

“A Forest of Masts:” The Port of New Orleans in Antebellum Times

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Security regulations and a massive concrete floodwall now isolate the people of New Orleans from the Port of New Orleans, despite the reality that that residents live as close as a thousand feet from global shipping activity. While that proximity is as old as the city, the current barricaded condition is something new. Until containerization arrived in the 1960s and the floodwall went up in subsequent decades, the port was no mystery to locals; pedestrians could freely stroll the wharves — if, that is, they managed to get past the tangle of railroad tracks, sheds and warehouses dominating the riverfront since the late 1800s.

Prior, and since colonial times, “the levee” — or “the quay,” “wharf,” or “landing,” as the downtown riverfront was variously called, lay seamlessly integrated with the front of town, and people would enjoy its breezes and bustle like a tourist attraction.

Nearly every educated person in the Western world knew about the New Orleans levee; it ranked as famous, and as notorious, as the city itself. There a visitor would see “the most extraordinary medley of...[c]raft of every possible variety,” as one spectator put it in 1832. By one estimate, the operation “rated...as the fourth port in point of commerce in the world, exceeded only by London, Liverpool, and New York.” By another, it represented “the leading export city of the United States and one of the leading ports of the world.”

How did it all work?

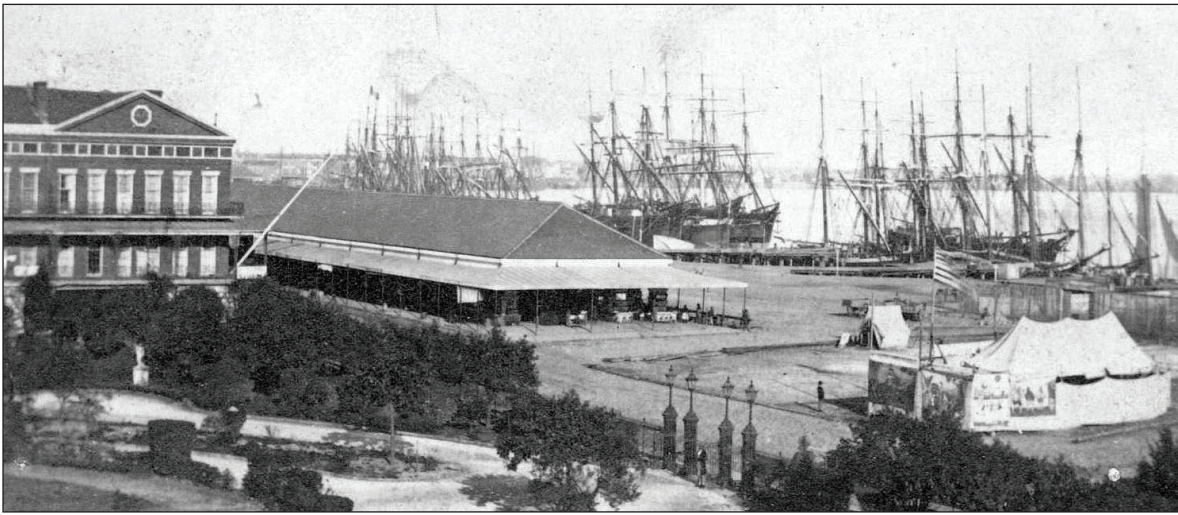
Maps of the era show scores of “docks” protruding into the river every hundred feet for three miles. The docks adjoined the “wharf,” a plank-covered platform over 120 feet wide, thousands of feet long, and open to the sky. The wharf overlaid the artificial levee, which lay at the crest of the natural levee, upon which most of the city was built. On the city side of the wharf ran a road — Levee and New Levee streets, now Decatur and

North and South Peters — where people, beasts and cargo moved back and forth freely.

Masts, spider-web-like rigging, plumes of smoke and steam darkened the downtown riverfront, while smaller craft clustered along the upper and lower fringes. A specialized nautical lexicon — part English or Old English, part French, part American — could be heard: there were ships (three masts, ocean-going), barks, brigs (two masts), something called hermaphrodite brigs, schooners (one mast), and sloops. Rafts could be barges, flatboats, and keelboats, the last of these designed to be rowed against the current. There were also feluccas, galliots, ketchers, luggers, pettiauger, brigantines and bat-teau. Then there were steam-powered vessels: steamboats and steamships; steam ferries, steam tugs and steam schooners.

Crews moored vessels to the docks and arranged “flying bridges” to discharge cargo. Additional ships tied up to docked vessels in parallel “tiers,” two, four, sometimes six deep. Waiting vessels anchored 60 fathoms (360 feet) away, fighting currents and evading traffic. The curving river dealt different hydrological challenges to various banks: those above the *Place d’Armes* (now Jackson Square) grappled with sand bars; those below constantly battled bank erosion. The St. Mary batture, subject of lingering legal discord throughout the antebellum era, created so wide a beach along lower Tchoupitoulas Street that the city in 1819 had to invest in “flying-bridges [for] unloading of commodities aboard the flat-boats.”

Port conflicts were a source of constant public griping. Why are some agents allowed to hog wharf space with sloppily arranged deposits? Why are certain captains permitted to impede others by mooring inconveniently? Why are some wharves rotting, unplanked, insufficiently extended, or not properly



These three images of the New Orleans riverfront, captured by Sgt. Marshall Dunham of the New York 159th Regiment during 1862-1865, show a level of shipping activity much slowed by the federal occupation and the ongoing Civil War. During antebellum times, hundreds of vessels of dozens of types circulated along the Mississippi riverfront daily, attended by thousands of dockworkers and mariners. Marshall Dunham Collection (details), LSU Libraries- Special Collections Division.

numbered? How can those flatboats get away with “remain[ing] permanently on the beach as fruit stores and haunts for villains of every cast and color[?]” “The committee of the city council on levees,” growled one editorialist in 1835, “appear[s] to be very negligent.”

Everyday grievances aside, port activity — a chief source of government revenue in this era before income taxes — was carefully regulated by federal and local officials. The Collector of Customs, a prestigious presidential appointment, represented the federal government. He collected duties owed by foreign importers, controlled outbound vessels and policed against smugglers, pirates, filibusters, illegal slave traders and rumrunners. Locally, the City Council enacted regulations while the governor appointed a Harbor Master to enforce those rules and oversee day-to-day operations. Among his charges were the skilled ship pilots who boarded incoming sea vessels at Pilot Town (Balize) and guided them up to the city, a practice that continues today. Also beneath the Harbor Master were the Wharfinger, who collected duties from ocean-going sailing ships, and a Wharfmaster, who did the same for interior vessels.

Abundant regulations, and a rotating horde of transient sailors willing to test them, kept the wardens busy. Every ship had to have at least one capable hand — by law, a white man — on board at all times. No ballast, wastewater, pitch or tar could be discharged. On-board kitchen fires were closely regulated, as were cargoes of hay, gunpowder, and other combustibles. Discharging of cannon and firearms was forbidden. Excessively heavy cargo like granite pillars or lead bars could not be piled upon wooden planks. The Master Warden, aware that time meant money, ensured that port calls were quick and efficient. Moor, unload, load and depart. No dillydallying. No vending. No upkeep, repairs or tinkering. Dismantle and remove broken-down craft immediately. Unload merchandise swiftly, arrange it unobtrusively and carry it off after no more than five days. Penalties included steep fines or seizure.

Behind the wardens were teams of inspectors for flour, beef and pork, tobacco and other perishables. Inspectors seized damaged goods, examined vessels and verified weights and measures, as duties were based on tonnage. In 1830, a sea vessel would pay a \$12 wharfage fee for 100 tons of cargo, and up to \$60 for over 450 tons. Steamboats owed \$6-\$12 for 80-160 tons. A loaded flatboat, regardless of weight, paid \$6.

Behind the chief officials toiled a much larger workforce of agents, factors, brokers, traders, merchants, lawyers, bankers and others stewarding the transfer of wealth. When things went awry — when vessels sunk, crews were robbed, cargo went bad or livestock died — shippers trekked over to a notary public to file a Ship Captain’s Protest. This document evidenced the legitimacy of the loss to the captain’s clients, insulating him from legal action and enabling them to file an insurance claim. Thousands of Ship Captain’s Protests lay filed in the New Orleans Notarial Archives today.

The port never closed. While activity waned in late summer and early autumn and waxed in winter and spring, vessels nonetheless arrived year-round, seven days a week. Wharf action slowed down on Sundays to about one-third normal levels. Nightfall precluded much activity, but lanterns, torches, gaslights and moonlight allowed shipmen to squeeze additional hours of work out of their port call. It must have been a dazzling sight.

Bustling traffic, limited space and cargo of varying value meant officials had to regulate where certain vessels were allowed to dock, called a “station.” Generally, ocean-going sailing ships arriving from the Gulf of Mexico were assigned to the downriver stations, while river vessels bearing bulk commodities from the “upcountry” docked in upriver stations.

The advent of the steamboat in 1812 brought a major new player to the riverfront stage. By 1819 they totaled 287 per year, and by 1830, steamboats arrived at a pace of one per hour, with 50 docked at any one time. Where should this lucrative fleet dock? The City Council in 1824 adopted a sweeping new ordinance which divvied up stations with an eye toward ethnic settlement patterns and political tensions. On the American side of town, ocean-going vessels were stationed at and below Common Street, while steamboats controlled the docks from Common to Poydras, and barges, flatboats and keelboats up to St. Joseph. On the Creole side of town, steamboats controlled from Elysian Fields down to Mandeville, but, with permission, could also dock along a 460-foot-wide flatboat landing at Conti Street. Another stretch by the French Market allowed for “smaller vessels doing the coasting trade” to deliver foodstuffs, while an 80-foot stretch at Conti was reserved for ferry landing. Ocean-going sailing ships controlled most other sections of the Old City riverfront, creating a spectacle visitors often described as a “forest of masts.”

Flatboats, the notorious bearers of nuisance-emitting cargo, required special handling. Those carrying “horses, hogs, oxen, or other animals” or rotting cargo “emitting disagreeable odors” were exiled to the nuisance wharf. Citizens themselves regularly dumped “filth in the current” using ramps built of recycled flatboat timber. The city acknowledged that “the banks... are in a most unsanitary condition,” replete with “dead animals and an accumulation of filth whose pestilential effluvia may be prejudicial to public health.” Its solution: task “the negroes of the city work shop to empty and clean said river bank...”

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continued from page 17 Daily dynamics played out along the riverfront among buyers and sellers, transients and locals, shipmen of various stripes, competing laborer castes and classes, and between all of the above and the dues-collecting, rules-enforcing officials. Inevitably, conflicts and tensions arose. One flashpoint involved “retailing flatboats,” in which boatmen vended cargo directly to residents, a practice that enraged local merchants, who paid high rent and taxes only to lose business to the loathsome squatters. After flatboatmen sold their cargo, they proceeded to dismantle their vessels — another flashpoint, as this noisy task cluttered valuable wharf space endlessly, at the expense of incoming. The scrap flatboat wood went into everything from banquettes to barge-board cottages, and much of it survives today.

For all the discord, order prevailed at the Port of New Orleans; there was too much money at stake to allow chaos to reign, and preventing it

from doing so required constant diligence. Negotiating the Mississippi’s tricky currents amid heavy traffic, shifting winds, sandy bottoms, and cantankerous steam engines tested the very best captains as they awaited their berth, tied up, paid dues, unloaded, conducted business, serviced their vessel, loaded, and departed — all while avoiding danger, vice and virus. Benefits far outweighed costs, and more and more vessels called — making overcrowding yet another pressure point. An editorialist in 1831 called on authorities “to look to widening the...wharfage and the landing of articles [to handle] immense additional tonnage.... The evil, of want of room and convenience, is felt sufficiently at this moment.”

However complex port activity was in the 1820s-1830s, it would only heighten, as New Orleans in 1836 separated into three semi-autonomous municipalities and tripled nearly all its functions, including port management. After reunification in

1852 came even busier days, when port activity seemed destined to fulfill the circa-1820s predictions that New Orleans would “one day become the greatest [on the] continent, perhaps even in the world.”

But Northern canals and railroads by that time had been quietly diverting much traffic away from the lower Mississippi, and after war clouds gathered on the horizon in 1861, the great New Orleans quay would never quite be the same.

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