"Fort-Prints" at the Edge of the French Quarter Are Relics of New Orleans' Fortified Past

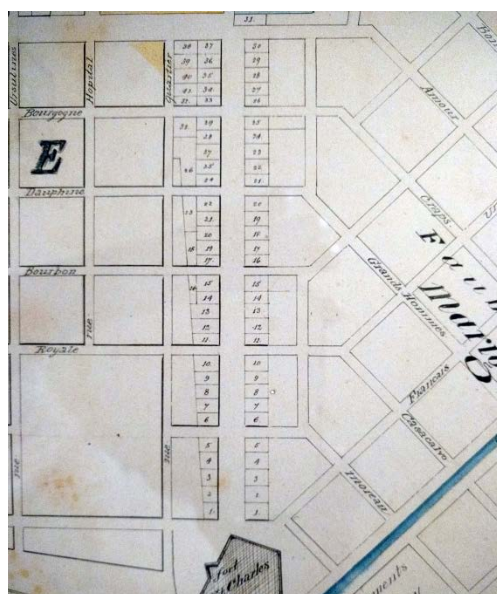
by Richard Campanella, published in the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, May 12, 2017

The past leaves behind expressions in the present-day cityscape. Many are ubiquitous, like our vast inventory of historical buildings. Some are intentional and at times contentious, as the Confederate monuments and the ongoing removal effort attest. Other expressions are subtle and seemingly mundane: needlessly jogged streets; oddly angled houses; apparently random clusters of businesses. Only upon understanding their backstory do these relict cityscapes become rational and elucidating.

Those jogged streets, for example, probably came from a misalignment of two adjacent faubourgs platted and surveyed at different times. (They're all over Uptown.) Those angled houses—along Bayou Road, for example—were built on parcels aligned with old French long-lot plantations, which were later superimposed by a rectilinear urban grid. Those business clusters—think Magazine Street—aggregated around a public market to take advantage of foot traffic, and while the market has long since disappeared, the cluster remains.

So too a handful of trapezium-shaped parcels along the edges of the French Quarter. I call them "fort-prints," and their story goes back three centuries.

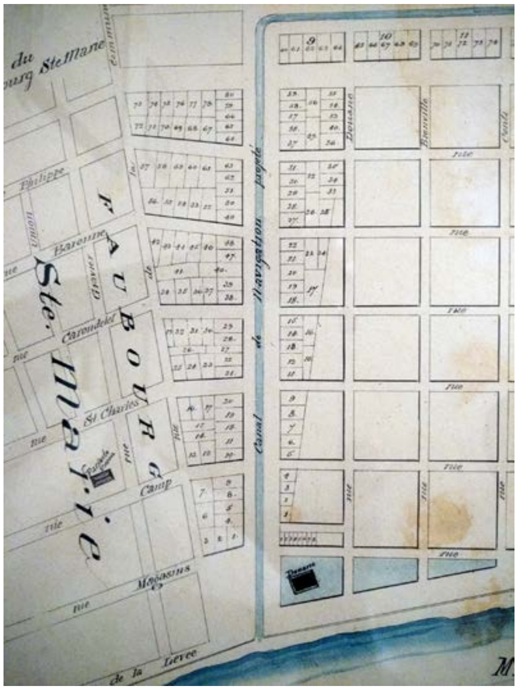
When assistant engineer Adrien de Pauger and his boss Le Blond de la Tour created the French Quarter in the early 1720s, they had two design principles in mind. One was for an orderly grid of squares and straight streets, an urban planning concept traceable to ancient Greece which later became a template for colonial settlements. The second principle recognized that these outposts were vulnerable to attack and had to be walled and defended.

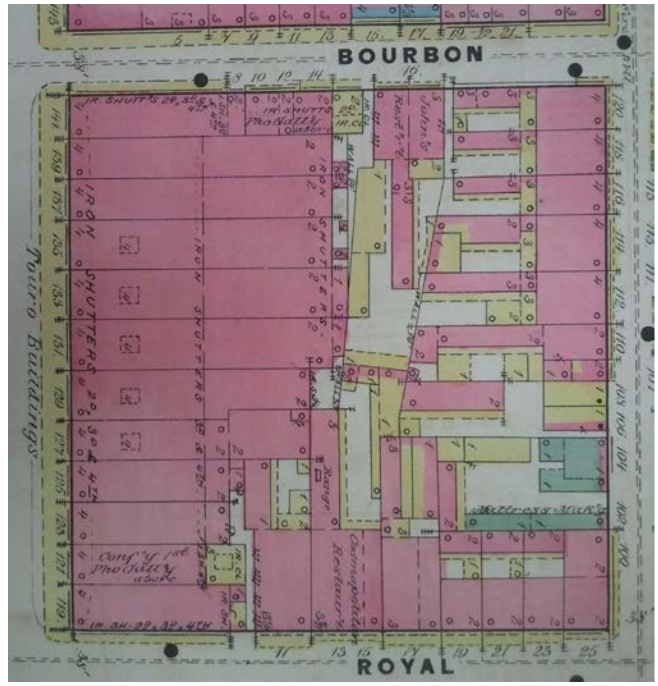


Detail from 1812 map shows how the old angled fortification line got incorporated into new urban lots. Courtesy Library of Congress

French engineers fortified their cities in accordance with the guidelines of Sébastien Vauban, the Crown's chief military engineer. Vauban's "*New Method of Fortification"* (1693) instructed "How to make the Draught of a Square" and "the Streets in a Fortress," and told "of the principal Angles of a Fortress." Vauban also advised on "the Advantages and Disadvantages of a Place situated on the side of great River." Suffice to say the early engineers of New Orleans had much to learn from Sébastien Vauban.

When Pauger adapted de la Tour's plan, originally intended for Biloxi, to the environs of New Orleans, he sketched a grid of 6-by-11 squares among straight streets and surrounded them with angled fortifications (walls or ramparts) connecting five forts (bastions). The straight streets gave authorities visual





control over the city and allowed troops to be mustered and dispatched efficiently. The angled fortifications increased the length of the weaponized perimeter and exposed attackers to maximum firepower regardless of their approach direction.

Those fortifications sliced diagonally across what are now the 100 blocks and 1300 blocks of the French Quarter, between Canal and Iberville streets and between Barracks Street and aptly named Esplanade Avenue. In the rear of the city, along eponymous Rampart Street, the wall had the shape of a delta wing.

Maps from the French colonial era depicted these fortifications as intimidatingly impenetrable. But this was cartographic deception, aimed to scare off scheming enemies—or, more likely, to impress distant bosses who had been sending funds for defenses. In fact, hardly anything was built until the 1729 Natchez Indian uprising, after which authorities erected a palisade and dug a shallow moat. When emplacements were finally installed 30 years later, for fear of a British attack during the French and Indian War, the Crown came to realize its earlier funding had been misspent, and a Louisiana corruption scandal ensued in Paris.

After France lost the war, the Louisiana colony transferred to Spain, and Spanish authorities erected the five bastions among the ramparts surrounding New Orleans. Forts Borgoña (Burgundy), San Fernando, and San Juan, which guarded the rear of the city, comprised earthen berms fortified with pickets and timber palisades and mounted with guns, fronted by a 30-foot-wide moat with four-foot-deep water. Each bastion was manned by up to a hundred troops, who resided in barracks inside and moved about on banquettes (wooden walkways) open to the sky. Forts San Louis and San Carlos, at the upper and lower river corners of the city, were similar except that their walkways were covered, making them look something like frontier stockades.

As it turned out, New Orleans did find itself under relentless attack in this era—not from troops but from floods, hurricanes and conflagrations. So thoroughly did the Good Friday Fire of 1788 char the city, the Spanish decided to start afresh by laying out a new subdivision upriver. It was designed by Spanish Surveyor Gen. Don Carlos Laveau Trudeau and named the Suburbio Santa Maria (Faubourg Ste. Marie), today’s Central Business District. In sketching his plat, Trudeau had to leave open a commons for potential artillery fire between the upper fortification and present-day Common Street (thus the name), despite that the new subdivision sat on the wrong end of the shooting. The same situation happened downriver in 1805, when the Faubourg Marigny was surveyed outside the lower wall, and in 1810, when the Faubourg Tremé was created behind the rear fort line.

It was becoming clear that 19th-century New Orleans had outgrown its 18th-century defenses. It simply didn’t make sense to have urbanization on both sides of a fort line.

By this time, Louisiana had transferred to American dominion, and the commons became federal property. New Orleans needed that land more than the feds, so in 1807 an Act of Congress transferred the commons to city ownership. The Americans retained Fort San Carlos, which they called St. Charles, but demolished all other defensive spaces and subdivided them to become the Canal, Esplanade and Rampart corridors. For a while, the interstitial space on the Canal Street side was used as a rope walk, an elongated area for twine-making.

Urbanization eagerly proceeded all around the former fortifications. Because older properties on the interior side had already incorporated the forts’ slanted geometry into their shapes, surveyors of the new exterior parcels had little choice but to do the same for the lots they laid out. Over the years, many of the odd-shaped lots were fused with adjacent parcels, and the old angled fort line disappeared. In other cases, the off-plumb spaces were turned into a narrow alley so that the rest of the parcel would have 90-degree corners. Over time, these alleys too got subsumed.

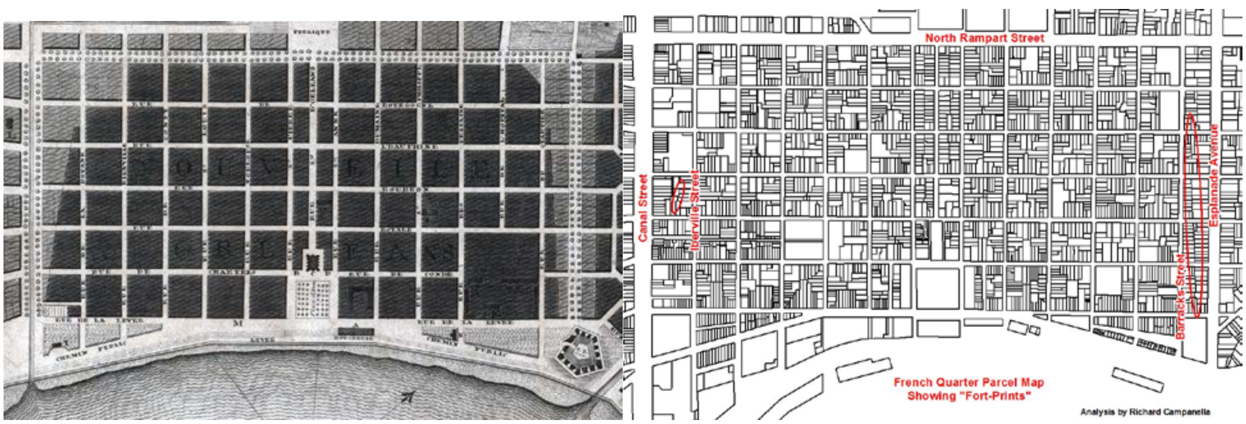
But in a handful of remarkable cases, property owners simply retained the irregular shapes, and architects designed buildings and walls accordingly, freezing fragments of the circa-1700s defenses into the cityscapes of the 1800s, 1900s and 2000s. Thus, “fort-prints.”

The best-preserved fort-prints may be found in the 500, 600 and 700 blocks between Barracks and Esplanade. These lines, mostly marked by courtyard walls and largely hidden from public view, align perfectly with the right-of-way of the colonial defenses. A slightly tapered driveway on the 1300 block of Royal and the off-plumb house at 1308 Dauphine are the best place to see a fort-print from the street.

Additionally, there are some likely fort-prints in the 1300 block of Burgundy as well as in the 100 blocks between Chartres and Bourbon, including the rear of the Acme Oyster House Building and the adjacent parking containing Dickie Brennan's Steakhouse at 716 Iberville. (To be clear, all these buildings postdate the fortifications by decades or centuries, and no structural artifacts of the defenses survive. It's their shape that is preserved.)

New Orleans' fortifications never saw enemy fire, but one component did manage to affect military history. In late 1814, as Major Gen. Andrew Jackson arrived to save New Orleans from the advancing British, he found Fort St. Charles in abysmal condition and the rest of the city all but unprotected. For this reason, he shifted his strategy downriver, by building earthworks and stationing troops throughout today's Bywater, Lower Ninth Ward, St. Bernard Parish and the West Bank. When the long-expected battle finally erupted, it did so on the plains of Chalmette, over four miles downriver from city's never-quite-adequate original defenses.

Demolished in 1821, Fort St. Charles left no fort-print, nor did the other four other bastions. However, it's worth noting that three of them occupied spaces that remain in the public domain to this day. Fort San Louis' site is now the U.S. Customs House plus adjacent streets; Fort St. Charles is now occupied by the Old U.S. Mint and the Esplanade/North Peters intersection, and Fort San Fernando became Congo Square.



At left: Tanesse Map of New Orleans, 1815, showing parceling of commons and Fort St. Charles; at right, modern parcel map of the French Quarter, showing fort-prints in red. *Analysis by Richard Campanella.*

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