

“Ominous”

New Orleans’ Old Criminal Courts Building and a Brief History of Penal Architecture

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The Criminal Courts Building viewed from Elk Place, around 1906. Image courtesy Library of Congress

THE ADJECTIVE “OMINOUS” typically accompanies historical descriptions of the prisons of New Orleans’ past. Though the word does not necessarily express the architectural intentions of the city’s five major penal facilities, it does fairly well characterize the reputations they would earn. Chief among them was the Old Criminal Courts Building and Parish Prison, which dominated the downtown skyline from 1893 to 1949 (pictured above and right). But first, a brief history of prior penitentiaries.

A series of *calabooses*, under various jurisdictions and incarcerating everyone from escaped slaves and prisoners-of-war to petty thieves and murderers, operated directly behind the present-day Cabildo (1799) for the first hundred years of the city. By the 1820s, population density and economic prosperity made an inner-city prison impractical, and a new facility was erected seven blocks toward the swamp, on Orleans Street in the Faubourg Tremé (pictured top of next page). Consequently, the Cabildo’s calaboose was demolished and replaced by the Arsenal, although a police station and small jail remained on site into the early 1900s.

The geography of the new prison reflected a tendency in historic New Orleans to push stigmatized or otherwise unwanted features (prisons, hospitals, cemeteries, garbage dumps) out of the more empowered riverfront neighborhoods and toward the “back of town” near the swamp. The architecture of the new prison was nonetheless a bit more progressively informed. Designed by prominent local architects Joseph Pilié and A. Voilquin and built during 1831-1836, the compound occupied an entire block and bore a majestically austere Franco-Spanish aesthetic, featuring long arcades with arched openings, stuccoed walls, interior courtyards with galleries, and separate sections for different offenders and offenses. The design communicated strength and stern discipline to the streetscape, but not without touches of beauty, perhaps intended to signal mercy and rehabilitation: two graceful cupolas were set atop the hipped roofs, and sycamore trees were planted in front to soften the austerity.

Prison operations and conditions were hardly fiscal priorities for the city or the populace, and the Tremé parish prison soon took on an aura that was perfectly ominous. That reputation was further sullied when, in 1891, its walls and wardens failed to prevent an angry mob from entering and lynching 11 Italian men acquitted of the supposedly mob-associated murder of Police Chief David C. Hennessy. The incident provoked an international crisis between the United States and Italy and hastened efforts to replace the 60-year-old structure.

The city saw the need for a new prison as an opportunity to centralize judicial, constabulary and punitive functions, and in February 1892 issued a call for a challenging set of architectural proposals. On the square bounded by Gravier, Common (now Tulane Avenue), Basin (South Saratoga, now Loyola Avenue) and Franklin (now gone), authorities envisioned a complex with five interrelated programs: a parish prison with cells for 300 men and 50 women, plus “condemned cells,” a chapel, and a mortuary; a criminal courthouse complete with courtrooms and dozens of ancillary chambers for judges, attorneys, clerks and juries; a citywide headquarters for the Police Department; a First Precinct Police Station for the local neighborhood; and a Recorder’s Office to handle the bureaucracy generated by the agencies. “Particular attention,” read the request for proposals, “must be given to the ventilation and lighting of the entire premises, as well as full provision for water closet and sewerage and drainage with distinction for both sexes.” Indoor plumbing was new at the time, and the city wanted the latest amenities. Total expenditures would be \$350,000 for design, supervision and construction. As before, the prison complex would be located in what Louis Armstrong would describe as the “back-a-town” (others called it “the Battleground,” for its rampart vice). By this time, the swamp had receded and gritty neighborhoods now predominated all around.

The winner of the competition was Max A. Orlopp Jr., a Brooklyn-born German-American architect/builder based in Dallas who specialized in Richardson Romanesque-style brick and stone courthouses for Southern cities. Orlopp devised for New Orleans something that would stun the eye and cower any criminal. Wrote a *Times-Picayune* columnist, the design “reminds one of an old-time chateau or Norman country house, [with] circular towers rising in the center... castellated, with turrets,



The Criminal Courts tower, around 1906. Courtesy Library of Congress

battlements and slits for the archers.” “A closer view,” he added, “shows a sort of hybrid architecture, with a mixing of the Romanesque, the Gothic and the nondescript of hurried get-through-quick style of the later day.” High above was a reconnoitering clock tower visible for miles.

The design and siting of the complex, completed in 1893, were clearly intended to send a message of judicial power and social order, particularly to the tough neighborhoods of the Third and Fourth wards. Chinatown, known for its opium dens, sat directly across the street, and the vice zone that would become Storyville in 1898 lay only two blocks downriver, within the sightlines of the imposing — and ominous — tower.

Inside could be found all the proscribed programming except the Orleans Parish Prison, which was in an adjoining set of buildings on Gravier at Basin (now Loyola). To its rear was a fenced yard where, until a change in law moved executions to the state penitentiary, convicts were hanged, the last such spectacles in New Orleans history. Stylistically, the courthouse, prison, and dependencies were all unified by Orlopp’s “Romanesque...Gothic” design and salmon-red brickwork, such that the entire massing when viewed from a distance looked like one colossal citadel-city. It was quite a sight.

Then came to light a litany of problems which literally undermined Orlopp’s architectural display of power. Just as officials were settling into the new building, nearly half of City Council members, according to a *Times-Picayune* report, “were indicted for bribery and graft...in connection with the construction of the building.” News of the financial shenanigans were followed by reports of cracks developing in the walls and foundations of both the courthouse and prison. Floors tilted, doors stuck, and windows jammed. Something was wrong.

One wonders if Orlopp, who did most of his work in the interior South, did not understand the specialized requirements of New Orleans’ soft deltaic soils (he served as both designer and builder on this contract). But according to an 1892 report in *The American Architect and Building News*, the problem was not Orlopp but his client, and the fact that “the competition was held under one administration and the execution of the work left to its successors.” Confusion and incompetence, the reporters surmised, paved the way for a sloppy competition, hasty approval, design changes, budgetary shortfalls, misunderstandings galore, opportunities for corruption, and animus all around. “We can hardly understand how Mr. Orlopp deserves all that has been said against him,” the journal lamented, “except perhaps that he should be on his guard next time, and look before he leaps into such enticing opportunities.” Fiscal, political, and architectural troubles became indistinguishable, and the project became a fiasco.



The Old Parish Prison on Orleans Street in Tremé, started in 1831, is shown here in the 1890s just prior to its demolition. Courtesy Tulane Southeastern Architectural Archive

Worse, the facilities swiftly became obsolete. As the city expanded and new technologies such as radio communications and automobiles came to the task of policing, the headquarters found itself increasingly inadequate, not to mention leaky and listing. The new City Planning Commission in the 1920s, like its counterparts in the 1820s, came to feel this downtown location was inappropriate for incarceration, and employees inside wanted out. In 1931, prison and court functions were relocated to new facilities at Tulane and Broad, leaving only the precinct station in the 1893 building. Locals called it the “Old” Criminal Courts Building, despite that it was all of 40 years of age.

To add injury to insult, further deterioration necessitated the humiliating removal of the landmark tower in 1940, leaving a rambling hulk used for ministerial banalities like permitting and driver’s licenses. The building became something of a city joke when, in 1948, “hoboes” were discovered living — rather sumptuously, and for six years — in “the ancient catacombs under the old criminal courts building at Tulane and S. Saratoga,” which a *Times-Picayune* journalist dubbed “Hotel de Bastille.”

Unloved by citizens and a liability to the city, the complex was unceremoniously dismantled during Christmas and New Year’s 1949-1950. As a measure of the building’s unpopularity, Mayor de Lesseps “Chep” Morrison proudly cited its demolition as evidence that his administration truly cared about the adjoining neighborhoods. Later in his administration, the entire “back-a-town” of Louis Armstrong’s childhood, including his birthplace on Jane Alley and the footprint of the penal complex, would be declared a slum and targeted for a massive urban renewal project. Out of this came today’s Civic Center, including City Hall, Duncan Plaza, and the Public Library.

The 1931 Orleans Parish Prison on 531 South Broad would, like its predecessors, also earn an ominous mystique, and by the 1960s, the City Planning Commission called for a modern replacement at Gravier at South White. That prison, opened in the late 1970s, swiftly earned a reputation as among the worst in the nation, and was itself replaced recently amid a growing nationwide debate on incarceration — in a place regularly described as the most incarcerated city, state, and nation on earth.

As for the circa-1893 courthouse and prison, their footprints today lie beneath the Main Branch of the New Orleans Public Library and the adjacent green space plus the lakeside half of the widened Loyola Avenue. To get a sense of the lost citadel, New Orleanians now have to travel to Max Orlopp’s home base of Dallas, where the architect had designed another turreted Richardson Romanesque courthouse. Affectionately known as Old Red, it is now a city museum — and anything but ominous.

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View of the entire penal complex from downtown, looking up Tulane Avenue at right, around 1900. Courtesy Tulane Southeastern Architectural Archive

