Before Storyville

Vice Districts in Antebellum New Orleans, Part I

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SAY “New Orleans” and “red-light district,” and Storyville usually comes to mind — for good reason. In operation from 1898 to 1917, that famous tenderloin district represents the city’s best example of a spatially confined and legally defined vice zone, and has been extensively documented by historians and depicted in literature and cinema.

But it was not the first. For nearly a century prior, the city boasted — or suffered — a number of other sub rosa spaces which formed organically, had soft edges, and operated at the margins of both the law and the city. From a preservationist point of view, practically nothing remains structurally of these spaces; indeed, there is hardly any historic memory of them: how many people think of O’Keefe or Girod streets in today’s Central Business District as being hotbeds of debauchery? In this two-part article, we look at the geography of the illicit sex, gambling and drinking trades in New Orleans during the antebellum years.

Abundant as it was, vice generally scattered itself hither and yon throughout New Orleans in the early 19th century. Grog shops and tippling houses, “caravanserai” (flop houses), music and dance halls, gambling dens and brothels popped up wherever demand and supply shook hands, and that meant most neighborhoods, if not most blocks. Yet spatial concentrations did exist, for the same reasons other industries form clusters and districts: to take advantage of a mutual client pool, for the convenience of supply chains and workers, to lower costs through economies of scale, and to maximize accessibility while minimizing scrutiny.

Police reports, court records, and news articles about illegal sex activity (1846-1862), gathered by the late Tulane historian Judith Kelleher Schafer and mapped by this researcher, show that most prostitution and its attendant indulgences occurred in three principal zones. One was located in middle-rear edge of town; another in the upper edge; and the third along the lower riverfront. When mapped, these zones dominated the periphery, rather than the core, of the antebellum metropolis.

In the First Municipality— that is, the French Quarter and Faubourg Tremé — the vice zone lay around the intersection of Customhouse (renamed Iberville in 1901) and Burgundy streets. Schafer unearthed at least 75 illegal sex reports from court records and other sources, many of them involving scores of arrests, with addresses on Customhouse, Burgundy, Dauphine, Conti, Bienville, Basin, Franklin and adjacent streets. Why here? This area lay behind the Old City — none too elegant, none too pricey, yet conveniently proximate to clients galore in the urban core. Better yet, the nearby Old Basin (Carondelet) Canal turning basin and its attendant industries, plus the popular Globe Ballroom, drew a steady stream of potential johns. Testifying to this area’s repute is the police blotter from a single day in 1853, when 54 brothel-keepers were arrested around Customhouse’s intersections with Burgundy and Dauphine. Two years later, police detained an additional 53 prostitutes in the same area — “nymphs de pave,” the press called them, lamenting that they were more sinned against than sinning, [their] woe-begone appearance aptly illustrative of their fallen fortunes. Another article described the whores of the Dauphine, Burgundy and Conti area as “the originators of all kinds of scandal.” Potation usually accompanied prostitution, so it is probable that a hefty number of grog shops operated here as well. So prevalent was illicit sex in and around Customhouse Street that a number of doctors and pharmacists specializing in the treatment of sexually transmitted diseases set up their practices here. This vice area would later form the Tango Belt, a competitor of sorts with Storyville and a predecessor of today’s Bourbon Street.

In the Second Municipality (today’s Warehouse District, Central Business District, Superdome area and Lower Garden District), a crescent-shaped geography of sin spanned from the rears of Gravier and Perdido streets, up Philippa (now University Place, O’Keefe, and Dryades), and down Girod and Julia to the Mississippi River. Therein could be found the raffish back-of-town near Charity Hospital, the turning basin of the New Basin Canal and its leatherneck workforce, the hard-labor projects and industries along...
the semi-rural periphery, and above all, the uptown flatboat wharf along the Mississippi River. From the 1790s to the 1860s, thousands of young Western males guided flatboats down from the upcountry to this dock, whereupon they unloaded hinterland cargo, vended it, dismantled the vessel, and sold the scrap wood. Flush with cash, the boatmen usually treated themselves to a few days or weeks "fooloose" in the big city, liberated from farm toil and nagging kin and free to "see the elephant." (In frontier lexicon, "to see the elephant" meant to witness the utmost and live the experience to the fullest. Popular from the 1840s to around 1900, the expression may trace its origins to traveling carnivals which would hold out their most popular exhibit, a live elephant, as a climax. The phrase later took on darker connotations, meaning death or violence, but in this era, it was usually used salaciously, and young travelers often spoke of "seeing the elephant" in New Orleans' vice districts.)

Transient boatmen formed a substantial source of such demands. Venues gratifying their desires opened immediately along the flatboat wharf (present-day South Peters Street), in part because the lads utilized their docked vessels as rent-free basecamps. That custom became a flashpoint for merchants, citizens and authorities who saw the riverine encampments as both a physical and a moral nuisance. "The flat-boats permanently moored [on] the levee... are the dens of sharpers [cheating gamblers] by day, and robbers and murderers at night," complained the Bee in 1835, "yet not the slightest precaution is used." An earlier visitor reported seeing flatboats "used as buckster shops, dwellings [and] pigpens..." Others disdained the mile-long "line of gambling-shops" formed by the flatboats on Sundays, not to mention the boatmen themselves, who, by one springtime 1830 account, numbered "5000 or 6000," or ten percent of the entire city's population. Curious visitors in the early 1800s made a point of seeing the flatboat wharf in the same manner that even the most pious visitors today take a peek at Bourbon Street.

Once boatmen were finally crowbarred out of their floating lairs, they spilled into adjacent streets to seek affordable room and board. The high-rent arteries of the Second Municipality, such as St. Charles, Camp, and Magazine streets, generally eschewed the scruffy vagabonds. Back streets, however, were a different story: these semi-urbanized margins were a bit more forgiving, with their enticingly discreet and dimly lit shelters and refuges. To this area (mostly) young single male transients gravitated, with time on their hands, cash in their pockets, and anonymity in their identity. Phillippa Street bore witness to a remarkable concentration of brothels, particularly around Gravier, Perdido, and Girod, and with them were all the affiliated didoes, scams, and crimes.

The most adventurous males debouched in a sketchy purlieu known as "the Swamp." Located a dozen blocks inland from the flatboat wharf, where Julia and Girod petered out into the backswamp, this area took in all that civilized New Orleansians threw out: the eerie Girod Street Cemetery (1822); Charity Hospital and its pestilential environs, the Smokey Boscis, or darkened optics; and there are some who instinctively grasp their Nagging kin and free to "see the elephant."

To be continued in next month's issue: Gallatin Street and the Lorette Law

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