

Before Tulane, Before Loyola, There Was Leland University

Story of Campus' Displacement is an Early Example of Gentrification

by Richard Campanella *New Orleans Times-Picayune* InsideOut section, May 8, 2015

Audubon/University ranks today among New Orleans' most affluent neighborhoods. But 150 years ago, the area was barely urbanized, only sporadically wealthy, and not in New Orleans. It fell within Jefferson, adjacent to Carrollton, both of which were cities in Jefferson Parish, and its landscape of recently subdivided plantations comprised mostly isolated houses with gardens amid pastures and orchards. Although the St. Charles and Carrollton Rail Road (today's streetcar line) provided mule-drawn rail access to the urban core, most parcels remained undeveloped and fairly cheap.

Downtown, meanwhile, was getting crowded, and residents and institutions alike, including the predecessors of Tulane and Loyola universities, scanned the cityscape for more spacious alternatives.

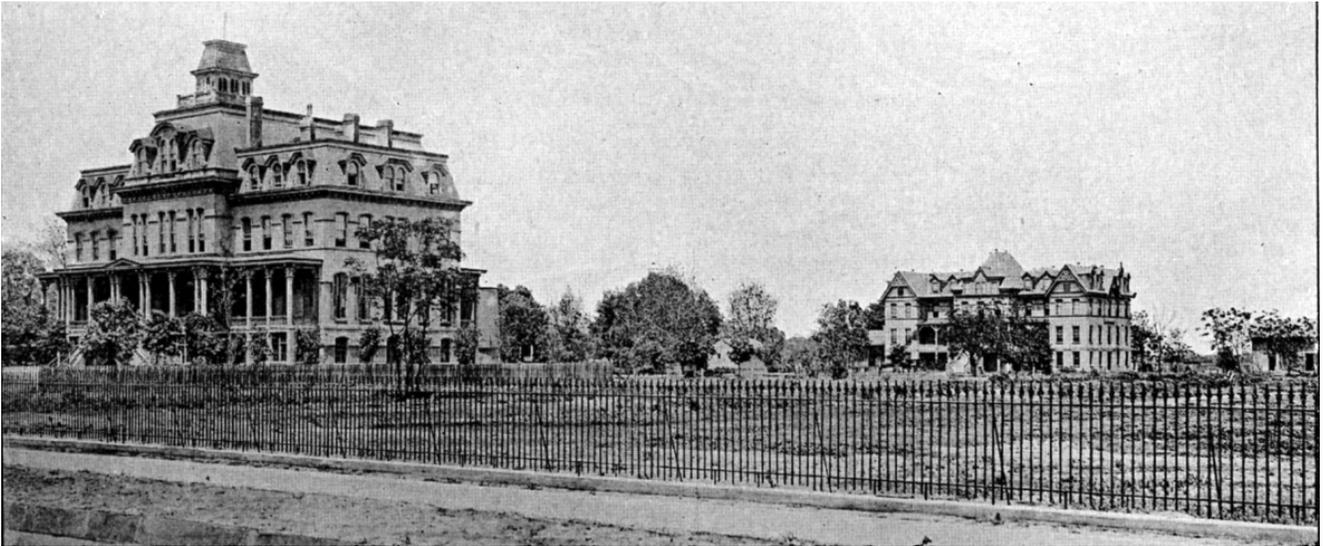
In 1870, the New York-based Baptist Free Mission Society established another institution of higher learning downtown. Named Leland University in honor of Brooklyn-based benefactors Holbrook and Izanina Leland Chamberlain, the co-educational college aimed to serve students, according to its charter, "irrespective of race, color or previous condition of servitude"—that is, enslavement.

In the spirit of Reconstruction, and following in the steps of the Methodists' Straight College (1869, a forerunner of today's Dillard), the Baptists launched Leland University to educate the first generation of emancipated African Americans in curricula that would include Collegiate, Theological, Normal (teaching), Industrial and Mechanics departments.

Realizing their provisional space in the Tulane Avenue Baptist Church would not suffice, Leland administrators spent \$20,000 for 10 acres uptown and, in 1873, moved their campus to bucolic St. Charles Avenue between present-day Newcomb Boulevard and Audubon Street. Known as the Greenville subdivision, this lightly developed area had been annexed into New Orleans only three years earlier, followed by neighboring Carrollton in 1874. Leland thus became the first university in a neighborhood that would become named for them.

Measuring 300 feet along the avenue and 1,400 feet deep, Leland's campus featured an impressive \$90,000 four-story Main Building with a grand gallery topped with a Second Empire roof and tower. The Chamberlain Dormitory, designed by Thomas Sully and built in 1884, sat farther back, separated by a traditional academic quad surrounded by working gardens, landscaping and live oaks. "No more beautiful or healthful location could be found in New Orleans," the *Weekly Pelican* wrote of Leland, "while its retirement from the crowded city renders it particularly suited to study."

By the early 1880s, a hundred students lived the familiar cadence of academic life—lectures, study and exams, semesters, ceremonies and diplomas. The 1885 commencement speaker was famed abolitionist Julia Ward Howe, lyricist of *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*.



Leland University campus in 1899, with St. Charles Avenue in foreground; photo courtesy Louisiana Black History Hall of Fame.

The year 1885 was a memorable one Uptown. The World's Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition had drawn international attention to Upper City Park, just steps from Leland's campus, and moneyed families living downriver came to appreciate the area's residential appeal. In subsequent years, land values rose as streetcar access improved, and comfortable townhouses were built on parcel after parcel.

Institutions followed: the Jesuits of Loyola University and the administrators of Tulane University acquired adjacent parcels in 1889-1891, across from the newly renamed Audubon Park (1886), and proceeded to build the present-day campuses starting in 1894. That same year, a private street named Audubon Place was laid out between Tulane and Leland, and, as one of the city's first gated communities, promptly became the city's most exclusive address. Lands that had started the 1800s as colonial-era slave plantations were ending the century as a quintessential American streetcar suburb, leafy, wealthy and white.

With Tulane newly arrived at one address and Leland at the other, the 6600 to 7000 blocks of St. Charles Avenue formed something of a microcosm of these dramatic social and urban changes. Relations between white male Tulanians and black co-ed Lelanders reflected timeless collegiate hijinks as well as the racial attitudes of the times. One incident in 1895 serves to illustrate.

The city had just installed wooden passenger landings along the recently electrified St. Charles streetcar line. Tulane students gained permission to paint their landing green for their school's color, while Lelanders painted theirs light blue—which also happened to be the color claimed by Tulane's sophomore class of 1897.

One night, a group of Tulane sophomores gathered in Audubon Park and, according to the *Picayune*, armed themselves with "pots of coal tar and paint brushes" and proceeded to paint over the blue Leland platform "shiny black" along with "a skull and cross bones [and] an immense '97."

Chagrined, Tulane President William Preston Johnston, a former Confederate soldier and son of famed Gen. Albert Sidney Johnston, condemned the ungentlemanly behavior and pressed the culprits to apologize under penalty of suspension. Defiantly, the entire sophomore class endorsed the tar-painting—and got themselves

suspended en masse. Half would eventually apologize, but the rest refused because the Leland student newspaper had dared label them “vandals and hoodlums.” The incident became part of Tulane lore for decades to come, but Lelanders remembered it in a less amusing light. Tulane’s school colors today include green and blue.



Leland's Main Building, erected in the mid-1870s, housed administrative offices, a chapel, auditoriums, classrooms, and labs; photo courtesy Louisiana Black History Hall of Fame

Rivalries and tensions aside, both universities flourished, as did the neighborhood. Leland enrollment surpassed 1,000 by 1904, and Tulane had more than 2,000 students by 1908. Audubon Park was undergoing tasteful landscaping by the famed Olmsted Firm, and surrounding residential areas ranked among the most desirable in town.

The rising real estate values put pressure on the old social service institutions, which had settled here back when land was cheap, and some decided to sell. The Touro-Shakespeare Alms House on Daneel Street, for example, would relocate to rural Algiers to make room for big new homes, while the Asylum for Destitute Orphan Boys at Valence Street moved to an upriver farm—“another evidence of the gradual tendency to remove such institutions from St. Charles Avenue,” the *Picayune* explained, “where at present they are occupying tracts very valuable indeed as residential sites.” In today’s parlance, Uptown was gentrifying, and Leland found itself sitting on some of the most valuable acreage in town.

Then came the Great Storm of 1915.

First of the modern hurricanes in terms of urban surge flooding, the September gale seemed to save its most tempestuous wrath for landmark buildings. Eleven church steeples toppled citywide, and both Horticultural Hall in Audubon Park and the old St. Louis Hotel in the French Quarter were so wrecked they were subsequently demolished.

Leland's two buildings suffered severe damage as well, enough to necessitate the cancellation of the fall semester, though not so much that could not be repaired. Nonetheless, within two weeks of the hurricane, Leland's New York-based trustees responded in a draconian manner. They decided to sell the campus and move the school out of town.

Most people blamed the storm for Leland's demise, but the trustees had been mulling the move for a while, and the disaster merely occasioned it. That Tulane University had recently purchased land directly behind Leland for its Sophie Newcomb women's college, and had originally eyed Leland's campus for that purpose, gave Leland's trustees all the more cause to sell while the market was hot. "Real estate men regard it as one of the choicest building locations in New Orleans," reported the *Item*, "and it will no doubt sell at fancy prices."

Local black Baptists, many of them Leland alumni, stridently advocated to keep Leland in New Orleans and would continue to do so into the 1930s, although it is unclear whether they explicitly opposed the sale of the St. Charles campus. Trustees instead purchased 212 acres near Alexandria for the new campus, but decided to sell it too because, according to a Leland historical monograph, "whites thought that there would be a conflict between their children and the Black students of Leland."

In 1922, the trustees settled for 160 acres on the former Groom Plantation in Baker, north of Baton Rouge, and reopened Leland College on Groom Road the next year. The new campus was spacious and its buildings attractive, but the student body had shrunk to about 300 students, with competing Southern University only a few miles away and its traditional pool of prospective students nearly 100 miles away. After the American Baptist Home Mission Society discontinued most of its support in the late 1930s, Leland struggled constantly for funding.



Leland College's Baker campus around 1940; photo courtesy Louisiana Black History Hall of Fame

The old campus on St. Charles Avenue, meanwhile, had been purchased in 1916 by industrialist Robert Werk for \$175,000, nearly nine times its original cost. *The Item* called it "the largest single adjudication [in New Orleans, and] probably the largest single tract of its nature ever sold for so much money at the auction exchange," and predicted Werk would "clean up \$100,000 at least..." The development would form the upriver side of Newcomb Boulevard, from St. Charles to Freret Street, and opulent homes were erected afterwards. The 16 properties there today have a combined assessed value of well over \$15 million.

Leland traced a different destiny. After struggling financially for decades, the college finally closed in 1960. Its former campus in Baker is now a gassy lot in a low-density suburban fringe, not unlike what its original St. Charles Avenue environs looked like nearly 150 years ago.

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Figure 1 Former Leland campus is now the upriver half of Newcomb Boulevard; photo by Richard Campanella

Richard Campanella, a geographer with the Tulane University School of Architecture and a Monroe Fellow with the New Orleans Center for the Gulf South, is the author of "Bienville's Dilemma: A Historical Geography of New Orleans," "Bourbon Street: A History," "Lincoln in New Orleans," and "Geographies of New Orleans." Campanella may be reached through richcampanella.com, rcampane@tulane.edu or @nolacampanella on Twitter.