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 in 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 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.
Roughly 1,200 people found themselves riverfront and infrastructure all around. To mention commercial assets along the river, preventing them from igniting, 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.

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

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 save rooftop tops 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 its way back down to the river.

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 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 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 Orleansians to the disaster was, in sum, far more disastrous than the fire, and both the lynching 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 Orleansians. 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 lynching’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.

Richard Campanella, a geographer with the Tulane School of Architecture, is the author of “Bourbon Street: A History,” “Bienville’s Dilemma,” “Geographies of New Orleans,” and other books. He may be reached at richcampanella.com, via email at rcampane@tulane.edu, or on Twitter at @ncampanella.