

Tunnel Vision

1966 Tunnel Beneath Downtown Is a Relic of Riverfront Expressway

by Richard Campanella *New Orleans Times-Picayune* InsideOut section, October 11, 2014

Under natural conditions, southern Louisiana's deltaic soils do not lend themselves to features like basements, tunnels or even subterranean graves. Abundant groundwater promptly inundates excavations, and organic matter makes the finely textured soils prone to slide laterally when a hole is dug. As a result, underground construction was rare in historic New Orleans.

This began to change in the 1900s, as drainage and pumping technology lowered the water table, and sheet piling and pre-casting of underground walls stabilized adjacent soils. Local architects began to design actual basements, and engineers started to build the area's first true tunnels -- beneath the Intracoastal Waterway in Belle Chasse (1954), in Houma (1961) and under the Harvey Canal in 1957.

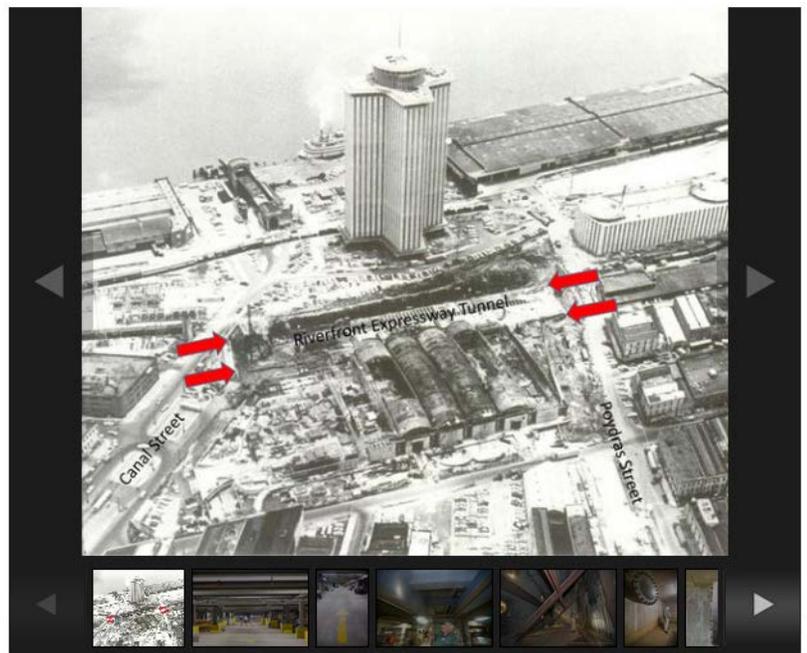
There's another tunnel in town, and it's in an unexpected place: beneath Harrah's Casino in downtown New Orleans. It's closed off to the public today, but it was originally designed to usher six lanes of high-speed interstate traffic between all points east and the West Bank.

The little-known chamber is a relic of an era of transportation modernization advocated by Mayor deLesseps "Chep" Morrison after World War II. A progressive reformer with a global outlook, Morrison led efforts to improve air travel connectivity, separate railroad and street crossings, streamline tricky intersections and widen key arteries. Concurrently, the Louisiana highway department in 1946 hired the renowned New York planning czar Robert Moses to propose ways of better connecting New Orleans with the nation.

Moses' "Arterial Plan for New Orleans" advocated widening a number of boulevards, enabling the flow of east-west traffic and building a Pontchartrain Expressway to access a projected Mississippi River bridge. Most significantly, Moses called for an elevated "Waterfront Expressway" connecting Elysian Fields Avenue with the West Bank via the French Quarter riverfront.

The plan was ahead of its time and funding. But with the launch of the national interstate system, two components of Moses' plan, the Pontchartrain Expressway and the Mississippi River Bridge (1958), came to fruition, and additional proposals were added by the early 1960s.

Planners envisioned inbound traffic on a new highway from the east (future Interstate 10) to bifurcate at Claiborne and Elysian Fields



This 1966 photo shows the proposed Riverfront Expressway tunnel. To evade the congestion of the Central Business District, engineers planned for the expressway to drop below grade between Canal and Poydras streets. The construction of the Rivergate Exhibition Hall on that exact spot required that the two be built jointly, despite that the expressway remained officially undecided. Photo courtesy of Harrah's

avenues. There, an elevated Claiborne Expressway would take motorists into the heart of the city and onward to Metairie, while a second elevated "Riverfront Expressway" (the new name for Moses' Waterfront Expressway) would take them down Elysian Fields, around the French Market, between the Mississippi and the French Quarter and onto the bridge to the West Bank.

Both the Claiborne and Riverfront expressways would connect with the extant Pontchartrain, forming a triangle. The plan gained traction, and in 1964 it officially became part of the nation's interstate highway strategy.

Resistance fomented immediately—but for only part of the project and from only part of the population. Preservationists and French Quarter residents recoiled at the idea of a noisy, smelly thruway severing the city's showcase neighborhood from its river. With their sizable civic clout, they launched an impassioned and well-organized effort to kill the Riverfront Expressway.

Folks along North Claiborne Avenue, who were predominantly African American, brought to bear fewer resources and less political capital to have their say on the Claiborne Expressway slated for their backyard.

One day in 1966, workers started cutting down North Claiborne Avenue's famed live oaks to make way for the elevated highway. It barely got any coverage; all the attention went to the debate over the Riverfront Expressway, with preservationists opposing it bitterly, and business interests (as well as the editorial board of the *Times-Picayune*) supporting it enthusiastically, in the name of progress and to keep downtown New Orleans relevant in this era of suburbanization.

Chief among the Riverfront Expressway advocates was City Hall, which, with one eye on the rise of Houston and another on the expansion of the petroleum industry, had embarked on three other massive downtown modernization projects: the building of an International Trade Mart, the widening of Poydras Street and the construction of a sprawling Rivergate Exhibition Hall.

That's where the tunnel came in.

To evade the congestion of the Central Business District, engineers planned for the Riverfront Expressway to drop below grade between Canal and Poydras streets. That required a tunnel, and the construction of the Rivergate Exhibition Hall on that exact spot required that the two be built jointly, despite that the expressway remained officially undecided.

So the city contributed \$1.3 million taxpayer dollars to integrate the tunnel into the exhibition hall and construct both together. Ostensibly, building the tunnel prematurely would prevent having to tear up the area twice.

But it's probably fair to say the city's real motivation was to create a sense of momentum and inevitability for the Riverfront Expressway. Surely federal officials would be impressed to see a municipality so eager to modernize that it would get the roadway started on its own -- and if it dispirited the opposition, all the better.

So tasked, architects at the firm Curtis and Davis designed a two-level basement beneath the Rivergate's main exhibition area, with the lower level for storage and the upper for mechanical equipment. Under the Rivergate's breezeway and concourse, the two basements would become one, forming a 20-foot-high flat-ceiling "box culvert" with three lanes of traffic in each direction and a total combined width of 98 feet.

Roughly 700 feet long and perfectly straight, the tunnel looked something like a gigantic men's tie box, built of steel and reinforced concrete and set into the deltaic muck between lower Canal and Poydras. Contractors began work in 1964; the International Trade Mart (today's World Trade Center) arose in 1965; the tunnel was completed in 1966; and the Rivergate Exhibition Hall opened in time for the city's 250th birthday in 1968.

One year later, New Orleanians received stunning news from Washington. Citing Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act, the U.S. Department of Transportation deemed the Riverfront Expressway would indeed do irreversible damage to the historic French Quarter—exactly as preservationists had argued—and cancelled the project. The victory marked the first time citizens defeated an elevated federal waterfront expressway, the likes of which had disfigured so many other cities' downtowns.

By this time, the Claiborne Expressway was all but complete and ready for Interstate 10 traffic. And a perfectly useless interstate tunnel lay below the city's most valuable real estate.

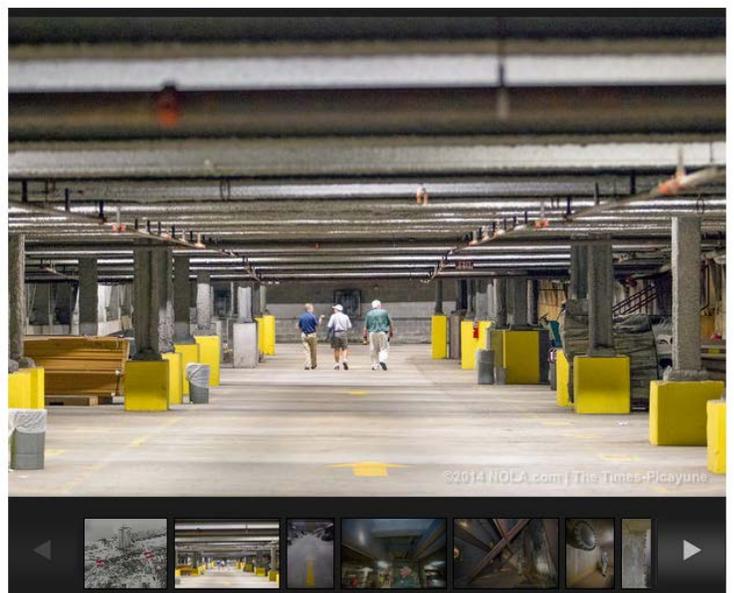
What to do with it?

Creative citizens in 1969 suggested turning the tunnel into an 820-seat theater performance space. Others envisioned a science museum or "an international food, cultural and entertainment mart" with a high-rise residential complex above. One city official interviewed by the Times-Picayune in 1987 joked the tunnel could be used for "growing mushrooms or for the world's biggest wine cellar;" others called for a "underground swimming hole(,) giant fish tank (or) tunnel of love."

Circumstances above ground had changed by this time. The Louisiana Superdome (1975) and the Convention Center (1984) gave conference organizers big new options for exhibition space, and they made the Rivergate seem small and outdated by contrast—despite its dazzling freeform Expressionist design widely admired by architects. With the push to legalize land-based "gaming" in the early 1990s, casino interests entered the picture, and they cast their eyes on the Rivergate.

Despite vocal opposition, the Rivergate was demolished in early 1995 to make way for a sprawling new Harrah's Casino, whose riverside flank would overlay the old tunnel. Facilities director Patrick Maher explained how engineers shored up the tunnel with new steel girders and columns and split it into two levels connected by ramps, while updating its pump and drainage system.

The Rivergate's old basements, meanwhile, were converted into a maze of offices and work spaces so labyrinthine that managers named hallways after French Quarter streets to aid navigation. (Maher's office is at "335 Royal.") Engineers also dug a new pedestrian tunnel beneath Poydras so patrons could move between Harrah's parking garage and its gambling facilities without having to cross a street.

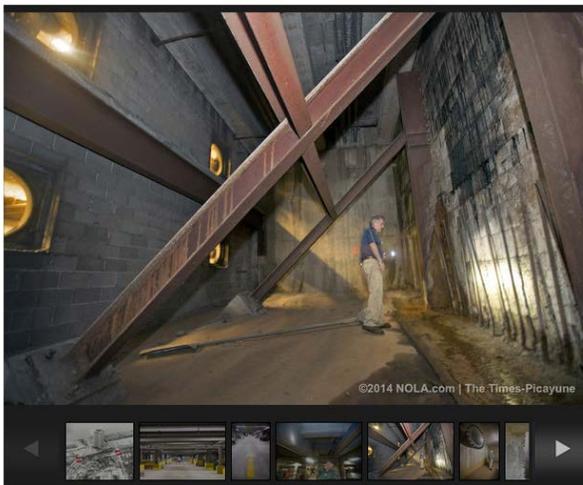


Kerry Hoppe, facilities manager for Harrah's Casino, Richard Campanella, and Pat Maher, director of facilities for the casino, walk in the underground tunnel below the casino that is being used for valet parking in New Orleans on Thursday, August 21, 2014. The six lane wide tunnel intended to connect the Riverfront Expressway to the Pontchartrain Expressway and Greater New Orleans Bridge was built in the

After lengthy construction delays, the casino finally opened in late 1999. Today, pedestrians walking Convention Center Boulevard would have no way of knowing a half-century-old, city-owned interstate tunnel lies below Harrah's breezeway. A close look, however, betrays clues: slight but conspicuous swells in the asphalt of lower Canal and Poydras perforated by cracks in the pavement, each lining up precisely with the tunnel, the result of its uneven subsidence rates compared to surrounding soils.

A similar phenomenon happened at Louis Armstrong New Orleans International Airport, where a tunnel built in 1991 to connect Veterans Boulevard and Airline Drive, since abandoned, now bulges above the tarmac as adjacent soils have sunk faster than the concrete chamber -- nature's way of telling us, perhaps, that these deltaic soils, despite modern technologies, still do not lend themselves to subterranean construction.

Richard Campanella, a geographer with the Tulane School of Architecture and a Monroe Fellow with the New Orleans Center for the Gulf South, is the author of "Bourbon Street: A History," "Bienville's Dilemma," "Geographies of New Orleans," "Lincoln in New Orleans," and other books. He may be reached through <http://richcampanella.com>, rcampane@tulane.edu, or @nolacampanella on Twitter.



Kerry Hoppe, facilities manager for Harrah's Casino, looks over one of the ends of an underground tunnel below the casino in New Orleans on Thursday, August 21, 2014. The six lane wide tunnel intended to connect the Riverfront Expressway to the Pontchartrain Expressway and Greater New Orleans Bridge was built in the mid 60's when the Rivergate was located on the site. The controversial Riverfront Expressway



Above: Cracks in the pavement of lower Canal trace the edges of the fifty-year-old tunnel.

Lagniappe: A Spinal Tap Tunnel?

Every city seems to have tunnel stories -- rumors of subterranean passageways and a subculture bent on exploring them.

New Orleans has its share, with stories of alleged warrens beneath City Hall, below neutral grounds, under the river, etc. Some are apocryphal, others hinge on exactly what constitutes a "tunnel" (as opposed to underground drainage canals and utility spaces), and still others are downright intriguing.

Recently I had a conversation with the ever-interesting Harry Shearer, the comedian-polymath and New Orleans advocate best known for his voice-acting on The Simpsons, the recent documentary "The Big

Uneasy," and his role as the hirsute bassist in the 1984 satire "This Is Spinal Tap." That rock "mockumentary" became a cult classic, and the band, reunited in 1992, went on a tour that brought them to New Orleans and a hotel on Canal Street.

Shearer shared with me how, late one night, Spinal Tap members were guided down an obscure underground passageway en route to a stage on the other side of Canal Street. The specter brought to mind the hilarious scene in the movie in which the cluelessly vainglorious rockers, in full concert regalia as if heading into battle, end up getting hopelessly lost backstage.

When Shearer first told me the story, I presumed the tunnel he remembered was the circa-1960s passageway described in the accompanying article. But after a follow-up inquiry, there may be another tunnel beneath Canal Street—call it the Spinal Tap Tunnel. Here's Shearer in his own words:

"Tap was performing a promotional gig (at) the plum performance slot of 11 Sunday morning. Just as we were recovering from that lovely news came word of our sound check time -- 3 a.m. the same morning. ... As we remonstrated, we were reassured that it would be fine. We could stay in our pajamas because we wouldn't be crossing Canal from our hotel -- the Sheraton -- to the convention hotel, the Marriott. We would take the tunnel, arrive in the Marriott, do our sound check, take the tunnel back, and nobody in the streets would be the wiser.

"And that's what we did. It was a nondescript tunnel -- no graffiti, no wall painting, no particular urine smell -- all of which suggested it hadn't been used very often. But it was lit. We went in, did a rudimentary sound check heavy on the grumbling, trudged back through the tunnel to the Sheraton, and got enough sleep to be less grumbly when time for the gig came around."

Is there a Spinal Tap tunnel beneath Canal Street or is Shearer "going to eleven" on this one? "I swear I didn't dream it," he said. "I have witnesses."

--Richard Campanella