

## The Annexation of Algiers

Richard Campanella, published in the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, August 11, 2017



*Drone photo of Algiers by Lorenzo Serafini Boni, March 2017*

Algiers has a complicated insider/outsider relationship with New Orleans. The neighborhood—or is it a district, a region, a river bank?—has been both sibling and offspring of its world-renown neighbor, at once near and far from it. Depending on one's definition of urbanism, Algiers may be described as either older or younger than the historic faubourgs across the river: initial development occurred in 1719, a year after the city's founding, but the surveying of today's Algiers Point street grid did not occur until well into the 1800s.

The complexity deepens jurisdictionally. Algiers was at first outside of New Orleans, then inside parish limits but outside city limits. Since 1870 it's been inside both parish and city limits—yet seemingly still apart.

Indeed, the very name “Algiers” alludes to its liminality. Some say the appellation originated with veterans of Spain's expedition against Algeria, who while serving in Spanish New Orleans were reminded of the North African city of Algiers on the Mediterranean when they saw this outpost on the Mississippi. There are other stories: that “Algiers” derives from the enslaved Africans encamped there, or from the piracy and smuggling activity associated with the Barbary Coast. Whatever the origins, it's been called Algiers for well over 200 years.



*The Kings Plantation, future Algiers, is marked on this 1765 English map, courtesy Library of Congress.*

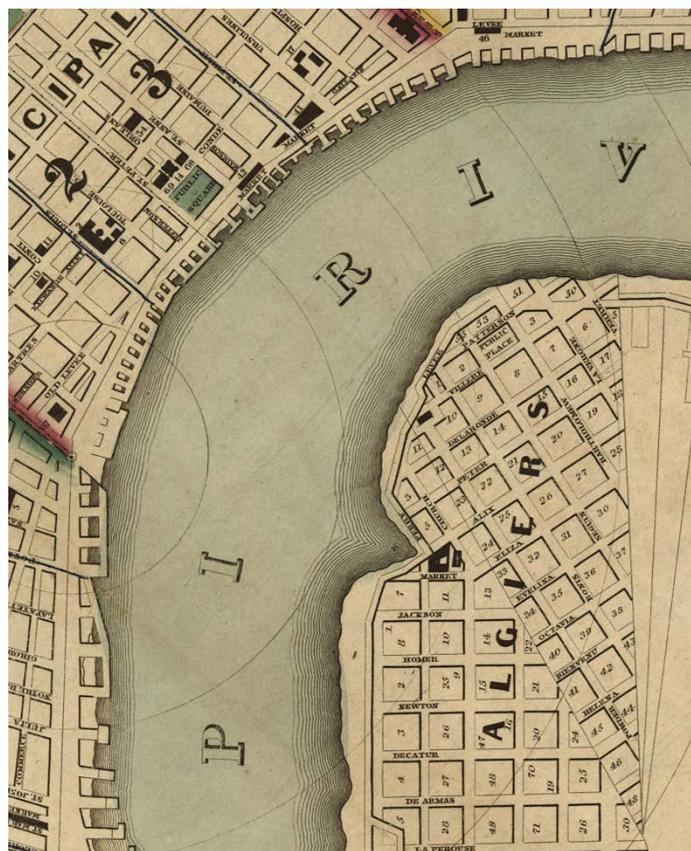
Algiers' bankside position, too, had a fluid vocabulary. We call it the West Bank today, but before the first bridge opened in 1958, folks also called it "the west side" or, among east-bankers, "across the river." In the nineteenth century, it was the "right bank," or "coast," an archaic usage which persists in the Lower Coast of Algiers. Mariners nowadays refer to Algiers' side of the river as the Right Descending Bank (RDB) or Left Ascending Bank (LAB); throughout the Mississippi system, the RDB is also known as the West Bank, regardless of the compass or the sun.

Amid all this spatial ambiguity, Algiers residents have understandably felt estranged from their metropolitan brethren, left out of everything from historical treatises to modern investments. As a result, tones of pride, defensiveness and occasionally resentment pervade cross-river conversations. This tetchiness is not unusual. New York City's "outer boroughs"—note the explicitly marginalizing term—delight in blowing Bronx cheers at Manhattan's conceits. St. Paul has an oftentimes prickly rapport with Minneapolis. St. Louis and East St. Louis are bonded by infrastructure and regionalism even as they are divided by river, race and statehood. Then there is New York and New Jersey, San Francisco and Oakland, Seattle and Tacoma...

The Algiers-New Orleans dissonance derives from three interrelated geographical factors: the physical separation of a wide and swift river; the 240 years it took to bridge it; and the fact that the east bank more directly abutted the rest of the continent, whereas the West Bank had mostly swamp or sea at its back. As a result, movements of people and capital have mostly circulated on the east bank.

Yet that pairing of proximity and isolation also incurred advantages. Algiers' riverfront, uncluttered with daily port bustle, made it ideal for shipbuilding and dry docks. Its seclusion suited it for powder magazines and defensive positions, and since 1849 Algiers has been a premier regional home to the U.S. military. Algiers' (as well as Gretna's and Harvey's) access to the Barataria Bay also made it a natural conduit for coastal resources, for which a network of canals were excavated. Perhaps most importantly, its connectivity to points westward (hence "Westwego") and Texas gave rise, starting in the 1850s, to Algiers' railyards and heavy industry in foundries and locomotive-building.

Given this mix of geographical blessings and curses, Algiers residents have long debated how best to govern themselves: by parish, by city, or by themselves?



*Algiers (right) in 1845, when it was an unincorporated area within Orleans Parish but outside the City of New Orleans. Detail of Norman's Map of New Orleans, courtesy Library of Congress.*

The area came into the colonial domain as a single French royal plantation in 1719 until its sale in 1770, under the new Spanish regime, to “pobladores”—that is, grantees aiming to populate and develop the terrain. What is now Algiers was granted to Luis Bonrepo, who promptly sold it to Jacques Rixner, who in 1777 passed it to P. Burgaud, who transferred it to Martial LeBoeuf, who sold it to Bartholomy Duverjé in 1805.

By that time Louisiana was under American dominion, and New Orleans gained a municipal charter. Algiers fell outside the new city limits, but within Orleans County, an electoral and taxation district entailing today’s Orleans, Jefferson, St. Bernard and Plaquemines parishes. The county jurisdiction continued even after Orleans Parish was created in 1807, for judicial purposes, in a shape roughly matching today’s Orleans and Jefferson parishes. Into the 1840s, both counties and parishes would coexist in Louisiana, and unincorporated areas were governed confusingly via the two overlapping jurisdictions.

Orleans Parish shrunk considerably in 1825 when its upper half got re-designated as a new parish named Jefferson. Algiers, meanwhile, remained unincorporated, governed by state legislative enactments from 1805 to 1840, and thereafter by the “Police Jury of the Parish of Orleans on the Right Bank of the River Mississippi.” This body typically met in St. Charles Hall and included a president, attorney, treasurer, surveyor, syndic (public advocate), assessor and tax collector. Elected “jurors” passed ordinances and oversaw everything from policing and leasing to education, improvements and taxation.

The police jury system sufficed until Algiers started to urbanize and develop formidable industries. Capt. Augustin Seger, a primary force behind railroad and shipping improvements, had advocated for Algiers’ municipal incorporation since the mid-1840s. The idea gathered momentum, and in 1866 local newspaper publisher A.B. Bacon went so far as to draft up incorporation papers, arguing that Algiers’ geography was, in the paraphrasing of the *Daily Picayune*, “superior to New Orleans, (what) with Texas now teeming with wealth, and West Louisiana (by) far the richest and greatest portion of the State.” Algiers had a longer riverfront with deeper draft and nearby railyards, and seemed poised to attract Midwestern-style grain towers. “Were New Orleans now to be founded,” Bacon ventured, “it would be placed on the right bank, instead of the left.”

New Orleans recognized all too well Algiers’ competitive advantages. Its own shipping industry had limited wharf space, as everything above Toledano Street at that time pertained to Jefferson City and Carrollton City. On account of a controversial new state law, Algiers had also landed a new centralized slaughterhouse for the processing of Texas and Opelouses cattle, yet another reason for New Orleans to eye its neighbor.

So while Algiers mulled independence, New Orleans relished annexation. One can almost hear its hands wringing in an 1869 editorial which read, “The port of New Orleans is not confined to its left bank. Algiers is as much within the port, though not within the city.... Let us see to what extent this additional district can be employed to supplement (our) maritime advantages.... It is about time that New Orleans should awaken to the very great advantages (of) Algiers....”

Most Algerienes protested any talk of joining the City of New Orleans. They worried their taxes would increase, and that revenues would flow to projects and debts across the river—and to the

politicians and bureaucrats who lived there, who could hardly be counted upon to prioritize for their village-like enclave.



*Floating dry dock for shipbuilding and repairing, an industry for which the Algiers riverfront was ideal—and for which the New Orleans riverfront on the east bank had little room. Detail of c1910s photo courtesy Library of Congress.*

Economic reasons, vis-à-vis overwhelming power across the river, ultimately explain Algiers' envelopment as New Orleans' Fifth Municipal District and 15<sup>th</sup> Ward. But Reconstruction-era politics formed the proximate cause for the March 16, 1870 state law enacting the annexation.

Since the end of the Civil War, tensions had mounted between white Democrats who had supported the Confederacy and the federally backed, racially integrated state government headed by Republican Gov. Henry Clay Warmoth. In an attempt to consolidate his power statewide, Warmoth pushed to install political appointees in unfriendly municipalities, and if that didn't work, subsume these jurisdictions into adjacent cities. Toward this end, the 1870 law annexed Jefferson City into New Orleans, becoming today's Uptown. In an apparent attempt to counterbalance those likely new Democratic voters, Algiers' annexation was included in the bill, under the presumption that its substantial African American population would support the Republicans. Algiers thus became a throw-weight in a momentary political struggle, played out against a larger backdrop of economic geography.

Discontent with the municipal marriage has resurfaced ever since—as early as 1877, when the *New Orleans Times* reported on “Aggravated Algiers—Why She is Unhappy in her Union with New Orleans,” and in 1895, when the slow arrival of fire fighters from downtown made a terrible conflagration in Algiers Point that much worse. Over a century later, in 2004 and again in 2015, State Rep. Jeff Arnold sponsored legislation for Algiers to secede from New Orleans and become its own parish. Constituents, he said, were “tired of not being serviced” by city government, and of the community being considered “the red-headed stepsister of New Orleans.”

Sister, step-sister, insider, outsider: Algerienes have felt all of this—along with fierce pride—for nearly three centuries.

*Richard Campanella, a geographer with the Tulane School of Architecture, 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> or @nolacampanella.*