

Seven Municipal Districts—and Two Centuries of History

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Consider the map on this page. You've seen it many times. It runs each week in this section, indicating the boundaries of New Orleans' seven municipal districts, those bureaucratic spaces through which real estate transactions and tax assessments are organized. What could be more mundane?



Things that seem mundane, though, oftentimes reveal more about history and culture than landmarks or museum pieces. What you're seeing in this map is 200 years of tumultuous local machinations.

Let's start with Districts 1, 2 and 3, which are separated by Canal Street and Esplanade Avenue. Into the mid-1800s, the Francophone Creole population generally settled at the riverside end of what are now Districts 2 and 3, that is, the French Quarter, faubourgs Tremé and Marigny and some of present-day Bywater.

Most members of the incoming English-speaking Anglo-American population, meanwhile, settled in what is now District 1, which was called Faubourg St. Mary at the time and now is the Central Business District.

Cultural differences between the Creole and Anglo populations, each of which developed alliances with various immigrant groups, led to economic and political tensions, which in turn led to a draconian solution: instead of learning to get along, why not get a divorce?

New Orleans in 1836 thus divided itself into three semi-autonomous municipalities, each with its own council, police, schools, port, services and amenities, ostensibly united under a single mayor and a general council. Each even had its own seal.

Because Canal Street roughly separated Anglo and Creole neighborhoods, it became the logical dividing line for the two new municipalities. The mostly Creole area from Canal and Esplanade was labeled the First Municipality, while the Anglo-dominated area from Canal to Felicity (New Orleans' upper edge at the time) became the Second Municipality. Locals semi-jokingly described the spacious Canal Street median as a "neutral ground" between the rival ethnicities, borrowing an old colonial-era term for disputed regions between imperial claims. The term caught on and is now used to describe medians citywide.

Because Esplanade Avenue divided the Creole area into two roughly equal halves, that wide thoroughfare became the line between the First and Third municipalities. Farthest from the urban core and downstream from its pollutants, the Third Municipality found itself on the losing end of most local maneuverings and the recipient of several unflattering nicknames: “The Old Third,” “The Poor Third,” “The Dirty Third,” and, sarcastically, “The Glorious Third.”

The municipality system was a spectacularly terrible idea. It wasted resources, pitted neighborhoods against each other, confused visitors and wreaked havoc on the city’s bond rating. “Had the Legislature sought, by the most careful efforts, to create a war of races, to make distinction between Creole and American, they could not have chosen a better means...than the present division,” wrote the Third Municipality’s *Daily Orleanian* in 1849.

The municipality system finally was abandoned in 1852, and the city was reunified — but only after the Anglo contingent had established alliances with German and Irish immigrants and, as the new electoral majority, started winning elections. The 1852 reunification entailed some confusing renaming: the old First Municipality became the Second Municipal District, the Second Municipality became the First, and the Third remained the Third.

Also that year, New Orleans successfully annexed the neighboring City of Lafayette out of Jefferson Parish, an expansion that pushed Orleans Parish’s limits from Felicity to Toledano Street. Why there? Because that’s where four old French long-lot plantations — belonging to the Ursuline nuns and the Panis, Livaudais and Delassize families — had been previously subdivided into streets and parcels. Now as part of New Orleans proper, these lands became the Fourth Municipal District, today’s Irish Channel, Garden District and Central City.

Eighteen years later, an opportunity arose for New Orleans to annex Algiers on the West Bank, as well as the east bank City of Jefferson, which is the heart of today’s Uptown. Proceeding in numerical order, Algiers became the Fifth Municipal District and the former City of Jefferson — between Toledano and the lower line of the old McCarty plantation (hence Lowerline Street) — became the Sixth.

Finally in 1874, New Orleans annexed the Jefferson Parish City of Carrollton, which pushed the parish line from Lowerline to Monticello (the upper line of the old McCarty plantation), where the city limit remains today. This final expansion made Carrollton the Seventh municipal district.

One major, final change awaited the municipal district map. When first sketched in the mid-1800s, authorities felt little need to extend the district boundaries too far into the back swamp, because hardly anyone lived there. But after the drainage system was installed in the late 1800s, and its pumps, pipes and outfall canals ejected runoff and lowered the water table, new development spread in the early 1900s. With it came the need to administer thousands of new real estate transactions.

Thus authorities extended the First, Second, Third and Seventh district lines to the shores of Lake Pontchartrain, and used existing political or physical boundaries — the Jefferson Parish line, the New Basin Canal and Bayou St. John — to separate them. The Fifth Municipal District on the West Bank, meanwhile, was extended downriver to encompass the rural lower coast of

Algiers. Why not extend the Fourth and Sixth? Because the concavity of the Mississippi River's meander meant that those wedge-shaped districts — the products of 15 slender, colonial-era plantations — converged around present-day Gerttown, and never reached any further lakeward.

Thus, our municipal districts trace our urban expansion over the last 161 years. Why, for example, is today's Third District so large? Because the eastern half of the parish was once very lightly peopled, which made delineating all of its meager population into one gigantic district seem like a good idea — though it no longer does today.

Think how different the metro area would be today had New Orleans not annexed present-day districts Four, Six and Seven out of Jefferson Parish.

Consider also the impact of these lines on modern city life. Each district's autonomous or semi-autonomous heritage fostered the development of a certain level of parochialism, which persisted long after the 1852 unification and the last annexation in 1874. Until just a few years ago, each of the seven districts elected its own assessors, who staffed their own offices and assessed taxes independently — a system unique in the nation. It took civic intervention after Hurricane Katrina to finally consolidate those political redundancies.

Plantations, faubourgs, Creoles, Anglos, competition, expansion, drainage, politics, taxes: embedded in that seemingly mundane map are sundry episodes in the human geography of New Orleans, going back 200 years.



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