

“SO UNSAVORY A SMELL”

Managing Streets, Utilities, and Municipal Services in Historic New Orleans, Part I: The Colonial Era

By Richard Campanella
Photos by Richard Campanella

SIDEWALKS on selected French Quarter streets are undergoing reconstruction in anticipation for Super Bowl 2013. That's bad short-term news for Quarter residents, businesses and motorists, good news for everyone in the long term, and a great opportunity for aficionados of municipal history. Why? Because excavations in this nearly three-century-old neighborhood upturn interesting visual evidence of attempts of our forebears to make peace with soft deltaic soils by draining, planking, leveling, paving, cleaning, illuminating, repairing and managing city streets. You'll see fragments of soft red river bricks and hard clay lake bricks, rangia and oyster shells, a layer of ancient paving stones, an occasional rough-hewn wooden board recycled

once-high, now-dried groundwater have made street management an additional challenge here ever since Adrien Pauger first laid out the rectilinear arteries of today's French Quarter. Like today, street repair in colonial New Orleans required constant attention.

A small and largely improvisational French colonial government meant oftentimes residents were tasked with helping develop or maintain urban infrastructure. Officials in the 1730s, for example, mandated that proprietors dig drainage ditches five pieds from their lots, to dry out a corridor as a primitive sidewalk. Few complied and even fewer mastered local hydrology, and ended up creating back-upped and overflowing pools. Intersections were particularly problematic in



Saucier's *Carte particulière du cours du fleuve St. Louis*, made around 1750, depicts relationships among topography, hydrology, soils, drainage patterns, and the street grid of colonial-era New Orleans. Detail courtesy Library of Congress.

of France himself, informed recently of conditions in New Orleans by ordonnateur Edme Gatien Salmon, sympathized with inhabitants of this aquatic environ who were obliged to “dig little ditches in front of their houses, one or two feet in width by a foot or a foot and a half in depth in order to drain off the water that seeps through the levee [or] from the rains which are frequent...” Because elevations diminished away from the river, the ditches had to be excavated longitudinally to usher runoff toward the woods. Thus, “these ditches cross the streets” forced “inhabitants [to] build bad wooden bridges which must be repaired at least every year...” As financial officer and paymaster, Salmon proposed constructing three varieties of brick bridges, together with brick-lined drainage ditches, but his plan might have proven unpopular once white residents realized it would be funded by, according to a letter written by the king to Salmon and city founder Bienville, a tax of “five livres per head of negroes.”

Spanish administrators inherited New Orleans' street problems from the French, and drainage remained at the top of the list. Records of the Spanish Cabildo (City Hall) in the 1780s-1790s are replete with discussions of puentes (“bridges”), wooden paving planks built across cross-street drainage ditches to give drayage and pedestrians dry passage “thus avoiding the odor of corrupted and stagnant waters.” Authorities mandated that property owners were responsible for constructing puentes in front of their properties, but widespread noncompliance forced the Cabildo to let the work to city contractors (publicans) funded by property owners, a tax levied on cart proprietors or by the Cabildo itself. A typical New Orleans street in this era constituted packed earth paralleled by ditches and banquettes and lined with rustic cottages. On it were pedestrians, frolicking children, stray dogs, occasional livestock, the Cabildo-paid town crier, and peddlers offering, in sing-song French Creole, everything from “fresh beef,



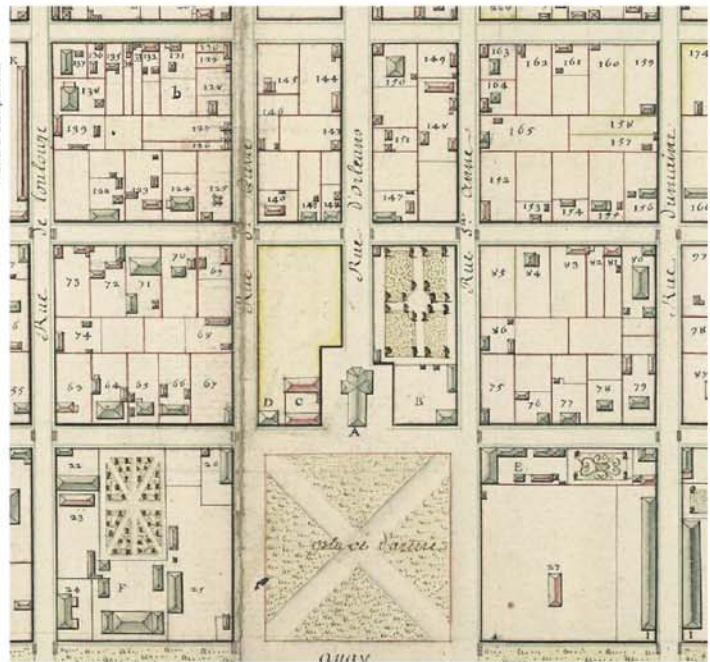
Utility cuts in the French Quarter may be a source of frustration to motorists, but they provide visual insights into hundreds of years of municipal history and physical geography. This ditch was excavated at the corner of Royal and St. Peter in 2003.

from a barge or flatboat, and more recent strata of concrete and asphalt. What you're not seeing is an intricate network of electrical and gas lines, water and sewerage mains, and wires and optical fibers that are also buried, and that must be handled with care when repairs are made. Our finely textured alluvium, abundant rainfall and

this regard, as filthy water puddled deeply and backed up into gutters. Stagnant watery ditches were a source of great nuisance and inconvenience throughout colonial times and necessitated the development of raised wooden walkways, banquettes, in lieu of earthen sidewalks. According to historian Marcel Giraud, the King



Above: Excavations at the World War II Museum earlier this year revealed brickwork from the Delord-Sarpy House, built around 1815 in a colonial style and demolished in 1957. Right: *Plan de la Nouvelle Orleans telle qu'elle estoit au mois de decembre 1731*, by Gonichon, depicts the ditches and wooden bridges that scored early colonial-era New Orleans streets. Detail courtesy Library of Congress.



fresh pork, salted meat and sausages...mutton, venison...rice, fresh and dry vegetables" to "wild fowl of all kinds and fresh fish." Foodstuffs that went bad en route were unceremoniously dumped in the gutters to rot.

Hoofs, feet, wheels, weather and water eroded streets unevenly. In response, the city tasked publicans to re-grade the streets, using fill and a water-level device to ensure proper inclinations for drainage. Grading was also required to shore up the elevation of the blocks such that runoff flowed into the gutters. This placed a premium on sediment, a scarce and treasured resource (to this day) in this flat and silty land. Citizens preferred to excavate dirt as close as they could find it, robbing Peter to pay Paul. The problem, of course: "pools will be formed and the water will become stagnant which is detrimental to the public health." So the Cabildo required that residents "bring [earth] from the outskirts of the city, instead of...the central section...for the construction of houses or for repairing the sidewalks..." The best source for sand was the batture along the banks of the Mississippi where the river's flow ran slack and deposited its load of coarsest sediment. Some citizens took it upon themselves to "[make] their own ditch and sidewalk, without paying attention to grading it to the proper level of the city," which, once again, compelled the city to hire engineers to intervene. Excavating, transporting, filling, shoring, paving, bridging, draining: the streets of modern-day New Orleans hide strata from sundry sources, stirred and re-layered relentlessly during the course of its first century alone.

The Spaniards also created a street sanitation service by funding horse- or mule-drawn wagons, food for the animals, and wages for a hired-out slave to gather and haul refuse to the town dump. The beasts, of course, fertilized the streets with their droppings, as did those pulling carriages or bearing riders. Coupled with the mud, stagnant water, potholes, ditches and planks, a stroll about New Orleans in the late 1700s could be a hazardous and disgusting ad-

venture —worse so at night. When "loiterers or people of bad character" successfully evaded authorities one too many times, the Cabildo acted on the need for nighttime illumination by mandating owners of corner properties to erect "reflectors," gas lanterns with reflective tin backing. They cast about as much light as an alacrity firefly. Two years later, the Cabildo ordered 86 oil lamps from Philadelphia, and hired Brion the blacksmith to determine their best placement at intersections citywide. They agreed to install wooden posts at each corner, with an iron arm extending the glass-encased lamp into the intersection and a counterweight at the opposite end. Costs for the "oil, cotton, sulphur, wicks, flints, and steel...to make sparks," plus nightly lighting and maintenance, was borne by property owners based on their frontage, although this was later changed to a chimney tax and a flour tax. Fuel for lamps included fish oil, bear oil and pelican grease; costly whale oil, which burned clean and bright, was reserved only for indoor lighting. To minimize costs, street lamps were lit only 22 nights monthly, "based on the decrease or increase of the light of the moon."

To be continued in the next issue of Preservation in Print.

Richard Campanella, a geographer with the Tulane School of Architecture, is the author of Bienville's Dilemma, Lincoln in New Orleans and other books. This piece is an excerpt from an upcoming book Campanella is currently writing. Footnotes and sources will appear in the final version. Campanella may be reached through richcampanella.com or rcampane@tulane.edu.



New sidewalks installed along Royal and Esplanade in August 2012. Note the reutilization of old granite paving blocks to form the curb.