

When Carrollton Became New Orleans

Richard Campanella, published in the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* InsideOut section, September 8, 2017

In previous months' *Cityscapes*, we examined how New Orleans annexed Lafayette City (1852) and Jefferson City (1870), as well as the unincorporated Orleans Parish community of Algiers (1870). Here we investigate the circumstances behind New Orleans' 1874 takeover of Carrollton, a move that gave both Orleans and Jefferson parishes their modern shapes.

Today we think of all these neighborhoods—the Irish Channel, Garden District, Central City, Uptown, Algiers and Carrollton—as part of the urban fabric and culture of New Orleans. In fact, their annexations were antagonistic to varying degrees, Lafayette's the least and Jefferson's the most. Carrollton's fell in between.

Like most riverfront neighborhoods, Carrollton is traceable to an eighteenth-century French long-lot plantation which urbanized in the nineteenth century. But the area had two distinguishing characteristics.



Drone photo of former Jefferson City at lower right and Carrollton City at center, which were annexed into New Orleans in 1870 and 1874, respectively. Photo by Lorenzo Serafini Boni.

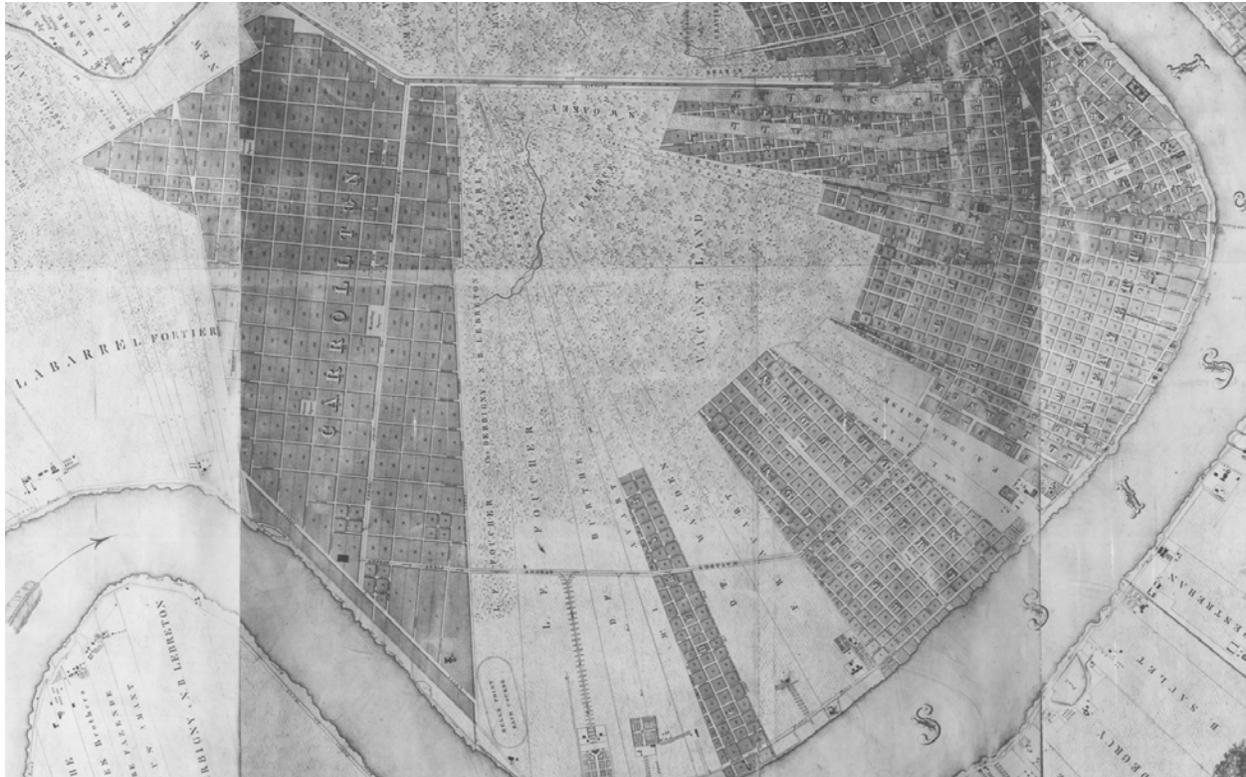
For one, it sat on the “cutbank” side of a sharp river meander, where currents would scour and occasionally rupture the bank. Waters would inundate the landscape but also deposit sediment, giving Carrollton an unusually broad natural levee. Carrollton's second distinction came from its initial surveying. Originally granted to Bienville shortly after he founded the city, the parcel measured fully 32 arpents (1.15 miles) along the riverfront, substantially wider than other local plantations, spanning from present-day Lowerline Street (thus the name) upriver to Monticello. Ownership passed into the hands of the Frenière brothers and then Louis Cesaire LeBreton, who in 1781 sold the land to a Scotch-Irish Creole named Barthelemy Macarty (McCarty). His son Jean Baptiste Macarty developed the area into an enslaved sugar cane plantation, and after he died in 1808, three of his children took over.

It was along the Macarty plantation's riverfront in May 1816 that a crevasse opened in the levee, inundating all the way to New Orleans. Flood control would remain a challenge, but “the receding water,” as historian Wilton P. Ledet noted, also “filled the low terrain with alluvial deposits enriching the soil as well as elevating the swamp sections.”

As New Orleans expanded dramatically in the 1820s, the Macarty family members found themselves sitting on prime real estate, spacious, elevated, accessible and well-aligned with the big city down the river.

In 1831, the Macarty clan sold their holding to a team of investors which included the New Orleans Canal and Banking Company. That outfit had an interest in the land because its rear abutted the company's envisioned navigation canal. Other investors were similarly involved in building a railroad to connect with New Orleans, and in 1833 they hired the railroad's engineer, Charles F. Zimpel, to also design a street plat for their new parcel. The investors probably named the development after Gen. William Carroll, who had encamped his Kentucky militia here prior to engaging the British at the Battle of New Orleans.

Zimpel's "New Orleans and Carrollton Railroad" (now the St. Charles Streetcar Line) began service in 1835; the Canal and Banking Company's "New Basin Canal" (now the I-10 corridor) opened in 1838, and by 1840 "Carrollton" was buzzing as a bedroom community, transportation hub and resort for the crowded metropolis five miles downriver.



Carrollton in 1834 according to a map by Charles Zimpel, who also planned Carrollton and connected it by rail to New Orleans. Courtesy Library of Congress.

Carrollton incorporated as a town in 1845, and after Lafayette merged with New Orleans in 1852, became the seat of Jefferson Parish. It therefore needed a courthouse, for which architect Henry Howard designed a majestic Greek Revival edifice, completed in 1855. Four years later, Carrollton was redesignated a city.

Antebellum Carrollton boasted planked roads, railroads, a ferry and drainage canals. It also had a public school system, police and fire protection, a public market, churches and a cemetery, as well as a tourism economy, with hotels, gardens, amusements, race tracks and sixteen liquor outlets catering to pleasure-seekers from New Orleans.

Carrollton's population, according to the historian Ledet, numbered 2776 in 1861, with German, Anglo-American and French surnames predominating. Sixty-three white households included enslaved African Americans, who numbered 248; there were also 99 free people of color in Carrollton. Most residents lived in the neighborhoods we now call the Riverbend, Black Pearl, Pigeon (Pension) Town, East Carrollton and Leonidas.



The former Carrollton Courthouse, designed by Henry Howard in 1854 and Jefferson Parish seat until 1874. Photo by Richard Campanella.

Steamboats and other vessels docked by Carrollton, and it was along this riverfront in 1850 that Gen. Andrew Atkinson Humphreys established the headquarters of the Delta Survey, the hydrological research project that would inform river-control policy. This explains why the district headquarters of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is in Carrollton, next to the eponymous Carrollton Gauge. It's an ironic spot for such a department, given Carrollton's history of bank crevasses.

In response to these flood threats, Carrollton in the 1830s began improving its rudimentary levee. Because the expenses taxed the town's meager revenues, neighboring New Orleans, which had a stake in Carrollton's ability to restrain the river, intervened with a loan. The debt, while nominal, went unpaid for the rest of Carrollton's existence—evidencing to some the dependency of the satellite city, and perhaps suggesting that its fusion with New Orleans may be in the best interests of both cities.

The story of Carrollton's annexation unfolded in two acts. The first came during the politically charged years following the Civil War, when Louisiana found itself with a Union-supporting Republican state government at loggerheads with former Confederates and Democrats in many local jurisdictions. A key moment in this tension came with the 1868 creation of the Metropolitan Police, a state-backed racially integrated constabulary granted authority in New Orleans as well as in adjacent communities, despite that they had their own police forces.

In the case of neighboring Jefferson City, the arrival of the Metropolitan Police was met with a violent street battle, to which an incensed Gov. Henry Clay Warmoth responded by replacing Jefferson City's representatives with his own political appointees. He eventually eradicated the defiant city by merging it with New Orleans in an 1870 act of the state legislature, and at the same, annexing Algiers.

An earlier version of the bill also including Carrollton in the municipal mega-merger. But it was dropped at the last minute, probably because, unlike in Jefferson City, Carrollton's police force had accepted the authority of the Metropolitan Police. There also seems to have been a political compromise at work: Carrollton's Democratic voters would have upset the balance of likely Democrats and Republicans that Jefferson and Algiers, respectively, would have brought to New Orleans' ballot boxes. So Algiers was retained in the 1870 Jefferson City annexation legislation, while Carrollton was removed.

With a new lease on life, the little city in 1872 expanded its upper boundary to Lebarre Road. But New Orleans in the meanwhile grew ever larger, and now abutted Carrollton along Lowerline Street, as if knocking on its door.

The second act in Carrollton's impending annexation came in 1874, and this one was motivated by both politics and geography. New Orleans had at that time 60 times more people, and they yearned for Carrollton's rail-accessed high riverfront land. New Orleans also had far more political and fiscal clout, and would do well in absorbing Carrollton's assets while eliminating it as a source of competition. Cities are, after all, public corporations, and their inclination to grow and amass wealth parallels their private-sector counterparts.

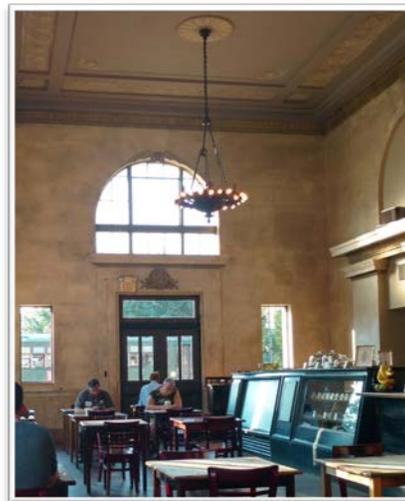
How hungry was New Orleans? When the city's Republican Senator A. E. Barber introduced an annexation bill to the state legislature in February 1874, it aimed to absorb, according to the *Daily Picayune*, "all the city of Carrollton and Jefferson Parish up as far as St. Charles Parish." But land acquisition was not the bill's only goal; some saw it also as gerrymandering. "It is confidently stated the measure will pass," wrote the *Picayune*, "which, if it does(,) will throw a large portion of the city into the hands of the Republicans by giving them a majority, the new district added being almost entirely colored."

Had Barber's original bill passed, the City of New Orleans today would span from Kenner to the Rigolets, and Jefferson Parish would be solely on the West Bank. Instead, the bill was trimmed back to annex only the original limits of Carrollton, to Monticello, which was mostly white and mostly Democratic.

Carrollton residents protested the move, but their concerns tended to be pragmatic. What effect will this have on property values? Will tax assessments increase? Will we send revenue to City Hall but not see improvements in return? Other residents saw benefits to the inclusion, chief among them the transfer of Carrollton's debt to New Orleans' ledger.

A key moment came when the *Carrollton Sentinel*, which initially opposed the bill, declared "we are now strongly in favor of annexation." As if to evidence its acquiescence, the City of Carrollton in its final weeks went on something of a spending spree, paving streets, curbing banquettes and digging fire wells, knowing invoices would soon be sent downtown.

On March 23, 1874, Barber's bill became law; the City of Carrollton in Jefferson Parish became the neighborhood of Carrollton in the City of New Orleans, as well as Orleans Parish's Sixteenth and Seventeenth wards and Seventh Municipal District. The borders of those jurisdictions today align perfectly with those of antebellum Carrollton's, and of the colonial-era Macarty Plantation.



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