

Uptown Serendipity

How Inaction Created Space for Eden

by Richard Campanella *New Orleans Times-Picayune* InsideOut section, November 8, 2013

Understanding history starts with questioning the notion that it flows neatly in a regular "course." More often, human events lunge unexpectedly in new directions on account of snap decisions, misunderstandings, bad weather, inexplicable inaction or sheer serendipity.

When I was asked recently to lecture at the Audubon Nature Institute's inaugural Olmsted Legacy Dinner, I had a chance to reflect on history's capricious nature as I explained the rather fortuitous way in which Audubon Park became the urban Eden we enjoy today.

If history did flow in a regular course, we would not have Audubon Park. Nor would we have the campuses of Tulane and Loyola universities, at least not in their present locations.

Let's back up a bit.

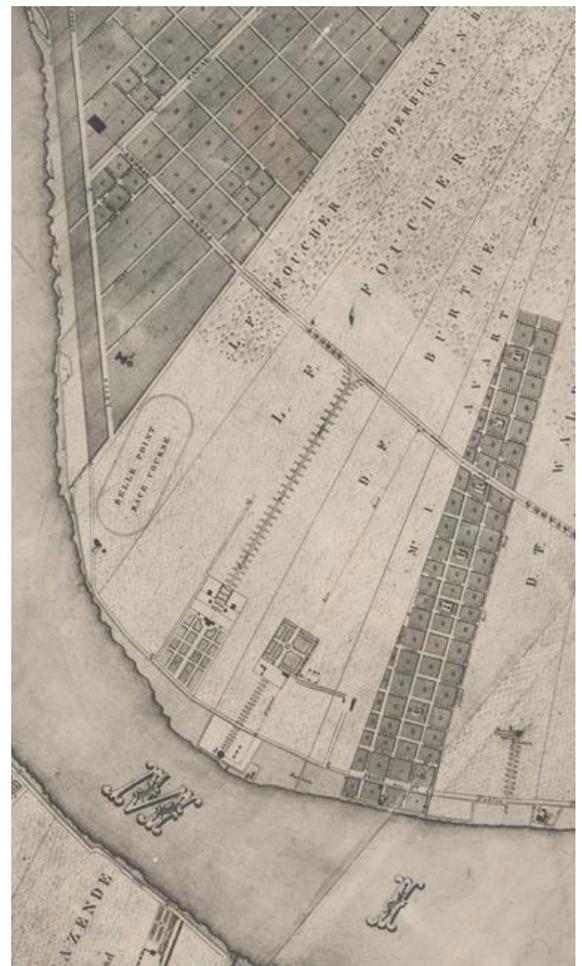
During the early 1800s, planters near New Orleans found themselves with an opportunity to make more money by selling their plantations for urban lots rather than continuing in agriculture. One by one, they sold, and by the 1840s, nearly all of present-day Uptown had been subdivided into streets and parcels, though only sparsely developed with houses. All, that is, except one.

Located five miles upriver from the city and owned in colonial times by the Fontenet family, this plantation -- running from the Mississippi River to the back swamp about where Fontainebleau Drive is today -- passed in 1792 into the hands of Pierre Foucher, who expanded it in 1825.

It's unclear whether he had any designs for his land, but if he were anything like his neighbors, he likely would have hired a surveyor and subdivided it. His death in 1832 passed that option to his son, Louis Frederic Foucher.

Louis seemed so inclined as well, having built a race track (located where Uptown Square is today) on adjacent land also owned by the Fouchers, which was later subdivided.

Subdivision became even more likely after 1835, when the New Orleans and Carrollton Rail Road, predecessor of today's streetcar line, began operating on Noyades Street, now St. Charles Avenue. The conveyance made



Charles Zimpel's 1834 'Topographic Map of New Orleans' shows the position of the Foucher Tract, a fallow parcel surrounded by plantations that were either urbanizing or in their last years of agriculture. The tract would later host a major park and two university campuses. *From the personal collection of Richard Campanella*

the Uptown plantations all the more attractive for residential living. Louis Foucher strove to get a spur line added to the railroad and extended the old Fontenet oak alley (parts of which still exist) all the way to St. Charles, further suggesting an upcoming suburban subdivision.

But Foucher, a French Creole who never quite Americanized, did not have his heart in the project, nor in returning to agriculture. Rather, he cast his eyes to the Old World and eventually decamped with his family to Paris, where he renamed himself the Marquis de Circe, claimed French citizenship, and all but abandoned his Louisiana property.

Until, that is, he learned that Union troops had wrought damages when they used his property as a field hospital and barracks during the Civil War. His claim for indemnification was paid years later, but not before Foucher died in Paris in 1869, leaving the tract to his widow.

Two years later, Madame Foucher sold it to two real estate developers, Bloomer and Southworth. It seemed like a good investment: the area had just been annexed into New Orleans city limits, and denizens of downtown were eager to flee the old city for the spacious new garden suburbs of Uptown. The former Foucher tract was finally about to be urbanized.

But Bloomer and Southworth were more schemers than developers. They devised an elaborate plan in which they lobbied the state to create two new amenities, a park and a state capitol on either side of St. Charles Avenue. They proceeded to sell the riverside land to the commission charged to create the park and the lakeside land (now more valuable for its proximity to the upcoming park) to other investors, profiting handsomely in the process.

When the scheme came to light, it outraged corruption-weary citizens and added to the case for the impeachment of Gov. Henry Clay Warmoth, effectively ending the state capitol idea. But the scheme did lead to legislation creating the park, and when the city of New Orleans purchased the land for that purpose in 1871, the Foucher tract became Upper City Park.

A decade later, when cotton advocates got Congress to approve a world's fair to stir up trade for New Orleans, they selected Upper City Park as the site for the event. The 1884-1885 World's Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition, while a financial flop, brought beautiful landscaping and ample attention to the area. In the years after it, the surrounding subdivisions became some of the most attractive residential real estate in town.

The open space lakeside of St. Charles, meanwhile, came to the attention of the Jesuits of Loyola University and administrators of Tulane University, both of whom were seeking to expand beyond their institutions' cramped downtown quarters. Uptown beckoned, and the old Foucher tract provided the perfect space. Both organizations purchased sections there in 1889-1891, and proceeded during the 1890s-1910s to build beautiful campuses for Tulane and Loyola. Together with Audubon Park (renamed in 1886), which by this time was undergoing tasteful landscaping by the Olmsted Firm, the twin campuses plus adjacent residential parks, such as Audubon Place, added further exclusivity to this area. The universities also created numerous professional jobs and attracted a well-educated and moneyed demographic. Today's Uptown/University area, one of the most beautiful examples of residential urbanism in the nation, had come together.

And it all happened rather serendipitously, without a city planning commission or zoning ordinances. Consider the what-if's:

What if the Fouchers had subdivided the family tract, as all their neighbors did?
What if Bloomer and Southworth hadn't come up with their scheme?
What if their scheme failed to spawn the park?
What if their scheme succeeded in landing the state capitol?
Uptown under any of these scenarios would be very different today.

The academic administrators still would have departed downtown, but my guess is that, without the Foucher tract, they would have established the new Tulane and Loyola campuses along the Metairie-Gentilly Ridge. This topographic ridge, now followed by City Park Avenue and Gentilly Boulevard, was well-drained, had attractive new housing and streetcar access, and lay close enough to the city for convenient access yet far enough that ample space could still be purchased for a reasonable price. (It's for these reasons that land uses with similar economic limitations, such as fairgrounds and cemeteries, predominate here, and it's worth noting that two institutions of higher learning, Dillard University and Delgado Community College, operate here today.)

City Park, meanwhile, would have become the city's only major green space, and likely would have been selected for the 1885 world's fair and later landscaped in an Olmsted fashion. With Tulane and Loyola nearby, this area likely would have attracted wealthy and well-educated families.

Uptown, lacking these amenities, might have developed with a more modest housing stock and received a more middle-class demographic.

Indeed, were it not for the Fouchers' inaction, today's Uptown/University area might be more like today's Mid-City/Bayou St. John, and vice versa.

Certainly we'd have very different urban geography.

We'll never know for sure, because history, and by extension human geography, is rarely meant to be. It twists and lunges, oftentimes by pure serendipity.



Ted Jackson, NOLA.com/ The Times-Picayune

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