Culture wars, ethnic rivalry and New Orleans' messy municipality era

First municipality

City of Lafayette (Jefferson Parish)

Second municipality

Canal Street

Felicity Street

Esplanade Avenue

Third municipality

In 1836, New Orleans was divided into three municipalities. *Map from the Library of Congress.*
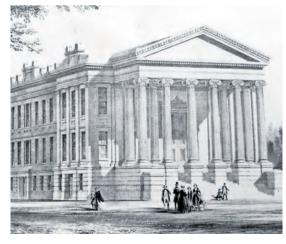
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This week marks 180 years since New Orleans embarked on its most peculiar experiment in city management. It would last for 16 years and leave behind influences still evident today.

On March 8, 1836, the state legislature amended New Orleans' original 1805 charter by dividing the city "into three separate sections, each with distinct municipal powers."

The First Municipality would include the French Quarter and Faubourg Tremé; the Second Municipality would run from Canal Street to the upper city limit of Felicity Street, and the Third Municipality spanned from Esplanade Avenue down to the present-day St. Bernard Parish line.

The three municipalities were then sectioned into wards, each of which elected a number of aldermen based on their population size.

Municipal Hall, designed in 1845 by James Gallier for the First Municipality, later became City Hall. *Image from the Library of Congress*

These Councils of Aldermen controlled all municipality affairs, from taxes and finance to infrastructure, education, sanitation and other services.

The three Councils of Aldermen would meet annually in the Cabildo on May 1 to form the General Council, which answered to a single mayor. Together, they legislated citywide matters, such as business licensing, port management, policing and incarceration. Debts were distributed among the three municipalities according to their ability to raise revenue.

It all seemed to make sense on paper; some compared it benignly to the relationship between states and the federal government. But in reality, the system was egregiously divisive in both its effects and its root cause: an ethnic rivalry ongoing since the Louisiana Purchase in 1803.

On the one side was an uneasy alliance between French-speaking Creoles (New Orleans natives) and "foreign French" (that is, immigrants from France, refugees from Haiti and other Francophones not from Louisiana) as well as Mediterranean, Caribbean and Latin American immigrants. This loose coalition, unified by their Catholic faith and a generally Latin culture, formed the majority, and thus dominated local political and cultural life in the early 1800s. In the vernacular of the era, they were known as "the Creoles," else "the French" and sometimes "the Latins."

On the other side were English-speaking, mostly Protestant transplants of Anglo-American ethnicity, who arrived after the Louisiana Purchase. Ambitious in their pursuit of business opportunities, "the Americans" enjoyed commercial dominance and shored up their political power through liaisons with German and Irish immigrants.

The Creole/American rivalry underscored nearly all aspects of city life, and either side constantly found fault with the other.

"There is, as everyone knows, a mutual jealousy between the French and American," reported visiting philosopher Harriet Martineau in the 1830s. "The French complain that the Americans will not speak French (and) will not meet their neighbors even half way, (while) the Americans ridicule the toilet practices of the French ladies; their liberal use of rouge and pearl powder...."

Exacerbating the tension were parallel hostilities between enslaved people and slave owners, and between free people of color and whites. Members of these and other demographic groups also found themselves positioned along the Creole/American, native/newcomer cultural spectrum.

How did this schism end up in the municipal split of 1836? The answer lies in the tendency of people to live among their own, thus forming ethnic neighborhoods.

Americans predominated in the recently developed upper faubourgs (present-day Central Business District, Lower Garden District, Irish Channel, Garden District and Central City), whereas Creoles prevailed in the older neighborhoods of the French Quarter and the lower faubourgs, namely Tremé and the Bayou Road, and the Marigny down to present-day Bywater.

This residential agglomeration raised the possibility that partitioning New Orleans along the lines of its ethnic geography might resolve the political problem of its ethnic infighting. Why work out your differences when you can just get a

The Third Municipality had its own newspaper, The Daily Orleanian, serving what is now the Faubourg Marigny and the Bywater.

divorce and divide up the property?

In the historical memory, it's usually the Americans who get the blame for the 1836 split, and for good reason. What's less known is that both Americans and Creoles had long pined for such a division.

In 1826, for example, City Council members of both ethnicities called for what one journalist deemed the "dismemberment" of New Orleans, cleaving the city down the middle of Canal Street. A subsequent bill circulated for "converting the whole [of New Orleans] into two cities, to be called the Upper and Lower City," according to Council records, "arising from the opposing influence of American...and French interests."

When American elements finally got their way in 1836, it was probably to the relief of many Creoles as well: each group would finally control its own domain. Good riddance.

And at first it appeared to work. Big new hotels and banks opened; waterworks and gas works were installed in both the First and Second municipalities, while the Second opened its ("New") Basin Canal to compete with the First Municipality's Carondelet ("Old Basin") Canal.

But the Panic of 1837 set finances afoul both locally and nationwide, and soon tripartite government would cause more problems than it resolved. It increased bureaucracy, engendered confusion and wasted resources, in that everything had to be done in triplicate. It pitted the municipalities against each other, as residents came to perceive a zero-sum game, where one's gain came at the other's expense.

Worse, ethnic rancor intensified, as did inequity, because the larger and more powerful First and Second municipalities left little for the Third Municipality below Esplanade. That marginalized area would be called the "old Third," "the dirty Third," "the poor Third" and, with frustrated pride, the "glorious Third."

In one 1849 editorial, the Third Municipality's newspaper The Daily Orleanian spelled out what was on most Creoles' minds: "Had the Legislature sought, by the most careful efforts, to create a war of races, to make distinction between Creole and American, they could not have chosen a better means...than the present division operates."

The system also landed the city deeply in debt, which lowered its credit rating and thwarted its ability to float bonds for much-needed improvements such as railroads. Something had to be done.

So motivated, the state legislature on Feb. 23, 1852, finally repealed the 1836 act and reconsolidated the municipalities back into one city. In a separate act on the same day, it annexed Jefferson Parish's City of Lafayette — today's Irish Channel, Garden District and Central City, between Felicity

and Toledano — into New Orleans, bringing along with it Anglo-American, German and Irish voters.

The annexation helped make the Americans and their allies, whose numbers had been increasing all along courtesy of in-migration, the numerical majority in the reconsolidated city. Increasingly they would win elections, adding to their growing power in politics and culture even as they dominated in the economic realm.

After 1852, English would be heard more often in the streets of New Orleans; American architectural tastes, such as Greek Revival and Italianate, began to appear more frequently, and English common law would make inroads into the state's Roman-influenced civil code.

Urbanization expanded faster in the upriver (American) direction, which attracted even more investment to that side of town, while the lower faubourgs and their working-class populations grew more modestly.

New Orleans was Americanizing, and old Creole culture was waning. The 1836 to 1852 municipality era was not the cause of this epic metamorphosis, but rather its key transitional stage.

Relics of the strange era remain with us today. The term "neutral ground" arose in the 1830s as hyperbole for the adversaries of the First and Second municipalities living on either side of Canal Street and its extra-wide median. By the 1860s, folks began to apply that term to other street medians. Today the colloquialism is used by everyone citywide — and by no one else anywhere in the nation.

Another vestige is our present-day system of municipal districts, the first three of which align precisely with the old municipalities, while the boundaries of the Fourth reflect those of old Lafayette at the time of its annexation.

Up until just a few years ago, each municipal district had its own elected tax assessor, a redundant system highly reminiscent of the old municipalities. And like its antecedent, that unconventional system was practically unique in the nation.

The year 1852 saw the launching of our present-day ward lines and numbers as well as the revision of the city's confusing house-address system, which was again updated to our current method in 1894.

The municipality era also lives on in two of our most cherished historic buildings. The Cabildo, built in 1799 in the Creole-favored Spanish Colonial style and located in the heart of the Creoles' neighborhood, served as City Hall until the end of the municipality era. When power shifted uptown, so too did City Hall.

The new building, today's Gallier Hall, embodied the Greek Revival fashion favored by Anglo-Americans, and was pointedly positioned in the heart of the American sector.

To this day, city government remains entirely above Canal Street, and one can find far more mansions and old money in the upper half of the city than in the lower faubourgs, where a Mediterranean and Caribbean ambience persists.

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