

Electric Avenue

Our Own *Champs-Élysées* Was Once Extraordinary—and Could Be Again

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Only one major artery in New Orleans connects the Mississippi River and Lake Pontchartrain with a single, straight, nearly longitudinal line.

Unusually wide and grassy, the avenue spans the city's full geographical gamut, from natural levee to former backswamp, to ridge, former marsh, and manmade lakefront.

Historically, it witnessed growth from the Napoleonic Age to the Space Age.

Architecturally, it hosts everything from an 1820 Creole cottage, to 1850s Greek Revival storehouses, to 1890s Victorian Italianate shotguns, to 1920s Spanish Villas, to 1960s ranch houses and post-Katrina houses jacked up on pilings.

Demographically, it's a cross-section of local society, in terms of class, race, and nativity, running from the gentrified historic districts at its foot to the middle-class families of Gentilly, to the suburban-feeling Lakefront and UNO campus.

Spatially, its axial position drove the geometry of fully six square miles of subdivisions and nearly every street, block and lot therein, while also giving it convenient access to major east-west arteries.

The avenue is Elysian Fields, and in my estimation, it's one of the most interesting and least appreciated corridors in the metropolis, one that has the potential to live up to the grandeur of its name.

I'll leave the urban planning ideas for another time; my purpose here is to recount how this *sui generis* pathway came into place, and perhaps that history will spawn ideas of how—or whether—to make this place more special.



Drone photo of Elysian Fields Avenue by Lorenzo Serafini Boni 2017

The story begins over 270 years ago with a colonist named Claude Joseph Villars Dubreuil.

Dubreuil owned plantations in present-day Harvey on the West Bank, and immediately downriver from New Orleans in today's Faubourg Marigny. A contractor for boats and buildings, Dubreuil found himself in constant need of wood, which, in the early days, could be obtained by the riverfront and dragged by oxen to worksites. But by the 1730s, these areas were mostly denuded for cultivation, meaning that timber had to be cut further back in the *ciprière* (cypress swamp) and floated in on manmade canals.

Toward this end, Dubreuil in 1736 directed his enslaved workforce to dig a channel back to the dense swamps around the aptly named modern West Bank subdivisions of Timberlane, Woodland, and Woodmere. The resulting 25-foot-wide canal enabled for the extraction of logs and the construction of twenty vessels, marking the beginning of the West Bank's ship-building industry.

In the late 1740s, Dubreuil aimed to replicate his West Bank success across the river—only here, the waterway would be designed primarily as a source of energy. Why? Probably because, unlike the Harvey parcel, Dubreuil's East Bank holding happened to front a sharp bend in the river, which, during high stage, sent fast-moving water at just the right trajectory, if properly diverted, to power a *moulin à planches* (sawmill).

So, once again, Dubreuil directed his slaves to excavate a channel to divert riverwater through a sluice gate to turn a waterwheel connected to a saw blade. Given the river bend, it made the most sense to position the canal in the middle of the plantation, and to dig it perfectly straight, as any curve would slow water velocity, diminish power, and lead to shoaling.

Unwittingly, these circa-1740s decisions established the location and shape of future Elysian Fields Avenue, and all its adjacent streets and neighborhoods.

The sawmill worked, at least during high water. At other times, the waterway could be used for local drainage or to float in backswamp resources, including timber and clay. Dubreuil also ran a brickyard here.

According to historian Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, Dubreuil owed much of his success to his "African slaves' technological knowledge—how to dam and control the waters of the rivers and bayous," and their metalworking skills. Bricks made and beams hewn at Dubreuil's mill may remain in some French Quarter structures today, possibly including the Old Ursulines Convent on Chartres Street, which Dubreuil built in 1752.

The canal persisted in the landscape even as the property was sold in 1758, encroached upon by the city fortifications in 1760, and sold three more times before landing in the hands of Pierre Philippe de Marigny in 1798. A map made that year by Spanish surveyor Carlos Trudeau labelled the fifty-year-old channel as the *Canal del Molino de Don Pedro de Marigny* and the board mill as *el molino de tablas*, located at what is now Elysian Fields at North Peters.

Upon his death in 1800, the elder Marigny passed the land to his son Bernard, who had the canal augmented into a semi-navigable waterway. Henry C. Castellanos, writing in 1895, remembered its "massive walls, built of solid masonry...used as supports to the sluice gates or locks that admitted the waters of the river," and recalled how boys would hunt for bullfrogs along what by that time was known

as the Marigny Canal. Its waters flowed back to present-day Florida Avenue and drained out Bayou St. John.



Figure The Marigny Canal and sawmill, in a detail of an 1803 painting by John Boqueta de Woiseri_courtesy Library of Congress

The operation provided a picturesque scene for artist John L. Boqueta de Woiseri in his 1803 painting, *A View of New Orleans Taken from the Plantation of Marigny*, above which reads a banner, “Under My Wings Every Thing Prospers.” This was the year of the Louisiana Purchase, and the prospects of dramatic population growth loomed. Marigny decided to subdivide his plantation for urban development, and in 1805 hired French engineer Nicholas de Finiels to design a plat.

Because the perfectly straight Marigny Canal already marked the middle of the parcel, Finiels repurposed it as the grand avenue of the new “Faubourg Marigny,” giving it great width, an adjacent park (Washington Square), and a lovely name: *Champs-Élysées*, inspired by the Parisian boulevard, itself a reference to mythological paradise. Finiels’ sketch was then passed to Barthelemy Lafon to survey during 1806 and 1807. Elysian Fields as a named street is thus 211 years old, although its shape is about 270 years old.

The Faubourg Marigny would develop as a working-class inner suburb, home to a large population of what Castellanos described as “Europeans of Latin extraction and of Creoles, white and black,” not to mention Irish, German and other immigrants. Light industry and warehousing predominated around lower Elysian Fields, and the space became vital to the lower faubourgs.

What drew investor attention to Elysian Fields was how it happened to mark an isthmus—that is, the shortest distance between the city’s riverfront and Lake Pontchartrain, beyond which lay valuable natural resources. What better way to span that gap than by that exciting new transportation technology from England and the Northeast: the railroad.

In the summer of 1828, a group of Creole businessmen discussed the idea. A year later they formed the New Orleans Railroad Company, and in January 1830, the state granted them a charter for the Pontchartrain Railroad Company, along with the power of eminent domain, exclusive route privileges for 25 years, and the right to develop a harbor at Lake Pontchartrain.

The route would run on Elysian Fields starting from “Pontchartrain Junction,” a station between present-day Decatur and Chartres, parallel the 3.5-mile Marigny Canal, and continue another 1.5 miles to “Port

Pontchartrain” on the lakeshore. Like the canal that preceded it, the trackbed had to be straight; any bends would only increase length, drive up costs and slow the train.

Capitalized at \$150,000, the company now had to secure a 90-foot-wide right-of-way across five miles. The Marigny Canal rights proved to be the most expensive (\$25,000), because of its length. The Darcantel estate at present-day Gentilly Boulevard held out for a high price, but the company made good use of the topographical ridge’s soils to raise the track bed through the bottomlands. Alexander Milne, meanwhile, provided land for Port Pontchartrain, and later profited handsomely when he subdivided the adjacent area as Milneburg. Most other land owners donated space for the trackbed, knowing full well it would greatly increase their property values.

Clearing of the path commenced on March 10, 1830, followed by the laying of track, using iron rails imported from England and red cedar ties from Mexico. Work progressed at a pace of about 250 feet per day, while a loading dock was built at Port Pontchartrain, which Congress had designated as an official port of delivery and departure.

On April 23, 1831, the horse-drawn Pontchartrain Railroad made its inaugural run, as the first railroad west of the Appalachians and the first in the nation to complete its charter. The talk of the town for months, the mechanical spectacle may have been seen by a young Abraham Lincoln, who happened to be in town that spring on a flatboat journey (and, after returning to Illinois, would run for office advocating for Western railroads). In late 1832, the company introduced the steam locomotive to New Orleans.

The Pontchartrain Railroad would serve New Orleans for 101 years, bringing countless passengers as well as freight into the city. Generations of New Orleanians hopped aboard for an afternoon of bathing at Milneburg, the lakefront resort and predecessor of the famed Pontchartrain Beach. Whichever workhorse locomotive happened to pull the cacophonous cars down Elysian Fields earned the nickname “Smoky Mary,” an endearing sobriquet remarkably well-remembered today.

The operation preordained the avenue’s lengthening. As early as 1834, the name *Elysian Fields* or *Champs Elysées* would appear on maps across all five miles, as planners aligned new faubourgs to its flanks. The Faubourg Marigny



Overlay of historic map of Port Pontchartrain with modern image of Lakefront end of Elysian Fields. Analysis and graphic by Richard Campanella

itself spawned a Faubourg Nouveau Marigny on account of the railroad; this would become today's St. Roch and Seventh Ward neighborhoods.

For decades, most coastwise travelers from Pensacola, Mobile, and Biloxi would arrive at New Orleans not by sailing up the Mississippi, but by steamboating through the Rigolets to Port Pontchartrain, at which point they would board the Pontchartrain Railroad and chug across the backswamp. For thousands of nineteenth-century travelers, Elysian Fields Avenue was truly the gateway to New Orleans.

All the while, new subdivisions in the Seventh and Eighth wards were laid out using Elysian Fields as their Y-axis. The swamp by the early 1900s would be drained, and new residents by the thousands started moving into greater Gentilly, most of which, too, adhered to Dubreuil's spatial precedent.

More homeowners meant that a noisy locomotive and its traffic-blocking tracks would be increasingly viewed as a nuisance. Neighbor complaints, plus the rise of autos and buses, sealed the fate of the old conveyance. In 1930, the Louisville & Nashville Railroad Company, which had owned the line since 1880 and kept it running mostly to preserve its route franchise, began relinquishing control of the neutral ground to the city. On the evening of March 15, 1932, Smoky Mary made her last run.

Tracks would be removed by the 1950s, but their influence on the cityscape would be permanent. Today, around 45,000 people residing between St. Bernard and Franklin avenues live their daily lives within an urban framework directly attributable to Elysian Fields Avenue's axial position, established by decisions made in 1830, in 1805, and the 1740s.

Such is the city we live in.

A few traces of Smoky Mary's route remain. Premier among them is Elysian Fields' spacious neutral ground, made wide for the rails and canal, and its paucity of mature trees, due to the presence of tracks into the 1950s. At the lake end still stands the circa-1855 Milneburg Lighthouse, now landlocked, which guided vessels to the awaiting train at Port Pontchartrain. And on the neutral ground by North Roman may be found a stone slab etched with the Roman numeral "I," meaning one mile from the river. This is the last of the five milestones along the Pontchartrain's tracks, and now stands as a sort of tombstone for Western America's first railroad.

Elysian Fields Avenue may be viewed as a microcosm of the urban developmental of New Orleans—the full span of the city's history, geography, architecture and demography, all represented along a single boulevard.

Yet despite its colorful history and spacious dimensions, Elysian Fields Avenue feels rather mundane today, with few full-canopy trees, little public art, and hardly any landscaping. There are no Mardi Gras parades to speak of, no streetcars, and only a few monuments. Its riverfront foot—high, dry, scenic, convenient to two of the city's most desirable neighborhoods—is nonetheless bleak and nondescript, a far cry from the picturesque scene Woiseri painted 215 years ago.

Changes are afoot, and Elysian Fields may figure prominently in them. Zoning adjustments and a booming real estate market will likely bring a higher population density to the Marigny riverfront. The St. Claude Streetcar line has spurred development at its intersection with Elysian Fields, where the Robert's supermarket has recently reopened, and perhaps someday the oft-discussed spur line down to the river will come to fruition.

Speaking of the river, the ongoing transfer of the Gov. Nicholls Street Wharf from Port to city control will lay the groundwork for the extension of Crescent Park at the foot of Elysian Fields. And at its head, the Lake Pontchartrain Basin Foundation's vision for restoring and reopening Pontchartrain Beach, currently on hold but still alive, might once again put recreational opportunities at the terminus of the avenue. Last but not least, Elysian Fields' busy intersection with Gentilly Boulevard, home to one of the city's larger commercial districts amid an array of interesting cemeteries, as well as the beautiful campus of Dillard University nearby, brims with enhancement opportunities.

What potential do you see in Elysian Fields Avenue? What improvements might you propose to bring the grandeur of its name to its streetscape? Alternately, is it just fine as it is, its lack of self-awareness and unballyhooped history the very essence of its appeal?



The riverside "foot" of Elysian Fields (left) today, where the sawmill canal once flowed starting in the 1740s, and the lakeside end, at the c1855 Milneburg Lighthouse at UNO, which was offshore until the Lakefront Improvement Project filled the area in the late 1920s. Photos by Richard Campanella.

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