

The St. Louis and the St. Charles

New Orleans' Legacy of Showcase Exchange Hotels

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NO ACCOUNT OF 19TH-CENTURY New Orleans' Creole-Anglo ethnic rivalry is complete without reference to each group's showcase hotel. For the Creoles, it was the St. Louis, in the heart of the French Quarter; for the Anglos, it was the St. Charles, in the epicenter of the Faubourg St. Mary, or "American sector," today's CBD.

Plenty other places to board could be found, and they served visitors of all classes. Many functioned as "exchanges," which in addition to lodging provided guests with financial services and meeting spaces, mostly notably for auctions, not to mention dining, drinking, entertaining and recreation facilities. But the St. Louis and the St. Charles topped them all, in grandeur and amenities, and either or both of their respective sites have hosted iconic lodges nonstop from 1837 to today, 178 years and counting.

The St. Louis

Architect J. N. B de Pouilly, commissioned by the Improvement Bank in 1835, originally designed the St. Louis Hotel and Exchange to occupy an entire block in the heart of the original city. The Panic of 1837 forced a reduction to slightly more than half that size, with the frontage along the lower side of St. Louis Street between Chartres and Royal. But grand it was nonetheless, especially with Exchange Alley leading from Canal Street all the way to its doorway.

For its first two years, the St. Louis (1838) would form, according to the *Daily Picayune*, "the pride of New Orleans and of Louisiana, the wonder and admiration of strangers, the most gorgeous edifice in the Union," featuring a "magnificent hall where merchants congregated, the saloon where beauty gathered for the dance, the elegantly furnished hotel, the bar room, the billiard room [and] numerous offices and stores..." The journalist wrote in the past tense because a terrible conflagration the previous morning, February 11, 1840, had completely leveled the building, its timber-supported rotunda collapsing spectacularly.

So brisk had been the hotel's business that the owners speedily rebuilt, this time funded by the adjacent Citizen's Bank at a cost of \$600,000 and executed with fire-resistant components such as a lightweight rotunda composed of a honeycomb of hollow clay pots. "We rejoice in seeing its lofty dome soaring

again to the sky," beamed the *Picayune* in May 1841, "and we hope to hail it... once more a proud architectural boast of New Orleans."

For the next 20 years, the St. Louis would form the nucleus of Creole business and society. Auctions of every conceivable form of property, including enslaved human beings, were conducted beneath the 88-foot-high dome surrounded by towering Tuscan columns, like a scene out of ancient times.

The Civil War altered the St. Louis' destiny. The hotel had closed, its rooms having been used by troops, and in 1874 the building came into the hands of the New Orleans National Building Association, which promptly sold it to the State of Louisiana. For the next eight years, the aging edifice became the *de facto* Louisiana state capitol. It returned to its original use in the 1890s, when, as the Hotel Royal, it featured a ladies entrance on Royal, a restaurant under the rotunda, a kitchen behind it, and a steam laundry in the adjoining Greek Revival edifice (facing Toulouse Street) of the now-defunct Citizens' Bank, funder of the earlier hotel.

With gradual divestment in the French Quarter, patronage of the Hotel Royal dried up, and the building found itself, according to a 1906 retrospective penned by Charles Patton Dimitry, in a state of "silence, neglect, emptiness and gloom." Tourists would explore its labyrinthine interior and, amid the ruins, come across vagrants and, on one occasion, a horse. After the Great Storm of 1915 further disheveled the landmark, the building was sold to the lowest bidder, the Samuel House Wrecking Company, which proceeded to dismantle it between October 1915 and early 1916. But for a few storefronts left standing along Chartres Street, the prime real estate would serve as nothing more than a salvage yard for decades to come.

After World War II, with tourism on the rise, the Vieux Carré Commission — which, despite its preservationist mission, worked closely with commercial interests in this era — floated the idea of a major new French Quarter hotel. According to a 1946 article in the *Old French Quarter News*, the Commission deemed there were "numerous potential sites and places where buildings could be torn down without any great loss to historic character of the quarter." One site was the salvage yard on St. Louis Street. The idea lay dormant until 1957, when the owner of the parcel, Edgar B. Stern, envisioned a major hotel for his

RIGHT: This 1852 lithograph by J.W. Hill and B.F. Smith, showing New Orleans from the top of St. Patrick Church, captures the circa-1837 St. Charles Hotel (dome at left) and the circa-1840 St. Louis Hotel (dome at center in distance) as they appeared just prior to the St. Charles' destruction by fire in 1851. Courtesy Library of Congress **ABOVE:** The third St. Charles Hotel, seen here from Canal Street four years after its 1896 opening, was demolished in 1974 and replaced ten years later by the Place St. Charles skyscraper. Courtesy Library of Congress





LEFT: The former St. Louis Hotel, built in 1840, is seen here in its declining years, a decade before its 1916 demolition. Note the cupola of the Girod (Napoleon) House at extreme right, and the roof of the Old French Opera House at extreme left. Courtesy Library of Congress

property. With assistance from Lester B. Kabacoff and the collaboration of Roger Sonnabend, chairman of the Hotel Corporation of America, a massive modern hotel arose in a style highly reminiscent of the circa-1840 St. Louis. The city's premier architectural historian and historical architect at the time, Samuel Wilson Jr., designed the exterior, while the comparably gifted Arthur Davis planned the interior.

The Royal Orleans Hotel opened in 1960, and, according to pioneer preservationist Mary Morrison, "exceeded everyone's expectations, [becoming] overnight practically, a very, very popular hotel." Demand was so high that architects three years later added a mansard roof with additional rooms and penthouse facilities, which the Vieux Carré Commission permitted on account of the antebellum predecessor's lofty dome. Wilson had also imbedded into the hotel's flank a fragment of the old storefronts left standing on Chartres Street, where may be seen today a palimpsest of the word "Exchange," the only remnant of the 1840 St. Louis Exchange Hotel.

The Royal Orleans does brisk business to this day.

The St. Charles

Six blocks upriver, on the second block of St. Charles Avenue on the American-dominated side of town, architects James Gallier, Sr. and (probably) Charles Dakin sketched plans for what would become one of the most splendid structures in the nation. The St. Charles Exchange Hotel, opened in 1837, bore a resemblance to the later-completed U.S. Capitol. Under its 185-foot dome and cupola, a landmark of the skyline and by far the highest point in town, were elegant accommodations and services catering to a mostly American clientele. Like the St. Louis, St. Charles guests could congregate, negotiate, dine, recreate, socialize and board, in luxury, all under one roof.

Hundreds of guests and workers, day and night, meant a constant presence of candles, oil lamps, calefaction and cooking pits. Hotels were therefore infamously prone to fire, as the owners of the original St. Louis could testify. Just before noon on January 18, 1851, a blaze broke out in the north wing beneath the eaves and spread faster than firemen could contain it, their hoses incapable of reaching so high. In a report written in real time, a *Picayune* journalist described "a scene of confusion that baffles description...with boarders... busy packing up...husbands looking for their wives, and wives wringing their hands in agony..." Winds shifted the flames southward, and upwardly they swept. "At 1 o'clock the dome fell in with a tremendous crash[;] the pride of our city gradually [became] a mass of ruins."

Attesting to its commercial success, the hotel was promptly rebuilt and reopened in January 1853 under the same name, and according to the *Picayune*, in "the same imposing architectural display that delighted every beholder of the old one" — only this time without the front steps and the costly dome. Like its predecessor, the hotel served as a focal point for Anglophones in St. Mary throughout the so-called "Golden Age" of the 1850s, and it bore silent witness to the subsequent Civil War, occupation, Reconstruction, and modernization.

But fire remained a risk. At 11 p.m. on April 28, 1894, a kitchen fire ignited wooden beams, spread laterally, and sent deadly smoke upward toward slumbering guests. Shortly after midnight, sections of the building began caving in, and by dawn only the massive columns and pediment remained. It was a harrowing sight, and the toll of four lives could have been much higher.

Once again, investors endeavored to rebuild, but only with the new safety technologies and higher standards of luxury. They sent architect Thomas Sully on a nationwide tour of comparable hotels, and, finding particular inspiration

in the Planters' Hotel in St. Louis (1894), Sully designed what the *Picayune* described as "a hotel containing all [the] latest modern conveniences, built especially for light, comfort and ventilation." The third St. Charles Hotel, with an Italian Renaissance aesthetic, opened just in time for Carnival, on February 1, 1896, and for the next eight decades, its reddish brick color, rooftop garden, 500 guestrooms, and arcade of street-level shops formed the veritable heart of the Central Business District. It was sold in 1959 to Sheraton for \$5 million and continued in service as the Sheraton-St. Charles.

By the 1970s, two factors put the third St. Charles in a defensive position. One was the rise of skyscraper hotels with all the latest amenities; the other was the petroleum industry, which exerted pressure for office and parking space in the CBD. In 1973, a local businessman partnered with an Italian financier to replace the aging lodge with what would have been a fourth hotel, 52 stories high, with 1080 guestrooms as well as office space. With the land title in their hands and zero preservation rules holding them back, they razed the 1896 building in 1974. (Two years later, the Planters' Hotel met the same fate in St. Louis.)

The lot remained empty until the Place St. Charles skyscraper, designed by Moriyma and Teshima Architects with The Mathes Group, was completed in 1984. Postmodern in style, Place St. Charles has a spacious triple-level veranda overlooking the avenue, ideal for viewing Mardi Gras parades, and boasts more stories (53) than any other building in the city (although One Shell Square's 51 stories rise higher, 697 feet to Place St. Charles' 645 feet). But initial plans for lodging fell by the wayside, and today Place St. Charles is home to finance, banking, legal and energy offices.

Thus ended the long history of lodging on the St. Charles site, even as it continues at the Royal Orleans on St. Louis Street — a dual hotelier legacy traceable, in one form or another, to 1837.

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ABOVE: The "Old Slave Block" under the rotunda of the St. Louis Hotel, where auctions were held in antebellum times. When this photograph was taken around 1906, tourists and vagrants would circulate freely in the ruinous interior. Courtesy Library of Congress