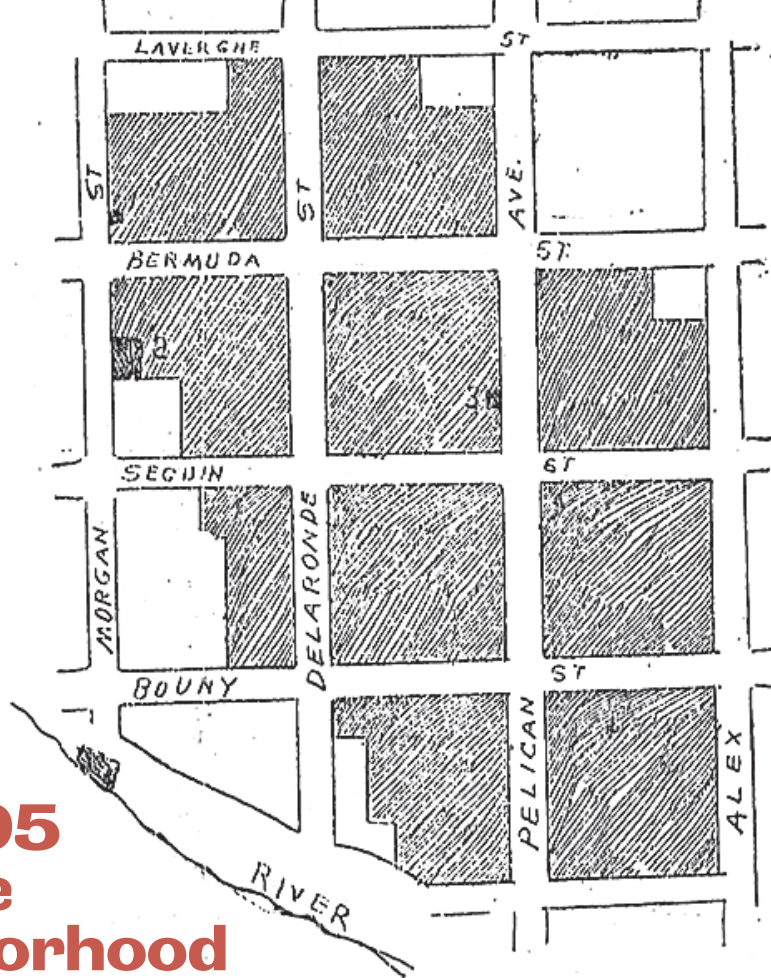


ALGIERS IN ASHES

'Great Fire' ignited 1895 lynch mob and remade a New Orleans neighborhood



This map, published in *The Daily Picayune* on Oct. 21, 1895, shows the fire area.

ALGIERS SWEEPED BY FLAMES.

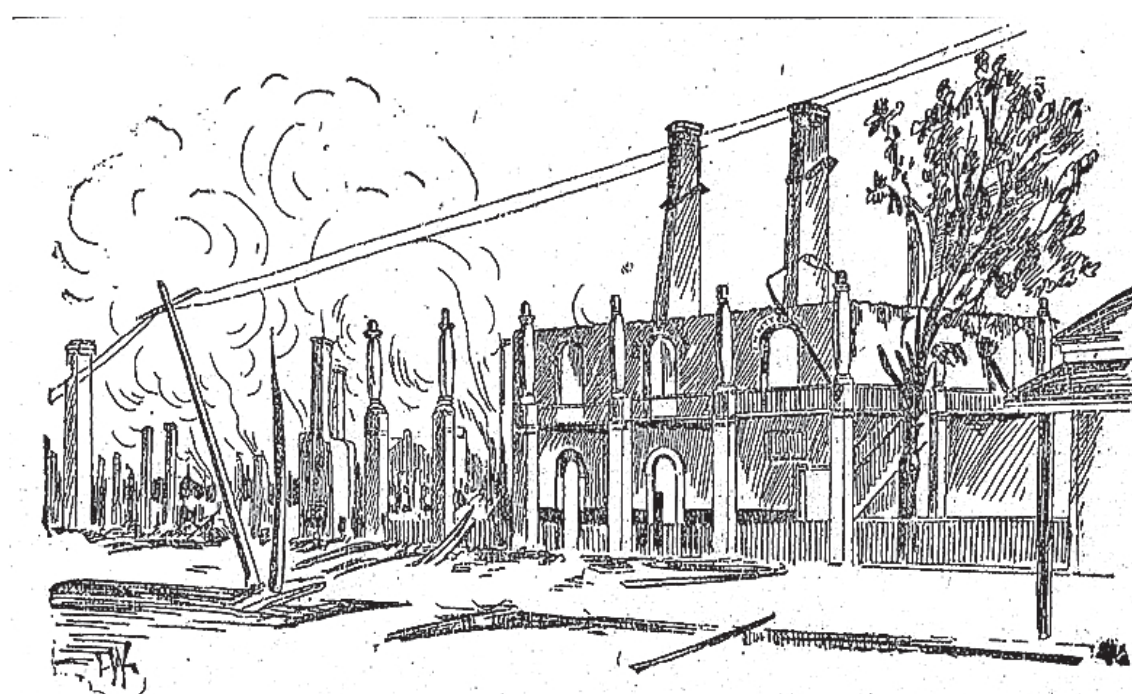


By Richard Campanella
Contributing writer

A hundred and twenty years ago this autumn, the heart of Algiers burned to ashes. The 1895 conflagration ranks as the third-worst in the city's history, after the 1788 and 1794 French Quarter fires, and sheds light on turn-of-the-century society as well as its response to crises — mostly for the better, some for the worse. The 10-block footprint of the disaster also helps decipher the historical cityscape of modern-day Algiers Point.

At 12:45 a.m. in the windy darkness of Sunday, Oct. 21, 1895, a fire ignited within a crowded Morgan Street tenement known disparagingly as *The Rookery*. Northeasterly winds fanned the flames throughout the two-story common-wall apartments, sending a dozen poor, mostly Italian immigrant families fleeing for their lives. Among them were the wife and children of Paul Bouffia, who operated a fruit stand at 307 Morgan St. where the fire seemed to have originated.

An alarm was sounded, and three horse-drawn fire trucks arrived promptly from the Engine 17 House on Pelican Avenue. Firemen operating the largest steam pump set its hose into the river, while the other two pump crews tapped



COURTHOUSE RUINS.

The courthouse was destroyed in the 1895 fire, along with all records of the city court, the marriage, birth and death records that were drafted before the Board of Health took over that work, and all but two of the recorder's court books, according to *The Daily Picayune*.

into ground wells within a block of the fire. Streams of water arced into the orange glow, and spectators breathed a sigh of relief.

But because it had been a dry autumn, the wells "were emptied of water (within) half an hour," wrote local historian

William H. Seymour in 1896, leaving the river pump alone to douse the rooftop flames. The blaze spread to adjacent houses beyond the pump's reach, and by 2 a.m., the 300 block of Morgan Street and both sides of 200 Bermuda Street were one gigantic bonfire visible for miles.

Chief Daly of the Algiers Fire Station called for help, but it took a solid hour for larger pumps to arrive via ferry from downtown. By that time, the fire had consumed the Eighth Precinct Police Station and the Algiers Courthouse, located in the century-old Duverjé Plantation

House, along with most of the 200 block of Morgan Street. Reams of official records dating to colonial times added fuel to the fire, and “when the old roof fell in,” wrote Seymour, “it sent up a shower of sparks... windward” into the next tier of doomed houses.

Realizing the blaze was now beyond human control, residents frantically removed valuables from their homes and carted furniture down to the batture, even as tank trucks and their skittish horses struggled to run relays from the river to the pumper trucks. Mayor John Fitzpatrick and his police and fire chiefs saw firsthand the sheer inadequacy of their resources: wells too dry, pumps too weak, hoses too short, firemen too few, and fuel too plentiful, in the form of wooden houses and yards stocked with coal and firewood—all in the face of that fateful wind.

Some would later blame the disaster on Algiers’ low prioritization from City Hall (the neighborhood had been annexed into New Orleans in 1870, but remained village-like and isolated from the urban core), a complaint still heard today. Others blamed the firefighters. “The principal causes of the rapid spread of the flames were not only the scarcity of water and a furious wind,” wrote the Picayune, “but the poor work of the fire department. When they lost control of the fire they became demoralized.”

The blaze next consumed both sides of the 300 block of Delaronde Street, then the 300 block of Bermuda Street, followed by the 200 and 400 blocks of Delaronde, most of the 100 through 400 blocks of Pelican Avenue (including the fire station) and the 100 through 300 blocks of Alix Street—plus all the intervening streets of Bermuda, Seguin and Bouny down to Powder.

Viewed from downtown, the conflagration must have made for a frightful sight, spanning a quarter-mile at its widest point with hundred-foot-high flames licking the night sky.

Three factors explain why the fire did not destroy all of Algiers. For one, alert operators of the Hotard & Lawton Saw Mill activated their steam pumps and, with a 1,300-foot hose tapping into unlimited river water, were able to soak rooftops and save everything downriver from Lavergne Street.

Tug boat crews, meanwhile, sprayed water into the coal barges moored along the river, preventing them from igniting.

Finally, and most importantly, the wind shifted direction and blew the flames into depleted areas. The fire burned itself out.

By dawn, ten blocks were charred utterly, leaving “a forest of chimneys” amid lingering smoke and glowing embers. At least 193 houses were destroyed and dozens more damaged, not to mention commercial assets along the riverfront and infrastructure all around. Roughly 1,200 people found themselves homeless, and while no one was killed,



A mill used its steam pumps to hose down houses below Lavergne Street, which explains why this 1849 townhouse, now a bed and breakfast, survived the 1895 fire.

a few suffered minor burns and smoke inhalation. Losses were estimated at \$400,000, or \$11.4 million in today’s dollars. There was no Red Cross nor FEMA at the time, nor any government disaster-relief programs to mitigate the losses for those who did not have fire insurance.

How did the fire start? Raising suspicions among neighbors was the rumor that Paul Bouffia, the occupant of 307 Morgan St., had recently acquired insurance. Bouffia was not a popular man; the Picayune cited a source describing him as “heartily disliked,” with “a very bad reputation,” particularly among his people, one of whom he had “nearly killed.” Neighbors spoke of his suspicious behavior the day prior, and reports circulated “that he had [started] two fires in the place before, which narrowly escaped being disastrous.”

Police located Bouffia and carted him to a provisional police station. Enraged survivors gathered outside, “and some were bold enough to openly cry out to lynch him.” Others, according to Seymour, spoke of “a contemplated expulsion of the Italian element of the population.” Only four years earlier, in 1891, eleven Italians accused of murdering the city’s police chief had been cornered and shot by a mob at the Orleans Parish Prison, precipitating an international crisis between the United States and Italy. Bouffia might have met the same fate had not the police safeguarded him until the mob dispersed.

Meanwhile, a mob of a different sort gathered on the ferry, this one of curious gawkers from across the river. So many



Algiers Point is a living relic of circa-1896 style architectural tastes.

PHOTOS BY RICHARD CAMPANELLA.

Disaster response in this era was largely based on local support networks, religious institutions, civil society and charity.

spectators mounted the iron bridge to the Algiers Ferry House that it collapsed, sending 100 people into the water. Twenty people were injured, two girls disappeared into the current, and a woman was later found drowned.

The initial response of some New Orleanians to the disaster was, in sum, far more disastrous than the fire, and both the lynch mob and ferry collapse gave the city some highly unflattering national news coverage.

What got less national coverage was the charitable response of many more New Orleanians. Leaders and citizens alike formed a Relief Committee that Sunday afternoon and secured food and shelter for the homeless at churches, meeting halls and schools (though all were racially segregated). In the ensuing weeks, nearly \$16,000 in donations was raised, or \$457,000 in today’s dollars—enough, along with insurance claims (\$300,000 or \$8.5 million today) and social support networks, to get victims at least back on their feet if not whole again. The episode serves as a reminder that disaster response in this era was largely based on local support networks, religious institutions, civil society and charity.

The neighborhood recovered speedily, as the fire had occurred during prosperous times and in the midst of promethean Progressive Era infrastructure improvements. Streets were paved; electrification arrived; a waterworks plant was built to resolve pressure problems; a viaduct was installed to decongest riverfront activity; and a new Moorish-style courthouse with asymmetrical crenelated towers was built, a distinctive landmark to this day.

New Victorian townhouses and exuberant gingerbread shotgun houses were erected in such numbers that, by late 1896 according to Seymour, “a walk along those attractive streets makes it difficult to realize that this was the same so lately in ashes and ruins.” A similar stroll today is a living lesson in 1896-style urbanism, and it is quite beautiful. One might be tempted to say that if Algiers had to burn, it did so at a good time.

As for Paul Bouffia, the target of the lynch mob’s vengeance, overwhelming evidence arose at a November court hearing that he was on the East Bank when the fire started, and that the accusations against him were entirely traceable to personal animus. “Opinion in Algiers has changed altogether in favor of the suspected man,” reported an out-of-state newspaper, and Bouffia was set free.

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