Before Storyville

Vice Districts in Antebellum New Orleans, Part II: Gallatin Street

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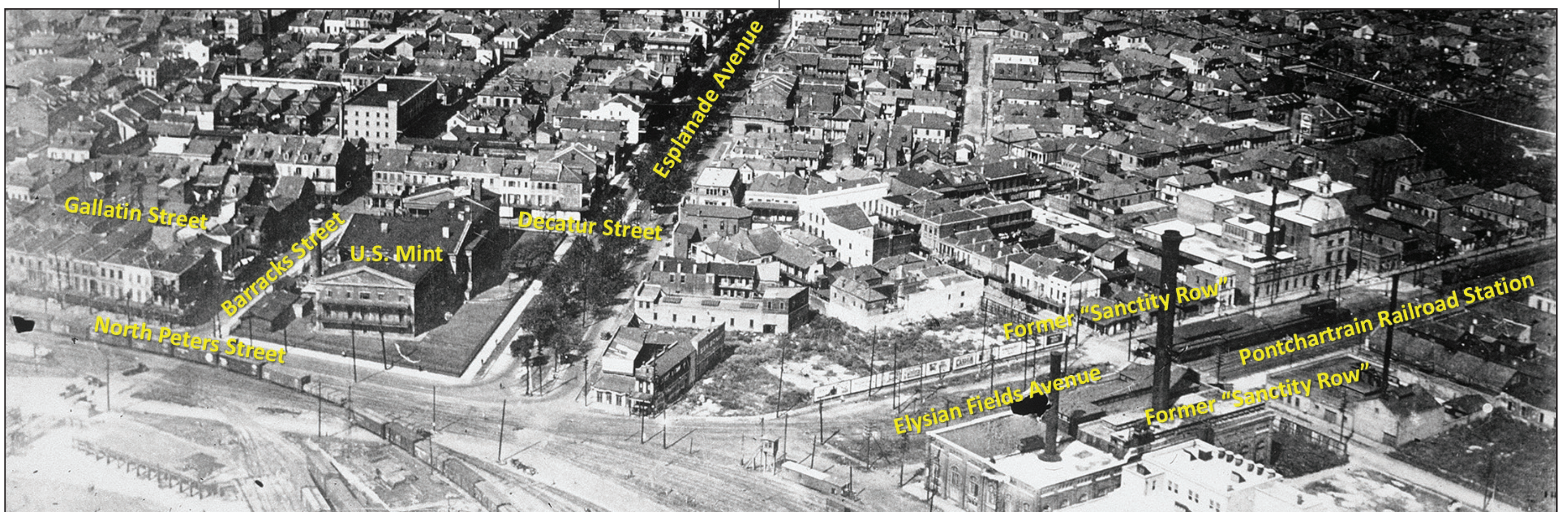
ABOVE: A view of the riverside buildings of Gallatin Street just prior to their destruction in 1935. The US Mint can be seen in the distance. Courtesy Louisiana State Museum **BELOW:** An aerial view from 1922, courtesy Louisiana State Museum; annotation by Richard Campanella

IN LAST MONTH'S PRESERVATION IN PRINT, we explored two little-known vice districts in antebellum New Orleans. One lay behind the upper French Quarter, where Customhouse (now Iberville) crossed Basin and Franklin and petered out in the backswamp. Another ran across the rear upper fringes of what is now the Central Business District, along present-day O'Keefe to a loathsome purlieus known appropriately as The Swamp, and down Girod Street to the gritty flatboat wharves in what is now the Warehouse and Lower Garden districts. Here we explore the most infamous of New Orleans' antebellum vice spaces, Gallatin Street (now French Market Place), and the early legal attempts to curtail the sex trade which would eventually pave the way for the creation of Storyville in 1897.

Only two blocks long, Gallatin Street, according to newspapers of the day, was "filled with low groggeries [dive bars], the resort of the worst and most abandoned of both sexes." Journalists characterized with understatement the Gallatin block between Hospital (Gov. Nicholls) and Barracks as "the rendezvous of many person whose characters are not of the most respectable stamp," and reported violence there regularly. The raucous space ranked among the few streets in the city to become a metaphor in the vernacular, such that if one spoke of a woman having a "career on Gallatin Street," or of "the frail daughters of Gallatin Street," everyone knew exactly what that meant. It also earned the rhetorical flares of sarcasm and irony, through such references as "that classic thoroughfare," "the numerous and chaste nymphs of that poetic region," and "that quiet, respectable thoroughfare." References to its thugs were formulated as "the Knights of Gallatin," "the Gallatin street boys," "Gallatin Street Rangers," and "the good…and true [men] of Gallatin Street." Its characters and joints became notorious locally, among them "Dutch Pete" Johnson and his California House, and the "houses" or "dens" (brothels all) of Archie Murphy, George Kent, John Swan, Bill Spriggin, William "Scott" Wilson and Cornelius Keegan. Few New Orleanians would have challenged the journalist who, in inventorying the city's geography of sin in 1855, wrote that "worst among the worse is Gallatin street…sons of fraud, treachery and blood meet there the daughters of the night, and with them hold high wassail and unhallowed revelry. There is no redeeming feature to this street of streets."

Nevertheless, more wickedness lay a short distance downriver, around the dogleg-shaped intersection of Elysian Fields Street (now Avenue). Here operated the Sign of the Lion (Lion's Den), the Stadt Amsterdam, The Mobile, The Pontchartrain House, The Whitehall, and Tivoli Gardens. Winking, locals dubbed it Sanctity Row.

Gallatin Street plus Sanctity Row formed the highest concentration of illegal sex, drinking (licensed or otherwise), violence, robberies, pickpockets and scams in late antebellum New Orleans. Why here? It lay at the periphery of the French or Creole Market, the city's largest municipal emporium, which buzzed with stalls, conveyances, errand-runners, day-hires, cheap food, running water, amusements, customers round-the-clock, and cash in every pocket. Such activity attracted loiters, transients, curiosity-seeks and adventurers, to whom bars, brothels and gambling dens catered. The adjacent streets also ranked fairly low socio-economically; one visitor called this area "the St. Giles of New Orleans…where poverty and vice run races with want and passion." It attracted troublemakers with its cheap rents, and lacked the civic clout to keep them out. The nearby US Mint, a smoky industrial operation, further suppressed the cost of living and added to the foot traffic, as did the international shipping wharves at the foot of Esplanade. And on Elysian Fields was the Pontchartrain Railroad Station, which landed visitors from Mobile



via Lake Pontchartrain (hence The Mobile and The Pontchartrain House saloons). For many disoriented travelers, this spot formed the back-end gateway to New Orleans, and it had all the right ingredients for a vice district: access, anonymity, low rents, cheap eats, a quick buck, and strangers coming and going at all hours.

Select incidents help paint a picture of Gallatin Street's decadence. One night in 1849, for example, a hapless chap named Chambers got a room in a Gallatin boarding house, and, predictably, soon found himself "having a chat" with a lady named Miss Bridget. As she cunningly excused herself to get water, a man by the name of Warden suddenly appeared, "asserting [to Chambers] in very strong terms that he was the husband of the lady who had just gone out. As is usual in such cases, a fight ensued…." By dawn, Chambers found himself robbed of $15; both men found themselves cut and bruised; and Miss Bridget and her accomplice Warden found themselves in the slammer. "This is an old game," admonished the *Picayune*, "and the young gentleman had not paid as dearly as many before him have for seeing the 'elephant.'" (Note: "Seeing the elephant" was a 19th-century Americanism meaning to indulge oneself and live life to the fullest, dangers and all. It was often used in connection with a trip to New Orleans, and the implied activities often took place in these vice spaces.)

Later that year, three employees of a nearby boarding house entered Wilson's Gallatin Street Saloon, and in short order, got into a fight with the barkeeper who in turn shot one and stabbed another. The wounded comrades returned with "fifteen or twenty [reinforcements, who] commenced an indiscriminant destruction of…the bar-room and the upper apartments. They piled up the contents in [Gallatin] street and set fire to the mass." Such large-scale affrays — what the late Tulane historian Judith Schaffer characterized as brothel riots — involved alcohol-tinged bad blood between rival establishments, and erupted frequently in the vice districts of many antebellum cities. One in 1855 entailed the notorious Archy Murphy and his "Gallatin Street Rangers" invading the brothel of madam Elizabeth Myers on adjacent Barracks Street, "beating her and destroying her furniture." Only recently had the same gang also "riotously destroyed the furniture and fixtures of an oyster saloon" on nearby Levee Street. Today's Bourbon Street pales in comparison to antebellum Gallatin Street.

ABOVE: A view of the riverside buildings of Gallatin Street just prior to their destruction in 1935. The US Mint can be seen in the distance. Courtesy Louisiana State Museum

Laws had been on the books for years targeting "lewd and abandoned women," but they mainly prohibited "occasion[ing] scandal or disturb[ing] the tranquility of the neighborhood" rather than paid sex per se. Gallatin-style mayhem and the sheer ubiquity and profitability of prostitution, however, impelled city authorities to further their pursuit of a legal solution. In March 1857, explained the historian Schaffer as well as LSU historian Alecia Long, the City Council passed An Ordinance Concerning Lewd and Abandoned Women, a 16-act, thrice-amended piece of legislation said to be the first of its kind in the United States. Dubbed the 'Lorette Law' after the French slang for whores, the ordinance for the first time restricted the sex trade by taxing prostitutes $100 and brothel keepers $250 annually. Because it applied only to certain areas, the law reworked the geography of prostitution and, by taxing it rather than banning it, routed some of the industry's profits into city coffers. The spatial restrictions aimed to make the sex trade invisible: harlots could not occupy any one-story building, or the lower floor of any structure, nor could they "stand upon the sidewalk…or at the alley way, door or gate… nor sit upon the steps [with] an indecent posture [nor] stroll about the streets of the city indecently attired…." The Lorette Law also mandated that white and "free colored" prostitutes not occupy the same house, and banned public women from soliciting johns in cabarets or coffee-houses.

Generally speaking, the Lorette Law had the effect of curtailing prostitution in the front-of-town (the urban core by the Mississippi River) and pushing it outwardly to the rear and lower fringes of the city. Although it remained legal to sell sex from an upper floor within the urban core so long as it was quiet, unnoticeable, and licensed, the Lorette Law marked the beginning of the end of the old Phillippa/Girod and Gallatin/Elysian Fields vice concentrations, not to mention the scores of dispersed brothels. However, one old concentration evaded the new delimitations. Because the Lorette Law did not restrict prostitution on the swamp (lake) side of Basin Street between Canal Street and Toulouse, the old Customhouse Street concentration around the Franklin intersection managed to persist — with great consequence 40 years later.

The Lorette Law came under legal attack immediately, from public women, brothel keepers, and the landlords who rented to them. One madam, Eliza Costello, refused to pay the $250 fee and ran her case to the Louisiana Supreme Court, which in January 1859 ruled the ordinance unconstitutional on licensing technicalities. Sex workers celebrated with a vulgar victory parade.

Authorities fought back. "For the next forty years," wrote Schaffer, "city leaders passed eight new versions of the Lorette Law, all of which attempted unsuccessfully to control, regulate, or just make money on prostitution…." Licensing fees and penalties were tweaked variously, but the spatial limits of the law generally remained the same as in 1857. This meant that, by default, the one place in the city where sex workers could ply their trade with no costs, minimal police interference and maximum proximity to downtown clients pools was that Customhouse/Basin area. Forty years later, that area would form an opportunity for the city to attempt its greatest corralling of vice, one that would cinch New Orleans' enduring reputation for the lascivious and lay the groundwork for today's Bourbon Street. It would become known as Storyville.

As for Gallatin, the city during the Depression targeted the seedy old street as part of the New Deal's urban renewal and renovation programs. The French Market figured prominently in those plans, and given Gallatin's forlorn condition — "virtually abandoned by traffic, a loafing place for human derelicts," according to the *Times-Picayune* — a decision was made to demolish all buildings on its riverside flank and scrub the area clean of its ancient stigma. In 1935 the city acquired the requisite land and proceeded with demolitions; the next year it renamed Gallatin Street "French Market Place;" and in 1938 it dedicated the new open-air Farmers' Market pavilion, today's French Market Flea Market.

Few of the vendors or visitors there today know of the area's dark history, but this was not the case in the 1930s. Gallatin Street, wrote the *Times-Picayune* in 1938, is "known to modern New Orleans through numerous written accounts as the street where shadowy forms darted in and out, a lane of sinister doing [where] seamen were "Shanghaied," smuggled goods were hidden, and men and women were murdered."

Richard Campanella, a geographer with the Tulane School of Architecture, is the author of Bienville's Dilemma, Lincoln in New Orleans*, and other books. This article is drawn from his latest book,* Bourbon Street: A History *(LSU Press, 2014), to which readers are directed for more information and sources. Campanella may be reached through http://richcampanella.com, rcampane@tulane.edu , and @nolacampanella.*