

# A Clubby Sort of Town

## *Chess, Checkers, and Whist, 1880-1935*

By Richard Campanella  
Tulane School of Architecture

**I**F, as Alexis de Tocqueville observed in 1835, Americans “made associations” for every conceivable reason — “to give entertainments, to found seminaries [and] churches, to diffuse books, [to establish] hospitals, prisons, and schools” — then New Orleans was a veritable city of associations, clubs, societies, krewes, institutes, and fraternities of all types. “Private clubs have played an important part in...New Orleans’ social life,” commented the authors of the 1938 WPA *New Orleans City Guide*, adding that “in former days the lines of social caste were more sharply drawn, and in no phase of social life was this more apparent than in the membership roster of the exclusive clubs.”

Before television usurped people’s evenings, hundreds such organizations operated locally, meeting on any given night throughout the social season, and some were prosperous enough to occupy landmark buildings on prominent thoroughfares. Along with religious institutions, they formed the organizational framework of civil society, and their pursuits went beyond faith and fête: prior to the era of government involvement, their members provided much of the social welfare for the city’s indigents, orphans, elderly, and infirm.

Such import has since waned, but to this day, New Orleans is a clubby sort of town — clubs of the widespread variety, such as Rotary and Kiwanis, as well as the locally distinctive: old-line krewes like Rex and Comus, ladies’ societies such as Le Petit Salon and The Orléans Club, men’s clubs like the Boston and Pickwick, the Autocrat and Young Men Illinois clubs in the black Creole community, and the social aid and pleasure clubs (benevolent societies) and Mardi Gras Indian tribes among the African American population.

The club behind this featured building on the corner of Canal and Baronne was a gentlemen’s social and literary fraternity first organized in 1880 and formally dedicated in 1882, to “promote the knowledge and encourage the development of the scientific games of Chess, Checkers and Whist[;] the cultivation of literature and science...and thirdly the regulation of social intercourse and amusement among the members.” After meeting in a series of provisional homes, members of Chess, Checkers and Whist settled into the Perry House on the corner of Baronne and Canal, which was leased to the club for an annual rent of \$3,600. A stately series of row buildings in the French style, the Perry House had been erected after the 1850 demolition of the Louisiana State House and previously a predecessor of Charity Hospital (1815).

The club, which had affiliates in other American cities, reflected a boom in



the popularity of board games in the late 1800s. Postbellum industrialization had augmented the size of the middle class and the affluence of the upper class, which in turn expanded the amount of time for recreation and socializing. Domestic space became less central to these leisurely pursuits, what with streetcar lines and electrification, and Americans were more inclined to venture out for what sociologist Ray Oldenburg would later describe as “third places” — pleasant and fulfilling social spaces outside of home (one’s “first” place) and work (the second).

Checkers and the now-rare card game of whist topped the list of popularity, and if New Orleans was a club town, it was certainly also a chess town, birthplace and home of world-famous chess master Paul Morphy (1837-1884). Just about any news of chess tournaments in turn-of-the-century New Orleans involved Chess, Checkers and Whist, and the club welcomed a steady stream of international players and their entourages. Reading and lectures on literature,



ABOVE: Detail from 1922 aerial photo of the of former Chess, Checkers, and Whist Club from a private collection. TOP: Chess Checker and Whist Club in 1903, courtesy Library of Congress



LEFT: Nighttime during Carnival by John Teunisson, photo undated. Gift of John Norris Teunisson. Courtesy of the Louisiana State Museum ABOVE: Bourbon Street site in 1935 by Charles L. Franck. Courtesy The Charles L. Franck Studio Collection at The Historic New Orleans Collection, Acc. No. 1979.325.1790

geography, history and science were also favored activities in the clubhouse, making it the equivalent of the book clubs and discussions groups we have today. The organization, which at one point had over a thousand members, proudly claimed what the *New York Times* described as “one of the most valuable libraries in the world,” including Morphy’s archives and memorabilia.

All was lost one night in January 1890, when a fire broke out in a humble oyster stand wedged in the Baronne Street alley behind the club. The loss of irreplaceable contents was heartbreaking, but the club’s membership, which read like a who’s who of the city’s aristocracy, endeavored to persevere — and had the money to do so. “The [destroyed] building...is one of the most desirable sites in New-Orleans,” explained *The Times*, as it was situated “in the clubhouse neighborhood, and without doubt the most elegant and costly club edifice in the South will rise from its ashes.”

They were right. Shortly after the fire, a handsome Victorian Italianate replacement, distinctive for its corner cupola, finials and ornate window treatments was constructed on the same site. The club negotiated a \$5,000 annual lease with its owner, Bertrand Beer, and for the next 30 years held its tournaments and amusements here. Members also used its ballroom and wrap-around gallery for Carnival festivities, as most club members were also krewe members. Two of the more notable events in the club’s history were the 1916 and 1919 visits of Cuban chess master José Capablanca, who treated members to a week of lectures and “individual and peripatetic play.” The building also generated income through rental of storefront units and other spaces.

By the 1910s, Canal Street was becoming a bit too congested and pricey for Victorian-style gentlemanly leisure. The owner of the building renewed the club’s lease at \$10,000 per year, double the original rent, and when it rose again to \$12,500, the club decided to buy their own home. At first members eyed a smaller structure further up Baronne Street, next to Immaculate Conception, but instead in 1919 they bought part of the circa-1892 Cosmopolitan Hotel on the first block of Bourbon Street for \$215,000 (see March 2016 *Preservation in Print* for an article on this building).

The old clubhouse at Canal and Baronne took on new tenants and came to be known as the Beer Building. Investors eyed the lucrative corner location for other uses, particularly with the new Hotel Grunewald high-rise (now the Roosevelt Hotel) next door and the Maison Blanche Building across Canal, with its dozens of doctor’s and dentist’s offices upstairs. Missing its signature corner cupola in its latter years, the old Chess, Checkers and Whist Club was demolished in 1937 and replaced the following year by the streamlined Art Deco-style Walgreen’s, which aimed to fill the pharmaceutical prescriptions of the many medical offices across the street. It has been in business ever since, a flagship location of the national pharmacy chain.

Chess, Checkers and Whist continued at its Bourbon Street address over the next 15 years. But during that time some key first-generation club leaders

died — like many volunteer organizations, the few held together the many — and new members failed to fill their shoes or match their numbers. The halcyon era of Tocqueville’s “associations” had plateaued if not peaked by this era, as movies, radio, dance halls and other evening options increasingly competed for people’s leisure time. Operating a large building in prime real estate became harder to pull off in the spare time of even the rich.

In 1935, the club’s contents were auctioned off and the organization folded. Its Bourbon Street high-rise was later demolished for the expansion of a Woolworth’s; today, the Astor Crowne Plaza Hotel (2000) occupies the space.

No longer is America the “nation of joiners” it once was, as argued by Robert D. Putnam in his influential 2000 book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. Yet New Orleans seems to defy the national trend, retaining scores of krewes, societies and clubs, many of them well over a century old and active as ever.

Sadly, Chess, Checkers, and Whist is not among them.

*Richard Campanella, a geographer with the Tulane School of Architecture, is the author of Bienville’s Dilemma, Lincoln in New Orleans, Geographies of New Orleans, Bourbon Street: A History, and Lost New Orleans, from which this material was adapted. Campanella may be reached through <http://richcampanella.com>, [rcampane@tulane.edu](mailto:rcampane@tulane.edu), and @nolacampanella.*

**BELL | ARCHITECTURE** APC

Michael J. Bell, FAIA  
[bellarchitecture.net](http://bellarchitecture.net)