

Today's Lafitte Greenway Was Spanish New Orleans' Carondelet Canal

Richard Campanella, published in the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, November 17, 2017

For decades, a weedy strip coursed through New Orleans' historical heart, unnamed, underutilized and barely noticed except as a nuisance. All this changed two years ago, when the newly christened Lafitte Greenway opened new access to old neighborhoods and mended a gash in the urban fabric.

The linear movement of pedestrians and bicyclists on the Greenway today echoes that of vessels starting more than 220 years ago, at a time when New Orleans made some influential planning decisions.

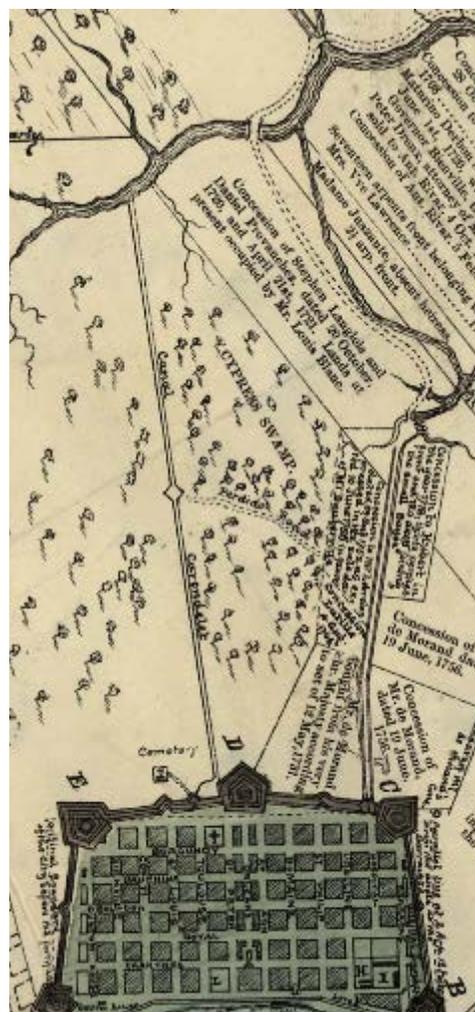
At that time, the governor of the Spanish colony of Louisiana was a Belgian-born baron named Francisco Luis Hector de Carondelet. Upon attaining his position in 1792, Carondelet found New Orleans' infrastructure in a state of transition. Rebuilding had slowly progressed since the ruinous Good Friday Fire of 1788; a new *suburbio* named Santa Maria (today's Central Business District) gradually developed upriver; the dead could now be entombed in a new cemetery (now St. Louis No. 1); defenses surrounding the city were being fortified; and a new market would help centralize food retailing with improved sanitation—the beginnings of today's French Market.

But urban problems proliferated, and two of the biggest involved water. One was the drainage of urban runoff, and the other was hassle of overland drayage along muddy Bayou Road to get to Bayou St. John and the Lake Pontchartrain basin, whose abundant resources were sorely needed.

Governor Carondelet aimed to resolve both with a single improvement.

In June 1794, Carondelet announced plans for a canal to be excavated to Bayou St. John. The channel's centralized position behind the city would abet street drainage, while its lake connection would allow resources to flow directly to the urban populace.

Authorities in Spain approved the project but did not fund it, so the governor resorted to the labor of 100 *presidios* (convicts) as well as 60 enslaved men. Phase one of the excavation took the rest of 1794, during which workers dug out a channel 6 feet



Detail of 1798 map showing Carondelet Canal connecting city (bottom) with Bayou St. John (top). Courtesy Library of Congress.

wide and nearly as deep, running 1.6 miles to Bayou St. John. Phase two, in 1795, involved another 150 enslaved workers, who widened the channel to 15 feet, removed stumps, and shored up the banks. In 1796, the waterway, officially named the Canal Carondelet, opened for business.

The next year, Spanish authorities transferred Governor Carondelet to Quito, and his eponymous canal, having lost its champion, fell into disrepair.

Around that time arrived one James Pitot, a Frenchman by birth who had escaped the slave insurrection in Saint-Domingue and sought refuge in New Orleans in 1796.

Over the next decade, Pitot would witness the transfer of Spanish Louisiana to France in 1800 and its sale to the United States three years later, followed by his own appointment as New Orleans' first mayor in 1805. With dramatic urban growth on the horizon, Pitot knew lake access would be critical to growing New Orleans—and that the Carondelet Canal would be critical to lake access.

In 1805, Pitot organized the Orleans Navigation Co., and in 1806, his workers began clearing the bayou of debris and expanding the adjoining canal. The project, which entailed the privatization of a publically owned asset and spawned a legal battle with the city, would take \$300,000 and more than a decade to complete. Tow paths were laid atop the guide levees so mules could pull the barges, and timber-reinforced docks were built around the inland turning basin, thus giving rise to "Basin Street." Workers installed a drawbridge over Bayou St. John and a dock and lighthouse at Spanish Fort by the lakeshore.

In May 1817, the Orleans Navigation Co. re-opened the canal, charging \$1.25 per ton for passage. Business boomed. "Where there was formerly a filthy ditch and noisy frog-pond," wrote John Adems Paxton in 1822, "we find a beautiful canal, with a good road and walks on each side, with gutters to drain off the water, and a large and secure Basin where vessels can lie in perfect safety at all seasons."

Small craft brought in, according to Paxton, "cotton, tobacco, lumber, wood, lime, brick, tar, pitch, bark, sand, oysters, marketing...furs and peltries.... We frequently see in the Basin from 70 to 80 sail(boats, and) 550 to 600 barrels, from the West Indies, the northern states, Pensacola, Mobile, Covington and Madisonville...." Enough money was changing hands for the federal government to appoint two inspectors to collect fees.

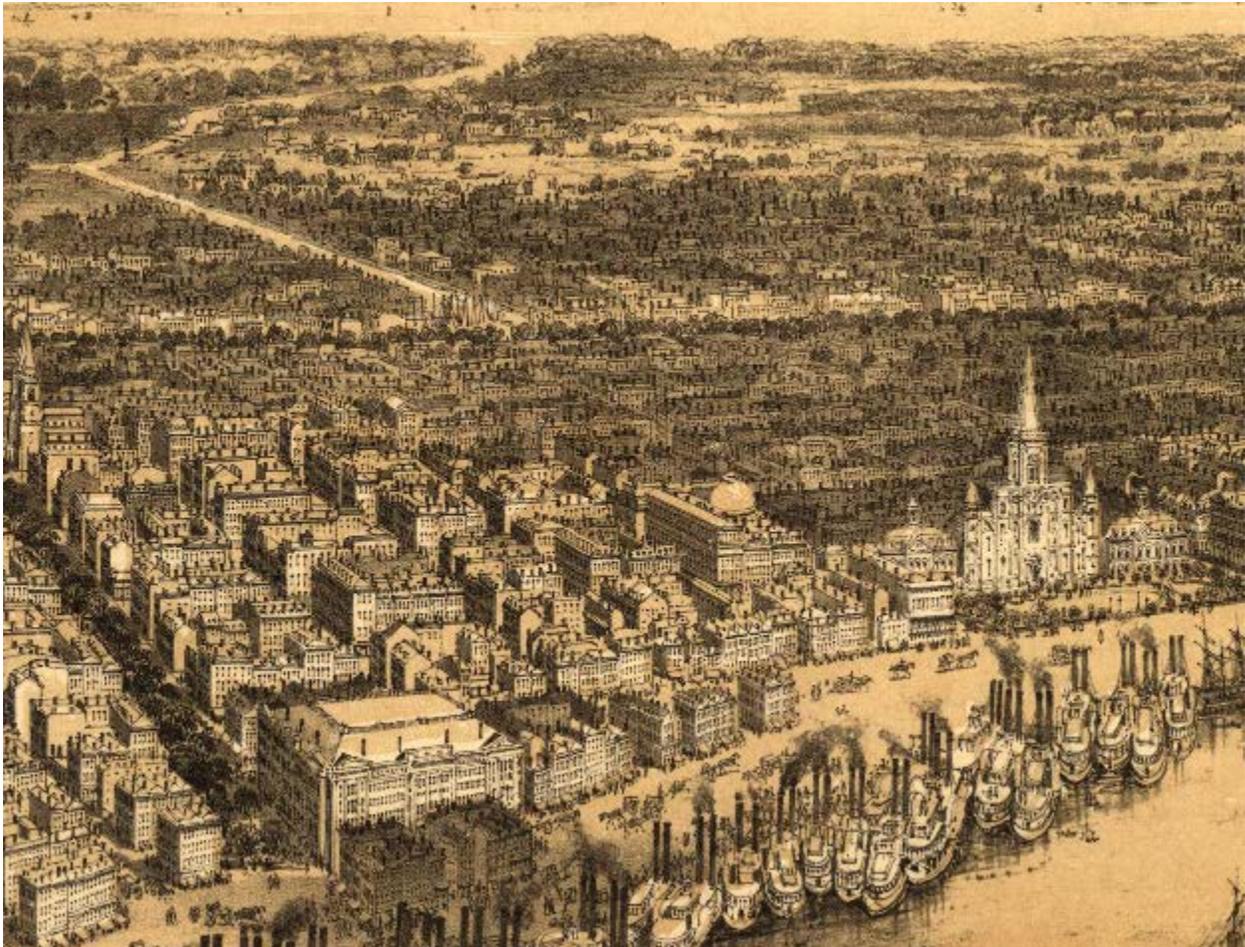
New Orleanians also saw aesthetic properties in the canal, and a popular Carondelet Walk opened along its flanks. Here people would promenade and enjoy views of elaborate "pleasure gardens" maintained on adjacent private property, perhaps implanting the idea of a linear public park.

Rivals took note of the Carondelet Canal's monopoly on lake trade. In 1831, downtown investors opened the Pontchartrain Railroad, providing a swift and novel new access option. The next year, investors uptown began hiring Irish "ditchers" to connect the lake with the rear of the American sector.

Named the Basin Canal and completed in 1838, the new waterway spelled trouble for the Carondelet Canal, which folks unhelpfully rechristened as "old." The nickname stuck, and for a century to come, New Orleanians referred to their two cross-swamp seaways as the Old Basin and New Basin Canal.

The Orleans Navigation Co. went bankrupt in 1852 and auctioned its assets to the New Orleans Canal and Navigation Co. Under new management, the canal's activity resumed, if not its profitability. "The large fleet of brigs, schooners, sloops, and steamers...strikes the attention of the stranger," wrote the *New York*

Times in 1853, “and he wonders how the vessels ever got...into the heart of the city.” Management shifted again in 1857 to the Carondelet Canal and Navigation Co., and once again, activity lagged behind the New Basin Canal.



Detail of “Birds Eye View of New-Orleans 1851” shows Carondelet (Old Basin) Canal in distant upper left, connecting Bayou St. John. Courtesy Library of Congress.

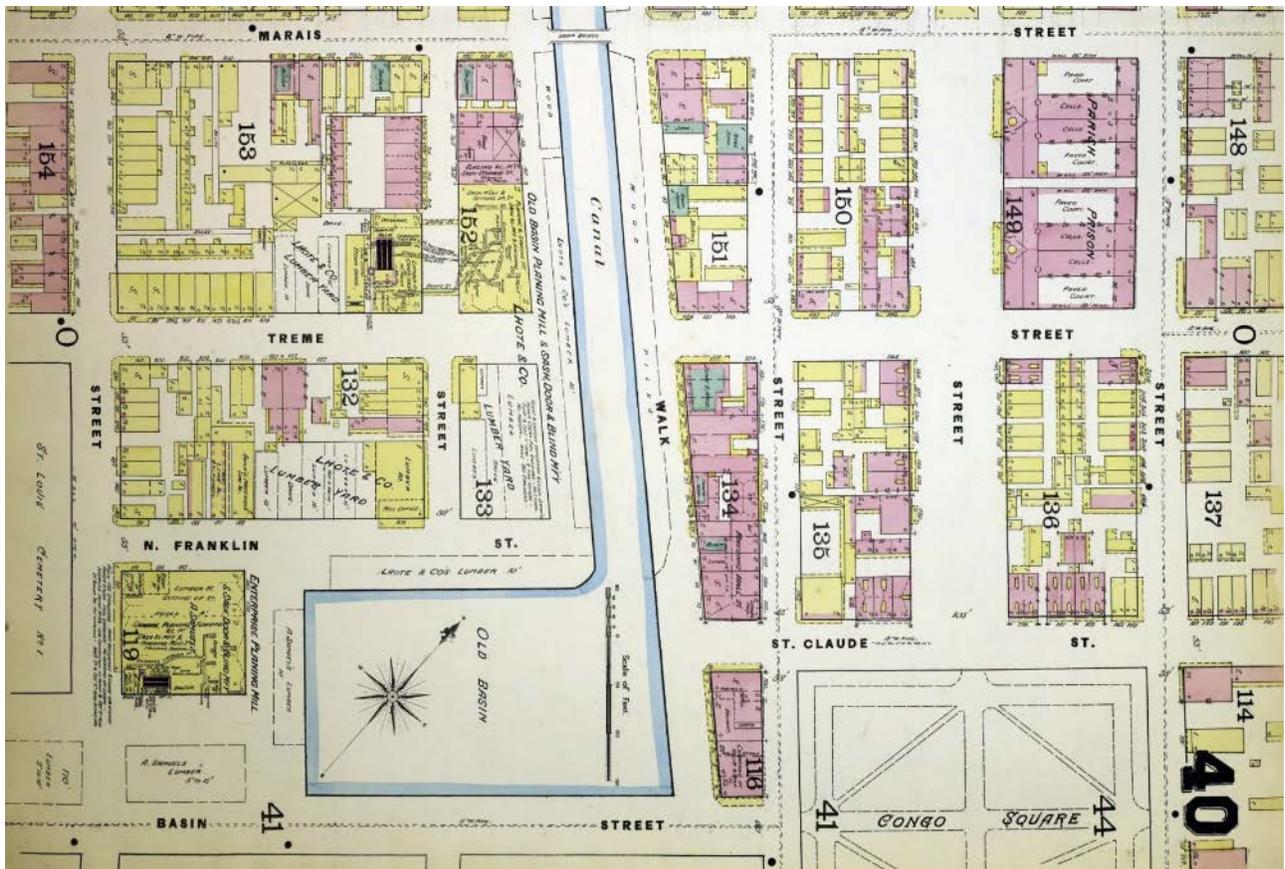
Cargo figures from *Gardner’s New Orleans Directory for 1866* attest to the competition. For every one cord of wood or barrel of oysters shipped on the Old Basin Canal, two came on the New Basin Canal. For every brick or sandbag that came on the Old, three to four came on the New. Cotton and lumber were over 5-to-1 in favor of the New Basin Canal; and rosin, tar and shells, over 17-to-1. Only in shingles and staves were the two canals even, and only in charcoal and turpentine did the Old Basin Canal dominate.

Yet the aging waterway nevertheless helped sustain local industry. All around its turning basin were lumberyards and charcoal deposits; carpentry and planing mills; stables and warehouses; even a vinegar maker. Shellfish and finfish moved briskly to local markets, and stacks of firewood were sold to stoke a thousand stoves.



Oyster and firewood luggers in the Old Basin Canal, c1910.

Within a few blocks could be found the Parish Prison, the 350-foot-long Tremé Market, the famed Globe Theater, notorious Storyville starting in 1898, the St. Louis cemeteries No. 1 and 2, Congo Square, and expansive Creole neighborhoods, chief among them the Faubourg Tremé. Parallel to the waterway ran track bed of the Southern Railroad, allowing steam locomotives to deposit passengers at the elegant Terminal Station (1908) on Basin at Canal—within steps of Storyville’s brothels.

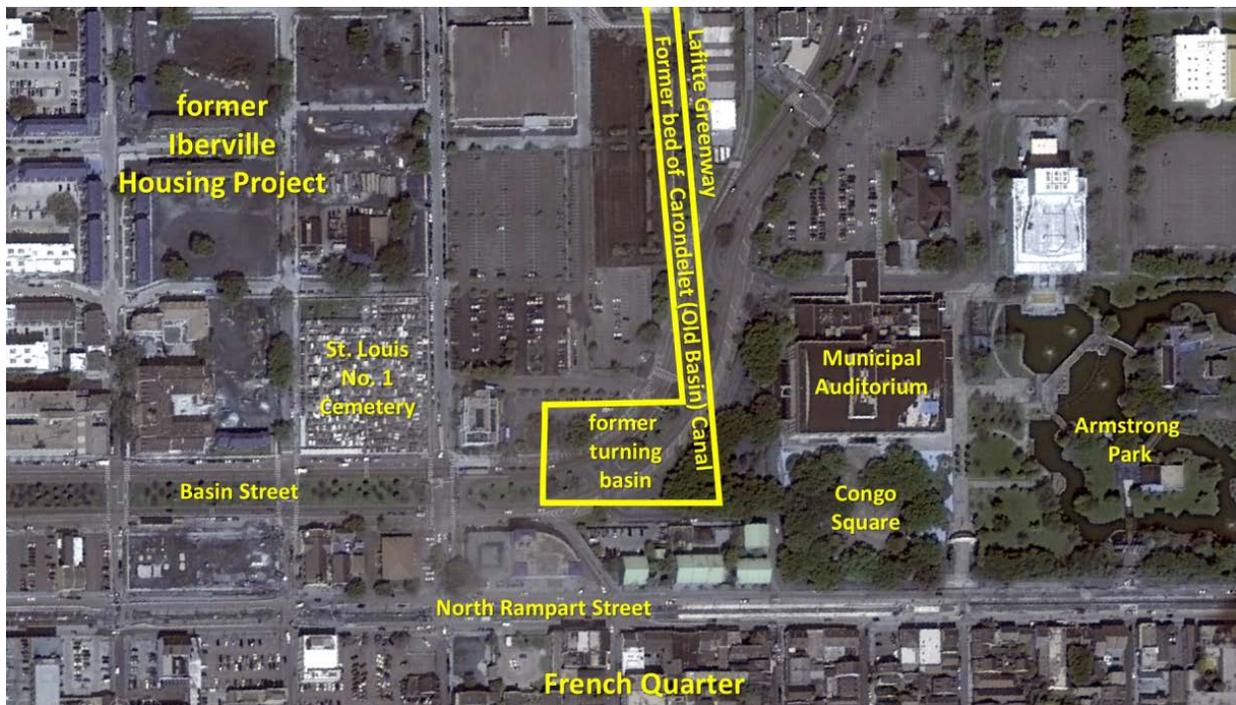


1885 Sanborn Map of the turning basin of the Old Basin Canal, courtesy Library of Congress

But by this time, railroads were generally outcompeting the old waterways, and by the 1910s, trucks took an additional toll. Now there were various ways of getting lake-area resources into New Orleans, and the historic canals were the slowest.

The aging ditch suffered another defeat in 1913 when the Louisiana Conservation Commission ruled lake oysters must enter the city via the state-owned New Basin Canal rather than the private Old Basin Canal, which had a reputation for cheating the commission of tax revenue. By the 1920s, the Old Basin Canal, now under the control of the railroads, came to be viewed as a traffic obstacle and eyesore, stagnant and clogged with water hyacinth, the scene of all too many accidents and drownings.

In 1924, the city purchased the right-of-way with the intention, according to the *New Orleans Item*, of “removing the menace to health of the Old Basin canal...and converting it into a parkway or a sunken garden.” Filling began in 1925, followed by landscaping in the 1930s. One notable amenity was the Richard Bertholet Lemann Playground, which, in fact, encompassed two playgrounds -- one riverside of North Claiborne for white children, and the other lakeside for black children. Plans for a longer linear park, meanwhile, fell by the wayside. People came to think of the dormant space by its paralleling street, and the “Lafitte Street corridor” endured as a conspicuously open swath through the Fifth Ward, home to surplus traffic lights, city vehicles and a brake tag station—mundane to say the least.



Turning basin area today; map by Richard Campanella

Fully 210 years after the opening of the Carondelet Canal, visionary citizens saw aesthetic and ecological value in the weedy belt, and formed the Friends of the Lafitte Greenway. After years of design charrettes and neighborhood meetings, the advocates worked with city authorities to secure a \$9.1 million grant to begin construction. The Lafitte Greenway opened in November 2015, and the park, akin to Carondelet’s vision from 1794, has since helped manage runoff while improving access—only now, it’s bioswales that absorb the runoff, and bicycles that reach the bayou.

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 “Time and Place in New Orleans,” from which this research was drawn. Reach him through <http://richcampanella.com> and @nolacampanella on Twitter.



Drone photo of Lafitte Greenway, upper left to lower right, by Lorenzo Serafini Boni, 2017.