



Before Storyville

Vice Districts in Antebellum New Orleans, Part I

By Richard Campanella
Tulane School of Architecture

SAY “New Orleans” and “red-light district,” and Storyville usually comes to mind — for good reason. In operation from 1898 to 1917, that famous tenderloin district represents the city’s best example of a spatially confined and legally defined vice zone, and has been extensively documented by historians and depicted in literature and cinema.

But it was not the first. For nearly a century prior, the city boasted — or suffered — a number of other *sub rosa* spaces which formed organically, had soft edges, and operated at the margins of both the law and the city. From a preservationist point of view, practically nothing remains structurally of these spaces; indeed, there is hardly any historic memory of them: how many people think of O’Keefe or Girod streets in today’s Central Business District as being hotbeds of debauchery? In this two-part article, we look at the geography of the illicit sex, gambling and drinking trades in New Orleans during the antebellum years.

Abundant as it was, vice generally scattered itself hither and yon throughout New Orleans in the early 19th century. Grog shops and tippling houses, “caravanseraï” (flop houses), music and dance halls, gambling dens and brothels popped up wherever demand and supply shook hands, and that meant most neighborhoods, if not most blocks. Yet spatial concentrations did exist, for the same reasons other industries form clusters and districts: to take advantage of a mutual client pool, for the convenience of supply chains and workers, to lower costs through economies of scale, and to maximize accessibility while minimizing scrutiny.

Police reports, court records, and news articles about illegal sex activity (1846-1862), gathered by the late Tulane historian Judith Kelleher Schafer and mapped by this researcher, show that most prostitution and its attendant indulgences occurred in three principal zones. One was located in middle-rear edge of town; another in the upper edge; and the third along the lower riverfront. When mapped, these zones dominated the periphery, rather than the core, of the antebellum metropolis.

In the First Municipality—that is, the French Quarter and Faubourg Tremé — the vice zone lay around the intersection of Customhouse (renamed Iberville in 1901) and Burgundy streets. Schafer unearthed at least 75 illegal sex reports from court records and other sources, many of them involving scores of arrests, with addresses on Customhouse, Burgundy, Dauphine, Conti, Bienville, Basin, Franklin and adjacent streets. Why here? This area lay behind the Old City — none too elegant, none too pricey, yet conveniently proximate to clients galore in the urban core. Better yet, the nearby Old Basin (Carondelet) Canal turning basin and its attendant industries, plus the popular Globe Ballroom, drew a steady stream of potential johns. Testifying to this area’s reputé is the police blotter from a single day in 1853, when 54 brothel-keepers were arrested around Customhouse’s intersections with Burgundy and Dauphine. Two years later, police detained an additional 53 prostitutes in the same area — “nymphs de pave,” the press called them, lamenting that they “were more sinned against than sinning, [their] woe-begone appearance aptly illustrative of their fallen fortunes.” Another article described the whores of the Dauphine, Burgundy and Conti area as “the originators of all kinds of scandal.” Potation usually accompanied prostitution, so it is probable that a hefty number of grog shops operated here as well. So prevalent was illicit sex in and around Customhouse Street that a number of doctors and pharmacists specializing in the treatment of sexually transmitted diseases set up their practices here. This vice area would later form the Tango Belt, a competitor of sorts with Storyville and a predecessor of today’s Bourbon Street.

In the Second Municipality (today’s Warehouse District, Central Business District, Superdome area and Lower Garden District), a crescent-shaped geography of sin spanned from the rears of Gravier and Perdido streets, up Phillippa (now University Place, O’Keefe, and Dryades), and down Girod and Julia to the Mississippi River. Therein could be found the raffish back-of-town near Charity Hospital, the turning basin of the New Basin Canal and its leatherneck workforce, the hard-labor projects and industries along

ABOVE: This detail of J. Wells’ 1863 bird’s eye illustration of New Orleans shows at upper left some of the seedy peripheral districts mentioned in this article. The French Quarter appears at center. Courtesy Library of Congress.

Girod Street, connecting the riverfront flatboat wharves with the New Basin Canal and nearby Swamp district, hosted a disproportionate share of vice venues and crime. After a particularly gruesome grog-shop killing in 1838, out-of-state newspapers noted that “Girod Street, New Orleans, where the murder took place, is said to be the den of cut-throats, gamblers, and other infamous persons...” In an early example of conflating a social problem with its structural environment, the paper “proposed to root them out by tearing down the houses and widening the street.” Many locals would have agreed; some called Girod “a sink of pollution” with “scarcely a decent house in the whole street...” Even its defenders acknowledged the high numbers of indigent renters and a “laxness shown by the authorities.” Into the 1850s, Girod remained in a “shameful condition,” and city advocates called for the razing of “all the dirty hovels which have so long disfigured this street, and disgraced the city...”

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. This article is drawn from his latest book, Bourbon Street: A History (LSU Press, 2014), where readers can find more material and sources. Campanella may be reached through <http://richcampanella.com> or rcampane@tulane.edu; and followed on Twitter at [@nolacampanella](https://twitter.com/nolacampanella).