

# Sleuthing an 1890 French Quarter Streetscape

***Famed Frontier Photographer Captured Street Life in New Orleans.***

***But Where, Exactly?***

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Serious students of historic New Orleans peruse the limited stock of nineteenth-century photographs of our city like a family album, and can rattle off building names and dates as if they were cherished elders. I myself enjoy determining the camera's exact street position all those years ago, so that I may re-photograph the scene as it appears today.

Among the long-gone photographers I've "stalked" in the streets of New Orleans are Jules Lion, who introduced the daguerreotype here in the 1840s; Jay Dearborn Edwards, active in the late 1850s; William D. McPherson and Theodore Lilienthal, who photographed during and after the Civil War, and George François Mugnier, active throughout Louisiana in the 1880s-1900s.

Then there was William Henry Jackson (1843-1942), the famed Western photographer and member of the 1871 Hayden Survey into Yellowstone in the Wyoming Territory. Perhaps best known for his photograph of Colorado's elusive Mount of the Holy Cross, Jackson's work brought attention to the natural wonders of the West and helped lead to the designation of Yellowstone as a National Park.



*William Henry Jackson, left; "Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone River," painted by Thomas Moran, and subset at right, likely showing Jackson with his photographic equipment during the 1871 Hayden Survey of Yellowstone. Courtesy Smithsonian American Art Museum.*

Given his treks in the untamed Rockies, it's hard to picture this frontiersman in the hardscrabble streets of steamy New Orleans. Here he arrived in autumn 1890 (more on this later), and proceeded to capture a number of unposed and highly informative 5x7 glass-plate negatives of everyday life—vendors in the Poydras Market, traffic by the French Market, and various urban and riverfront scenes.

Most locations are readily identifiable, but one has long intrigued and puzzled me: a random moment of children playing in a filthy gutter as a peddler passes and a flâneur rests by a large institutional building. Behind is a time-worn house that could have been in any port city from the Caribbean to the Mediterranean.

What's striking, in addition to the poetic decrepitude, is the stances of the five neighbors, particularly the peddler, who strides purposefully, attired in wraps and a tignon. Each is in his or her own world, oblivious to the famed photographer and his newfangled equipment in the street. I find myself pondering the worlds of those individuals:

perhaps the peddler, who appears to be African-American, had been born into slavery; perhaps the children lived to see a man on the moon.

The undated photograph—picturesque yet also melancholic, as poignant as it is quotidian—is captioned “Street in French Quarter, New Orleans,” either by Jackson or by the Detroit Publishing Company, to which he later sold his negatives.

But where exactly? Though the buildings’ styles certainly looked familiar, I did not specifically recognize them. After recently sharing the scene with my Twitter followers and inviting them to the identification challenge, the mystery only deepened, and I endeavored to solve it like a detective, by amassing clues.

Clue no. 1 entailed the social aspects of the scene. Disheveled walls and herring-bone brick sidewalks? Peddlers and poor kids plying stone-paved streets with no asphalt? This was probably not in the more commercial upper French Quarter, which, then and now, had fewer residents, bigger and newer buildings, and more of a business bustle. Rather, this was likely in the lower Quarter, where Creole and Sicilian children had little choice but to play in the streets, and where peddlers sold foods to homemakers door-to-door.

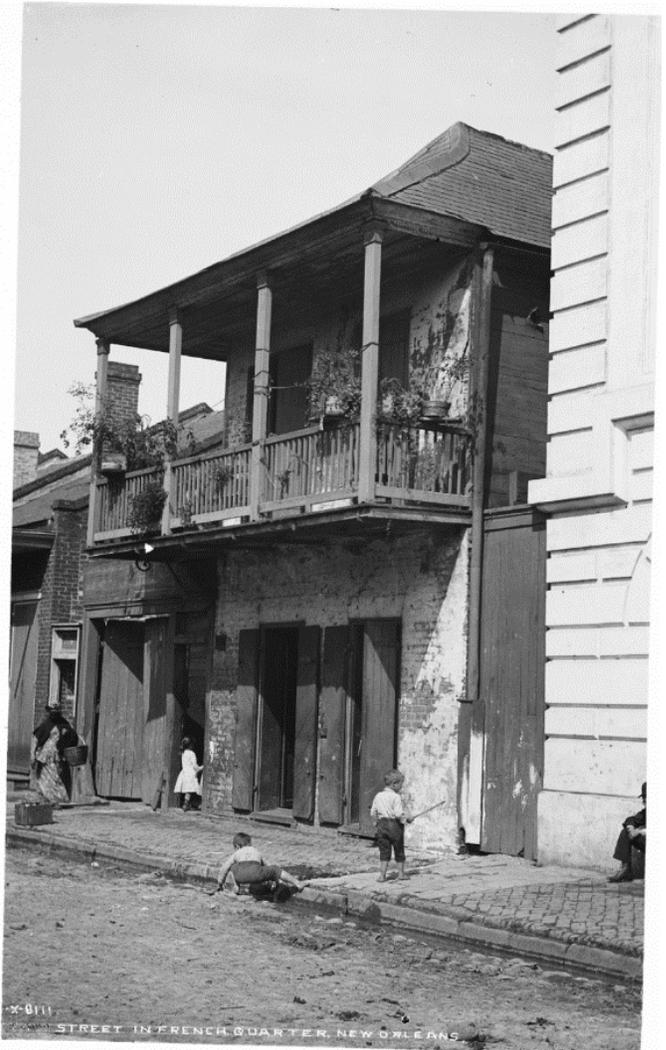
But the same could be said of adjacent faubourgs, and, realizing that neighborhood names tended to be loose and informal back then, I did not rule out the possibility that this was in the Faubourg Tremé or Faubourg Marigny.

Another clue was the architecture. The main townhouse in the scene exhibits a striking Creole design and perhaps a touch of Spanish Colonial, with its double-pitched hipped roof, wooden balcony with wrought-iron brackets, lack of a centralized entrance, jack-arch lintels above two narrow French doors, a stucco-covered brick façade and clapboard-covered side walls. All this iterates that the scene is in the lower part of the city, as does the Creole cottage to its left. These sorts of house types and vintages were pretty rare in the upper Quarter by the 1880s.

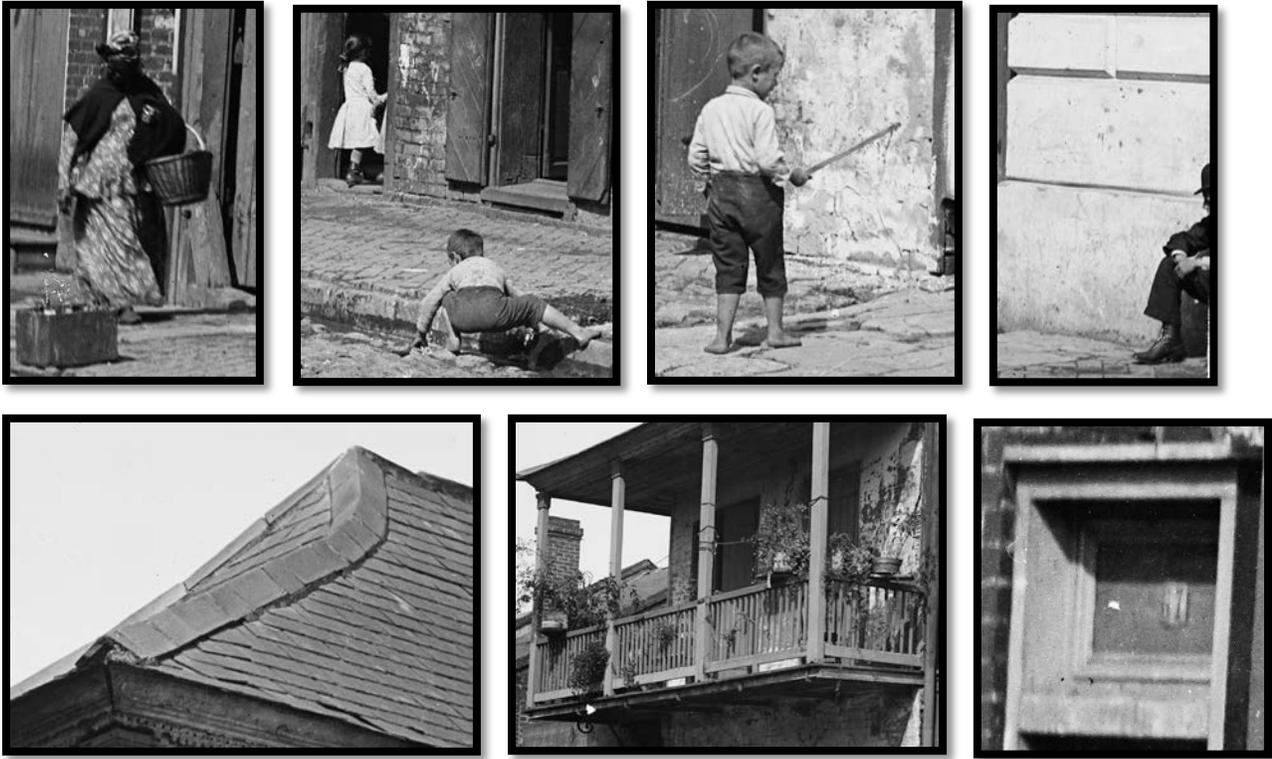
Going a step further, this particular house strikes my eye as dating to the late 1700s, at which time both the Faubourg Marigny and Faubourg Tremé were still undeveloped. This narrowed down my search to exclusively the lower half of the French Quarter.

Next clue: the sun angle. Note the shadow cast by the standing boy and the balcony. Given the orientation of French Quarter blocks, only a south-facing street could yield this sun angle. This qualifies all downriver and lakeside flanks of blocks, and excludes those on the upriver or river side of the street.

Note also the lack of streetcar tracks, which mostly ran parallel to the river. This increases the likelihood that our street ran perpendicular to the river.



*The scene, captured by William Henry Jackson, November 1890—but where? Courtesy Detroit Publishing Company, Library of Congress.*

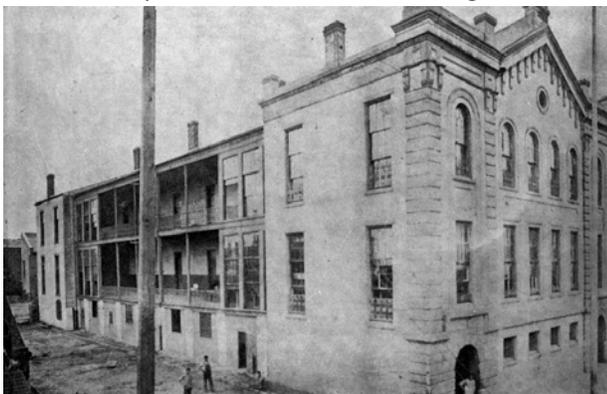


*The clues.*

Only after obtaining a super-high-resolution version of the photo, and digitally manipulating its pixels, was I able to discern a critical new clue: what appeared to be the number 67 on the wooden frame on an alley. A house number!

Alas, this could not have been our modern system of addresses, which increments by 100 for every block from Canal Street or the Mississippi River. Introduced in 1894, this so-called decimal system replaced a rather ad-hoc enumeration initiated in 1852, and in place when Jackson arrived. Quirky as it was, the old system consistently assigned odd numbers to all downriver and lakeside blocks, thus validating our sun-angle and streetcar-track clues: this was definitely the lower side of a lower-Quarter street. And while the 1852 address system was hardly orderly and rational, it was fairly well documented, including by the 1883 Robinson's Atlas and the 1886 Sanborn Fire Insurance maps, which I consulted next.

Looking for all the 67's in the central or lower Quarter on those maps, I saw some that were structurally inconsistent with our scene. But a few others passed muster, and only one—the lower side of St. Philip Street between Royal and Bourbon—had a large institutional building next to it, a relative rarity in the lower Quarter.

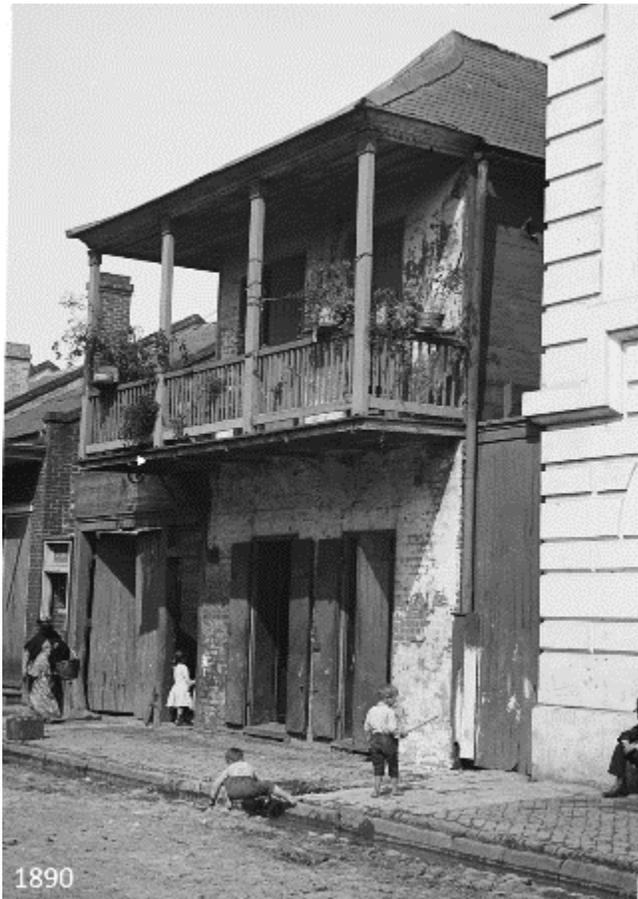


That nailed it. The institution was the St. Philip Boys Public School (*left, courtesy Vieux Carre Survey/The Historic New Orleans Collection*), built on the site of the famed St. Philip Street Theater, and a precursor to the McDonogh 15 School. A period photo of the St. Philip School show the same Neoclassical façade partially visible in Jackson's scene. The insurance maps showed exactly the right juxtaposition of structures and alleys, as well as the correct house numbers.



Today, the peddlers are gone from French Quarter streets (though not the flâneurs), and while hardly any local children still play in Quarter streets, it is a joy to see them in the school yard of the Homer A. Plessy Community School, formerly McDonogh 15.

This last schoolhouse in the French Quarter will give rise a next generation, and someday, many years hence, we'll pore over old (digital) photographs of them in the streets of New Orleans, and ponder their New Orleans lives.



1890 photograph by William Henry Jackson; modern photo by Richard Campanella, May 2018.

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