



Circa-1900 view of Old French Opera House (1859-1919), on Bourbon Street (running mid-left to lower right) at the Toulouse intersection in New Orleans' French Quarter. Detroit Publishing Company, courtesy Library of Congress.

REMEMBERING THE OLD FRENCH OPERA HOUSE

THE BOURBON STREET LANDMARK (1859-1919) TESTIFIES TO THE CULTURAL POWER OF OLD BUILDINGS — AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THEIR LOSS.

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PRESERVATIONISTS NEED NOT be reminded of the power of old buildings. We recognize them as testaments of social memory, artifacts of architecture and vessels of culture, and we know all too well how their razing lays the groundwork for historical amnesia. What may come as a surprise is that their destruction can also accelerate cultural decline, or at least reify it. A case in point comes from one of the most important buildings in New Orleans history, the Old French Opera House on the corner of Bourbon and Toulouse streets in the French Quarter. Its magnificent rise, colorful career and fiery demise testify to the relationship among people, place, and edifice.

In the late 1850s, in this town smitten with performance and sprinkled with rival venues, Bourbon Street — an otherwise rather middling artery with a mixed population and motley commercial scene — scored a cultural coup. A new Parisian owner had taken possession of the nearby Théâtre d'Orleans, renowned for featuring touring European companies under the management of New Orleanian Charles Boudousquié. The Frenchman planned to keep that success going, but because he failed to negotiate a lease with Boudousquié, the local impresario decided to open a superior venue for French opera himself.

Boudousquié formed the New Orleans Opera House Association in early March 1859, quickly raised well over \$100,000 from affluent aficionados, purchased a 193.5-by-191.5-foot lot, and contracted to build a splendid edifice, according to the original building contract, “at the corner of Bourbon and Toulouse Streets, in accordance with the plans and elevations made by [architectural firm] Gallier and Esterbrook.” Work commenced in May, and, with an eye on the autumn social calendar, proceeded round-the-clock with nighttime lighting coming from large

bonfires erected in adjacent streets. It must have been a magnificent sight, as yellow-orange illumination danced off the rising walls of what the New Orleans Delta predicted would be “a handsome structure of the Italian order [that will] rise like a Colossus over everything in that vicinity.”

The grand opening occurred on the evening of December 1, 1859 with a performance of Rossini's *Guillaume Tell*. It was a triumph that would be remembered for years. “Superb...magnificent...spacious and commodious...a spectacle...richly worth view-

“...the one institution of the city above all which gave to New Orleans a note of distinction and lifted it out of the ranks of merely provincial cities...”

ing [at] a scale of great elegance,” raved the *Picayune* of the gleaming white New French Opera House.

Theaters were a big deal in this era. Featuring not only opera and plays but also reenacted historical and current events, magicians, “natural philosophers,” balls, dances, and socials, these venues were a premier locus of social activity in a time when all performance entertainment was live. The French Opera House, and nearby competing venues such as the St. Peter Street and Orleans theaters, stoked the twilight bustle of downtown and gave entrepreneurs an opportunity to serve that same conveniently gathered pool of potential clients with food, drink, lodging, and other forms of diversion. Antoine's Restaurant, for example, noted on its calling card how it catered to patrons of nearby theaters. In this manner, a noc-

turnal food, drink and entertainment district began to form in the central French Quarter, and because the grandest of all venues was the French Opera House, Bourbon Street found itself as the axis. Thus was planted one of the seeds from which, decades later, the modern-day Bourbon Street night scene would germinate.

For the next 60 years, despite Civil War, occupation, declining fortunes, managerial turnover and a few missed seasons, what became beloved as the “Old” French Opera House played host to a litany of famous names and performances, not to mention countless Carnival balls and society events. It served as a home away from home for a steady stream of French and other European performers at a time when New Orleans' connection to the Old World grew increasingly tenuous, and when Gallic syllables became less frequently heard in local streets. And magnificent it remained, particularly at night: Wrote one observer in the postbellum years, “the building, with its fresh coat of whitewash, glimmers like a monster ghost in the moonlight.” Its prominence persisted despite the economic woes of the late 19th-century French Quarter — so much so that a proposal floated in the *New Orleans Tagliche Deutsch Zeitung* to widen Bourbon Street into a boulevard from Canal Street to the French Opera House at Toulouse, to showcase the venue and “raise hope in the French Quarter of new vital business life.” The newspaper correctly predicted that the widening project “will probably not get enough support to be realized [because] such a project needs [finances], public spirit, community initiative, and energy, and these are exactly [what is lacking] in the French Quarter.”

Perhaps the greatest significance of the Old French Opera House came not from its architecture or performances but from its enthusiastic patron-



This detail of a circa-1905 panoramic photograph, taken from the roof of the Maritime Building looking down Bourbon Street, captures the rarely seen uptown flank of the hulking Old French Opera House. Detroit Publishing Company, courtesy Library of Congress.

age by neighborhood French Creoles, who simply adored the place. While many members of this deep-rooted local ethnicity had departed the French Quarter after the Civil War, enough remained to maintain a Francophone society in this and adjacent neighborhoods at least two decades into the 20th century. Critical to the precarious cohesiveness of this culture were cherished local structural landmarks, which gave French Creoles space and sym-

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bolism against the forces of national assimilation. St. Louis Cathedral and other downtown Catholic churches, for example, bonded them religiously. About 20 tiny private institutes, so-called “French schools” taught by aging Creole society gentlemen like Alcee Fortier, kept alive their language and heritage. And the French Opera House unified them in the arena of civic rituals and entertainment.

It is almost impossible to overstate the affection French Creoles held for this building, for the performances held inside and for the Gallic cultural continuity they represented. Quarter children would routinely attend Sunday matinees for 25 cents, and were seated in a special section downstairs. “I was brought up in that way[,] to enjoy music,” recalled Madeline Archinard, born in 1900; “Even as young children[,] we learned to love music in that way.” Interviewed by the Friends of the Cabildo in a 1982 recording archived in the New Orleans Public Library Louisiana Division, Mrs. Archinard recalled how she used to spend Carnival around 1910:

There was a Mrs. Parmaris who lived on Bourbon Street who had a home on the parade routes, and while all of our parents used to go there before the balls [at the Old French Opera House], the children were taken [by] our nurse to see the parades... We always knew on what floats our relatives were and they would always throw us a lot of beads... It’s a little shop now, but it reminds me of the past every time I go there.

Mildred Masson Costa, born in 1903 into a strictly French-speaking household in the Quarter, described

the Old French Opera House as “my second home... I practically lived there[,] three nights a week, and then we had the matinee on Sunday.” Because she arrived early with her grandfather, little Mildred would run around in the dressing rooms and get free ballet lessons from the dancers. Then came the performance. Recalled Mrs. Costa with a laugh,

The very first thing I saw was *Faust*, and when the devil came out, with the smoke and the drumbeat, yours truly got panicky and I flew backstage to my grandfather!... I was two years old; it was more than I expected. I met the devil afterwards, and he was very charming.

Even better for the precocious little French-speaking New Orleanian was what came after the performance. “The foyer was right in the front, upstairs, on the second floor,” she recalled three-quarters of a century later; “and there they used to always serve punch for the ladies[;] there was never a man in the place.” The men went “down in the bar in the basement,” on Bourbon Street — and that’s where Mildred wanted to be. She “used to slip underneath...the double swinging doors” of the saloon to visit her granddaddy in the bar, where they would “sit me on the bar, and I was given a glass of Maraschino cherries... in a Sazer-

The loss punctuated and hastened the decline of French Creole culture in the French Quarter and enabled its hybridization with American culture.

ac glass...at nine or ten o’clock at night!” By the time the performance ended, it was nearly midnight, but perish the thought that this meant bedtime. Rather, Mildred would accompany her granddad to Johnny’s, a little eating place across Bourbon Street.

All my grandfather’s cronies would gather at Johnny’s...and at one o’clock in the morning, I was eating fried oysters and I was eating rum omelets. I loved rum omelets! I loved to see these little purple flames go up and down and I can still see it there.

Then we walked home.

Everyone in the Quarter went to the Old French Opera House on Bourbon; patronage transcended the lines of class, ethnicity and race, although black patrons were relegated to inferior seating. There was another reason, however, for Mildred’s regular at-

tendance: Her grandfather belonged to the volunteer organization Les Pompiers de L’Opéra (Opera Firemen), whose members pledged to attend operas nightly and, in exchange for enjoying the production gratis, would check for fire hazards before, during and after the event. They took their jobs very seriously. “When there was a fire to be built upon the stage,” explained Mrs. Costa in 1985, “they were the ones who built it, and they were the ones who put it out... Before they went home — well, me too because I was there — they used to go over every single seat to see that not a cigarette was left under those seats.” Because fire hazards came when there was an audience, the Pompiers worked only during performances, not rehearsals. That policy, which seemed rational, would prove to be fatal.

Just before midnight on December 3, 1919, the concert master of the Old French Opera House and his colleague from the New Orleans Grand Opera Company went out for drinks following a rehearsal of *Carmen*. As the two men headed down Bourbon Street at 2:30 a.m., they noticed a plume of smoke wafting from the theater’s second-story window. To a nearby saloon they darted to alert the central fire station. Flames of unknown origin had proceeded to ignite highly combustible props, costumes and scenery, and soon engulfed the upper floors. Neighbors awoke to witness the terrible sight, as fire crews struggled to prevent the blaze from spreading. By dawn, “[t]he high-piled debris, the shattered remnants of the wall still standing, the wreathing smoke” reminded an *Item* journalist of “a bombarded cathedral town.”

The allusion to the recent fighting in Europe was apropos. The Great War weakened the already-fragile exchange that French cultural institutions struggled to maintain with the former colonies of their fading empire. New Orleanians at the receiving end of that exchange took special pride in their French Opera on Bourbon Street — “the one institution of the city above all which gave to New Orleans a note of distinction and lifted it out of the ranks of merely provincial cities,” wrote *Times-Picayune* editorialist. It represented an “anchor of the old-world character of our municipality...without [which] will be the gravest danger of our drifting into Middle-Western commonplacidity.”

Mildred Masson, by this time a teenager, was among those devastated by the loss, particularly since her own grandfather toiled pro bono as a Pompier to ensure this would never happen with a full house. “You see, the fire burned the night after a rehearsal,

not after a performance.” Her voice betraying agitation and indignation even 66 years later, she declared that the Pompieri “were not responsible for being there during rehearsals because you weren’t supposed to use the rest of the theater, you were supposed to be on the stage, and they thought the actors or the singers would have the sense enough not to smoke. You can’t very well smoke and sing anyway.”

Now, with the destruction of the city’s last best French cultural toehold, even the Grand Opera Company admitted in a special notice posted in the Item that it had suffered “a severe blow to the artistic and social life of New Orleans.” So intrinsic was the theater to the neighborhood that the aforementioned editorialist pondered whether the fire would “sound the death knell of that entire quarter of the city, with its odd customs that charm the stranger...” Recent evidence suggested he might be right. Just three years earlier, another major Creole landmark, the former St. Louis Exchange Hotel on St. Louis Street, was razed for damage inflicted by the Great Storm of 1915. A few years before that, officials leveled an entire block of Creole townhouses across from the hotel and replaced it with a gigantic Beaux Arts courthouse. Newspaper editors received hundreds of letters pleading Grand Opera Company authorities to rebuild at the same site, but all too aware of its decaying vicinage, they demurred. When officials finally erected a comparable multi-use venue 10 years later — today’s Municipal Auditorium — they located it outside the French Quarter. Many New Orleanians by that time viewed the neighborhood as a dangerous dirty slum — “Little Palermo,” they called it, and not flatteringly — and some called for its wholesale demolition. Two Creole girls born in the Quarter

around 1900, Madeline Archinard Babin and Marie Pilkington Campbell, testified emphatically in their elder years that it was after the Great War, which coincided with these cultural and structural losses, that the last wave of old French Creole families finally departed the French Quarter.

“The loss of major landmarks...helped lead to the legal protection of the French Quarter in 1937.”

Would Francophone Creole society have persevered had not the Old French Opera House burned? No. But the building’s destruction eliminated a major bastion and incubator for its cultural activity, and the volume it left behind was never filled with a comparable institution. The loss punctuated and hastened the decline of French Creole culture in the French Quarter, and enabled its subsequent assimilation, or hybridization, with American culture.

Charred ruins stood throughout the 1920s in the hope of a restoration, but were eventually cleared away. The lot, which had fallen into the unlikely possession of Tulane University, hosted such unbecoming land uses as the basecamp for the Samuel House Wrecking Company. Ironically, this and other Quarter wrecking yards became meccas for first-generation restorers, who, according to pioneer preservationist Mary Morrison, would go “nosing around the sidewalks[,] beachcombing[,] swapping hardware....You’d buy some beautiful particular fine wood or something, and you’d just drag it home!” The anecdote serves as a reminder

that, while the loss of major landmarks like the Old French Opera House and St. Louis Exchange Hotel came at great cultural cost, they also catalyzed preservationist intervention and helped lead to the legal protection of the French Quarter in 1937.

As Bourbon Street grew more popular and valuable in the midcentury decades, entrepreneurial eyes envisioned better uses for the weedy lot where sopranos and ballerinas once performed. In 1964, investor Winthrop Rockefeller of Arkansas teamed with corporations based in Memphis and Houston and received permission from the Vieux Carré Commission to erect on the site a three-million-dollar five-story hotel with 186 rooms. The Downtowner Motor Inn (later Le Downtowner Du Vieux Carre) opened on December 4, 1965, 46 years to the day since the fire.

Today, only a handful of clues of the old gem remain. A nightspot across Toulouse Street calls itself the Old Opera House Bar, and the circa-1964 hotel, now the Four Points by Sheraton, heralds the site’s heritage through a brass plaque and occasionally features opera singers at its club. Perhaps the most salient relic is the widened span of Bourbon Street, accommodating a setback that Gallier and Esterbrook had designed in 1859 to allow patrons to disembark from their carriages en route to an evening at the opera.

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