

Geographies of New Orleans

Link to the Past:

‘From French Colonists to the Beginnings of Jazz,’ Spanish Fort Traces Its History Across Three Centuries

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Published in the *Times-Picayune/New Orleans Advocate*, September 8, 2019, page 1.

Author’s note: Over the next few months, we will explore the various coastal communities that once surrounded greater New Orleans, principally along the brackish waters of the tidal lagoon known as Lake Pontchartrain. Though mostly gone now, these hamlets remind us that New Orleans, a riverine and deltaic city, may also be considered a coastal city.

If you flew along the southern shore of Lake Pontchartrain a hundred years ago, you’d see a mostly marshy lakefront lined with spindly wooden fishing camps and punctuated by a sequence of lacustrine communities of varying shapes and sizes.

To the west there would be the fishing enclave of Bucktown and the adjacent West End resort, accessed by the New Basin Canal to downtown.

To the east you’d see Milneburg, birthed by the circa-1831 Pontchartrain Railroad, and a chain of tiny train-station hamlets extending toward the Rigolets—Seabook, Edge Lake, Citrus, Little Woods, South Point—resulting from railroads built in the late 1800s.

In the middle of them all would be the oldest of the lakefront enclaves, and the only one occasioned by a natural waterway. The waterway was Bayou St. John, and the enclave would become Spanish Fort.



Aerial view from the south showing City Park, Lake Vista, Orleans Avenue Canal, Spanish Fort, Bayou St. John and New Pontchartrain Beach, with Gentilly in the foreground. Times-Picayune

Known as “Bayou Choupic” to the Acolapissa Indians, “Grand Bayou de St. Jean” to the French, “Bayu San Juan” to the Spanish, and “St. John’s Creek” to English-speakers, this rivulet drained runoff from the topographic bowl rimmed by present-day Esplanade Avenue, Tchoupitoulas Street, and Carrollton Avenue. Possibly on account of a sedimentary fault, the outflow was able to break through the Metairie-Gentilly Ridge – which follows today’s City Park Avenue and Gentilly Boulevard -- and drain northward into Lake Pontchartrain.

Despite its twisted, debris-strewn channel and overhanging vegetation, Bayou St. John enabled natives to sail in from the Gulf of Mexico and Lake Pontchartrain and make their way to a slight interior ridge starting at today’s Moss Street at Bell Street. That convenient portage, shown to French colonials by the Acolapissas in 1699, circumvented nearly a hundred miles of grueling river navigation, amid sand bars and against the current. Now followed by Bayou Road and Gov. Nicholls Street, the shortcut explains why Bienville selected the site of today’s French Quarter to establish New Orleans in 1718.

“[T]he capital city is advantageously situated,” Bienville later wrote; “Bayou St. John which is behind the city is of such great convenience because of the communication...it affords with Lake Pontchartrain and consequently with the sea.... [I]t cannot be esteemed too highly.” A 1732 map indicated as much, marking the Entrée du Bayou nearly as prominently as Nouvelle Orleans itself.

To defend the ingress, the French erected a small blockhouse at the mouth of the bayou in the early 1700s. By 1728 the installation had been expanded into a six-gun redoubt known as Fort St. Jean, and improved again in 1748. A map made the next year indicated that Fort St. Jean was as important, if not as large, as the bastions at English Turn. In 1770, the English spy Capt. Philip Pittman described the stronghold as “a battery of six guns and a [sergeant’s] guard [defending] the entrance of the Bayouk of St. John.”

By this time Louisiana had transferred to Spanish control, and the new administrators made changes to the colony’s oversight. They issued land grants along “Bayu San Juan,” including two fort-side parcels to Jean LaVergne and J.P. Blaise in 1771, thus laying the legal groundwork for later private-sector development. Hunters and fishermen established camps nearby, and sent their catch up the bayou for sale in the city.

The Spanish also rebuilt and refortified “Fuerte del San Juan” as war broke out with the British, who controlled British West Florida across Lake Pontchartrain and were fighting their own colonists in what would become the American Revolution. The new Spanish bastion (1779) formed a crescent-shaped stockade of cypress set upon a foundation of cement made from local shells, with a powder magazine and barracks inside.

Two decades later, Spanish Gov. Hector Carondelet further strengthened Fuerte del San Juan, as he did for the five bastions surrounding the city proper. He also directed the excavation, from 1794 to 1796, of a navigation canal connecting the city to the bayou. Originally known as the Carondelet Canal (later the Old Basin Canal, today’s Lafitte Greenway), the channel led to an increase of vessel traffic and economic activity in the fort area.

After the Louisiana Purchase, the new American regime too feared an attack via Bayou St. John, and in 1809 the Americans rebuilt the fort and installed six guns and a barracks for 30 men. But in the years following the Battle of New Orleans in 1815, federal military engineers shifted their defensive strategy to focus on the entrance of Lake Pontchartrain, where the bastions known now as Fort Pike and Fort Macomb were built.

The new defenses rendered Fort St. John obsolete, and the area, now demilitarized and marked by a lighthouse, got repurposed for warehousing, transshipment, and hunting and fishing camps. Denizens of this rural area, at the edge of today’s Lake Vista neighborhood, bordered by Beauregard Avenue and Bayou St. John, from Robert E. Lee Boulevard to Balsam Lane, commuted to the city via the bayou and canal, or their parallel shell road. Increasingly, city dwellers came in the opposite direction, giving the area a new economy: lakefront recreation.

In 1826, a visiting German duke named Bernhard, sailing “to the light-house of Fort St. John,” noted that “this fort...is abandoned, and a tavern is now building it its place.” From there a boardwalk led to “a public house, called Pontchartrain Hotel, which is much frequented by persons from the city during summer, [playing] the darling amusements of the inhabitants, in a pharo [faro] and roulette table.”

About 10 years later, the English sociologist Harriet Martineau described Spanish Fort as “a small settlement, wholly French in its character, where the ancient dwellings, painted red, and with broad eaves, look highly picturesque in the green landscape.” The bayou-side “winding road,” she added, “is thronged with carriages...full of families [and] gay parties of young people...going to the lake to drink or to bathe[,] breathing the cool air.”

The pied piper of the area’s bastion-to-barroom transformation was entrepreneur Harvey Elkin, who acquired the old fort from the military in 1819 and built upon it a public bathhouse and hotel. Elkin billed his resort as “an agreeable Retreat from the City...during the scorching heat of our summer sun” where could be enjoyed “salubrity...coolness of air...beautiful prospect [and] fine fish,” according to 1827 City Council records and the 1830 City Directory.

A few years later, Elkin’s land had been subdivided, at least on paper, as Elkinsburgh and Summerville. The two projects’ conflated grid of about 20 blocks paralleled the lakeshore, along what is now Robert E. Lee Boulevard by Lake Vista and the U.S. Department of Agriculture research center in City Park.

Elkin soon had competition for lakefront tourism and development. The 1831 opening of the Pontchartrain Railroad on Elysian Fields Avenue incentivized neighboring landowner Alexander Milne to subdivide “Milneburgh” (Milneberg) to the east, where rival recreational facilities arose to tap into downtown demand, now just a train ride away.

Later in the 1830s, workers dug the New Basin Canal through the backswamp and created a lakefront perch two miles to the west of the old fort, giving uptown populations access to the lake. This would soon give rise to another waterfront resort, New Lake End, later renamed West End.

Elkin died in 1834 and his Bayou St. John resort came into the hands of John Slidell, who renamed the lodge “Spanish Fort Hotel,” even though the bastion had been French earlier and later American. The name stuck, and we’ve called the area Spanish Fort ever since.

While the private Elkin’s Club catered only to its high-rolling members, the general public had a variety of amusements from which to choose. “In the 1840’s,” wrote historian James P. Baughman, “the Bayou St. John Hotel offered billiards, pistol shooting, bathing, a fine bar, and seafood dinners.... The nearby Carondelet Hotel opened in the 1850’s, and Moreau’s Restaurant [became] a favorite lakeshore dining spot.”

By this time, the Millaudan family, big landowners regionally, held the title to the lands around Spanish Fort. In 1874 ownership came into the hands of the City Park and Lake Railroad Company, and later that same year, Moses Schwartz acquired both the railroad and the property, with aims to connect the two with swift, direct transportation.

The advent of steam rail service to downtown heralded the next phase in Spanish Fort’s history. Under Schwartz’s management, the waterfront area transformed from a bourgeois weekend getaway to a daily amusement park for the urban masses. “The question of summer retreats,” wrote a *Picayune* reporter on May 5, 1878, at the time the railroad came into service, “now presents itself as a household topic. The Old and New Lake Ends [Milneberg and West End] have been deservedly favorite resorts and the main safety-valves of patient and suffocating citizens, but [now] the City Park and Lake Railroad [aims to make] that old Spanish Fort...better developed, [more] convenient and pleasant [and] more seductive to the people.”

To capture the experience for his readers, the reporter trekked to the station on Basin Street, boarded the small steam train with new cars, and after a 35-minute ride (“very smooth”) and a torrential downpour, found himself at “the historical old fort” enjoying the “picturesqueness of the place” with “many beauties surrounding.”

Hammers pounded, saws cut, and workers shouted: all around him was the new Spanish Fort under construction. A breakwater was being built to create a protected harbor; “tents, booths, and platforms...new bath houses [and] fancy ponds” were going up, and even “an old Confederate torpedo boat which was lately rescued from the depths”—a reference to an 1862 iron submarine found in Bayou St. John—was being put on display for “sheer curiosity.” Spanish Fort’s restaurants and prices? “Quite advantageous.” Food and service? “Superb.” The fish and entrees? “Artistically prepared,” and their cost “astonishingly small.”

Spanish Fort boomed. Its biggest facility was a casino pavilion, built in 1881, and it was here in June 1882 where over a thousand people came to hear Oscar Wilde—dressed exactly as you might picture him, “in black velvet coat of Charles the Second style, knee britches and silk stockings, [and] a large scarf”—lecture on domestic architecture.

A grand theater opened in 1888, fitted with the latest gadgets and considered one of the finest in the region. In 1896, a new railroad opened, and, according to a 1911 retrospective published in the *Daily Picayune*, a “long wharf and trestle bridge was built one-half mile over the water,” from which an excursion boat would take tourists into the “Ozone Belt” of St. Tammany Parish, itself famous for piney woods, clean water and supposedly salubrious air.

Most amusements at Spanish Fort were white-only, to which editorialists in the black press, according to historian Dale A. Somers, responded with protests. “The most respected colored citizens of our community are deprived of the pleasures and benefits of these resorts,” inveighed the *New Orleans Louisianian*, “while the most despicable, or depraved white man or woman, can enjoy the hospitalities as bountifully as our most respected white citizens.”

At least one entrepreneur agreed. In 1880, businessman J.A. Brett “opened a fine saloon and restaurant, called the ‘Sea Breeze,’” reported the editor of the *Louisianian*, “where all can be entertained without distinction of color.” For the next sixteen years, Spanish Fort had a spotty record on racial access, with some facilities specified for one race or the other, or either, and occasionally switching. Segregation was not closely policed.

Apparently that was too much for some. White patronage declined, creating a business problem but also an opportunity. “It seems that Spanish Fort is not to the taste of the white people,” said Captain Poitevent, general manager of the railroad company that owned the place in the 1890s. Poitevent announced a new resort policy in a *Daily Picayune* article on December 9, 1896. “You see, there are a whole lot of negroes in this city, some 70,000 or more, and they need some kind of place they can call their own, where they may eat, drink and be merry as other people.... We have decided to give the poor negroes an opportunity of having some fun there.” That business decision resulted in Spanish Fort becoming a major social and recreational space for African Americans, as well as a key venue in the developmental years of jazz.

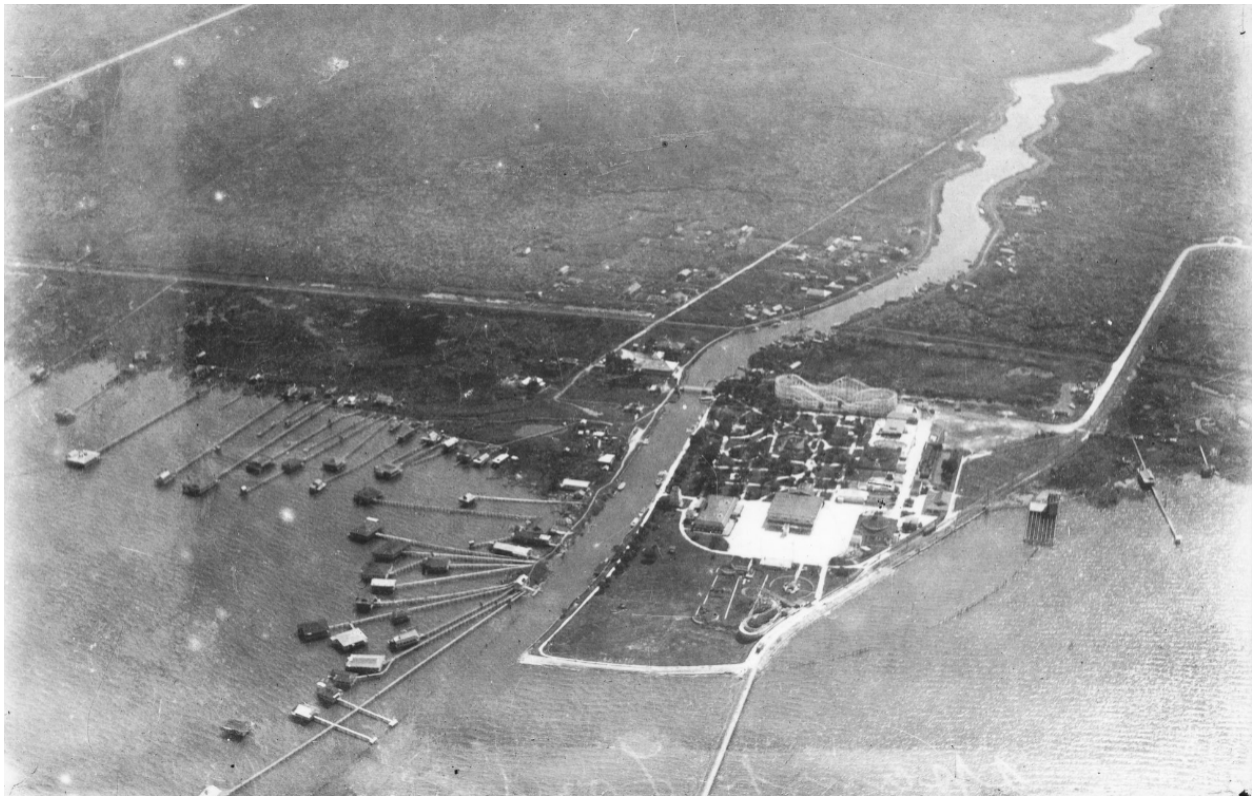
This new phase in Spanish Fort’s history would not last long. Hurricanes and lake flooding were persistent problems—this was, after all, a coastal community, with nary any levee protection. In 1903, steam railroad service ended, leading the *Daily Picayune* to declare on July 13, “Spanish Fort is dead” beneath the sub-headline, “The Fort Once a Popular Resort, But Was Relegated to the Negroes.”

Yet it endured—until October 1906. Shortly after a tropical storm severely eroded the shore and revetments, a spark from a boat engine ignited a wooden building, and winds fanned the flames. “Spanish Fort Succumbs to Attacks of Flames of Waves,” read the headlines of the *Times-Democrat* the next morning. “Famous Old Resort of the Fashionable People Is No More.”

New life came in 1909, when the railroad previously serving West End, whose lease ran out amid a disagreement with the city, switched its investment to Spanish Fort. The New Orleans Railway and Light Co. opened an electric streetcar line to Spanish Fort in 1911, and rebuilt its attractions better than ever—though not for everyone. Photographs from the 1910s and 1920s show apparently all-white crowds strolling an elaborate midway with wall-to-wall restaurants and amusements, extensive ornamental gardens, a rollercoaster, entertainment pavilions, and ample water frontage for bathing, boating and fishing.

It was Spanish Fort’s last hurrah.

In 1926, the Orleans Parish Levee Board embarked on a massive shoreline reinforcement and reclamation project, primarily in the interest of flood protection for Lakeview and Gentilly but also to create new high, dry multi-use waterfront land. Over the next eight years, the “Lakefront Improvement Project” created 2,000 acres of new land by the water by dredging lake-bottom sediments and pumping them into a cofferdam positioned 3,000 to 4,000 feet offshore.



Spanish Fort around 1922, four years prior to the Lakefront Project. Courtesy NOPL.

The Lakefront Project radically altered all three historic lacustrine communities by moving the shoreline out into the lake. But while Bucktown-West End managed to retain something of a lakefront perch, and Milneburg was able to reinvent itself with a new beach and amusement park, Spanish Fort found itself landlocked and eventually incorporated into the new neighborhood of Lake Vista.

Only ruins remained of the storied fort, which were stabilized in the 1930s by the WPA and made into the pleasant park courtesy the advocacy of local neighborhood associations in the 1970s. Archeological research by UNO at that time found the area to be loaded with artifacts, as would be expected for a site that, as one enthusiast put it in an 1976 *Times-Picayune* article, has been linked to “every facet of this city’s history—from the French colonists to the beginnings of jazz.”



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