year-old settlement of New Orleans. We call this area Algiers Point today, but for its first century, it went by various names: the “Company Plantation,” “King’s Plantation” or “King’s Domain,” *Pointe St. Antoine* or *Punta San Antonio*; “Duverjeville” starting in 1821; and “Algiers” probably in the 1830s. Its side of the river also had multiple names. The earliest French colonials called it “left bank;” in the 1800s everyone called it the “right bank;” and today we call it the “West Bank.”

Algiers Point is sometimes described as the city’s second-oldest neighborhood. But, as its many early monikers suggest, the settlement originally had a number of functions, and “neighborhood” was not among them. Rather, the Company Plantation, named for the private enterprise (Company of the West, later Indies) founded by John Law and granted a commercial monopoly to develop Louisiana, was a multi-purpose warehouse, workshop, lumber mill, farm, and commodity plantation serving the larger colony and the city across the river.

Above all, it functioned as a jail-like compound for those captive Africans who survived the wretched Middle Passage and arrived to New Orleans in chains. To the Company Plantation landed many, probably most, of the 6000 people forcibly shipped into Louisiana from the Senegambia, Bight of Benin, and Congo regions of West Africa during the French colonial era. From this spot, most were sold into slavery and sent off to clear forests and cultivate fields; some were held in bondage by the Company itself and put to work locally. It’s no coincidence that the three-hundredth anniversary of Algiers is also the three-hundredth year since institutional slavery arrived to Louisiana, and that both shortly followed the establishment of New Orleans.



Detail of Vue et Perspective de la Nouvelle Orleans by Jean-Pierre Lassus (1726) showing slave labor at Company Plantation in foreground.

By the early 1730s, the Company Plantation spanned over 18 arpents (about 3500 feet) along the riverfront and up to 26 arpents (5000 feet) of depth, most of it cultivated in rice, tobacco, and indigo. Its population, according to a 1731 census, was 224, of whom 99 percent were enslaved, making present-day Algiers Point the largest concentration of people of African ancestry in the entire region. At times the black population would swell to over 400, as enslaved visitors from New Orleans, on Sunday off-days, arrived on pirogues to assemble with brethren, an antecedent of the Congo Square gatherings of the 1800s. The Company Plantation was also the scene an early planned slave insurrection, eighty years before the 1811 German Coast revolt, which would be the largest in American history. Company plantation supervisor Le Page du Pratz learned of the scheme and violently suppressed it before it started.

Du Pratz was also an engineer and architect, and together with Alexandre DeBatz, they designed the Company Plantation’s brick works and forge, slave cabins, infirmary, and dwellings for the manager and employees. The most prominent buildings were the two-story rice depot and mill, adjacent to which was a sluice flume, where diverted river water turned a millstone to rub off the bran and leave behind the edible grain.

In 1731, the Company went bankrupt, and administration of Louisiana shifted to the French Crown. The Company Plantation became the “King’s Plantation,” and Governor Étienne Pérrier was replaced by none other than New Orleans founder and former governor, Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne, Sieur de Bienville. This was bad news for the King’s Plantation, because during his prior term, Gov. Bienville had claimed Algiers-area land for himself (as well as much of present-day Uptown), only to lose most of it in a bitter dispute with his superiors.

Now back in power, Gov. Bienville was not about to invest in the very operation that displaced him. “The Plantation of the King was reduced as an economy,” lamented Le Page du Pratz of this transitional period. “My post was reduced; I was also.” Over the next few years, the buildings he designed fell into ruin and the facility went dormant, in part because slave imports plummeted after 1731. People began to refer to the King’s Plantation as the “King’s Domain.” Gov. Bienville did manage to retain some West Bank land for himself, where he built a country home named Bel Air. Long since disappeared, Bel Air was located near present-day Savage Street in Federal City.

Bienville’s retirement in 1743 brought in a new leader, Governor Pierre Rigaud de Vaudreuil, who came to recognize the value of the King’s Domain. In 1749, workers rebuilt houses, warehouses, and the powder magazine, making it into “a sort of receiving station and storage place,” according to architectural historian Samuel Wilson Jr. In 1760, a contract was let to build 25 new cabins for enslaved people owned by the French Crown. By this time, the promontory on which the King’s Domain stood came to be known as *Pointe St. Antoine*.

In 1769, as Spain took possession of the Louisiana colony, Gen. Alejandro O’Reilly had a different vision for what the Spanish would call *Punta San Antonio*. He aimed to sell off the King’s Domain in sections, unburdening the government of its management and letting colonists populate the land. A colony, he reasoned, is only as good as the wealth it produces, and Spanish administrators found in Louisiana a surplus of land and a deficient of *pobladores*.

This proved to be a key moment in the history of Algiers, because it put in place private owners who would make the decisions laying the groundwork for the neighborhood we know today.

On February 3, 1770, Governor O’Reilly sold the holding and its dozen or so buildings (all except a small riverside triangle for a powder magazine, which would become today’s Powder Street) to Don Luis de Bearepos. Within the year, Bearepos vended the land to Jacques Rixner, who in 1777 sold it to Pierre Burgand, who willed it to his nephew Martial LeBeuf in 1786.

In 1805, the LeBoeuf family sold the land to Barthélémy Duverjé for \$18,000. Shortly after the sale, Duverjé sliced off the upper four arpents (768 feet), at today’s Powder Street, and sold them to Toussaint Mossy. He later sold a small riverfront tract to André Séguin, who would build the state’s first slipway—the beginning of Algiers’ ship-building industry, at today’s Seguin Street.

In 1812, Duverjé had constructed upon his land an archetypal French Creole Louisiana plantation mansion with an enormous wooden gallery, “built with the strength of a fortress,” as the *Picayune* later described it. The house (pictured below) was surrounded by four pavilions and a number of brick slave cabins directly behind it, plus a two-arpent brick yard and kiln with an inventory of over 140,000 bricks. The Duverjé “habitation was not a sugar plantation,” historians David Fritz and Sally Reeves pointed out, “but rather a mixed-use agricultural and manufacturing site [devoted to] brickmaking, vegetable sales, cattle raising and butchering.” Many years later, the Duverjé House would become the Algiers Courthouse, and such multi-use working farms would predominate throughout the nineteenth-century West Bank.



In 1821, the Duverjé family members decided to subdivide their parcel for urban development. The move was likely prompted by the death of patriarch Barthélémy Duverjé, as well as the new ferry now operating to New

Orleans, which made their land more valuable for residences. State surveyor General C. N. Bouchon sketched a plat for the parcel, using the orientation of the Duverjé House to position his grid, starting with Villere (now Morgan), Seguin, Barthelemy (now Bermuda), and Delaronde streets. This explains the distinctive angle of Algiers Point's modern street grid. Called Duverjeville or Bourg Duverjé, the former Company Plantation would now finally become a neighborhood.

Duverjeville was not the first urban subdivision on the West Bank; that distinction went to McDonoghville, just upriver from Toussaint Mossy's parcel, which John McDonogh, famed philanthropist and future benefactor of New Orleans public schools, had subdivided starting in 1813.

In 1833, Mossy decided to subdivide as well, and had city surveyor Joseph Pilié sketch a plan to connect Duverjeville with McDonoghville. Pilié decided to abandon the angled geometry of Duverjeville and conflate his new "Mossyville" streets with the existing McDonoghville grid. The interface of the two grids is today's Opelousas Avenue.

Plantations downriver from Duverjeville were also getting surveyed into subdivisions in this era, among them narrow parcels of J.B. Olivier and the Widow Gosselin, becoming today's Varrett Street to Vallette Street. So too the larger plantations downriver from Vallette, which passed through the ownership of familiar names in New Orleans history, including Bienville himself, and the families of Destréhan, St. Maxent, Macarty, Marigny and LeBeuf. This last family built a house in 1840 that still stands in Federal City today, one of only a handful of surviving antebellum country villas or plantation houses on the West Bank.

In this piecemeal manner, the colonial West Bank transformed to a medley of tiny villages, farms, pastures, orchards, and dairies set among larger sugar cane plantations and a growing industrial sector, including foundries, lumber mills, brickyards, dry docks, and shipyards. What is now Algiers was not in the City of New Orleans, nor was it its own municipal entity; it was an unincorporated section of Orleans Parish, governed starting in 1840 by the "Police Jury of the Parish of Orleans on the Right Bank of the River Mississippi."

By this time, people were increasingly referring to the area as "Algiers." Many have speculated on the origins of this curious sobriquet, and a variety of theories circulate: that it was named for the Africans who landed there, for its association with piracy, or for the comparability of its position across the Mississippi to the North African city of Algiers across the Mediterranean. Most of the theories miss one important clue: in the late 1830s, about two miles downriver from Algiers Point, Pierre Cazalard's plantation had been subdivided and given the name "Tunisburg," now the area around Odeon Avenue and Horace Street. The name appeared in the 1839 Springbett and Pilié *Topographical Map of the City and Environs of New Orleans* and would circulate locally, either as Tunisburg or Tunis, for decades to come.

What does this have to do with Algiers? Tunis and Algiers are major cities in the North African nations of Tunisia and Algeria, across the Mediterranean from France, and both had come to the attention of Americans, and particularly New Orleanians, twice in the prior two decades.

Firstly, during the Second Barbary War in 1815, as American naval forces engaged pirate strongholds along the North African coast, Commodore Stephen Decatur succeeded in bringing the cities of Algiers and Tunis under control. The action made Decatur a national hero, this being the first major foreign engagement of the U.S. Years later, New Orleans would rename Levee Street to honor Decatur.

Secondly, in the late 1820s, France became economically and militarily active in both Tunis and Algiers, and in 1830 sent troops to colonize Algiers. To New Orleans' French-speaking population, who were pointedly proud of their mother country, the names of Algiers and Tunis took on positive symbolic meaning—just the sort of thing marketers like to tap into. It's unclear who first applied the names "Algiers" and "Tunis" to these two particular West Bank subdivisions, but, then as now, catchy names help sell real estate, all the more if they instill a sense of pride. "Algiers" as a neighborhood name started appearing in newspapers in the 1830s, around the same time as "Tunis." In this same era, a number of uptown streets were named to commemorate Napoleon's conquests, with a principle avenue named for the emperor himself. That same intersection of ethnic pride with real estate marketing probably explains Algiers and Tunis.

The two West Bank names would have different fates. "Tunis" and "Tunisburg" remained in use sporadically until 1890, when the McLellan Dry Dock Company renamed the area "McLellanville." Neither circulate in the vernacular today. "Algiers," however, stuck, perhaps for the sheer prominence of its promontory, which seems to call for a singular name.

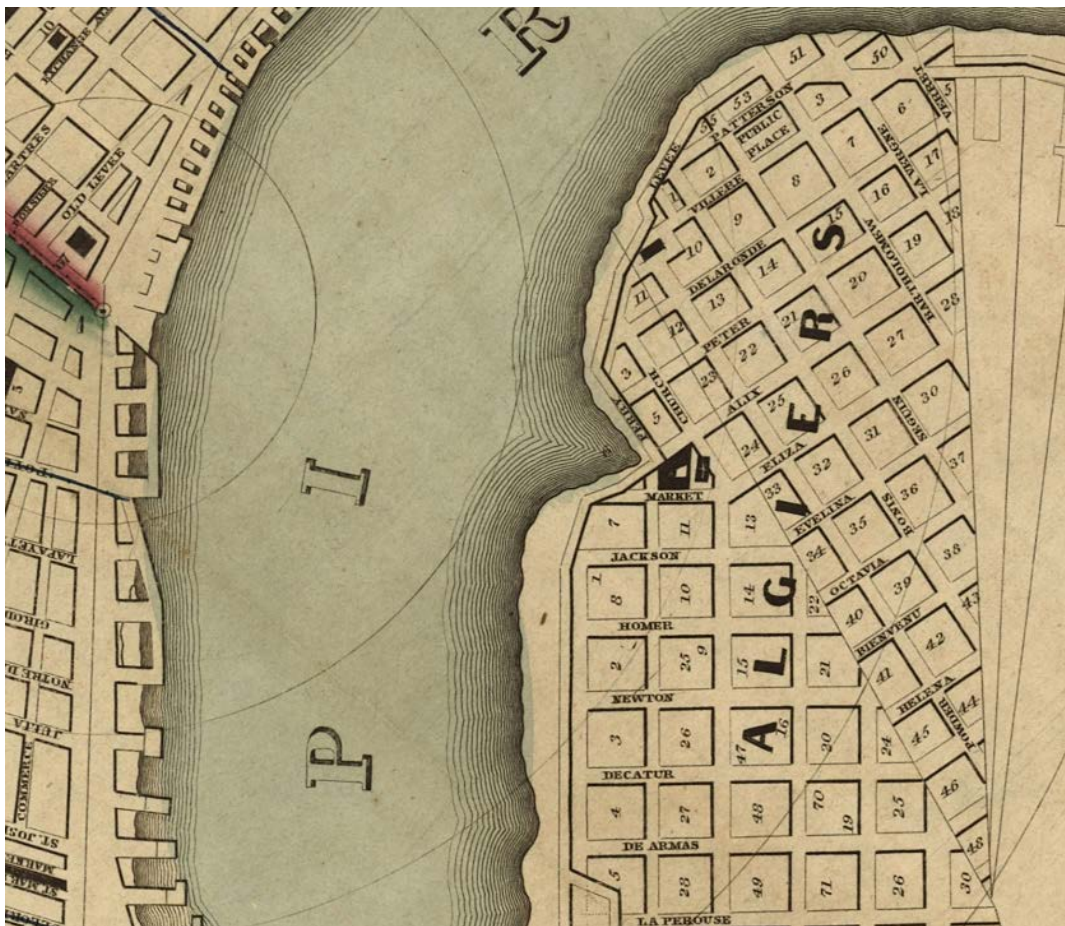
Algiers emerged from its bucolic past to become an industrial powerhouse. Dry docks for ship repair would come in the 1830s; railroads in the 1850s; annexation into the City of New Orleans in 1870; and major shipping facilities and railroad yards by the 1890s. Farther downriver, small farms, village-like enclaves, and the city's last major sugar cane plantation endured well into the new century.

In 1895, a great fire destroyed Algiers Point, including the Duverjé House. The beautiful late-Victorian neighborhood we know today was built mostly in 1896, including the present-day Algiers Courthouse—all within the same street grid surveyed in 1821, upon lands first settled over a century prior.



Drone photo of Algiers by Lorenzo Serafini Boni, 2017.

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Algiers in 1845, when it was an unincorporated area within Orleans Parish—from Norman's Map, courtesy Library of Congress.

