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ADDRESSING URBAN ORDER

It took 176 years for New Orleans to perfect its house-numbering system — and that's faster than many cities.

Numbering buildings in a consistent and universal system throughout a city is far more complicated than one would expect.

By Richard Campanella
Photos by Richard Campanella

THE NUMBER ON YOUR DOOR may seem like a minor part of your municipal identity, but in it are clues to centuries of urban historical geography and decades of modern city planning. The seemingly simple task of enumerating houses in a consistent and universally recognized manner took the better part of two centuries for New Orleans to master — and that's a pretty good record compared to other cities which grapple with it to this day. Logical and consistent house-numbering systems, like zoning ordinances and preservation statutes, come about only when a certain level of civic authority passes from individuals and private developers, working independently in a decentralized fashion, to professionals charged with oversight of the entire city from the top down.

House numbering in New Orleans became problematic because the founding generation, living in a city so small in which everyone knew where everyone lived, did not foresee that someday their community would grow enormously. Thus they missed the opportunity to create a regularized system at the inception. City engineer Le Blond de la Tour and surveyor Adrien Pauger, who designed and laid out the present-day French Quarter in 1722, as well as a mapmaker named Gonichon in 1731, did enumerate properties in their respective charts of the city, but the labels were probably intended for cadastral use only — that is, as a key to land ownership records — rather than as house addresses. Not until the early American years did an initial system materialize. To design it authorities tasked Matthew Flannery, a good man for the job, because he had also been contracted to take the 1805 door-to-door population census.

Flannery's house-numbering method rested on three suppositions. First, he reasoned that the Mississippi River and Orleans Street formed the city's principle X and Y axes — reasonable enough, given Pauger's design intentions and the circa-1805 urban footprint. Second, Flannery declared Orleans Street to be oriented east-west, thus making those blocks downriver "north," and those upriver "south," of Orleans. This was not so reasonable, given that Orleans angled by 37 degrees off an east-west line. Third, he decided to enumerate houses in the order they occurred — a flat-out bad idea, because it ignored vacant lots and future changes in density. To mitigate, he doubled all numbers, giving the system elbow-room should an extant house gain a new neighbor. A look at Bourbon Street provides insights into how Flannery's system played out. His 1805 directory indicates 58 houses on "Rue de Bourbon S.," which would have been distributed from present-day Iberville to Orleans, plus another 54 houses on "Rue de Bourbon N." from Orleans to Barracks. Flannery himself lived at 71 South Bourbon, which meant the 35th or 36th house from Orleans counted in a southern, or upriver, direction. Between which blocks? We do not know, and therein lies another flaw in Flannery's system. We do know a man named Josiah lived in the uppermost house on Bourbon (79 South Bourbon), but we can only presume it was at the present-day Iberville intersection. We also know Jean Mariano (84 North Bourbon) was the lowermost Bourbon resident, 42 houses down from the Orleans intersection, but can only speculate whether he lived at the present-day Barracks intersection. We are safer in presuming that Veuve Carabe (4 South Bourbon) and John Bautiste Beauregard (4 North Bourbon) lived on either side of the Orleans intersection.

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CONFUSED? SO WERE CITIZENS. The City Council nevertheless approved Flannery's system and mandated that every street corner have two pairs of wooden signs mounted at right angles, one in French and one in English for both intersecting streets. Occupants had to pay Flannery two and a half bits for a tin plaque with their house number to affix to their abode.

Flannery's system failed to gain momentum, for a number of reasons. New development had shifted the urban fulcrum decidedly upriver, which repositioned the newly surveyed and grandly dimensioned Canal Street as the city's universally recognized Y-axis, rather than little old Orleans Street. Furthermore, in the absence of top-down oversight or a pressing official need for consistency such as home postal delivery (which did not exist at this time), house enumeration proceeded capriciously in the new faubourgs. Different areas handled rules and situations, such as odd-even numbering, incrementation, directionality, absent owners, open land, multiple entrances, and new constructions, in different ways. Worse yet, authorities never clearly documented whatever ad-hoc system existed, opening the door to further improvisation. People generally gave up on the system, as evidenced by the countless antebellum advertisements directing inquiries to "Dauphine corner Orleans," "St. Peter at the Square," or "at the Exchange on Chartres" rather than via Flannery's numbers.

The city intervened in 1831, requiring every 20 feet of street space citywide to be enumerated with even numbers for the downriver side of those streets perpendicular to the Mississippi, as well as the river side of those parallel to the river. Odd numbers would be assigned to those upriver or lakeside. No other system-wide rule was stipulated, although the law did specify how houses should post their signage. Searching for an address on mid-antebellum Bourbon Street would have entailed seeking an oval-shaped tin or iron plate above each building's door, or to its right at least 10 feet above the soil, with the house number painted at least three inches high in black oil and varnished to protect from rain. (How many residents actually abided by these requirements is another matter.) Street signs, a municipal responsibility under the direction of the city surveyor, were conveniently color-coded: black lettering on a yellow field if the street ran perpendicular to the river, and white lettering on a black field for those that paralleled the river. Clues from the 1830 City Directory, which listed numerical addresses with convenient textual clarifications, and L. Hirt's 1841 Plan of New Orleans with perspective and geometrical views of the principal buildings of the city, which cartographically recorded the system, allow us to

reconstruct piecemeal the mid-antebellum system. It was never fully documented.

THE YEAR 1852 brought major changes to the administration of New Orleans. The inefficient municipality system, which since 1836 had subdivided the city into three semi-autonomous municipalities, was finally abandoned — but only after Anglophones had allied themselves with uptown German and Irish immigrants to guarantee numerical superiority over Francophones. The reunified city now tipped toward the control of Anglo-Americans, who subsequently began winning local elections. City Hall moved out of the Creole quarter and into the American sector, and the fulcrums of commerce and media did the same. Creole cultural influence gradually began to wane.

The 1852 reforms also brought changes in political geography. First, the former municipalities were (confusingly) renamed and renumbered such that the old First Municipality (French Quarter and Faubourg Tremé) became the new Second Municipal District, and the old Second Municipality (Faubourg St. Mary up to Felicity, today's CBD and Lower Garden District) became the new First Municipal District. Next, the City of Lafayette in neighboring Jefferson Parish (present-day Garden District and Irish Channel) was annexed into the city of New Orleans. Third, wards were redrawn to accommodate the reunified and expanded city. Serving electoral and statistical purposes, ward limits had been reconfigured at least four times prior, going back to the colonial era. Because Felicity Street had previously delimited New Orleans' upper boundary, the new ward enumeration began at Felicity (First Ward) and continued consecutively downriver. To equalize populations within wards, the high-density French Quarter was sliced into the narrowest wards (Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth), while the less-populated lower faubourgs allowed for more expansive areas (Seventh, Eighth, and Ninth wards).

The great municipal reshuffling of 1852 also provided an opportunity for authorities to, once again, rework the house-numbering system. Mostly this effort took the form of fixing quirks and smoothing over erratically numbered areas rather than a wholesale redesign. While the 1852 system did maintain odd-and-even-numbered street sides and incremented the numbers upwardly with distance from Canal Street and the river, it did not space the numbers out consistently and paid no heed to the significance of a block. Unlike the early antebellum system, the post-1852 system is well-documented, in part because the Sanborn Insurance Company carefully labeled parcels with numbers in their gigantic canvas map portfolios. Mailmen delivering letters to homes, a service started by the U.S. Postal Service during the Civil War in some Northern cities, would have used this system after home delivery reached New Orleans in the late 1800s.

THE PROGRESSIVE SENSIBILITIES of the 1890s brought an exciting time in the urban developmental history of New Orleans. Promethean drainage and water treatment systems were being designed; streetcars were electrified and lines expanded; steel frames and pilings allowed buildings to rise vertically even as the city spread laterally to Carrollton, to the Metairie and Gentilly ridges, and downriver toward Arabi. The era called for fixing, rather than patching, pesky old urban problems, and with the planned drainage system anticipated to convert the backswamp into developable real estate, now was the time to fix the house-numbering system.

Other cities were not so fortunate: parts of lower Manhattan, for example, never adopted the decimal system, and finding a certain address today can (without the help of a smart phone) entail canvassing numerous blocks.

Following an 1892 ordinance, City Engineer L.W. Brown, the same man in charge of the infrastructure improvements, took the lead in overhauling the numbering system. His engineers kept what worked about the two prior systems — the Canal Street/Mississippi River axes and the odd-even street siding — and wiped away everything else. The new design, developed in 1893 and deployed in 1894, utilized the Philadelphia-inspired "decimal system," which consistently incremented by 100 per block, such that one could estimate locations and distances from house address. "One does not have to hunt for a number," extolled a supportive Picayune editorialist. The system also followed Philadelphia's lead in deciding how to allot numbers to parcels and blocks of varying sizes, multiple-unit buildings, and other common aberrations. Odd numbers would be ascribed to the downriver and lakeside halves of streets, and even numbers opposite.

At first, the city required dwellers to purchase official number plates or face a penalty, but later backed off when the penalty raised legal questions regarding monopolization, a heated topic in this era. Signage, which was part of the funded effort, took the form of aluminum letters set against a dark green metal field for street names and against a blue field for house numbers. One of the biggest stakeholders in the project was L. Soards, the publisher of the City Directory. His business dependent on it, Soards nervously tracked the progress of the conversion throughout the city in 1894, and at one point admonishing readers of the Daily Item, "Caution[:] former or old numbers…should and must be retained till the New City Directory comes out, otherwise serious inconvenience would arise!"

Normally such civic change brings with it civic resistance. But the old system was such a headache, and the new system so vast and logical an improvement, that most citizens and merchants conformed to it swiftly. Perhaps it helped that the change came about roughly a generation before America life grew complicated and changing one's address meant multitudes of paperwork to ensure delivery of high-stakes things like tax forms and Social Security checks. Other cities were not so fortunate: parts of lower Manhattan, for example, never adopted the decimal system, and finding a certain address today can (without the help of a smart phone) entail canvassing numerous blocks. Some European cities got stuck between the two systems Mr. Soards wrote about, and post both the old and the new numbers on houses to this day. Others in less-developed countries remain in a position where New Orleans was in the early 1800s.

The Philadelphia decimal system of house numbering adopted by New Orleans in 1894 is the system we use today. It has been successfully expanded into 20th-century subdivisions and has influenced the systems in adjacent suburban jurisdictions. A perfect solution to an old problem, it's a testimony to the Crescent City's progressive spirit in matters of municipal improvement in the 1890s-1900s and provides clues to the historical geography and management of the city every time you jot down an address.

Richard Campanella, a geographer with the Tulane School of Architecture, is the author of Bienville's Dilemma, Lincoln in New Orleans *and other books. Preservation in Print is honored to feature a series of articles by Campanella, which began with the September 2012 issue. He may be reached at rcampane@tulane.edu.*