

## **Odd Angles Tell Interesting Tales** ***Peculiar Seventh Ward Enclave Is Traceable to*** ***18th Century Plantations, 19th Century Canals—*** ***and a Pepper Sauce Connoisseur***

by Richard Campanella *New Orleans Times-Picayune* InsideOut section, April 11, 2015

Things at odd angles tell interesting stories. The New Orleans cityscape abounds in such eccentricities—misaligned streets, odd-shaped blocks, off-axis houses—and like archeological artifacts, they shed light on conditions and decisions from centuries ago.

Such is the case for one of the most peculiar quirks of our map, a dizzying labyrinth of streets in the heart of the historic Seventh Ward.

On the outside, it's bounded by St. Bernard Avenue, North Galvez, Allen and North Roman streets, all of which extend into adjacent neighborhoods like any rational urban grid.

But on the inside are disconnected street fragments with curious names, such as Old Roman, Old Prieur, New Prieur and a short narrow public alley named Old St. Bernard. Strwn about are irregular blocks and neutral-ground shards that, in maps, look like the floor of a mismanaged tailor shop.



*"The Cut:" Enclave of oddly rotated streets in the 7th Ward. Map by Richard Campanella.*

New Prieur is especially elusive. It's one of the few places on earth that has managed to evade Google Maps, nor does it appear in the city's official street gazetteer. But assessor records and street signs indicate New Prieur is no apparition.



*Above: There's only one place on earth where Old Prieur, New Prieur, and North Prieur streets come together. Photograph by Richard Campanella.*

As for Old St. Bernard, well, that artery got superseded in the mid-1800s by a nearby New St. Bernard Street. But don't presume New St. Bernard is today's St. Bernard Avenue; in fact, it's now Allen Street.

So, in other words, old New St. Bernard Street, which no longer exists, supplanted Old St. Bernard Street, which still exists, and neither of them are today's St. Bernard Avenue (formerly White Street), which once hosted the New St. Bernard Canal—the successor to the Old St. Bernard Canal.

How and why this vortex fell into place has long perplexed me. But some historical-geographical sleuthing, aided by rare surveys at Tulane's Southeastern Architectural Archive, has shed new light on the mystery.

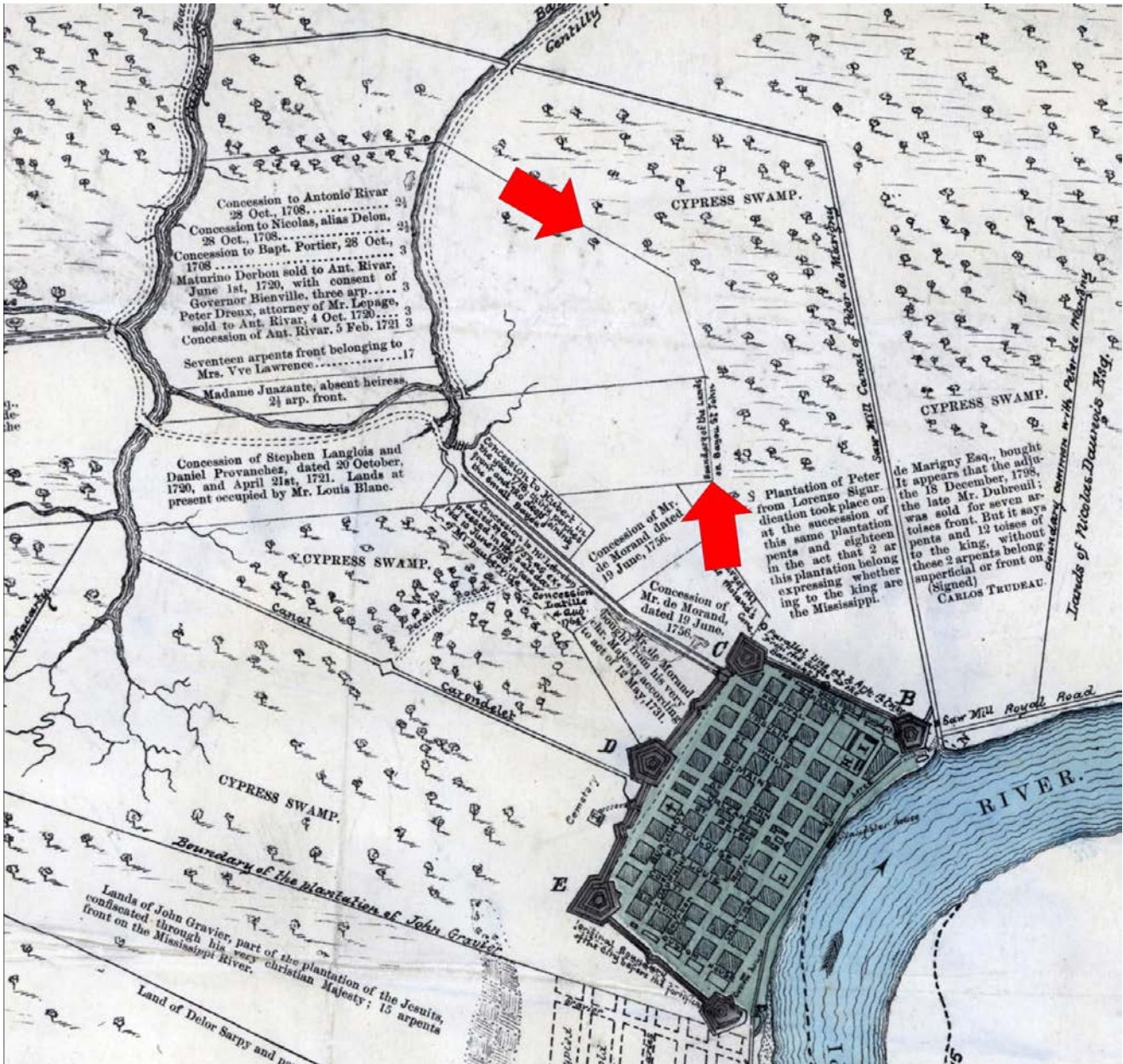
First, it's important to understand how French colonials surveyed land here. They did so by delineating elongated lots perpendicularly from waterways and ridges, such that each landholder attained valuable frontage as well as a slice of the arable land behind it. The resulting "long lots" were measured by the French unit arpent, equaling 192 English feet.

A typical French long lot measured 6 to 10 arpents wide by 40 arpents deep, roughly a mile and a half, the typical span of the higher terrain before it petered out into backswamp.

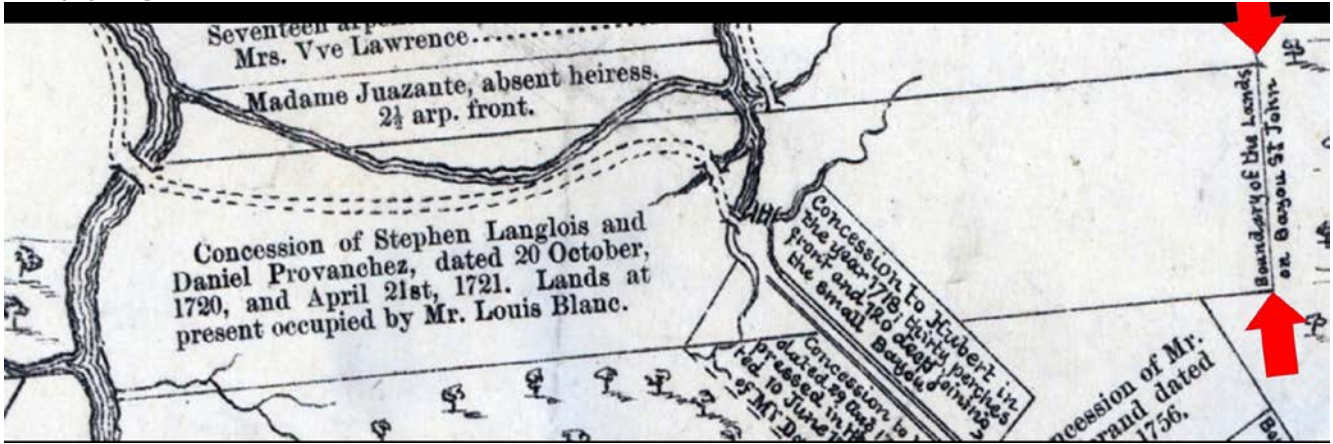
Most modern riverside neighborhoods can trace their street patterns to their prior long-lot plantations, whose elongated shapes lent themselves to urban grids fairly effectively.

But things got a bit messy when long lots converged in the uptown crescent. If you've ever gotten lost in Gert Town, for example, join the club.

Things got messier still in the area that's today's Seventh and Eight wards. They were bounded by the Mississippi River to their south, Bayou Road and Bayou St. John to the west, and the Gentilly Road to the north. All were key transportation arteries in colonial times, all had cultivable land along their flanks, and all had been surveyed into long lots. And they would all converge around our Seventh Ward labyrinth.



Above: Adaptation of 1798 map showing how 1720s plantations delineated from Bayou St. John (left) formed the beginning of the still-evident “zig-zag line” (red arrows). Below is a detail showing rear property line (right) that is now Old St. Bernard Street. Map: Library of Congress.



As early as 1720-1721, a few years after the founding of New Orleans, a land concession was made to Stephen Langlois and Daniel Provanchez fronting a bend of Bayou St. John and extending 40 arpents eastward into the backswamp.



The “zig-zag line” (red arrows) as it appeared in the 1834 Charles Zimpel map. Map courtesy Tulane Southeastern Architectural Archive.

The rear lines of other colonial-era plantations emanating off curvaceous Bayou St. John and the Gentilly Road reflected these features’ bending frontages. Together with the Langlois-Provanchez rear edge, the property lines formed a zigzagged sequence of boundaries across otherwise undeveloped swampland in today’s Seventh Ward between Interstate 610 and Interstate 10.

On the opposite side of that zigzag line lay the rear holdings of the famous Creole aristocrat Bernard Marigny, whose plantation fronted the Mississippi River just below the city proper.

In 1805, Marigny had the front of his property subdivided, becoming today’s Faubourg Marigny. A few years later, he contracted Joseph Pilie to do the same for his back lands, creating the Faubourg Nouveau Marigny, or New Marigny.

Pilie ran his street system all the way up to the zigzag line, which by this time hosted a drainage ditch, called the St. Bernard Canal.

New Orleans subsequently spread primarily upriver and downriver from the original city. But it also expanded lake-ward, up the Bayou Road, in the form of the Faubourg Tremé, which had been surveyed by Jacques Tanesse in 1810. It additionally spread into the Faubourg New Marigny, whose street grid, because of the bend of the river, met the Tremé grid at a 40-degree angle.

All this encroaching development left open a space in between—that is, between Bayou Road and that old zigzag property line and canal. It pertained to Pierre Gueno, who ran a brickyard on it. After he died, his heirs in 1832 had it subdivided by surveyor Louis Bringier as the Faubourg Gueno.

Bringier, quite rationally, took Tanesse’s Tremé streets from the other side of Bayou Road and extended them straight to the St. Bernard Canal along the zigzag line.

But when the city aimed to expand drainage capacity, it dug a new canal through the middle of Bringier’s street plan. The centrally positioned ditch, named the New St. Bernard Canal (today’s St. Bernard Avenue) would supersede the zigzag canal, which became known as the Old St. Bernard Canal.

It would also form a clear and obvious new neighborhood axis, to which Bringier probably should have responded by abandoning his use of the Tremé grid. For the between-the-canals area, he should have extended the New Marigny grid up to the New St. Bernard Canal.

Had he done so, all of Faubourg Gueno’s streets would then meet neatly at 40-degree angles, as most do today.

Enter at this point an Irish-born Kentucky polymath named Maunsel White. A veteran of the Battle of New Orleans who married into a wealthy French Creole family, White became an influential planter, politician, businessman, civic leader and, in typical New Orleans style, a connoisseur of pepper sauces. He was also an original board member of the University of Louisiana, the precursor to Tulane University.



*Maunsel White, the pepper-sauce-loving polymath whose actions inadvertently created a twisted street grid in the 7th Ward. Courtesy LEH.*

In the 1840s, White purchased 56 lots within the between-the-canals section of Faubourg Gueno, and in 1848 donated them to the university with instructions to sell them in 30 years for “the establishment of a chair of Commerce and Statistics.”

White’s actions appears to have locked in place Bringier’s Tremé-influenced plan and making it difficult to “correct” to the New Marigny system. Reworking all those separate land titles would have been bureaucratically complex, and the 30-year no-sell stipulation put the area in a holding pattern

The result: one twisted checkerboard circumscribed within another, with the rogue streets prefixed “Old” to distinguish them from their compliant counterparts preceded with “North.” Things got even messier when London Avenue, today’s A.P. Tureaud Avenue, was cut through, leaving behind erratic blocks and helter-skelter neutral grounds. Perhaps for this reason, residents call this area “The Cut.”

In time, White’s donation would form what may be the first professorship of business in an American university; and White’s heirs, a year after his death in 1863, would capitalize on their patriarch’s penchant for pepper by launching Maunsel

White’s Concentrated Essence of Tobasco Pepper, derivatives of which are still available today.

(Food historians debate whether White ought to be credited for the Tabasco sauce recipe and trademark, a notion tersely rebuked by the McIlhenny Co.—in no less a place than the “Myths” section of its webpage, first item listed.)

As for the tangled enclave White inadvertently created, both canals have long since been filled, houses have been erected, and the area now comprises the heart of the Seventh Ward.

A visit there today is a trip into the fascinating idiosyncrasies of our urban geography. Inspecting it from above, through aerial photographs and property maps, brings the cryptic past to life even more vividly.

Remember Old St. Bernard? That little back alley, still an official city street today, falls precisely on the 40-arpent line of the circa-1720 Langlois-Provanchez concession. Part of the old zigzag line, Old St. Bernard also once hosted the channel of the eponymous canal that precipitated much of the confusion.

The rest of that archaic zigzag persists today not as streets, but in tellingly angled fence lines and driveways of dozens of Seventh Ward residents, having been unknowingly passed down—from colonial surveyor, to planter, to subdivider, to real estate agent, to homeowner—across nearly 300 years.

It is a true urban artifact, an undiscovered relic from early colonial times, and incredibly, you can even see it in satellite images.

These are some of the tales told by things at odd angles.



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