Geographies of New Orleans

Where "I'll Just Do as I D__n Please:"
A Historical Geography of Milneburg

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Author's note: This is the second in a series exploring the coastal communities that once surrounded greater New Orleans, principally along the brackish waters of the tidal lagoon known as Lake Pontchartrain. Last month we looked at Spanish Fort; today we examine its neighbor to the east. Though mostly gone now, these hamlets remind us that New Orleans, a riverine and deltaic city, may also be considered a coastal city.

One summer day in 1828, a group of businessmen met in a French Quarter coffeehouse to plan a new transportation technology for New Orleans: the railroad. After obtaining a state charter in 1830 to form the Pontchartrain Railroad Company, they decided to route the tracks along the Marigny Canal on Elysian Fields Avenue and continue straight north. That trajectory, traceable to the circa-1740s Dubreuil Canal, pinpointed an obscure spot on the wild shore of Lake Pontchartrain where the rail cars would transfer cargo with lake vessels.

Thus was born Milneburg.

The name for the forthcoming lakeside settlement came from the Scottish businessman Alexander Milne, who prospered as a merchant and brickmaker and sunk his wealth into lakeside land. Understanding that transportation can raise real-estate values, Milne eagerly sold a slender right-of-way to the railroad company for its track bed. A train station and loading dock were built at the lakefront terminus, to be known as Port Pontchartrain (today's Elysian Fields Avenue, from Leon C. Simon to Lark Street), which Congress had designated as an official port of delivery and departure.

On April 23, 1831, the six inaugural cars of the horse-drawn Pontchartrain Railroad "moved in the most imposing manner to the sound of music amidst…admiring spectators," reported the Louisiana Advertiser, "and reached the lake by happy coincidence at the moment the Mobile steamboat arrived for the first time at Port Pontchartrain with the mail."

This meant business. Milne got to work sketching out a subdivision for Port Pontchartrain. Within weeks, the City Council approved Milne's plat, and shortly thereafter, surveyors traced out the streets in the soggy shore. In 1833, the Pontchartrain Railroad began using a steam locomotive (later dubbed "Smoky Mary") for faster and more powerful service, and in 1834, "Milneburgh" appeared prominently on Charles Zimpel's "Topographical Map of New Orleans and Its Vicinity." Zimpel's map showed the neighborhood as twice the size of the French Quarter, with avenues named Paris, London, and St. Anthony to the west of the central axis of Elysian Fields Avenue, and Washington, Franklin, and People's to the east.

The main intersecting corridor was named Edinburgh Avenue, reflecting Milne's Scottish heritage, along which were embedded four public squares, also with cosmopolitan names, in a design evocative of James Oglethorpe's famous plan for Savannah, Georgia. A public market would be placed at the crux of the grid, around today's Vienna Street intersection with Elysian Fields.

As authoritative as Zimpel's depiction appeared, its details were largely projections. The lakefront at this time constituted tidally influenced saline grass, described on one property map as "Open Sea Marsh." It had no natural levee, of course, because Lake Pontchartrain, really a bay, did not deposit sediment, although wave action and tidal fluctuations did amass enough organic matter to shore up its edges, along which was built a rudimentary embankment.

So while much of Milneburg's street grid was laid out, not all of it constituted developable land. The remote subdivision instead became a settlement on stilts, a typical Louisiana coastal "camp" community, having no choice but to live with water, rather than fight it.

And live with water it did. Half of Milneburg's economy came from the transshipment of Lake Pontchartrain basin resources to the cars of the Pontchartrain Railroad: fish, oysters, game, bricks from St. Tammany Parish clay, shells for paving and making lime; and firewood and timber from the piney woods. Out went merchandise and cargo from the shops and ships of New Orleans to communities like Covington. Passengers also came and went daily on steamers serving Madisonville, Mandeville, Pass Christian, Biloxi, Mobile, and Pensacola.

The other half of the Milneburg economy came from bathers and recreationists looking to escape the steamy city for a day of fun, just 20 minutes away by train. "The lake is literally alive with people luxuriating in the cool water," wrote the Daily Picayune of the Milneburg scene one June afternoon in 1839. "The curling breeze, waking up the waves to kiss the gorgeous sky, bears their merry laugh and joyous shout to land," where could be found people "pistol shooting, [playing] the sleepy game of dominoes[,] billiard balls, [and] ten-pin alleys."

Hunting, fishing, and boating were also popular, as were catching crabs and crawfish. Hotels and restaurants opened, "coffeehouses" (saloons) served libations, and raised houses were built for resident workers.

Alexander Milne was a philanthropist as well as a developer, and he introduced a benevolent element into his community. Milneburg was home to the Milne Asylum for Destitute Boys and Girls, bequeathed by Milne upon his death in 1838.

New Orleanians went to Milneburg in the mid-1800s as their descendants would frequent Grand Isle or Biloxi. It was their day trip, their weekend getaway, the nearest best place where, as that 1839 Picayune writer put it, "every one seems to say, 'I'll just do as I d--n please.'" People called the area "Lake End," and in the newspapers at that time, there were just as many references to Lake End as there were to Milneburg.

Milneburg's built environment was like few others in New Orleans. Visitor Joseph Holt Ingraham described it in 1834 as "a village of handsome, white-painted hotels, cafés, dwellings, store-houses, and bathing rooms," adjacent to "the pier, constructed of piles and firmly planked over…lined with sloops and schooners, which were taking in and discharging cargo, giving quite a bustling, business-like air to this infant port."

Twenty years later, Frederick Law Olmsted, who later gained fame as a landscape architect and designer of Central Park, described Milneburg as he steamed in from Mobile. "There were many small buildings near the jetty," he wrote, "erected on piles over the water—bathing-houses, bowling-alleys, and billiard-rooms, with other indications of a place of holiday resort." After his steamer docked, "a locomotive backed, screaming hoarsely, down the jetty," and passengers transferred to the cars. "Off we puffed, past the restaurant…through the little village of white houses…and away into a dense, gray cypress forest" toward the Faubourg Marigny and French Market area five miles south.

A year later, in 1855, a lighthouse was built offshore to guide steamers to Port Pontchartrain. Much like the Biloxi Lighthouse, the Milneburg Lighthouse would become the icon of this coastal hamlet.

Milneburg had competition from the start. To the west, the abandoned fort at the mouth of Bayou St. John had become a lakefront picnic and recreational spot as early as 1826, gaining the name "Spanish Fort." Further west still, starting in the mid-1830s, was the terminus of the New Basin Canal ("New Lake End"), which later became West End.

Connected to various New Orleans neighborhoods by rail, West End became a larger, more upscale rival of Milneburg. "In the summer the population of New Orleans goes to the West End by electric cars [from] Canal and Bourbon streets," wrote B. R. Forman, Jr. in 1900. "In some respects it is like Coney Island in New York. There is music[;] Vaudeville, restaurants, a scenic railway [roller coaster] and sideshows and special attractions" as well as "the Southern Yacht Club…and the West end and the St. John Rowing Clubs."

Yet Milneburg endured, despite repeated disasters, of fire, wind, and surge. It persevered by being a sort of "Riviera for the rest of us," equal parts bawdy and bourgeois amid a beautiful natural environment, convenient to downtown populations.

The Great Storm of 1915 spelled the beginning of the end of old Milneburg. Probably the most directly striking of all the powerful hurricanes ever to affect New Orleans, the storm and its surge "covered the entire resort and washed practically every camp down the main streets of the place," reported the Item on Sept. 29, 1915. "Washed away[,] Milneburg is no more."

Rebuilding followed, but by now circumstances were changing. Ongoing drainage of the interior swamps meant that urban development in Gentilly would creep closer to the lake, while dried-out soils dropped below sea level, requiring more levee construction along the lake.

Circa-1880 Robinson Map of Milneburg (in yellow) overlaid on 2004 satellite image, courtesy Richard Campanella, Geographies of New Orleans.

The Great Storm of 1915 impelled authorities to do something about the flood threat to the new low-lying residential subdivisions of Gentilly as well as Lakeview. Among the solutions: beach-building, higher lakefront levees, a stepped concrete seawall positioned offshore, and most radical of all, the in-filling of the area within the seawall to become 2,000 acres of high, dry manmade land.

The "Lakefront Improvement Project," begun by the Orleans Parish Levee Board in 1926 and completed in 1934, landlocked Milneburg and allowed Gentilly to expand in its direction, eventually subsuming it. High earthen levees were built along the water's edge, hardening the formerly tide-washed shore.

So ended the circa-1831 coastal enclave, born of the Pontchartrain Railroad, which itself folded in 1932 after 101 years of service.

The built environment of Milneburg also transformed. Those buildings that had been on or near the water were relocated or demolished; those that were on the Milneburg street grid found themselves finally protected from their flood threat—but also divorced from their *raison d'etre*. A 1941 Works Projects Administration study recorded two blocks in old Milneburg whose structures had a median construction date prior to 1859, and another eight blocks with structures dating from 1860-1904.

The oldest buildings in 1941 appear to have been originally situated just offshore, such that sediments were pumped in beneath their raised floorboards—a coastal-to-urban transformation of the most literal kind. This was the fate also of the old Milneburg Lighthouse, which survived the Lakefront land reclamation and, incredibly, still stands today in its original spot, now on the campus of the University of New Orleans.
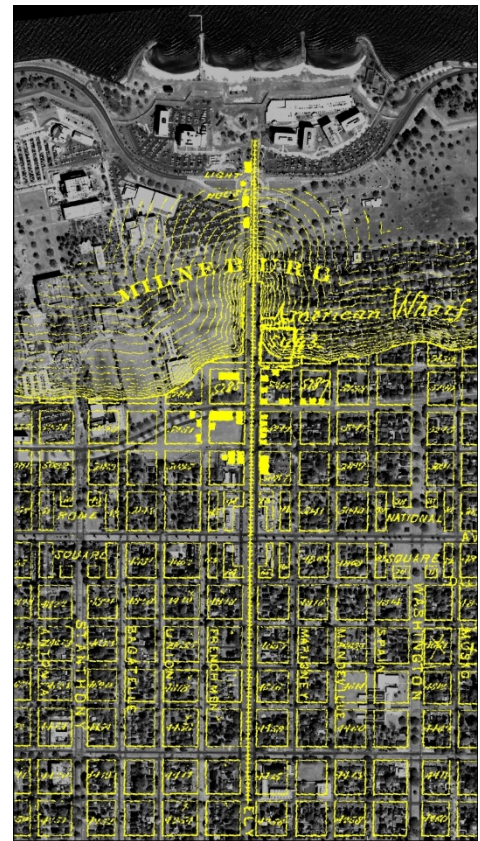
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Nearly all other historic structures have since disappeared, although Mike Carroll, who recently retired from the nearby Mosquito Control Board office and has studied the area, told me of an apparent circa-1900 house still standing on the corner of Marigny and Mexico streets. This may be the second-oldest surviving structure in former Milneburg, after the lighthouse.

While the Lakefront Improvement Project ended Milneburg as it was, the new land also revived a major element of Milneburg's legacy: as place for waterfront amusements. In 1939, Harry Batt proposed his idea for a sandy beach and amusement park inspired in part by the recent World's Fair in Chicago. The Orleans Parish Levee Board, which had hoped to continue Milneburg's recreational role on the new lakefront, loved the idea. A lease agreement gave rise to Pontchartrain Beach, which became an integral memory for generations of New Orleans—whites, that is, as it was segregated up to 1965—until its closure in 1983.

As for the land side of old Milneburg, the circa-1831 street grid gradually got integrated into the modern subdivisions of Gentilly. A fair number of original street names remain today, among them Paris, St. Anthony, Franklin, and Peoples. London Avenue has been renamed A.P Tureaud Drive, but persists in the London Avenue Outfall Canal. Elysian Fields Avenue, once viewed as a unifying axis, is now perceived as a divide, with the city-recognized neighborhoods of "St. Anthony" and "Milneburg" on either side.

One of those Savannah-style public squares, Rome Park, also survives, although it is now quartered into four indistinct corner parks. Latter-day iterations of the Milne Asylum, meanwhile, still stand on Franklin Avenue, in a complex recently renovated for the New Orleans Recreation Development Commission.

The name Milneburg endures as a neighborhood name today (often pronounced "Milenburg") and although the Pontchartrain Railroad has been gone for nearly ninety years, the term of endearment for its rattletrap locomotive, "Smoky Mary," remains remarkably well-remembered by New Orleanians today. The old engine, as well as Pontchartrain Beach, have both been commemorated in particularly spectacular Mardi Gras floats, by the Krewes of Orpheus and Endymion, respectively.

Pontchartrain Beach in the 1950s; lighthouse visible in right center. From Entergy-NOPSI photo collection of Richard Campanella

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