

Geographies of New Orleans

Bourbon Street's 300 Block

The History of French Quarter Land Use, in One Streetscape

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Looking down 300 Bourbon from Bienville, 1952 and 2012, from Bourbon Street: A History by Richard Campanella

Of all the squares in the French Quarter—and depending on when and how you count them, there were 66 originally and over 100 today—few have seen more representative land-use change as the 300 block of Bourbon Street. The river side of that block is a microcosm of the historical geography of New Orleans’ oldest neighborhood, having transformed from a forest, to a village, to a mixed residential/commercial cityscape, to an industrial site, to a notorious “lake” briefly in the 1960s, and finally to a keystone of the modern tourism economy.

First designed in 1721 and surveyed after a hurricane the next year had destroyed preexisting structures, this square retains precisely its colonial-era dimensions and bounding street names of Bourbon, Conti (Conty on early maps), Royal (Royalle), and Bienville. By January 1723, just under half of its hardwood forest had been axed, and it’s likely the remainder had been cleared by 1724.

What emerged was a sort of French-West Indian-looking village, with muddy streets and, as Ursuline Sister Mary Madeleine Hachard put it in 1728, a smattering of “houses...built with wooded-front and mortar, whitewashed, wainscoted and latticed,” their roofs “covered with shingles.” Set back from the street, the abodes were surrounded with gardens, sheds, chicken coops, dovecotes, rabbit hunches, fruit trees, and mulberry bushes. A network of narrow drainage ditches, some lined with crude picket or seven-board fences, demarcated the lots, and farm animals wandered about.

Though New Orleans’ population would grow into the low thousands in subsequent decades, its cityscape generally remained bucolic through the French and Spanish colonial eras. The 300 block of Bourbon barely evaded the flames of the 1788 Good Friday Fire, but was partially destroyed by the December 1794 blaze.

Subsequent rebuilding under the new Spanish building codes, which called for sturdier brick construction, followed by population growth in the early American era, transformed 300 Bourbon into a high-density urban environment. Colonial-era Creole houses and gardens had given way to multi-story townhouses, storehouses, and cottages, many exhibiting both Creole and American influences. The block's demographics were mixed, in terms of class and race, and its land use derived largely from market forces, with zero regulations for commercial or residential zones. Generally speaking, Bourbon at this time was just another downtown street; it had nothing of its current reputation, and its number of grog shops (drinking holes) and "coffee houses" (saloons) differed little from those on adjacent streets.

Some buildings from the mid-antebellum era still stand on the block, namely those at 325-341 Bourbon—only they would not have been enumerated as such. House numbers in the early 1800s were assigned in a rather ad-hoc manner, with gaps and jumps and other irregularities. City surveyors devised a slightly more standardized system in 1852, making this block 50-72 Bourbon. Not until 1894 did the city adopt the so-called "Philadelphia System," which, like the decimal system of measurements, calibrated blocks into increments of 100. Because this block was three squares below the agreed-upon Y-axis of Canal Street, it became 300 Bourbon.

Radical change came to upper Bourbon in the late 1800s. The French Quarter had transformed since the Civil War; wealthier residents increasingly departed for new outlying areas, such as Uptown and Esplanade Avenue, leaving the old city decidedly more working-class, its aging buildings deteriorating.

Commercial interests, including the nocturnal entertainment economy, moved in, as did a surprising amount of light industry, particularly in food processing. Large-scale bakeries and a claret (red wine) manufacturer came onto the block in the 1880s, and in 1890, the American Brewing Co. began purchasing lots through the middle of the square, from Conti to Bienville, with plans for a major brewery.

In subsequent years, the company would extend its footprint into a number of Bourbon-fronting lots, making the river side of 300 Bourbon an odd mix of historic storehouses interspersed with modern warehouses filled with vats and tanks. Kegs and bottles coming out of the Bienville Street end of the operation were put on mule-drawn wagons, and later trucks, all marked with the company's signature lager brand: Regal Beer.

Come Prohibition, the American Brewery adapted by selling alternatives such as root beer soft drinks, or "near beer," with less than 0.5 percent alcohol. Because near beer could only be made from full beer, brewers had to overcome the temptation to sell the illegal product for top dollar rather than the tepid brew for pennies. Many succumbed, and American itself was raided and fined thousands of dollars.

As an alternative revenue stream, the brewery rented out some of its Bourbon-fronting space, including the building at the 300 corner with Bienville, across from the famed Old Absinthe House. The lease went to "Count" Arnaud Cazenave, a French-born wine merchant who had established Arnaud's Restaurant diagonally across the intersection in 1918.

Cazenave sought to expand his business by introducing a recent cultural innovation, known as a “supper club” or “night club,” into Bourbon Street’s growing nighttime entertainment scene. Unlike the “coffee houses” and concert saloons of old, which catered exclusively to men and where the only women were employees or entertainers, night clubs welcomed couples and served fine food and drink with top-notch entertainment amid an air of exclusivity. Arnaud named his venue The Maxime Supper Club, after the famed Maxime’s in Paris, and formally opened its doors at 300 Bourbon St. on Jan. 13, 1926.

According to opening-night singer Babe Carroll McTague, interviewed in 1949 by Thomas Sancton for the *New Orleans Item*, “Maxime’s became a great success; [Cazenave] was the real Columbus of Bourbon Street.” She contended that Maxime’s was, in Sancton’s paraphrasing, “the first full-fledged Bourbon Street night club in the style that eventually made it one of the most famous streets in the country.”

Once Prohibition ended, in 1933, the American Brewery got back to business, and Regal flowed liberally, some of it right through the taps in those neighboring nightclubs. Advertised with the jingle “Red beans and rice and Regal on ice,” the beer became an integral part of local drinking culture, and most folks referred to the brewery simply as Regal Brewery. For over six decades, the hulking four-story operation, similar in style and size to Jax Brewery, dominated the 300 block of Bourbon, with two smokestacks above, a landmark tower around the corner on Conti, and an elevated conveyor belt to the bottling department across Bienville Street.

Remarkably, some of the water used for the beer-making came from beneath Bourbon Street. In 1947, the city permitted American to dig a well into the sidewalk, 77 feet from the Conti corner, in exchange for \$250,000 payable to the city over 10 years. “That oil-well looking object in the 300 block of Bourbon,” explained the *Old French Quarter News* in 1948, “is there to drill for spring water [for] Regal Beer.”

The increasing popularity of Bourbon Street, during its 1950s burlesque “golden age,” brought investor attention to available land in nearby blocks. Edgar B. Stern, owner of the 600 block of St. Louis Street where the famous St. Louis Hotel once stood, proposed for that empty lot a major new lodge. Teamed with local developer Lester B. Kabacoff and Hotel Corporation of America chair Roger Sonnabend, Stern in 1960 opened the Royal Orleans Hotel, modeled after the old St. Louis. It was an immediate success.

At the same time, constant mergers and competition from national beers spelled tough times for regional breweries. Regal Brewery closed in 1961, opening up a huge space in the heart of the Bourbon action—the 300 block. Stern, Kabacoff, and Sonnabend purchased the old brewery and, in 1963, announced their plan for a 543-room luxury hotel with an underground garage, all of which required the demolition of the 1892 complex.

The Vieux Carre Commission, the city agency charged with the protection of the French Quarter, saw little value in the gritty old industrial operation, and fearing it would become blighted, permitted its removal. The replacement, however, had to adhere to historical guidelines. Two leading local architectural firms submitted design proposals.

Preservationists were unhappy with the large size of the planned hotel, and particularly the demolition of three mid-1800s structures integrated within the 1890s brewery. The height was another sticking point, and investors worked with the City Council to get the Board of Zoning Adjustments to allow a variance to the 50-foot limit.

By September 1963, all permissions had been secured, and in 1964, a wrecking ball cleared the entire river side of 300 Bourbon. Shortly thereafter, a construction company named Diversa began digging the hole for the underground garage.

But then excavation work had to be suspended to give time to investors to secure an operator for the future hotel.

That's when, as an attorney would later put it, "evidence of something strange going on" began to appear. Groundwater from adjacent soils started to drain into the hole and fill it with water, earning the excavation the nickname "Lake Vieux Carre."

Then the soils themselves started to slough into the abyss. Cracks developed on the walls of 323-325 Bourbon; the base of the Judah Benjamin House at 327 Bourbon pulled away from the sidewalk; a courtyard wall at 315-319 Royal partially collapsed; and other rear quarters on 300 Royal listed so badly that demolition permits had to be issued for a hasty razing.

Surveyors discovered that vertical benchmarks had dropped by almost one-third of an inch in spots, and horizontal benchmarks at the Famous Door Bar and the Gunga Den had moved by nearly one-fifth of an inch, all just in a month.

The emergency made headlines late in the summer of 1966, as lawyers filed suits and preservationists sounded alarm bells. To bring attention to the plight, some worried Quarterites published a "Requiem of the Vieux Carré," which read in part

Almost a square on Bourbon Street
Is now a gaping hole;
The fine old buildings on its edge
Are sagging and we're told
The damage is beyond repair
They're doomed to demolition,
And brand new replicas will fill
These sites of planned attrition.



The Requiem of the Vieux Carré

Almost a square on Bourbon Street
Is now a gaping hole;
The fine old buildings on its edge
Are sagging and we're told
The damage is beyond repair -
They're doomed to demolition,
And brand new replicas will fill
These sites of planned attrition.

Since engineers and planners
Have learned our strange terrain,
It seems to us they might beware
A plan far more insane.
To build a huge expressway
Along the riverside,
With pilings sunk in fickle mud
Would cause this earth to slide.

The Mint would be the first to go -
Cracked by the shifting soil.
The Old French Market would be doomed
Unless this plan we foil.
The elegant Pontalbas
Would crumble into dust
And break the heart of the Vieux Carre,
So foil this plan we must!

Even Jax might not escape
And beer would bathe Decatur;
Jackson Square, by the greed of men,
Would become a yawning crater.
And when the dust had settled
The trucks would still be there -
Grinding through the lonely streets
of "The City That Didn't Care."

Louisiana Council for the Vieux Carré
Martha G. Robinson, President

The preservationists' attorney pulled no punches in berating city government. "The Mayor [Victor Schiro] and the Council must understand that this Hole is acting as a cancer drawing out minute by minute and day by day, imperceptibly but constantly, the moisture from the surrounding sub-soil.... [S]top the spread of this cancer!!... [S]afeguard the public and surrounding property owners against the Diversa holocaust in the Vieux Carre!"

The best way to solve the problem *and* save the project was to build the garage and edifice as quickly as possible.

The Hotel Corporation of America agreed to become the hotel operator, and construction work finally resumed in 1968—first the underground garage, then the hotel, designed to resemble the Miltenberger Buildings at 900 Royal.

The weight of the complex resolved the sublimation problem, and imparted a lesson on new construction in the French Quarter. Rued preservation architect Samuel Wilson Jr. in a 1987 interview by Abby Alexander Gorin, "I certainly wouldn't advocate underground parking in the Vieux Carre."

Opened in August 1969 and named the Royal Sonesta ("Son" coming from the surname of the chain's founder, A. M. Sonnebend, and "esta" from his wife Esther), the enterprise proved as successful as the Royal Orleans. Lodging hundreds of tourists on the heart of Bourbon Street, the hotel helped transform Bourbon's fading burlesque scene into the nightly pedestrian parade it is now.

The river side of 300 Bourbon now ranks as the largest privately owned parcel among the 1,739 properties in the Vieux Carre, and this Carnival season, like nearly every one since 1970, the 300 block of Bourbon will be among the most jam-packed in the city. While researching the dynamics of Bourbon Street a few years ago, I consistently recorded 50 to 100 people passing per minute on this block nightly, and well over 200 during Carnival, making it the busiest space on Bourbon and citywide.

It's quite a transformation from the bucolic village of 300 years ago, the bustling cityscape of 200 years ago, and the malty brewery of 100 years ago.



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