

When St. Bernard Made Cars

Arabi Assembly Plant Represented a Little Bit of the Motor City in the Crescent City

by Richard Campanella *New Orleans Times-Picayune* InsideOut section, November 8, 2014



Former Ford Plant today; photo by Richard Campanella

The New Orleans metropolis we recognize today largely took shape during the 1890s through 1920s, when most modern urban infrastructure was installed and drained swamps gave way to spacious car-friendly neighborhoods. Comparable transformations were going on nationwide, and as both a cause and an effect of those changes, the American automobile industry grew commensurately.

Contemplating how to satisfy this mounting demand, Ford Motor Company founder Henry Ford realized that if all parts were manufactured identically, there was no need to assemble and test automobiles in Detroit and ship the unwieldy cargo to dealers nationwide, as was done previously. Better to ship smaller components to plants across the country, which would then assemble, test and deliver the autos to regional dealers.

So after World War I, Ford built or expanded 15 auto plants across the nation, and by 1925, new Model-T's were rolling off assembly lines from Cambridge to Los Angeles, from Louisville to Salt Lake City, and from the uppermost city on the Mississippi River (Minneapolis/St. Paul) to the lowermost—not New Orleans proper, but Arabi in St. Bernard Parish.

Ford's selection of Arabi made sense. New railroads, superb river access, abundant fresh water and open land as well as great urban proximity had attracted investors here since the late 1800s. Thereafter, upper St. Bernard Parish steadily transformed from a mostly agrarian landscape of plantations and pastures, to a mixed-use cityscape of industry, shipping, warehousing, railroads, truck farms and low-density houses.

Chief among the employers was the vast slaughterhouse complex where citywide *abattoirs* had been concentrated since the 1870s. The Chalmette Slip, opened in 1907, gave St. Bernard a deep-draft harbor, and after petroleum was discovered onshore and offshore, oil and gas facilities followed. In 1912, the American Sugar Refining Company completed its Chalmette Refinery, which quickly supplanted the upper French Quarter riverfront as the fulcrum of the regional sugar-processing industry.

All the new jobs occasioned, starting in 1906, the subdivision of today's Old Arabi (also called Friscoville at the time) where, in this era before zoning, traditional cottages and shotgun houses were erected practically within the shadows of both antebellum plantations houses and modern factories.

There was another reason Ford invested here: New Orleans at the time formed the nation's premier commercial entrepôt with Latin America, a market Ford previously served through New York City. Arabi would make for a superior perch to access the Caribbean Basin and South America, not to mention the Gulf Coast.



Arabi plant under construction in 1922, courtesy Ford Archives

The corporation purchased ten acres at 7200 North Peters Street along the Arabi riverfront and in 1922 erected a 225,000-square-foot plant “built to the standard Ford specifications for branch buildings,” as the *Times-Picayune* reported, “of brick and white stone, with special provisions for lighting and ventilation....” Two stories in the front, one in the rear, raised above the grade, and replete with all the latest technologies including a freight elevator, Ford’s Arabi plant looked like exactly what it was: a little bit of the Motor City in the Crescent City. The designer was Albert Kahn, the famed industrial architect whose technique of using steel-reinforced concrete allowed for the creation of vast floor space obstructed minimally by pillars. Kahn became the favored architect of the automotive industry, and so prolific became his distinctive buildings that Kahn became known as the “architect of Detroit.” Kahn also designed the Packard Motor Company Building on 1820 St. Charles Avenue.

Not precisely a factory because parts would still be manufactured in Detroit, the Arabi facility, which opened in 1923, operated as an assembly, testing, and distribution plant. Auto components arrived by barge and were unloaded at Charbonnet Street Wharf in the Lower Ninth Ward, where they were moved onto the Public Belt Railroad and brought down to the plant.

Within two years, 400 skilled workers were outputting 150 autos per day, and demand only increased. Getting the inventory to dealerships meant Ford had to invest also in railroads and ships; Ford’s freighter *S. S. Oneida*, for example, would run back and forth to Tampa, Florida with loads of 300 completed automobiles, each “Made in Arabi.” All those men working all those hours needed facilities, and one of the distinguishing aspects of Kahn’s design, still in place today, were large industrial-scale bathrooms, including circular trough urinals, raised above the assembly floor.

The nationwide array of Ford plants were not without their problems. For one, machinery in each one had to be revamped every time a new model rolled out, a time-consuming process which forced the Arabi operation to go offline for a year. But the plant reopened in May 1928, and with pent-up energy, hundreds of men working in three shifts cranked out Model-A Fords round-the-clock. The Arabi operation broke company-wide records when it averaged 300 autos per day throughout the month of October 1929.





Interior of Ford plant in August 2014; photo by Richard Campanella

Unfortunately, that was the month when the Stock Market crashed, and the Roaring Twenties slipped into the Great Depression. The assembly plant shuttered in 1930, then reopened and expanded in 1931-1932 on account of sound demand in Central America and Cuba, only to convert in 1933 to a sales branch and in 1934 to a parts and distribution branch for cars assembled elsewhere. That was another problem of the national plants: they tended to cannibalize each other's workload during times of belt-tightening. Ford kept the Arabi facility viable by using it as a training school and meeting space for regional car dealers.

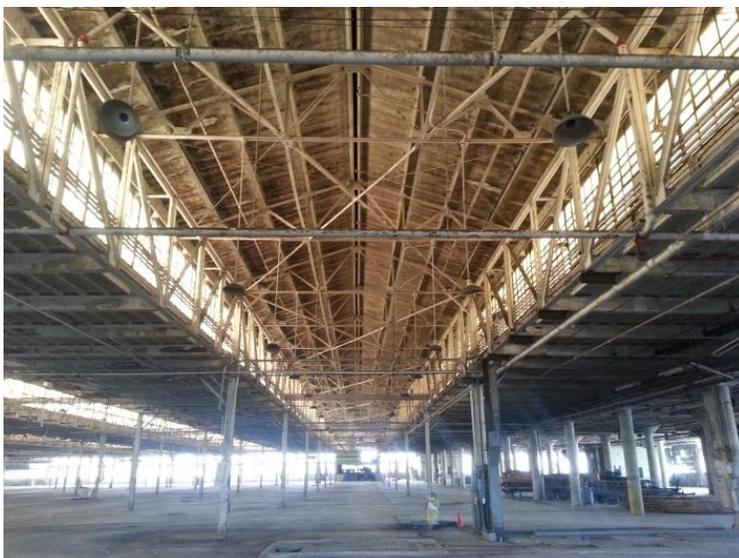
World War II ended the Depression, but the economic revival went mostly to military production. In 1942, the U.S. Army Port Quartermaster seized the Arabi plant and

put it to work as a warehouse, even as Ford sued the Army for the \$70,000 annual "fair rent" it paid the auto giant, seeking \$30,000 more. The plant resumed its function as a sales and distribution node in the late 1940s and 1950s, by which time ownership had transferred to Capital City Ford of Baton Rouge.

In December 1960, one of the property's sheds took on an incongruous new use: as temporary space for the segregated Arabi Elementary School Annex, used by those white children whose parents had withdrawn them from the recently integrated William Frantz and McDonogh 19 public schools in New Orleans' Ninth Ward.

The incident formed a harbinger of a major demographic shift about to hit the parish. In the ensuing years, white families from New Orleans relocated en masse to new suburban subdivisions in Arabi, Chalmette, and Meraux, where decent blue-collar employment could be found at enterprises like Kaiser Aluminum, Murphy Oil, Amstar's sugar refinery, and the Tenneco gas plant. Interstate 510 (Paris Road), which would later connect to the national interstate system, further improved the area's fine port and railroad transportation access.

The boom gave new life to the old Ford plant, which was purchased in 1971 by the auto distributor Southern Service Company. Four years later, Southern Service's parent company, Amco, was taken over by Toyota. With the New Orleans area enriched by an oil boom and the rest of the nation buying smaller imports to save gas, Toyota saw its sales skyrocket, and Amco brought the Arabi plant back online to receive, clean, repair, accessorize and test newly arrived Toyotas from Japan. Throughout the mid-1970s, thousands of Celicas and Corollas rolled through Arabi, just as Model-T's and Model-A's passed through fifty years earlier.



What killed the business, according to former building co-owner Jack Bertel, was the advent of screen-covered freight cars designed to protect new autos during rail delivery. The innovation reduced handling damages and led to a shift in distribution points of Japanese cars to more convenient West Coast locations, costing the Arabi plant its business. In 1977 Southern Service sold the Arabi building to Hayes Dockside, a public warehouse owned by Bertel and his business partner Cliff Miller. So quickly did the operation lose its value, Bertel said in an interview, the prior managers "handed us the keys and walked away, leaving behind papers on the desk, machinery, and even some Toyota cars and trucks."

From 1977 until 2005, Hayes Dockside stored freight such as coffee, twine, rubber, hardwood, burlap and cotton on its way in and out of the nation. When Hurricane Katrina's surge ruptured the levees and inundated St. Bernard Parish in 2005, around two feet of salt water swamped the building, despite its high riverfront elevation, and ruined the boric acid and wax inside. Today, the property is leased out to trucks for parking, and owner Cliff Miller has put the building for sale.

As for Arabi, the century-old Domino's Sugar Refinery continues to be a major employer, and the charming century-old cottages and shotguns of the Old Arabi and Friscoville historic districts are starting to see the first hints of gentrification—architectural restoration, newcomers moving in, even some new artist studios—diffusing from downtown New Orleans. The old Ford plant, now over 90 years old, today lies quiet and empty, much like its sibling buildings all over Detroit.

But with its solid construction, unusual history, great location and a budding interest in Old Arabi, it may not remain that way for long.

Richard Campanella, a geographer with the Tulane School of Architecture and a Monroe Fellow with the New Orleans Center for the Gulf South, is the author of "Bourbon Street: A History," "Bienville's Dilemma," "Geographies of New Orleans," "Lincoln in New Orleans," and other books. He may be reached through <http://richcampanella.com>, rcampane@tulane.edu, or @nolacampanella on Twitter.