

# New Orleans' Newspaper Scene Returns to Downtown Roots

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Observers here and nationwide have framed the recent purchase of NOLA.com | *The Times-Picayune* by the *New Orleans Advocate* in many ways, with some commentaries celebrating a return to local ownership and daily delivery, and others worrying about consolidation, the future of print media – and even journalism itself.

There is also a geographical arc here, in that the local media industry has returned to the space of its historical predecessors. In this regard, the geography of newspaper journalism has mirrored patterns of greater New Orleans, in that it was originally centered in the urban core, then shifted to the periphery, and is now returning to the core.

Newspapers came late to colonial New Orleans. Printing shops first opened in the 1770s and 1780s, during the era of Spanish colonial administration, when the population remained predominantly Francophone. The first newspaper, *Moniteur de la Louisiane*, did not hit the streets until 1794, and like other periodicals of the era, its pages were more likely to feature notices, official documents, and quirky proclamations than news reporting as we understand it today. It invited competition, and it got it.

In 1803-1804 came *Le Télégraphe* and *Louisiana Gazette*, the latter's English language marking the recent Americanization of the colony courtesy of the Louisiana Purchase. It would later go bilingual, joined by a litany of competitors publishing in French, English and/or Spanish. Among them were *Courier de la Louisiane* (1807), *El Misisipi* (1808), *L'Ami des Lois* (1809), *El Mensajero* (1810), *The Trumpeter* (1811) and *The Chronicle* (1818).

Although many of these newspapers lasted only briefly, together their bustling daily operations constituted a genuine local industry, and in this era of pedestrian-scale urbanism and face-to-face communication, firms tended to cluster into industry-specific districts.

It might seem counterintuitive that competitors would want to co-locate, but doing so allows firms to share resources and information, gain access to supply and distribution chains, and keep abreast of the latest developments in their industry. "In general it is to be said that here, as in the greater cities



everywhere,” wrote George W. Engelhardt of New Orleans in 1903, “concerns akin assemble together. Thus the grocery and provision lines, the import coffee trade, the iron works, the printing and publishing houses, the horse and mule markets have each their own special locality.” Earlier in the 19th century, a banking district formed around Royal and Conti streets, a cotton district on Gravier Street at Carondelet, and a sugar district on the upper French Quarter riverfront. Canal Street later gained a lock on the dry-goods trade, lower Magazine Street in wholesaling shoes and boots, and Poydras Street on bagging and rope.

New Orleans’s first newspaper and printing district—really just a small cluster of firms—formed in and around lower Chartres Street and adjacent blocks in the early 1800s. This area comprised the “central business district” of its day, and it teemed with merchants, lawyers, agents, and other professionals. Reporters and editors here found themselves in the heart of the action, and printers could attain needed materials and distribute their output conveniently.

Giving the cluster a boost was the emergence in the 1830s of *L’Abeille de la Nouvelle Orléans* (*The New Orleans Bee*, originally *L’Ami des Lois*) as the city’s premier newspaper. Originally located on St. Peter between Royal and Bourbon, *The Bee* moved in 1830 to the busy corner of Chartres and St. Louis, and later to a number of addresses on Chartres between Conti and Bienville, including the building still standing at 323-325 Chartres St. Its neighbors included *The Louisiana Courier*, *Louisiana Advertiser*, and Benjamin Levy’s publishing company, largest in the city. The press in this era, like the citizenry, was still predominantly French in language and Creole in culture, all the more reason why the newspaper industry would settle in the French Quarter, on the Creole side of town.

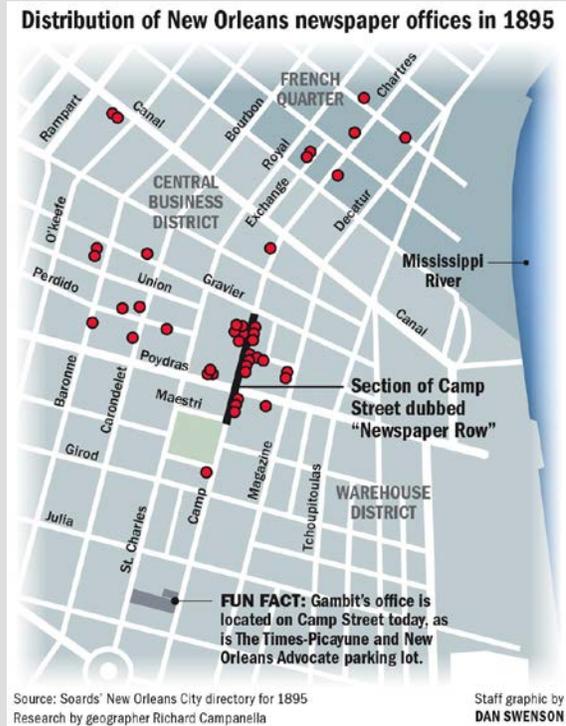
By the mid-19th century, changes were afoot in New Orleans—demographic, cultural, linguistic, urbanistic, and economic—and they would affect the geography of the newspaper industry. Anglophones were rising in number, especially in the Faubourg St. Mary, which became the new main commercial quarter (today’s CBD). Money and political power also shifted upriver, across Canal Street and into the so-called American Sector, and with it came the publishing industry. Whereas 100 percent of New Orleans’ editorial and printing offices were located in the French Quarter in 1809, only 40 percent remained there by 1838; the majority were now in the Faubourg St. Mary.

On Jan. 25, 1837, Volume 1, Number 1 of *The Picayune*, published by F. A. Lumsden and G. W. Kendall, hit the streets of New Orleans. With English as its first language and a staff full of Anglophones, *The Picayune* operated squarely on the American side of town, first on Gravier Street, then Magazine, then Camp. The paper gained prestige with its nationally cited coverage of the U.S. war with Mexico, and its readership and distribution grew.

Needing a new home after a fire destroyed most of the third block of Camp Street, the owners of *The Picayune* commissioned the construction of a new headquarters at 66 (now 326) Camp St. Builders Jamison and McIntosh finished the four-story Greek Revival row building in late 1850, making it the first plant erected by a newspaper in the city. There was no mistaking *The Picayune*’s office: a copper eagle spread its wings dramatically across the parapet, an ornate iron-lace verandah clung to the second floor façade, and between the third and fourth floors were etched THE PICAYUNE, the letters of which are still faintly visible today. A glass rooftop sunlight and white interior paint made the most of natural light for the benefit of the editors and typesetters. The building had the latest office technology, including a steam elevator, dumbwaiter, gas jets, and three Hoe cylinder presses powered by a coal-burning steam engine, all made locally.

The *Picayune's* state-of-the-art office and growing clout brought attention to lower Camp Street. Soon, four of the city's 15 newspapers and periodicals located here, while another seven functioned nearby, among them *The Times-Democrat*, *Daily States*, *City Item*, *Daily News*, and others.

Once a critical mass formed, support services followed, such as printers, binders, book publishers, pamphlet presses and stationary stores, all of which made the district that much more attractive for players to set up shop here. From the Civil War to World War I, lower Camp Street would become home to more newspapers and publishers than any other street in the city. Folks nicknamed the 300 block of Camp "Newspaper Row," and for good reason: it was wall-to-wall publishing firms in front, while in back, along the narrow alley known as Bank Place (now Picayune Place), young hawkers aggregated in such numbers that the Society of St. Vincent de Paul and the Sisters of Mercy of St. Alphonsus opened a "newsboys' home" in 1879. The largest such district in the South, New Orleans' Newspaper Row peaked during 1890-1910, when approximately 20 major publishing-related concerns operated in that vicinity.

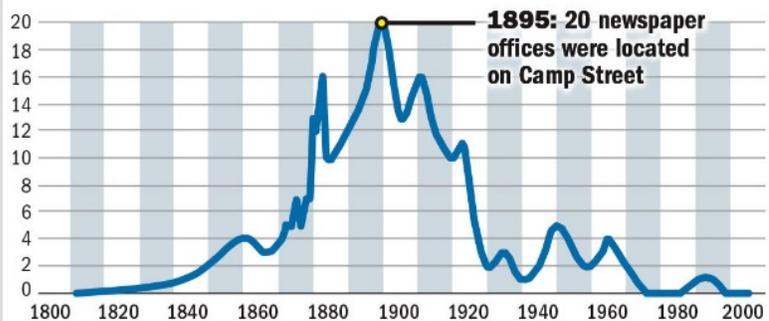


Three factors led to the decline of Newspaper Row: production costs, changes in distribution, and a relentless series of mergers. "From the simple operation it had once been," wrote Thomas Ewing Dabney of the early 1900s, "newspaper publication [became] a highly specialized and tremendously costly manufacturing process. Machinery grew larger and more expensive; telegraph tolls increased; the cost of news service rose; paper; ink; and other materials climbed; so did labor."

Smaller papers with slimmer profit margins became prone to buyouts. *The Times* and the *Democrat*, for example, merged in 1881, and then acquired *The Picayune* in 1914, becoming *The Times-Picayune*. Years later, the *States* and *Item* would consolidate, and then eventually become part of the *Times-Picayune/States-Item*. Each merger eliminated a downtown office and made the surviving firm that much larger, until they began outgrowing the quaint narrow streets and back alleys of the old Faubourg St. Mary.

## NEWSPAPER HEYDAY

Number of New Orleans newspaper offices located on Camp Street, also known as "Newspaper Row," between 1807-2000



Source: Soards' New Orleans City directory for 1895  
Research by geographer Richard Campanella

Staff graphic by DAN SWENSON

Distribution, meanwhile, shifted to trucks driving long distances to reach new subdivisions in recently drained lakeside swamps—all the more reason to relocate headquarters. In 1919, the *Times-Picayune*, long the fulcrum of the Camp Street cluster, moved to a new million-dollar office on Lafayette Square, with 75,000 square feet of floor space for, among other things, new Hoe presses yielding 80,000 sixteen-page newspaper sections per hour.

That same year, the *Times-Picayune* bought out *The Bee (L’Abeille)*, the old bilingual traceable to Chartres Street days. It had gone into decline after 1914, when the state Legislature rescinded the requirement that certain legal documents be published in French, which is what kept *L’Abeille* in business. The old paper lived out its last years in the new *Times-Picayune* building and was finally discontinued in 1923. By 1930, only five publishers remained on Camp Street, none major. Soon they too disappeared.

A generation later, New Orleans proper started to see its population decline in favor of surging development in the suburbs. To reposition itself, spatially and otherwise, the *Times-Picayune* opened a huge new complex at 3800 Howard Ave., convenient to the new expressways for incoming deliveries of paper and ink, and for distribution of the final product to subscribers metro-wide.

As people suburbanized, so did the news. In response, the *Times-Picayune*, which by the late 1980s had become the only paper in town, opened a half-dozen brick-and-mortar suburban bureaus and produced an even greater number of geographically specialized supplements: *Downtown Picayune*, *Uptown Picayune*, *Lakefront Picayune*, *East New Orleans Picayune*, *Algiers Picayune*, *Gretna Picayune*, *Marrero Picayune*, *Westwego Picayune*, *Kenner Picayune*, *Metairie Picayune*, *Harahan Picayune*, *St. Bernard Picayune*, *River Parishes Picayune*, *Slidell Picayune*, and the *St. Tammany Picayune*.

Well within the span of the 20th century, the geography of the New Orleans newspaper industry, much like that of the metropolis itself, had reversed, shifting from an urban concentration to a suburban dispersion.

Then came Katrina in 2005, the flood, the rocky recovery of the late 2000s, and, in the 2010s, the enthusiastic rediscovery of the historic inner city. By the time the recovery gained momentum, new digital-media firms, many run by young newcomers with a penchant for city living, began opening downtown.

The *Times-Picayune* itself blossomed, with a devoted readership following recovery-related news reported by award-winning journalists. Retailers paid for gobs of advertising supplements as flood victims shopped for new furniture and appliances.

Readers know the rest of the story. The rebuilding leveled off to a “new normal;” ad revenue declined; smartphones came out; and social media drove readers to an immense range of free content online. Shortly after the 2012 launch of the online-focused new company known as NOLA.com | *The Times-Picayune*, which would print and deliver only three days a week, managers decided to depart the Howard Avenue complex and move downtown—to Canal Place in 2013, and to the Warehouse District in 2018, where staffers found themselves within a few blocks of various private-sector digital media firms.

*The Advocate* of Baton Rouge, meanwhile, entered the local newspaper scene in 2013, aiming to fill the much-lamented loss of daily print delivery by launching the *New Orleans Advocate*. Four years later, after stints in two downtown buildings, *The Advocate* opened a new office downtown on 840 St. Charles Ave., and in 2019, it purchased NOLA.com | *The Times-Picayune*.

With all the tumult in local publishing over the past century—technological, economic, logistical, and otherwise—only its geographical aspect has returned to its historic state. The suburban bureaus have now mostly closed, and starting this week, the *New Orleans Advocate-The Times-Picayune* will operate downtown, on St. Charles Avenue, just a few blocks from where the *Picayune* in 1850 helped established New Orleans’ Newspaper Row.

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**Newspaper Row today. Photo by Ian McNulty.**