When Lafayette City Became New Orleans

*1852 annexation brought today's Irish Channel,
Garden District and Central City into Orleans Parish*

Richard Campanella, published in NOLA.com | *The Times-Picayune*, InsideOut section, June 9, 2017

The Garden District ranks as a nationally famous New Orleans neighborhood, and the adjacent Irish Channel and Central City are equally vital to the city today. Yet all three were late arrivals to New Orleans. For 19 years, they were a separate city called Lafayette in a parish named Jefferson. Their annexation was a product of pragmatism as well as politics, and there were winners and losers on both sides.

Like most river-flanking lands in lower Louisiana, this area had been cleared of vegetation starting in the 1720s for mixed-crop farms or enslaved plantations of rice, indigo and, after 1795, sugar cane. Urbanization pressure mounted after the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, as land owners foresaw dramatic growth in the newly Americanized city. The population of New Orleans doubled by 1810 and tripled by 1830, to almost 50,000 full-time residents plus many transients.

Detail of 1845 Norman's Plan of New Orleans and Environs, showing Lafayette. Courtesy Library of Congress

To make room for the boom, owners of outlying plantations hired surveyors, laid out street grids and sold off lots. The faubourgs Marigny, Tremé and parts of present-day Bywater were subdivided by 1810, as had been the Faubourg Ste. Marie (today's Central Business District) in 1788 and the present-day Lower Garden District up to Felicity Street by 1810. From Felicity Street to present-day St. Andrew Street remained an uncultivated parcel belonging to the Ursuline nuns. It abutted the Panis family's plantation, up to Phillip Street, which adjoined the Livaudais tract up to Harmony Street. Each proprietor independently subdivided their land in 1810, 1813-1824 and 1832 respectively, becoming three faubourgs, named des Religieuses (or Nuns), Lafayette and Livaudais.
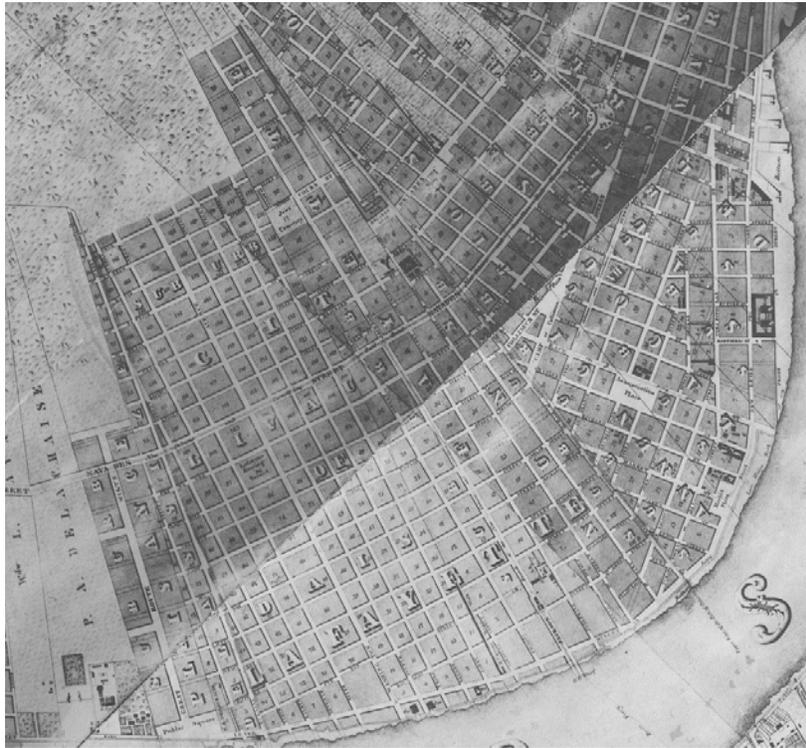
This same plantation-to-faubourg transformation would occur all around New Orleans for decades to come. But there was a distinction here: as of an 1825 state act, terrain upriver from Felicity Street previously part of Orleans Parish was made into a new parish named Jefferson.

The change broached the question of governance. To keep control in their own hands, residents of the three faubourgs petitioned the state to grant them a charter. On April 1, 1833, the City of Lafayette came into existence.

Because Lafayette commenced as planned subdivisions rather than as spontaneous settlement, it did not have a nucleated town center, much less a main plaza. Rather, Tchoupitoulas Street, facing the busy

riverfront, emerged as Lafayette's principal artery, and its intersection with Jackson Avenue formed something of a "downtown."

Lafayette's economy rested largely on shipping, particularly the flatboat wharf, where varied cargo from the "upcountry" sustained local industries such slaughterhouses, rendering plants and tanneries—operations that needed to be near the urban core but not in it, for which Lafayette was ideally suited. Living in Lafayette also gave access to employment at outlying infrastructure projects, including canal excavation, street-clearing and track-laying for the New Orleans and Carrollton Railroad (streetcar line) on Nayades Street (today's St. Charles Avenue).

With its abundance of low-skill jobs and cheap housing, working-class families, particularly Irish and German immigrants, gravitated to Lafayette. They favored the city's river-fronting First Ward, as well as the cheaper rear wards near the backswamp. There, the

Detail of 1834 Topographical Map of New Orleans, by Charles Zimpel, showing Lafayette, with New Orleans at upper right. Courtesy Library of Congress.

Gormley Canal, which had a quay on Dryades Street (now O.C. Haley Boulevard) and a channel along St. Andrew Street, formed yet another source of employment in Lafayette: brick-making from swamp clay.

In between Lafayette's front and rear precincts lay a swath of prime real estate—convenient to the streetcar line, far enough from the riverfront to evade its hubbub, and equally distant from (and higher than) the flood-prone backswamp. It was here, between Magazine and Nayades (St. Charles) that affluent Anglo-Americans began erecting large townhouses on spacious lots ideal for ornamental horticulture. People nicknamed the area "the garden district," and the name stuck.

One 1850s usage in the *Daily Picayune* sheds light on tensions between livestock drivers coming from Lafayette's riverfront and the gentry living inland: "Not only are cattle, goats and hogs allowed to roam at large…in the Garden District," huffed one informant, "but pickets (fences) are deliberately torn down by their (herders) and the remonstrances…are met with defiance and abuse."

While Lafayette suffered the same health and environmental risks as New Orleans proper, the little city also had much to boast about: an ahead-of-its-time public school system; police and fire protection; and public markets on Jackson, Magazine and Ninth streets, not to mention numerous businesses and newspapers. In addition to the streetcar line and its spur on Jackson Avenue, four mule-drawn omnibus lines provided transportation on planked roads, and vessels plied its riverfront. Congregations of the

Catholic, Presbyterian, Methodist, Episcopal and Jewish faiths had their own houses of worship, and for the deceased, there were centralized cemeteries in both the front and back of town.

Governance initially came in the form of a parish-style police jury with a board and a president, but by the 1840s, Lafayette had switched to a city-style council and mayor. Around the same time, Lafayette had expanded its boundaries to incorporate the Faubourg Delassize, up to Toledano Street.

Lafayette was a city of transplants. Research by historian John Leslie Kolp found that in 1850, its total population of 14,190 comprised 39 percent German-born or their children; 20 percent American-born outside Louisiana, either black or white; 19 percent Irish-born; 9 percent French-born, only 6 percent Creole (meaning Louisiana-born, usually francophone and either white or black) and the remainder born elsewhere. Thirteen percent of Lafayette's population was African American, lower than in most New Orleans wards, in part because German and Irish immigrants, for various reasons, tended to distance themselves from slavery. Yet, paradoxically, Lafayette also had a particularly high ratio (3 to 1) of enslaved people to free people of color, reflecting the fact that most *gens de couleur libre* were Creoles of color who lived downtown (where, incidentally, free people of color outnumbered the enslaved, 3 to 1).

What laid the groundwork for Lafayette's annexation were ethnic and political tensions in New Orleans proper. Since the Louisiana Purchase, French-speaking Creole and English-speaking American populations had vied for power; politically, the Creoles were generally Democrats while Americans were more likely to be Whigs. As relations grew contemptuous, the state legislature in 1836 adopted a draconian solution: divide New Orleans into three semi-autonomous sub-cities, such that Creoles would govern "their" First and Third municipalities, while the Americans would rule "their" Second Municipality. Inefficient, eccentric and unique in the nation, New Orleans' tripartite system gave little incentive to citizens of Lafayette to join their neighbor's mess. Indeed, Lafayette voters rejected an annexation proposition in 1847, fearing loss of autonomy and a possible gain of unwanted debt.

But there were compelling arguments in favor of annexation. New Orleans had prestige; it was a world port and a beacon of cultural sophistication, and outlying towns like Lafayette basked in its glow. New Orleans also had ample resources, investment potential and political clout, while the two cities' aligned infrastructure made their jurisdictional separation pointless. By 1851, most Lafayette residents supported annexation.

What Lafayette also had, from the perspective of the adjacent Second Municipality, was plenty of likely Whig votes, not to mention German and Irish immigrants, who were eagerly cajoled by American interests. The Democrats did the same among unaffiliated immigrants in the downtown municipalities, while some Creole leaders opposed reconsolidation and annexation, suspecting that Lafayette's Whiggish Anglo-Americans would shift power uptown. As if to validate that suspicion, some Whigs suggested making Lafayette a duty-free port, thus threatening to capture their neighbors' lucrative shipping industry.

The Creoles relented, and on February 23, 1852, the state legislature reconsolidated the three municipalities into a single City of New Orleans. A separate act on the same day annexed Lafayette into New Orleans as its Fourth Municipal District and Tenth Ward. Both remain as such today.

Winners in the 1852 annexation included the Whigs, the City of New Orleans and especially its American cohort, as well as Lafayette residents who supported the move (the majority). Among the losers were

Democratic political interests and the downtown Creole population, whose power indeed waned after 1852.

Jefferson Parish would also lose its most valuable real estate, as well as its parish seat. Yet a curious clause in the 1852 law made this uncertain, stating that "nothing contained in this act shall be construed as changing the lines dividing the parishes of Jefferson and Orleans; and all that portion of the city of New Orleans added to (Lafayette) shall continue to form part of the parish of Jefferson." The odd wording implied that New Orleans had been annexed into Lafayette, rather than vice versa, and would thereafter pertain to Jefferson Parish. The clause appears to have been a place-holder until parish lines could officially be updated in the state's constitution later in 1852.

Vestiges of old Lafayette endure in the street grid, which is nearly unchanged over two centuries, and in scores of surviving pre-1852 buildings, including the shell of Lafayette's Egyptian Revival courthouse at 2219 Rousseau St. Witness also the two cemeteries still named "Lafayette," the many old German and Irish churches and institutions, the enigmatic term "Irish Channel," and the persisting geographies of class, with poorer areas in the front and rear and affluence in between.

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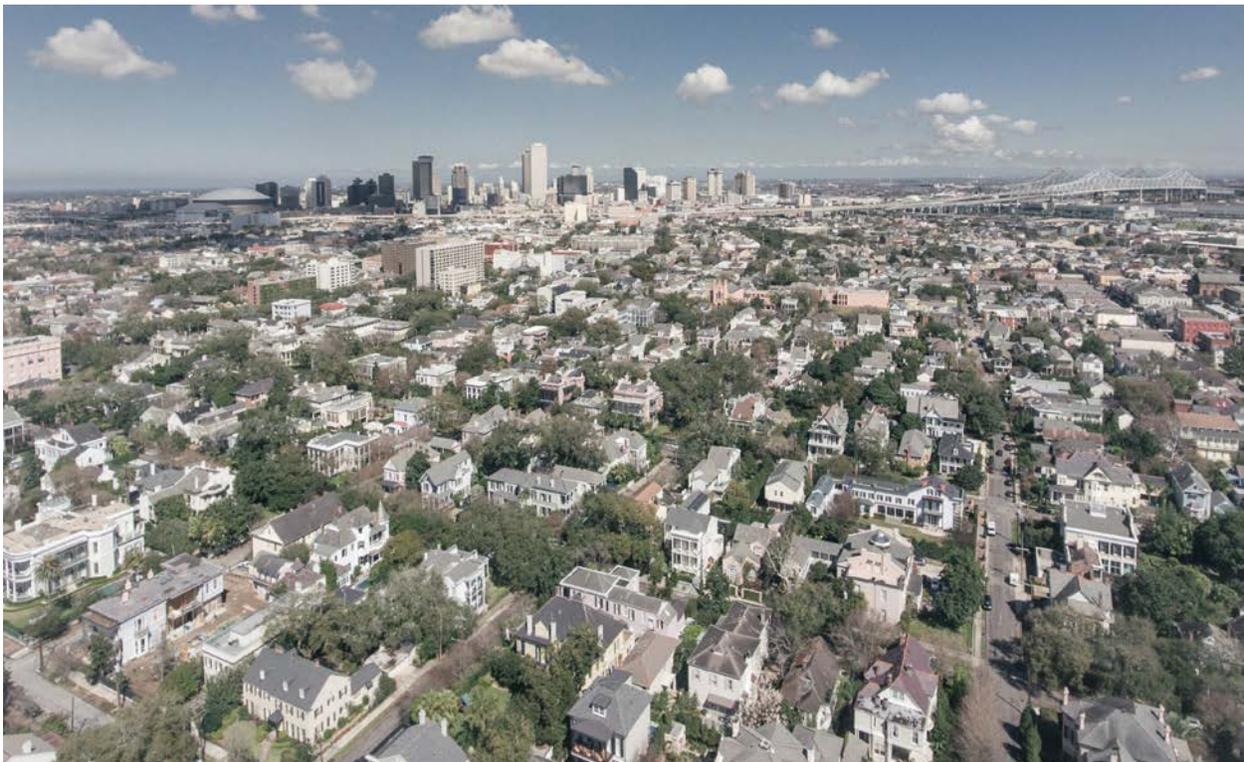
Except for the background, most of the area visible here, centered around the Garden District, pertained to the City of Lafayette in Jefferson Parish from 1833 to 1852. Drone photo by Lorenzo Serafini Boni.