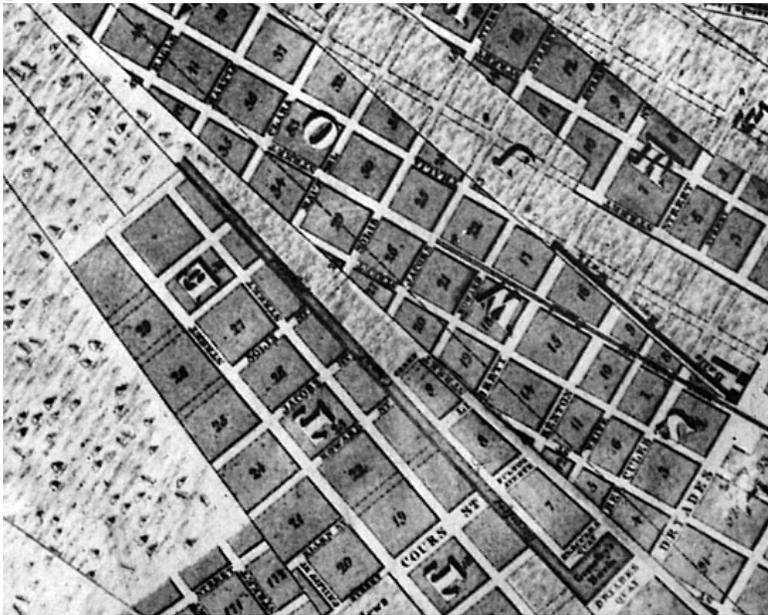




The man behind the project was William Gormley, who would spend years in complex court cases clearing his legal title to the right-of-way. A big slaveholder, Gormley likely used enslaved labor to dig the 4-foot deep, 80-foot wide, mile-long channel and its inland harbor, or basin. In a swampy environment, such a waterway would need guide levees and tow paths, which brought the full width to 100 feet.

The completed infrastructure appeared in Charles Zimpel's "Topographical Map of New Orleans" (1834) and in "Norman's Plan of New Orleans & Environs" (1845). Both maps show design features which ascertain its use for resource extraction rather than shipping or drainage. For one, the canal terminated just past present-day South Claiborne Avenue, with no navigable outlet. While it's possible there was an intent to extend the Gormley Canal to the lake, to compete with New Orleans' New Basin Canal, no extension was never made, so we may surmise that access to the backswamp itself, including a rivulet named Bayou des Cannes, was the Gormley Canal's main purpose. The maps also show a turning basin with two quays, evidencing that the Gormley Canal was not primarily designed for drainage, since docks would have blocked the flow of runoff. However, an illustration in the Notarial Archives does show a small ditch coming from the higher ground of the Garden District and Irish Channel and draining into the basin.



*Detail of Charles Zimpel's map of 1834 showing the Gormley Canal reaching to the backswamp at upper left. Library of Congress.*

Wood cutters and other workers would take pirogues or small barges out to the swamp, where they would fell timber for beams, fencing, planking and fuel; dig up clay for bricks; and hunt or gather wild foodstuffs for sale at emporia, such as the Dryades Market (1849) at Dryades and Melpomene streets. Around the basin itself were light industries processing the raw materials, including lumber mills, wood workers, tanneries and makers of brick, shingles and soap, among other things. Working-class housing surrounded the operation, in which lived predominantly Irish and German immigrants.

Despite its back-of-town environs, the neighborhood around the Gormley Canal boasted exotic Greek street names, the result of Barthélémy Lafon's penchant for classical antiquity. Best known

for the “Nine Muses” in what we now call the Lower Garden District, Lafon also used names such as Nayades and Dryades (the water and forest nymphs of Greek mythology) for today’s St. Charles Avenue and Oretha Castle Haley Boulevard, as well as Apollo, Bacchus and Hercules Streets for sections of Carondelet, Baronne and South Rampart. This explains why the Gormley Basin’s docks were named the Dryades Quay and the Hercules Quay. This mini-harbor once the block that today is bounded by O. C. Haley, Felicity, South Rampart and St. Andrew, occupied in part by the Majestic Mortuary Service.



Where St. Andrew Street cuts across O.C. Haley marks the area where Gormley Basin and quays operated from the late 1820s through early 1860s. The basin is now occupied by a mortuary (left). At right is the former main channel of the Gormley Canal, now St. Andrew Street from O.C. Haley to South Claiborne. Photos by Richard Campanella.

In 1852, New Orleans annexed Lafayette as the city’s Fourth Municipal District, putting the New Basin Canal and Gormley Canal within the same jurisdiction. Their respective owners, including the widow of William Gormley, contemplated connecting the two basins with a new 50-foot-wide channel. This would have turned a resource-extraction canal into a major lake-access navigation outlet. Had the idea come to fruition, we’d have a very different Central City today.

Instead, with the neighborhood now mostly developed and backswamp timber becoming scarce, the Gormley Canal became less an asset and more a nuisance. The basin — “that quagmire and receptacle of all filth,” according to a *Daily Picayune* editorial — was filled in 1855, though the main channel remained open, impeding cross-street traffic and forming “a stagnant reservoir of offal and dead animals.” Huffed the writer of that 1858 editorial, “Why is not this canal filled? Its existence reduces the value of property in its neighborhood nearly fifty percent.” Another editorialist described the water in Gormley Basin as having “a deep green mantle, which in a few hours of solar action converts into an elevated black foam,” after which “the basin yields up its dead, and the whole necropolis of departed animal and vegetable life lies naked to the rays of the sun.”

Stagnant water and detritus made the Gormley Canal suspected as a source of yellow fever, particularly after some neighbors suffered violent bouts of black vomit and died in the summer of 1853. Medical researchers in the wake of that worst-ever epidemic cited the Gormley Canal as evidence for or against various hypotheses for the cause of yellow fever, including miasmatic or “bad air” theory and “filth theory.” The real vector, the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito, would not be understood until decades later.

By 1860, sections of the canal had been filled in, and city agents began purchasing the reclaimed land from the Gormley heirs, whose once-disputed title had long since been confirmed by the Louisiana Supreme Court. In this incremental manner, during the early 1860s, the privately owned Gormley Canal transformed into the public street named St. Andrew, plus adjacent parcels on the upper side. The process was complete by 1868, as per a detailed engineering map released that year by M. D. McAlester. That lithograph shows no trace of the Gormley Canal while alluding to the reason of its obsolescence, posting the words “Cypress Swamp—Timber mostly felled” at its former terminus.

As the metropolis spread and drainage systems transformed the backswamp into suburbs, the phenomena of the resource-extraction canal shifted farther out to rural areas. In the Manchac Swamp, for example, radial pull-boat canals were dug to extract cypress logs, creating distinctive wagon-wheel patterns easily discernible from the air today. In subsequent decades, roughly 10,000 linear miles of oil and gas extraction canals were excavated through Louisiana’s coastal wetlands. Those resources too have since become largely depleted, though, unlike the Gormley, these extraction canals were never filled, causing land loss and salt-water intrusion to this day.

As for the Gormley Canal, the city did a remarkable job in weaving the filled bed into the fabric of the city, such that by 1883, when Robinson’s Atlas was released, the St. Andrew streetscape looked no different than its surroundings. There are, however, two clues in the modern cityscape evidencing the old waterway. For one, note the jump made by St. Andrew Street on either side of O.C. Haley, across from the Roux Carre food court. That full curb-to-curb distance spans about 100 feet—same as the width of the old canal and tow paths. Then there is the odd jog made by St. Andrew at its intersection with Rev. John Raphael Jr. Way (formerly Lasalle Street), into which the imprint of the 190-year-old waterway fits perfectly. It’s probably also true that the old basin and quays, now beneath the mortuary service, still contain the bones of what, 160 years ago, one observer called a “necropolis of departed animal[s].”



*Left: The curious intersection of St. Andrew at Rev. John Raphael Jr. Way (formerly Lasalle Street) is a relic of the old Gormley Canal. Right: In this area lakeside of North Claiborne Ave in Central City, swamp timber was felled and floated up the Gormley Canal. Photos by Richard Campanella.*

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