

West End: “The Coney Island of New Orleans”

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Author’s note: This is the third 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. In previous months we looked at [Spanish Fort](#) and [Milneburg](#); today we examine their neighbor to the west. Though utterly transformed today, these hamlets remind us that New Orleans, a riverine and deltaic city, may also be considered a coastal city.

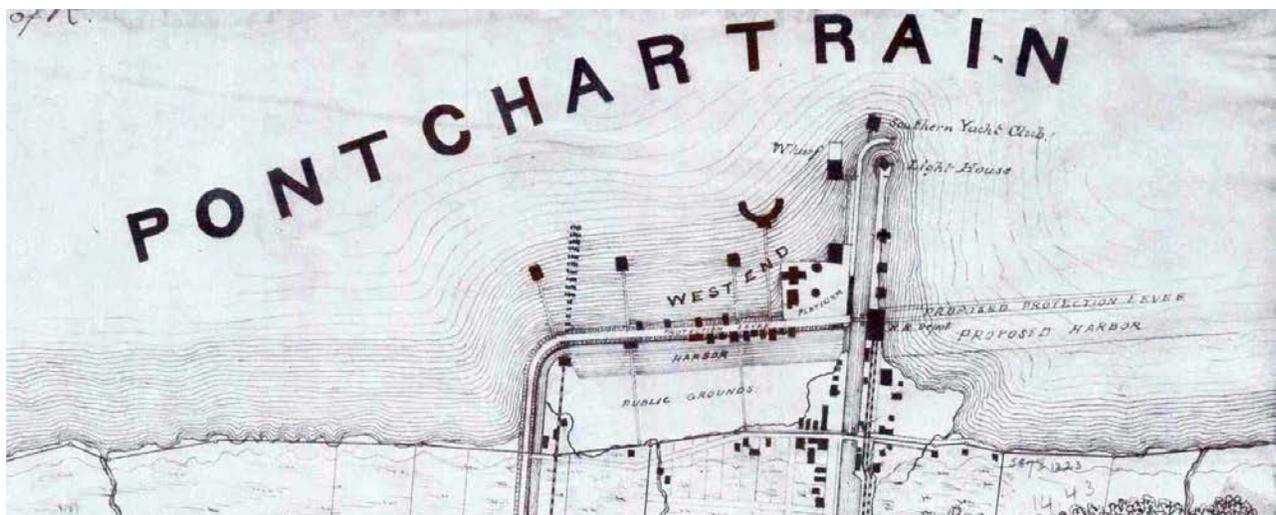
To most New Orleanians of the 1800s, Lake Pontchartrain represented two things. Firstly, it abounded in natural resources, including fish and game, oysters, and rangia shells, as well as timber, firewood, and clay in the piney woods on the other side. Secondly, the brackish bay was a recreational destination, where fresh breezes and bathing awaited city dwellers seeking respite from the malodorous metropolis.

The problem was access: how to get across the swamplands between the city and lakeshore? The original route entailed trekking the Bayou Road and plying Bayou St. John northward to its lake outlet. To improve that connection, Spanish Gov. Hector Carondelet had excavated in 1794 a canal named for him to link with the bayou and access a lakeside point that been militarized since the early 1700s. Later known as Spanish Fort, this spot would become New Orleans’ first lakefront recreational destination, starting in the early 1820s.

In 1831, downtown businessmen built a railroad to the lake and ordained a spot on the marshy shore, where Elysian Fields Avenue today crosses Leon C. Simon Drive, to become Milneburg, an early lakeside neighborhood. Also known as “Lake End,” Milneburg would also feature recreational facilities such as hotels, saloons and amusements.

Not to be outdone, uptown businessmen planned a larger canal to the lake. They created the Orleans Canal and Banking Co. and acquired a 6-mile-long right-of-way in the rear of what would become the city of Carrollton. Thousands of “ditchers” toiled during 1832-1835 to excavate the Basin Canal. After the channel fully opened in 1838, the terminus of what locals dubbed the “New” Basin Canal (to distinguish it from the Carondelet or “Old Basin” Canal) became a busy lakeside port.

So began West End, the “Coney Island of New Orleans.”



Late-1800s map of West End, from the State Land Office.

In fact, for its first decades, the future West End, known at the time as “New Lake End,” was little more than a long wooden pier with an octagonal lighthouse and a few service buildings. Hoyt’s Lake House, owned by the Canal Bank, was its most prominent building.

While New Lake End handled its share of freight, it didn’t get much recreational visitation, because Milneberg and Spanish Fort were closer to downtown populations.

In 1853, the Jefferson & Pontchartrain Railroad opened just west of the New Basin Canal, linking Carrollton and the Metairie Road with the lake. The new access enhanced the area’s recreation potential, such that the Southern Yacht Club, formed in Pass Christian in 1849 and later moved to Milneburg, started holding its regattas at New Lake End. The train line would also later give rise to the adjacent fishing hamlet of Bucktown.

The railroad tracks ran along today’s Orleans/Jefferson parish line, but at the time, everything west of the New Basin Canal (today’s Pontchartrain/West End Boulevard neutral ground) was located in the city of Carrollton, then part of Jefferson Parish. (This explains why there’s a “Carrollton Avenue” in the present-day Metairie subdivision also known as Bucktown—that’s where the tracks ran.) Marshy and remote, New Lake End remained too far from the urban core to form a self-sustaining community.

This began to change in 1871, when the city of New Orleans proceeded to work on the partially built lakefront levee, and the state of Louisiana authorized the Mexican Gulf Ship Canal Company to drain the marsh. Before going bankrupt, the company excavated today’s 17th Street, Orleans, and London Avenue outfall canals, whose spoil helped shore up the lakefront and create an offshore revetment levee between the railroad and canal piers, forming a harbor. (“17th Street,” incidentally, was the rear-most street in Carrollton, today’s Palmetto Street, and because its drainage ditch flowed into this new outfall canal, it attained the name of that Carrollton street. To this day, the Palmetto Canal flows into the 17th Street Canal, even though that a street by that name no longer exists.)

With better access to downtown New Orleans and growing populations uptown, city folks began to discover New Lake End. Harness-racing became popular on the Shell Road paralleling the New Basin Canal, and sailing and yacht racing were all the rage on the lake, giving an impetus for the construction of boardwalks and pavilions. Hoyt’s New Lake House reopened bigger and better after a fire, and now served tourists, not just shippers.

In 1874, Carrollton was annexed into New Orleans, and two years later, the New Orleans City Railroad Company inaugurated a steam line to New Lake End, making it competitive with Milneburg. In 1878 the city passed an ordinance giving the company (known also as the Canal Street Railroad Company) a 30-year lease to turn New Lake End into a full-blown waterfront resort. Whereas Milneburg was mostly on land and extended over the lake, New Lake End would be mostly built over the lake, on pilings and boardwalks.

Knowing the importance of a catchy name, the company rebranded the area as “West End.” The clever moniker invoked the allure of London’s famed West End, while also acceding with local geography, in that this was the westernmost spot along the Orleans Parish lakefront and at the “end” of the canal and railroad. “West End” sounded exciting yet familiar, and the name stuck. “No expense will be spared to make that place a pleasant resort for the public,” reported the *Daily Picayune* on June 6, 1878. “The revetment levee is to be repaired, sheds, pavilions etc., erected, and other improvements made...at the New Lake End, now known as ‘West End.’”

The company went all-out with the landscaping and architecture, which featured the detailed millwork popular in the late Victorian era. Even the revetment levee, which served to break wave energy before it hit the shoreline, was “laid out in an elegant esplanade, with the choicest flowers and shrubs, statues, mazes, walks and drives,” according to an 1885 guidebook. “Innumerable hotels and restaurants face it, and there

are, in addition, the Lake Hotel, an opera house and concert saloon, at which dramatic performances are given in the summer." With round-trip fare costing 15 cents, patronage boomed, particularly on holidays such as the Fourth of July and Bastille Day.

The next 30 years would be West End's heyday. The boardwalk resort became a regionally famous entertainment district, even as the shipping canal and freight railroads kept the port busy, and picturesque camps were built over the lake. The rail connection got integrated into the city's streetcar system and electrified in 1898, ushering in even larger crowds.

Wrote B. R. Foreman Jr. in 1900: "In the summer the population of New Orleans goes to the West End by electric cars that start on Canal and Bourbon streets. In some respects it is like Coney Island in New York. There is music there during the summer[;] very high quality. Vaudeville, restaurants, a scenic railway and sideshows and special attractions" as well as "the Southern Yacht Club...and the West end and the St. John Rowing Clubs," the last of those finding the New Basin Canal ideal for their pastime.



West End around 1901, from Library of Congress.

Free admission at West End kept crowds large, and in this era before air conditioning, patrons lingered late into steamy summer nights to catch breezes rolling off the lake.

West End was what today might be called an "entrepreneurial ecosystem" for the "cultural economy," where innovations were tested for their marketplace viability. It was here that outdoor moving pictures premiered, in June 1896; where decorative electrical lighting was used elaborately; and where guests could take nocturnal pleasure cruises on the lake while enjoying live music, itself undergoing innovation.

West End had some of the biggest and best amusements in the South, including a rollercoaster, flying horses (a carousel), a "tunnel of love," and a Ferris wheel, all on boardwalks over water. It also was a popular spot for air shows in the halcyon days of aviation; according to the *New Orleans Item* in 1915, the skies of West End were where "Miss Edna H. Grube, New Orleans girl [became the] first of her sex ever to make moving picture film from an aeroplane."

Perhaps West End's greatest contribution to American culture was as an inspiration, venue and employment opportunity for influential early jazz musicians. Joe "King" Oliver's *West End Blues*, later made famous by Louis Armstrong, captured the spirit of the place in this time.

But the *bons temps* were not for everyone. Whereas Milneburg and Spanish Fort had both white-only and black-only sections, West End's main attractions were exclusively for whites unless you worked there—like Oliver and Armstrong.

The delicate wooden village was also supremely prone to fire, wind and water, which led city officials in the early 1900s to contemplate redeveloping West End into a land-based park. Discord arose between the city and railroad when the company's 30-year lease on West End neared expiration. In 1909, the railroad's managers opted to switch their investment to Spanish Fort.

With West End back in the hands of local government, the Orleans Parish Levee Board built a new concrete seawall 500 feet out into the water and pumped sediment into an enclosure by the old revetment levee. So formed the oval-shaped landmass that was landscaped into present-day West End Park, complete with live oaks, scenic lagoons and a foot bridge. The project took most of the 1910s, in part because of delays caused by the Great Storm of 1915 and its surge flooding.

More transformations were forthcoming. In 1926, work began on the Lakefront Project, a massive shoreline reclamation motivated by flooding concerns in the recently drained neighborhoods of Lakeview and Gentilly. The effort required the removal of the old family camps and the erection of a concrete seawall enclosure, into which sediments dredged from the lake bottom were pumped to create a long swath of new elevated land, today's Lakeshore, Lake Vista, Lake Terrace, and Lake Oaks neighborhoods.

No longer would West End have unimpeded lake vistas and breezes. The same fate affected West End's old rival, Milneburg, but its reclamation included the creation of a sandy lakeshore, which in 1939 was paired with a big new amusement park named Pontchartrain Beach. Those were attractions that West End could not match.

In the meantime, the state in 1936 had passed a constitutional amendment to close the New Basin Canal. Workers started filling its channel in 1937 and completed it the early 1950s, bringing West End's port days, traceable to 1838, to an end.

In 1938, the WPA oversaw a \$1.8 million redesign of the West End complex, incorporating into it a municipal yacht harbor and new park features. The "Coney Island of New Orleans" became the recreational district we know today, comprising West End Park, Breakwater Park, the Southern Yacht Club, Municipal Yacht Harbor, and Orleans Marina, along with a boathouse community, seafood restaurants and other attractions.

Hurricanes Georges and especially Katrina dealt major blows to West End, destroying beloved destination restaurants such as Bruning's and Fitzgerald's and damaging infrastructure. The city is currently planning a \$5 million Breakwater Improvements Project that, among other things, aims to improve walkability among the many attractions of West End and Bucktown, a task complicated by its intermingled ownership, by Orleans Parish, Jefferson Parish and the state of Louisiana.

That complicated legal legacy is a vestige of West End's history, which may be seen today in the elegant balustrades still standing in certain areas, in the last segment of the New Basin Canal where it adjoins the lake, and in the canal's lighthouse, the latest in a line of illuminated landmarks marking this lakefront spot for 180 years. It is now home to the Lake Pontchartrain Basin Foundation's New Canal Lighthouse Museum.

Richard Campanella, a geographer with the Tulane School of Architecture, is the author of "Cityscapes of New Orleans," "Bourbon Street: A History," "Bienville's Dilemma," and other books. He is currently working on a book about the West Bank, and may be reached through <http://richcampanella.com>, rcampane@tulane.edu, or @nolacampanella on Twitter.