The What-If's of History—and Geography

What would the City of New Orleans look like today without the 1852-1874 annexations? The City of St. Louis may offer some insights.

Richard Campanella
Published in the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, October 13, 2017

Recent Cityscapes columns have explored how New Orleans expanded to include the Garden District, Uptown, Carrollton and Algiers within its city limits. These four episodes of New Orleans' municipal expansion—and Jefferson Parish's shrinkage—played out a century and a half ago.

The first was the 1852 annexation of the City of Lafayette, today's Irish Channel, Garden District and Central City, which pushed New Orleans' upper limit from Felicity Street to Toledano Street. The second and third came on the same day in 1870, when a state law subsumed Jefferson City (most of Uptown, from Toledano to Lowerline streets) into New Orleans, and shifted the unincorporated Orleans Parish community of Algiers to within city limits. The final annexation came in 1874, when Jefferson Parish's seat of Carrollton City became part of New Orleans, and Monticello Street became the Orleans/Jefferson Parish line. It remains so today.

The four annexations tend to get short shrift in our historiography—that is, the history of how we've understood our history — usually earning only fleeting mention as mere administrative adjustments. In fact, each was complex, hotly debated and perfectly contentious. Each came with costs and benefits for the various parties involved, with New Orleans on the aggrandizing side mostly on account of its larger size and stronger political wherewithal.

Our historical memory also tends to cast New Orleans' fulfillment of its current borders as an inevitability that was "meant to be." Historians describe this sort of thinking as "Whig history"— the view of the past as a progressive march toward an enlightened present. In fact, there was nothing inevitable or fixed about our map. History is replete with contingency, and our political jurisdictions, like just any other human decisions, could have been shaped differently.

And, in fact, they were, in other American cities. Look, for example, to another former French colony on the Mississippi River that grew into a major Western port amid a Southern plantation economy: St. Louis, Missouri.

St. Louis's city limits span six miles east to west, pretty close to New Orleans' length along the river as of 1852. Whereas New Orleans would expand an additional five miles westward and jump across the river, though, St. Louis did not, and remains today bordered on the west by separate cities. To its east, only 2,000 feet across the Mississippi, may be found separate cities (principally East St. Louis) straddling two counties in a different state (Illinois) — the counterparts of our

Algiers and West Jefferson communities, except so differently organized geo-politically. Looking westward, within St. Louis city limits, we find that Washington University, just like our Tulane University, has a medical campus in the urban core, comparable to our downtown, and a main campus farther out, in a leafy residential district similar to our Uptown.

But whereas Tulane's Uptown campus occupies a space that was once in Jefferson City and now pertains to New Orleans, "WashU's" main campus is technically outside St. Louis, and its students interact more with nearby Clayton and University City, both incorporated municipalities, than they do with downtown St. Louis. We may think of Clayton and University City as loosely the equivalent of old Jefferson City and old Carrollton City, had they never been annexed.
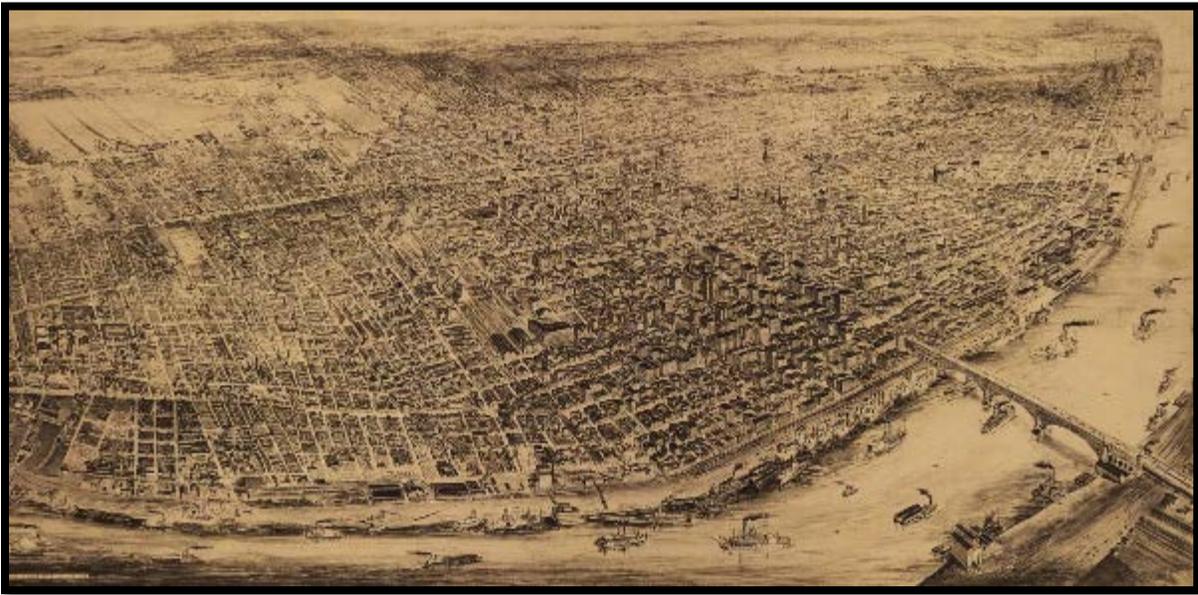

Top: Panorama of St. Louis in 1894 by Charles Juehne; below, City of New Orleans 1885, Currier and Ives. Library of Congress.

Urban and suburban municipalities in St. Louis (above) and New Orleans; maps by Richard Campanella.
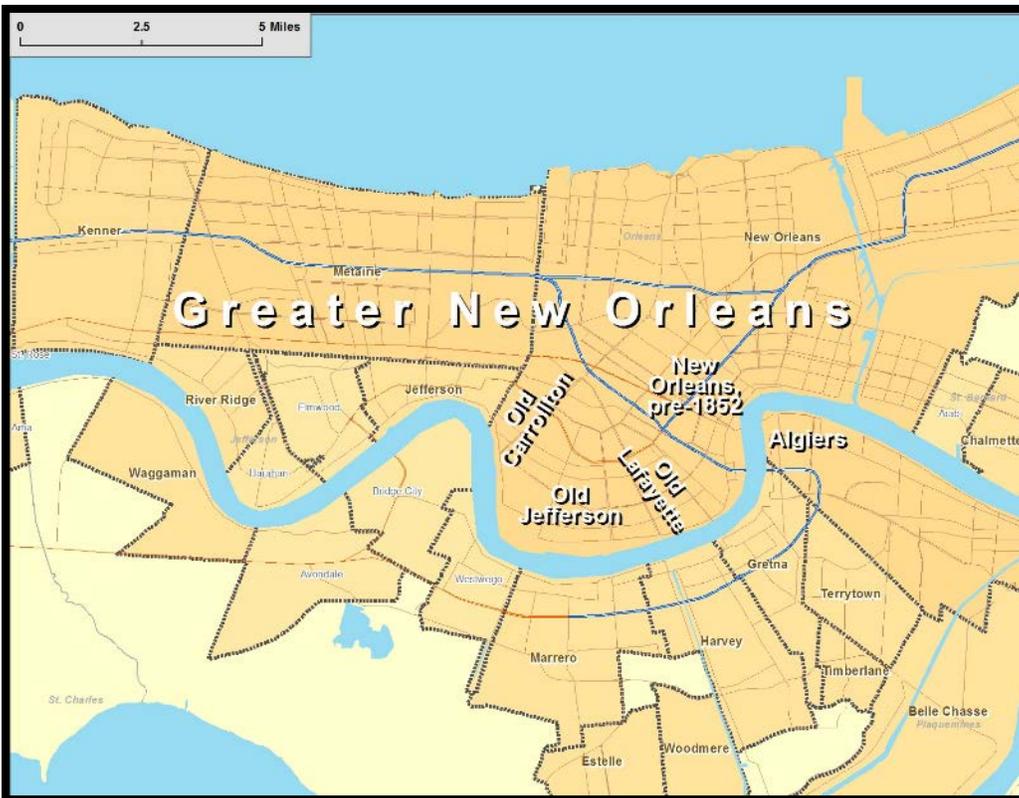
I had the opportunity to explore Clayton recently, during a visit to WashU (appropriately, to lecture on the role of geography in history). It gave me some insights as to what old Jefferson City, Carrollton City and Lafayette City might look like today had they remained separate municipalities.

Clayton has a discernible Central Business District, with a skyline of modest high-rises. Might such a micro-CBD have also formed in old Jefferson City's hub, at Napoleon and Magazine, or in Carrollton's at the Riverbend, or in Lafayette's at Jackson and Tchoupitoulas?

My bet is that each would indeed have formed more urbanized, built-up nuclei, and that the high-rises now concentrated in New Orleans' CBD would be more spread-out across Uptown. (To some extent, this happened anyway: note that St. Charles Avenue around Jackson Avenue is home today to cluster of businesses and taller buildings. This was once the middle of old Lafayette City.)

It's anyone's guess how port activity, transportation, water and drainage systems would have been managed, but surely each jurisdiction would have prioritized for its own infrastructure and competed with neighbors for commerce.

Politically, each city would have had its own mayor and council, and neighbors on either side of Felicity, Toledano and Lowerline streets would have paid visits to different city halls, debated different ordinances, and sent tax bills to different coffers. With no upriver land at its disposal, New Orleans proper would have expanded exclusively downriver and lakeward, while Jefferson Parish would be bigger, more populated, wealthier, and probably more nationally renowned than it is today. One can imagine modern promoters encouraging tourists to visit "Lafayette's famous Garden District" or "Jefferson City's lovely university campuses, park and zoo." Indeed, except for the French Quarter and the lower faubourgs, Jefferson Parish might have been more "New Orleans" than New Orleans!

All this to illustrate that there was nothing inevitable about our history — or our geography. Our jurisdictions could well have turned out more like those of greater St. Louis.

Consider the further parallels between New Orleans and St. Louis. Our City Park and Botanical Garden is their Tower Grove Park and Missouri Botanical Garden, while our Audubon Park and Zoo is their Forest Park and St. Louis Zoo. Our Audubon Place and other private Uptown residential streets were originally devised by St. Louis surveyor Julius Pitzman and "exported" to New Orleans by the St. Louis real estate firm Robinson & Underwood.

Both cities would host elaborate world's fairs that spurred the development of streetcar suburbs: the 1885 World's Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition in New Orleans and the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis.

And while St. Louis demolished its "French Quarter" in favor of the Gateway Arch riverfront park (leaving only the Basilica of Saint Louis, King of France, counterpart to our similarly named

cathedral), it proudly upholds its Soulard district as the city's showcase historical neighborhood—complete with a "French Market" (Soulard Market) and, since 1980, a Mardi Gras celebration.

I'll defer to experts on St. Louis as to why that booming river port did not annex communities to its west, and why the suburbs of St. Louis County instead developed an astonishing 90 separate incorporated municipalities. (Jefferson Parish, by contrast, has only six—Kenner, Harahan, Gretna, Westwego, Lafitte and Grand Isle—although it once also had Lafayette City, Jefferson City and Carrollton City.)

Of course, history's "why not" questions are nearly as difficult to answer as history's "what-if's." But they're worth asking, because they help remind us that the past could have played out differently, and that the future is within our control.

Richard Campanella, a geographer with the Tulane School of Architecture, is the author of "Bourbon Street: A History," "Bienville's Dilemma," and the recently released "Cityscapes of New Orleans" (LSU Press, 2017). He may be reached through http://richcampanella.com or @nolacampanella.

Photo by Richard Campanella