

The View from Krewe du Vieux

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Krewe du Vieux, which rolls Saturday January 27 at 6:30PM, is best known for its ribald satire of public figures and current events. But in its structural form and route geography—small mule-drawn floats on old, narrow streets packed with revelers—the parade is also something of a throwback to 19th-century Carnival. While spectators on Saturday night will be eyeing the Rabelaisian tableaux and civic spoofs, yours truly will have a unique perspective of the route, as I have the honor (dubious, I'm reminded) of serving as king this year. Following is what I'll be viewing from the royal float of Krewe du Vieux:

Start, Decatur at Marigny. This area formed the heart of the plantation of Bernard Xavier Philippe de Marigny de Mandeville, who lived in a mansion where the electrical substation now stands. Expecting that the Louisiana Purchase would spur urban expansion, Marigny had his parcel subdivided for urbanization in 1805, hiring French engineer Nicolas de Finiels to design a plat. Finiels successfully reconciled an extension of the French Quarter street grid with a sharp bend of the Mississippi by reshaping key connector squares into polygons of various configurations, which surveyor Barthelemy Lafon then laid out in 1806. First neighborhood downriver from the city proper, the Faubourg Marigny soon developed into a predominantly Creole community, including substantial numbers of both Free People of Color as well as enslaved African Americans, plus large German, Irish, and other immigrant populations. A century later, these riverfront blocks hosted a variety of light industrial land uses worked by the neighborhood's blue-collar residents. The four blocks surrounding this intersection were occupied in the early 1900s by rice mills, an ice plant, horse and mule stables, a yarn and hosiery factory, and a streetcar barn; the streets themselves were paved in granite stones.



Chartes from Marigny to Franklin. Originally named Rue Moreau, Chartres Street presents an eclectic mix of New Orleans historical house typologies, from early-to-mid-19th-century Creole cottages and townhouses, to Victorian Italianate shotgun houses and Craftsman bungalows of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Of particular interest is the majestic townhouse at 2340 Chartres, designed and constructed in 1838 by Nelson Fouché, a free man of color of Haitian ancestry. Exhibiting both Creole and Greek Revival traits, the building reflects the transitional state of architecture in this era, as Creole influences waned and American styles increased in popularity.

Franklin Avenue. Originally named Rue d'Enghein and later Lafayette, Almonaster, and finally Franklin, this avenue marked the lower limit of the Marigny Plantation and of the original faubourg, despite that current perception places the neighborhood's lower border at Press Street. The area below Franklin was subdivided after 1810 as the Faubourg D'Aunoy and soon developed a similar cultural milieu as its neighbor. The imposing lavender building overlooking the Chartres/Franklin intersection was once a Methodist church, and the restaurant across the street is said to incorporate circa-1790s structural elements from the D'Aunoy plantation complex.

Royal Street heading upriver. This stretch of Royal Street, formerly Rue Casa Calvo, is quintessential Faubourg Marigny. Of particular interest is 2231 Royal, a one-of-a-kind 1830s townhouse with a central carriageway and raised basement, as well as the two solid circa-1850s Greek Revival structures on either side of the Elysian Fields intersection. Royal Street was the return route of the "streetcar named Desire," after it rolled down Bourbon and Dauphine to Desire Street in present-day Bywater. Electricity for the streetcar system in these lower neighborhoods came from the brick edifice at the foot of Elysian Fields, known in the early 1900s as the New Orleans Railways and Light Company Claiborne Power House.

Crossing Elysian Fields Avenue. Years before the Marigny family came into possession of this land, it was owned by Claude Joseph Villars Dubreuil, a French colonial builder in constant need of lumber. In the 1740s, Dubreuil had a diversion canal excavated from the levee through the center of his parcel, to power a sawmill with the flow of river water. Dubreuil's canal later became the Marigny Canal, and when Finiels designed his street grid in 1805, he used this pre-existing axis to serve as the subdivision's grand avenue, giving it great width, an adjacent park (Washington Square), and a lovely name, *Champs-Élysées*. In 1831, Elysian Fields became the right-of-way for the Pontchartrain Railroad, first to complete its charter west of the Appalachians. Known as "Smoky Mary," the steam line operated until 1932.

Royal at Washington Square. Into the 1960s, the river side of this block was home to Holy Redeemer Church, a black Catholic congregation worshipping in a circa-1860 edifice originally designed as the Third Presbyterian Church by architects Albert Diettel and Henry Howard. Next door, on the corner of Frenchmen, was a Carnegie Library built in 1902. All this changed when Hurricane Betsy utterly destroyed the church and damaged the library. Five years later, in 1970, the cleared lot became home to the Christopher Inn, a project of the Archdiocese's nonprofit housing agency created by Archbishop Phillip Hannan for elderly congregants. The building's large scale and International Style have raised the ire of historicists ever since, but the apartments provide affordable downtown living for senior citizens, many of whom grew up in the neighborhood and would otherwise be unable to live here.

Frenchmen Street. Named for the five French Creoles who resisted Spanish rule in 1768 and paid for it with their lives, Frenchmen Street by the mid-20th century comprised a handful of functional shops serving local needs. This began to change as the surrounding neighborhood began to gentrify in the 1970s, and Frenchmen, with its commercial zoning, started to attract night spots and music venues which had previously set up on lower Decatur Street, as an alternative to Bourbon Street. Among the first new Frenchmen businesses were the Dream Palace (1976) at 534 Frenchmen, the Vis-à-Vis Art Gallery, and the Faubourg Marigny Bookstore, said to be the first gay bookshop in the South. Frenchmen gained momentum in the 1980s, and by the late 1990s it had earned a national reputation for its music, food, and drinking scene—"Bourbon Street for cool people."

Decatur Street. Formerly Levee Street and originally known as the Quay to the French or Calle Frente al Malecon ("street fronting the docks") to the Spanish, the upcoming stretch of Decatur Street comprised by the late 1800s the main commercial artery of "Little Palermo," the mostly Sicilian immigrant community residing in these blocks and working at the French Market. Of special interest is the nearly integral row of 1830s storehouses on the lake side of 1100 Decatur, the former banks around the Ursulines and St. Philip intersections (banks often established branches near municipal markets on account of the cash flow associated with these emporia), and Latrobe Park, site of architect Benjamin Latrobe's steam-driven waterworks, which operated from 1823 to 1836.

Right on Dumaine and down Chartres Street. Lower Chartres, formerly Rue Condé, exemplifies the varied architecture, mixed land uses, and intermingled social classes which defined the 19th-century Vieux Carré. The next four blocks will take us past antebellum townhouses, former horse stables, an ex-macaroni factory and ice house, musician Danny Barker's birthplace, three adjacent quintessential Creole cottages at the corner of Ursulines, and

across the street, the oldest surviving fully intact, fully documented building in the region, the Old Ursuline Convent, completed in 1752. St. Mary's Church, appended to the convent in 1845 (by which time the sisters had moved downriver), came to be known as "the Italian Church" for its mostly Sicilian congregation.

Left onto Barracks Street. Rolling along Barracks, we are paralleling the original city's lower fortification, an angled palisade-lined earthworks fronted by a moat. By the early American era, this defensive structure had become obsolete, with the Faubourg Marigny already under development on the other side. The commons was eventually subdivided to become the Esplanade Avenue corridor, and all evidence of the fortification was cleared away. Yet its slightly angled orientation is retained in some rear walls and property lines, and with careful inspection, may be seen in a driveway and walls on Royal between Barracks and Esplanade.

Royal Street. Royal may be justly deemed the most beautiful street in the French Quarter, and the parade route will transect both its tranquil lower blocks and part of its elegant commercial upper section. In terms of extant buildings, the Royal-bordering squares from Dumaine to Conti contain the city's densest cluster of very old buildings; by my count, of the 96 French Quarter structures built before 1820, over half occupy this relatively small area. Perhaps along here, if you quint your eyes on the night of the parade, you can gain a sense of what 19th-century Carnival looked and felt like in New Orleans.

Left on Toulouse. As we head toward the river on Toulouse, look on the lake side of 600 Chartres toward the Cabildo. This streetscape has the largest concentration of Spanish Colonial-era structures, and may well be the city's oldest surviving structural streetscape, notwithstanding numerous façade alterations. At the corner (601-607 Chartres) is the circa-1795 Reynes House; next is 609-615 Chartres, built at the same time; next is the Bosque House at 617-619 Chartres, dating to 1795, and 625-627 Chartres, built around 1800. The Cabildo, originally the Spanish City Hall, was completed in 1799, also in the last years of Spanish rule.

517 Toulouse: The parade terminates at the former Haspel Suit Factory, famed makers of seersucker outfits, and more recently the home of Ralph and Kacoo's Restaurant, where Krewe du Vieux Doo bash will be held. If you can't get in, turn around and look across the parking lot for a nice view of the rear of 500 Chartres, including an unusual perspective on the cupola of the Girod (Napoleon) House.

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Krewe du Vieux will roll through the foreground neighborhoods of Marigny and the French Quarter on Saturday evening January 27, 2018. Drone photo by Lorenzo Serafini Boni.