

City Has History of Rebirth from Ashes

Canal Street Blaze a Loss—and Now an Opportunity

by Richard Campanella; published on the front page of the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, Sunday January 31, 2016

New Orleanians awoke Wednesday morning (Jan. 27) to broadcast scenes of an enormous blaze consuming two large row buildings at 1012-1018 Canal St. The loss of these historical buildings is a serious setback for this block, and their charred ruins will not be a flattering backdrop to the upcoming Carnival revelry.

But students of urbanism should take heart that New Orleans has a long history of responding to fiery disasters with sound policies and shrewd revitalization. A number of examples come to mind.

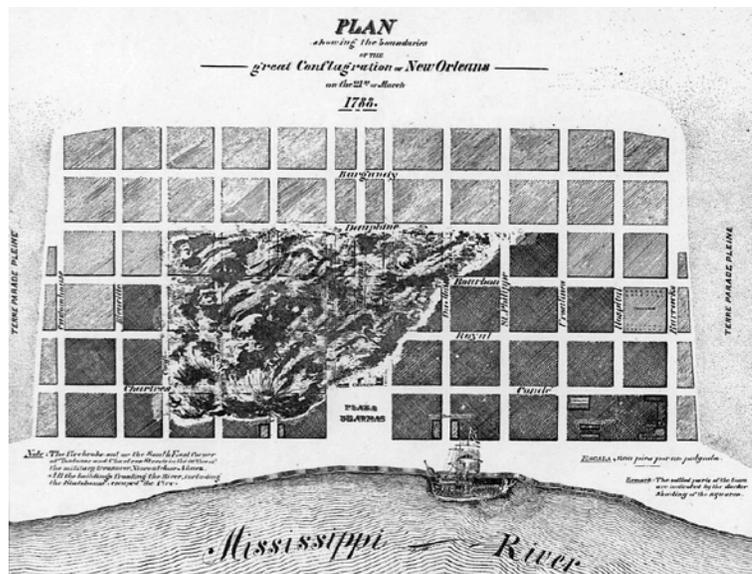
The first came on Good Friday in March of 1788, when a votive ignited a curtain and torched the house on the corner of Chartres and Toulouse streets. Dry winds swept the flames into adjacent structures, and by late afternoon, according to the records of the Spanish Cabildo (city council), “4/5 of the populated section of this City was reduced to ashes.” The losses included 856 “fine and commodious” houses, mostly of the West Indian-influenced Creole style dating to French colonial times, with cross-timbered walls and double-pitched roofs.

It was a terrible blow to the tenuous colony. But thanks to political leadership and the generosity of private benefactor Don Andres Almonaster y Roxas, the city averted the shrinkage and divestment that sometimes follow urban traumas.

In fact, the city’s footprint expanded—exactly the opposite of the 2005 suggestion to shrink the urban footprint in the wake of the Katrina deluge.

After the fire, a new subdivision was laid out in the adjacent Gravier plantation as the Suburbio Santa Maria, later known as Faubourg Ste. Marie or St. Mary (the American Sector) and now the Central Business District. A construction boom ensued citywide.

Changes in Spanish policy in response to the 1788 disaster focused on fire suppression rather than prevention, as authorities requested “four pumps...60 leather buckets...two hooks with a chain...rope...and six hooks with long wooden handles.”



Area burned in the Good Friday Fire of 1788; courtesy Library of Congress

All this changed six years later, when on Dec. 8, 1794, boys playing in a courtyard lost control of a fire, which ignited adjacent wooden houses. Three hours later, the conflagration had consumed 212 structures, most of them just a few years old.

This time, the Spanish dons responded with new building codes designed not only to suppress fires but also to prevent them.

According to Cabildo records, the new rules required new houses to be “built of bricks and a flat roof or tile roof,” and “two story houses...should all be constructed of brick or lumber filled with brick between the upright posts, the posts to be covered with cement, (plus) a flat roof of tile or brick.”

Extant houses had to be strengthened “to stand a roof of fire-proof materials,” and their wooden beams covered with stucco. “[All] citizens must comply with these rules whenever they wish to construct a new building,” declared the Cabildo.

It is difficult to evaluate the efficacy of the 1794 architecture codes, given the city’s rapid growth after the Louisiana Purchase (1803). But the changes gave New Orleans a more solid brick urban countenance, in the stout tradition of Spanish colonial cities—more along the lines of a Havana or Cartagena than the semi-rural village that was French colonial New Orleans.

And while there would be many structural fires in the decades to come, some of them major, there were no further large-scale neighborhood conflagrations until the late 1800s.

On the night of Feb. 16, 1892, amid what the *Daily Picayune* described as “a ceaseless procession (of) merry, happy” people patronizing “saloons (and) restaurants,” a fire started in a store on Canal at Bourbon. Flames “crossed [Bourbon] street in a bound” and enveloped half the block. Crowds fled; steam pumps arrived, and plumes of water arched into the sky. By morning, both sides of 100 Bourbon St. were reduced to smoldering embers. Damages exceeded \$2 million, and 13 businesses were destroyed. Coincidentally, this same block had burned two years earlier, on Mardi Gras night 1890, but this time was much worse.



This scene captures the gaping hole in the 100 block of Bourbon Street caused by the 1892 fire; courtesy Richard Campanella.

One person’s disaster, the adage goes, is another person’s opportunity. Owners of the burned lots on the lake side of the street found an eager buyer in the famed Canal Street department store D. H. Holmes, which purchased the now-open parcels at the corner of Customhouse Street (now Iberville) and expanded its enterprise onto Bourbon. “Holmes’s” would have an illustrious history on both sides of this block for the better part of a century to come, enabled by the 1892 fire.

Owners of the river side of the Bourbon ruins, meanwhile, had an equally eager neighbor: the fancy new Cosmopolitan Hotel on Royal, whose owners envisioned a valuable second entrance on Bourbon. They purchased the parcel of a burned-out piano store, cleared the wreckage and commissioned architect Thomas Sully to design an annex. Sully's design would rise seven stories high and boast an imposing granite façade. As the tallest structure in the vicinity, the enlarged Cosmopolitan Hotel would attract a steady flow of moneyed visitors, who in turn would accelerate the formation of a nocturnal entertainment district in the upper French Quarter. New restaurants and bars opened nearby, among them what is now Galatoire's (1905).

The Cosmopolitan's success ushered in a new era of handsome high-rise hotels appealing to affluent leisure travelers, including the Grunewald (1893) on Baronne Street (now the Roosevelt), the Denechaud on Perdido Street in 1907 (now Le Pavillon) and, five years later, the Monteleone, towering 12 stories above 200 Royal St. and family-owned to this day.

By 1920, twenty additional hotels were operating in downtown New Orleans, while the older business hotels, such as the venerable St. Charles Hotel, adapted themselves to the new leisure market.

All the competition would cost the Cosmopolitan its marketplace advantage, and it would eventually fold. But we may credit it today with catalyzing the rise of luxury lodging and the modern tourism industry.



Cosmopolitan Hotel annex, the 7-story building facing Bourbon Street at left, arose after 1892 fire; courtesy Library of Congress

Three years later, at 12:45 a.m. in the windy darkness of Sunday, Oct. 21, 1895, a fire of unknown origins started in a crowded Morgan Street tenement in Algiers. Northeasterly winds fanned the flames beyond the control of local firefighters, who found themselves with insufficient hoses and pumping capacity. Others would lay blame on Algiers' low prioritization from City Hall: the neighborhood had been annexed into the city in 1870, but enjoyed few of the modern resources of the urban core across the river.

By dawn, ten blocks of Algiers were charred utterly, leaving only what one observer described as "a forest of chimneys." At least 193 houses were destroyed, and dozens more damaged; 1,200 people were homeless. Losses were estimated at \$400,000, or \$11.4 million in today's dollars, and there was no government disaster relief to help those without fire insurance.

What did exist, however, was a generous civil society. New Orleanians formed a Relief Committee that Sunday afternoon and secured food and shelter for the homeless. 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 other aid, to get victims back on their feet.

As for the cityscape, recovery was amazingly speedily. The fire had occurred during the height of the Progressive Era, when cities put a premium on new infrastructure and municipal

improvements. New Orleans was no exception, and Algiers benefitted especially. Its streets were paved; houses were electrified; a waterworks plant was built to resolve pressure problems; a viaduct was installed to decongest riverfront activity; and a new Moorish-style courthouse opened and serves to this day. New Victorian houses with exuberant gingerbread were erected in such numbers that, by late 1896, one proud resident reported that “a walk along those attractive streets make 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 chose a good time.

There are more recent examples of deadly fires prompting judicious changes. The 1972 Rault Center fire at 1111 Gravier St. killed six people, some falling to their deaths on live television. But along with a rash of similar high-rise fires across the nation, the Rault Center tragedy led to the establishment of what is now the U.S. Fire Administration and the writing of architectural codes for sprinkler systems and other prevention/suppression measures. Uncounted numbers of lives have been saved by these regulations. (Reports indicate the burned buildings on Canal Street had no sprinklers on the unoccupied upper floors.)

One year later, on a summer night in 1973 at the corner of Iberville and Chartres streets, a terrible local record was set. A jilted customer set a fire in the stairwell of the gay-oriented Upstairs Lounge. Thirty-two patrons were trapped on the second floor and perished amid smoke and flames, ranking as the deadliest fire in New Orleans’ history.

While the tragedy brought forth no specific changes in regulations or the cityscape—if anything, some officials and the media tended to be flip about the magnitude of the calamity, due to the sexual orientation of the victims—the Upstairs Lounge Fire did serve as a reminder of the perils of crowds in spaces not up to fire code.

There are plenty of exceptions to the pattern of infernos igniting improvements, and we should not be so naive as to believe that disasters “[wipe the slate clean](#)” and allow us to finally get things right. The burning of the Old French Opera House in December 1919, for example, formed an irreparable blow to the francophone Creole population of the French Quarter and hastened its decline and dispersal; worse, the venue’s site on the corner of Bourbon at Toulouse remained a weedy lot until 1965.

Indeed, on any given street in impoverished areas today, one can find all too many charred ruins and blighted houses waiting to catch fire, all of which only exacerbate neighborhood decline. Clearly key factors must be at play for revival to rise from ruins, such as the presence of investment money, proximity to vibrant areas, good architectural bones, civic support, and most importantly, a visionary with wherewithal and a good idea.

These factors appear to be in place in and around 1000 Canal St., and I would not be surprised if the recent loss may soon follow the pattern of 1794, 1892 and 1895 and pave the way to better urbanism.

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