

150 Years After Battle of New Orleans Victory, Two 1965 Cultural Defeats

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While much deserved attention this week has gone to the 200th anniversary of the American victory at the Battle of New Orleans, this year also marks the 50th anniversary of two less-remembered losses near the Chalmette battlefield. They were vestiges of opposite ends of antebellum Creole society, one a tiny hamlet of poor black families, the other an opulent plantation mansion.

Both survived a century after the Civil War, and both were obliterated in 1965.

The hamlet developed out of a rice field owned by Pierre Fazende, a free man of color who appears to have inherited a portion of the Chalmette plantation on which the Battle of New Orleans was fought. In 1856, his son subdivided the elongated parcel, positioned roughly parallel to the former American firing line, and sold the 33 lots of "Fazendeville" to other free people of color, and after the Civil War, emancipated slaves. By the turn of the 20th century, three to four dozen black families called Fazendeville home.

According to local historian Roy Chapman, the linear village featured a one-room school, two barrooms, a grocery, church, dance hall, ball field and a single straight access road paralleling an old millrace used to drain runoff. All houses were positioned on the downriver "British side" of the road, and one practically overlaid the spot where British Maj. Gen. Sir Edward Packenham fell wounded in 1815.

In form, Fazendeville resembled dozens of other one-street African-American communities perpendicularly abutting the banks of the lower Mississippi River. But this was the only one in predominantly white St. Bernard Parish, and it was uniquely positioned between two historic sites that would come under the jurisdiction of the National Park Service: the 1815 battle's American rampart 800 feet upriver, and, equidistant downriver, the circa-1864 Chalmette National Cemetery.

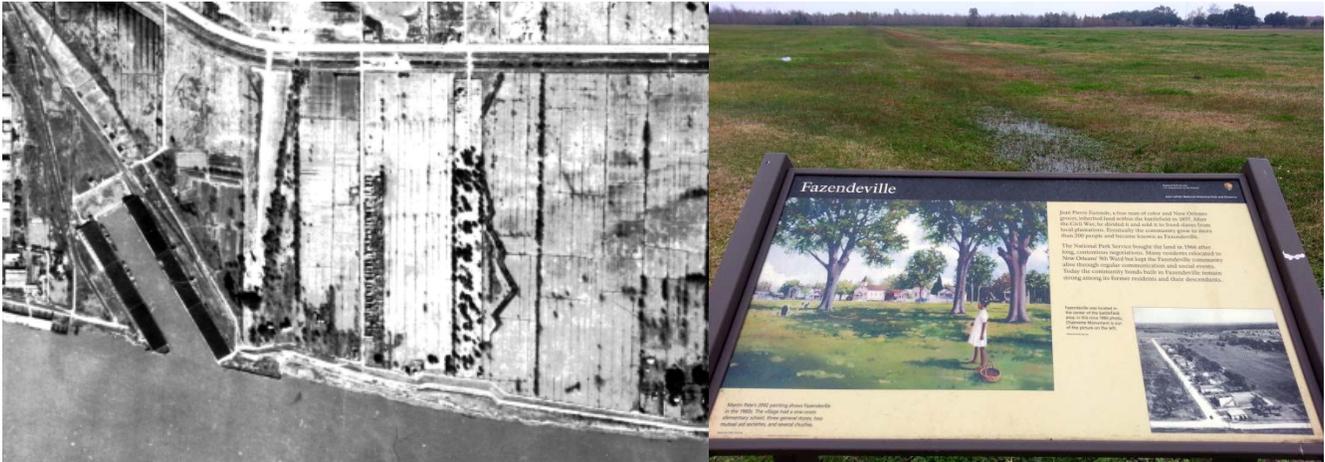
Fazendeville residents were proud of the history in their backyard; they named their house of worship the Battleground Baptist Church and saw themselves as part of the area's legacy. Others, however, saw them as, quite literally, an intrusion on history, and in the early 1960s, sought to oust them.

The move to eliminate Fazendeville is viewed through two interpretative lenses today.

One holds that well-intentioned but thoughtless history buffs, with the battle's sesquicentennial on the horizon, aimed to unify the American firing line and the national cemetery into one military historical park. Local and federal governments supported the concept, and attempted to buy out the 200 or so denizens of Fazendeville living in between.

But when those offers were declined, expropriations ensued, and what began as historical memorialization turned into ham-fisted forced displacement. Most Fazendevillians ended up settling into New Orleans' Lower Ninth Ward or the community of Violet further downriver in St. Bernard Parish, and few if any received fair market value for their homes.

The other interpretation holds that local officials, in this era of civil rights protests and resistance to integration, covertly sought to dislodge a poor rural black outpost from a potential tourist attraction in the heart of their rapidly suburbanizing parish, and carried out this hidden agenda under the subterfuge of historical remembrance. Wrote LSU anthropologist Joyce Marie Jackson in her study of the community, “It could be coincidental that [the civil rights tensions] and loss of their land to the government happened around the same time. [But] the confluence of events was close enough that it was certainly logical for villagers to see them as connected.” That they hired famed civil rights attorney A. P. Tureaud to make their case attests to this viewpoint.



Fazendeville, center, in a 1952 aerial photo; Chalmette Slip at left. Right: National Park Service sign marking village’s space today.

But power was overwhelmingly on the side of the government. The National Park Service, after all, had a long record of displacing locals — usually the rural poor — in the name of protecting and preserving the nation’s natural and historical heritage; prior examples included the removal of Native Americans from Yellowstone and Glacier national parks and rural whites from the Shenandoah and Great Smoky mountains.

Millions nationwide may have benefitted from these decisions, but they came at a dear cost for the locals removed, and among them were the folks of Fazendeville. The Park Service closed the village’s road in 1963; the last residents moved out in 1964; and by March 1965, the last remaining structures were relocated or bulldozed. Fazendeville, in more ways than one, was history.

At the same time, a half-mile upriver, a very different situation was playing out toward a similar end. It involved the magnificent Three Oaks mansion, built around 1831 for Sylvain Peyroux, a Creole sugar cane planter and French wine importer. As one of the largest homes below New Orleans, Three Oaks would become a local landmark, distinguished by its towering pearl-white Doric columns and prominent hip roof.



Left: American Sugar Refinery and Three Oaks, 1913. Library of Congress

Legend has it that, after Admiral Farragut’s Union fleet dodged cannon fire from forts St. Philip and Jackson in April 1862 and sailed up the Mississippi River to New Orleans, a Confederate battery fired on the warships at Chalmette and a return volley knocked down one of Three Oaks’ columns. The brief action

represented the last and only exchange of fire just prior to the Union's capture of Confederate New Orleans.

Three Oaks' destiny shifted from the raising of cane to the refining of cane juice when the American Sugar Refining Co. bought the mansion with the surrounding land in 1905. In 1909, the company opened its towering Chalmette Refinery (where Domino Sugar is made today), and proceeded to draw to these rural precincts the industrial refining that used to occur on the upper French Quarter riverfront.

By this time, the adjacent community of Arabi (Friscoville) had been laid out with streets (1906) and houses, and bucolic Three Oaks found itself on the industrializing fringes of a growing metropolis.

Because Three Oaks was secured on the refinery property, it managed to stave off the capricious speculators, absentee ownership, vagrants and vandals who precipitated the demise of so many other aging plantation houses in this era. But the mansion also languished in isolation, inaccessible to the tourism circuit and largely unknown outside the history and architecture community. Company officials would occasionally open it to admirers, but they had other priorities, and they would later point out that only seven visitors came to see the century-old building over 10 years.

On Feb. 15, 1965, an explosion ripped through the Chalmette Refinery, killing one worker, injuring dozens and causing more than a million dollars in damage. Shaken company officials devised a recovery strategy that prioritized for modernization. Among the obsolete assets targeted for demolition were three old barrel-making buildings, a molasses factory, a lime storage shed, old oil tanks, a former clock-in office — and Three Oaks, which company officials said suffered from a bad case of dry rot.

Not unlike what had transpired in Fazendeville, the situation pitted ostensibly good intentions against the wrong problem and led to a regrettable decision. One day in late June 1965, company officials had the 134-year-old landmark hurriedly bulldozed. Stunned preservationists, who were given no notice, reported a few days later that the mansion had been so rigorously eradicated that its footprint was all but unidentifiable.

The act earned the company the ill will of historic preservationists, at least one of whom I know boycotts Domino Sugar to this day. It also led to calls for public notice laws requiring owners to post plans for demolitions of historic buildings before they are executed. These rules have led to the last-minute rescue of numerous historic buildings slated for the wrecking ball.

Three Oaks' destruction left only a handful of intact antebellum plantation houses in urbanized upper St. Bernard Parish. In 2013, one of them, the LeBeau House, burned to the ground in an act of drug-induced arson.

The remaining survivors are, ironically, in the hands of the two entities responsible for the demise of Fazendeville and Three Oaks. They are the circa-1830 Rene Beaugard House at the Chalmette Battlefield unit of Jean Lafitte National Historical Park and Preserve, and the circa-1844 Cavaroc House owned by Domino Sugar.

Fifty years after the demolitions, the only vestiges of Three Oaks are its eponymous trees, and until recently, the only evidence of old Fazendeville was its faint footprint in the now-unified battlefield. This changed a few years ago when the National Park Service, in an institutional mea culpa of sorts, erected a sign recounting to visitors the elimination of one history to commemorate another.

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