

Fiery Calamity in an Era of Change: The Old French Opera House, 1859-1919

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Published in the New Orleans Picayune-Advocate, December 1, 2019, page 1.

New Orleanians know the ritual all too well: the loss of a beloved local institution, the realization of its importance, and the angst that some threshold may have been crossed, beyond which New Orleans becomes just another American city, robbed of its cultural distinction. The list is long, and includes everything from stores (Godchaux's, D. H. Holmes, Maison Blanche, Krauss, K&B's) to eateries (Maylie's, Kolb's, Bruning's, Uglesich's, McKenzie's, Hubig's Pies) to places like old South Rampart Street and Claiborne Avenue before the overpass.

Recent as it seems, this feeling—of imminent cultural homogenization—is nothing new. A hundred years ago this week, New Orleanians went through that same cycle of mourning, reflecting, and fretting, as they contemplated the demise of the city's last major showcase of Francophone Creole culture, the Old French Opera House.



Photo by William Henry Jackson, 1890s, courtesy Library of Congress.

A Cultural Coup

In the late 1850s, in this town smitten with spectacle and profuse with performance venues, Bourbon Street scored a coup. A man from Paris had taken over the nearby Théâtre d'Orleans, which had featured European troupes under the management of a local Creole impresario named Charles Boudousquié. The Parisian planned to continue that success,

but because he failed to negotiate a lease with Boudousquié, the Creole decided to open his own venue for French opera, outdoing the Frenchman at his own game.

Boudousquié formed the New Orleans Opera House Association in March 1859, raised over \$100,000 from opera aficionados, purchased a 193.5-by-191.5-foot lot, and committed to build a capacious theater “at the corner of Bourbon and Toulouse Streets,” according to the original building contract, “in accordance with the plans and elevations made by Gallier and Esterbrook.”

The Bourbon Street of 1859 was not the garish strip of today. While it had its share of saloons and nightlife, Bourbon was otherwise a rather middling artery, its population as mixed as its architecture and commerce

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— really just another downtown street. An elegant theater would bring a fresh dose of haute culture to this French side of town.

Toward that end, lead architect James Gallier Jr. designed a monumental hall in the Greek and Italianate order, three to five stories high in its various sections, with five tiers of seating inside and curved corners outside.

Work commenced in May, and, aiming to debut in the winter social season, proceeded round-the-clock with the aid of nocturnal bonfires. It must have been a magnificent sight, as flames illuminated the rising walls of what the *New Orleans Delta* predicted would be “a handsome structure of the Italian order [that will] rise like a Colossus over everything in that vicinity.”

The triumphant grand opening occurred on Dec. 1, 1859 with a staging of Rossini’s *Guillaume Tell*. “Superb...magnificent...spacious and commodious[;] a spectacle...richly worth viewing [at] a scale of great elegance,” raved the *Picayune* of the gleaming-white “new” French Opera House.

Theaters were a big deal in this era. Prior to the phonograph and cinema, all performance was live, and fancy venues served not just as commercial places but as key social spaces. Featuring not only opera and plays but also reenacted events, orators, magicians, balls, dances, socials, and ceremonies, theaters were cultural hearths of the first order. The Anglophones had theirs on the American side of town, the Francophones theirs on the Creole side of town, and other groups had their equivalents, including dance halls and concert saloons, in the faubourgs and banlieues.

For the next 60 years, despite the Civil War, occupation, managerial turnover, and a few missed seasons, what became cherished as the “old” French Opera House persevered by playing host to a litany of performances, Carnival balls and society events. It served as a home away from home for French and other European performers at a time when New Orleans’ connection to the Old World grew tenuous, and when the Gallic patois became less frequently heard in local streets.

In tribute to both its architects and its programming, the Old French Opera House retained its magnificence, particularly at night. Wrote one observer during the otherwise disheveled postbellum years, “the building, with its fresh coat of whitewash, glimmers like a monster ghost in the moonlight.” Its prominence persisted despite the neighborhood’s economic decline -- so much so that the *New Orleans Tagliche Deutsch Zeitung* suggested widening Bourbon Street into a boulevard starting at Canal Street, to showcase the Old French Opera House and “raise hope in the French Quarter of new vital business life.”



Roofline of Old French Opera House, center left, seen around 1900. Library of Congress.

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Perhaps the greatest significance of the Old French Opera House came from the enthusiastic patronage of local French Creoles, both white and black. While many members of this deep-rooted ethnicity had departed the Quarter after the Civil War, enough remained to sustain a French-speaking society here and in adjacent neighborhoods well into the 20th century.

Critical to their cohesion were keystone civic institutions, providing French Creoles with social space and cultural sustenance counteracting the forces of national assimilation. St. Louis Cathedral and other downtown Catholic churches, for example, bonded them religiously. About 20 tiny private academies -- so-called "French schools" taught by aging Creole society gentlemen like Alcee Fortier -- kept alive their language and heritage. And the Old French Opera House kept them entertained through French-themed performance arts.

Quarter children would routinely attend Sunday matinees for 25 cents, and were seated in a special section downstairs. Black patrons, themselves predominantly Creole and French-speaking, were relegated to balcony seating.

Inside, the music and performance tended to unify even as the seating divided. "I was brought up in that way[,] to enjoy music," recalled Madeline Archinard, born in 1900; "even as young children[,] we learned to love music in that way."

Interviewed in 1982 by the Friends of the Cabildo on a cassette tape archived at the New Orleans Public Library, Archinard recalled how she would spend Carnival in the 1910s: "There was a Mrs. Parmaris who lived on Bourbon Street who had a home on the parade routes, and while all of our parents used to go there before the balls [at the Old French Opera House], the children were taken [by] our nurse to see the parades.... It's a little shop now, but it reminds me of the past every time I go there."

Mildred Masson Costa, born in 1903 into a strictly French-speaking household in the Quarter, described the Old French Opera House as "my second home.... I practically lived there[,] three nights a week, and then we had the matinee on Sunday."

Because she would arrive early with her grandfather, little Mildred would play in the dressing rooms and get ballet lessons from the dancers. Then came the performance. Recalled Masson with a laugh, "The very first thing I saw was 'Faust,' and when the devil came out, with the smoke and the drumbeat, yours truly got panicky and I *flew* backstage to my grandfather!... I was two years old; it was more than I expected. I met the devil afterwards, and he was very charming." Even better was what came after the performance. "The foyer was right in the front, upstairs, on the second floor," Masson recalled, "and there they used to always serve punch for the ladies[;] there was never a man in the place."

As for the gents, "all my grandfather's cronies would gather at Johnny's," across Bourbon Street, where Mildred happily joined them. "At one o'clock in the morning, I was eating fried oysters and...rum omelets. I *loved* rum omelets! I loved to see these little purple flames go up and down and I can still see it there. Then we walked home."

There was another reason for Mildred's regular patronage of the Old French Opera House. Her grandfather belonged to *Les Pompiers de L'Opéra*—The Opera Firemen, volunteers who attended performances nightly and, in exchange for a free ticket, checked for fire hazards before, during and after the event.

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Les Pompiers took their jobs seriously. “When there was a fire to be built upon the stage,” explained Masson in 1985, “they were the ones who built it, and they were the ones who put it out.... Before they went home—well, me too because I was there—they used to go over *every single seat* to see that not a cigarette was left under those seats.”

Fateful Night

One brisk evening in early December 1919, performers arrived at the Old French Opera House for a rehearsal of *Carmen*. It was a rote affair that went late, and afterwards, some performers went for a nightcap at a nearby saloon.

At 2:30 a.m. on Dec. 4, as two musicians headed home, they noticed smoke wafting from a second-floor window of the Old French Opera House and raced to alert the central fire station.

Props, costumes and curtains ignited, and by 3 a.m., flames engulfed the upper floors. Neighbors awoke to witness the frightful sight, as fire crews struggled to contain the blaze. By dawn, “[t]he high-piled debris, the shattered remnants of the wall still standing, the wreathing smoke” reminded an *Item* journalist of “a bombarded cathedral town.”

The allusion to bombardment was apropos. The Great War—that is, World War I—had further weakened the fragile exchange that French cultural institutions struggled to maintain with their fading empire. New Orleanians took special pride in the French performances at the Old French Opera House—“the one institution of the city above all which gave to New Orleans a note of distinction and lifted it out of the ranks of merely provincial cities,” wrote a *Times-Picayune* editorialist after the disaster. The theater represented an “anchor of the old-world character of our municipality...without [which] will be the gravest danger of our drifting into Middle-Western commonplacency.”

Sounding very much like their modern counterparts, New Orleanians a century ago feared the loss of this vital institution represented a sort of cultural point-of-no-return, after which New Orleans would never quite be the same. Mildred Masson Costa, by this time a teenager, was among those devastated, particularly since her own grandfather had volunteered as a *pompier* to ensure this would never happen.

“You see, the fire burned the night after a rehearsal, not after a performance,” she explained, sensing that a carelessly tossed cigarette probably caused the blaze. The *Pompiers* “were not responsible for being there during rehearsals because you weren’t supposed to use the rest of the theater, you were supposed to be on the stage, and they thought the actors or the singers would have the sense enough not to smoke. You can’t very well smoke or sing anyway.”

The Grand Opera Company admitted to the *Item* that it had suffered “a severe blow to the artistic and social life of New Orleans.” An editorialist pondered whether the fire would “sound the death knell of that entire quarter of the city, with its odd customs that charm the stranger.”

Newspapers received hundreds of letters pleading the Grand Opera Company to rebuild at the same site, but its owners demurred, pointing out that the company didn’t actually own the property. The theater had been bought by the wealthy philanthropist and early preservationist William Ratcliffe Irby, who sat on the Board of Administrators of Tulane University. Irby had donated the landmark to the Tulane Educational Fund, and for three years, the university used the Old French Opera House for graduation ceremonies and other functions. But with its mission of education and its campuses elsewhere, Tulane had no intention of rebuilding the specialized structure.

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An Era of Change

Were people's fears confirmed? Did the loss of the Old French Opera House pave the way to "Middle-Western commonplacidity"?

The fire certainly occurred amid an era of change in the French Quarter. It marked the third major architecture loss within two blocks. Just three years earlier, another old Creole landmark, the former St. Louis Exchange Hotel on 600 St. Louis Street, was demolished for damage inflicted by the Great Storm of 1915. Earlier, officials razed an entire block of old Creole townhouses for an enormous modern courthouse on 400 Royal, today's Louisiana Supreme Court.

Two Creole girls born in the Quarter around 1900, Madeline Archinard Babin and Marie Pilkington Campbell, attested that it was right after World War I that the last wave of old French-speaking Creole families left the French Quarter. The war ended in 1918; the Old French Opera House burned in 1919. This seems to validate the above-stated fears.

What such dire predictions tend to miss, however, is the fact that this society constantly reinvents itself, and, in time, comes to view its more recent cultural innovations (for example, jazz and second-line parades) as definitive of its ethos, even as old ones (such as the French language) fade away. In this manner, we constantly reset the baseline of what we believe makes New Orleans special.

We also come to appreciate what remains of old ways, and act to save them: witness the rise of preservation movement following the 1910s losses, which led directly to the official architectural protection of the French Quarter in 1937. The loss of some forms of distinction thus motivated the retention of what remained. The very fact that New Orleanians today still worry about their city losing its "uniqueness" suggests that the sense of distinctiveness felt a century ago never truly dissipated; it simply got repositioned on new forms of evidence.

The Site Today

As for the Old French Opera House, its charred ruins stood on Bourbon and Toulouse well into the 1920s, until the lot was cleared for leasing to the Samuel House Wrecking Company.

When Bourbon Street came into its current form as an entertainment strip, entrepreneurial eyes envisioned better uses for the weedy parcel. In 1964, investor Winthrop Rockefeller teamed with out-of-state corporations to purchase the land from Tulane University to erect a five-story, 186-room hotel. The Downtowner Motor Inn opened on Dec. 4, 1965, exactly 46 years after the fire.

A brass plaque on the wall of the hotel, now the Four Points by Sheraton, heralds the site's former occupant, and features inside allude to the operatic heritage of the site.

The new building retains one salient relic of the Old French Opera House: its eight-foot setback from Bourbon Street, which Gallier and Esterbrook designed in 1859 so that, as the *New Orleans Delta* put it, traffic would not be blocked by "ladies entering and leaving carriages."

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