

## **Before Storyville**

## Vice Districts in Antebellum New Orleans, Part I

By Richard Campanella Tulane School of Architecture

AY "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, "caravanserai" (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 repute 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 backof-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.

the semi-rural periphery, and above all, the uptown flatboat wharf along the Mississippi River. From the 1790s to the 1860s, thousands of young Western males guided flatboats down from the upcountry to this dock, whereupon they unloaded hinterland cargo, vended it, dismantled the vessel, and sold the scrap wood. Flush with cash, the boatmen usually treated themselves to a few days or weeks "footloose" in the big city, liberated from farm toil and nagging kin and free to "see the elephant." (In frontier lexicon, "to see the elephant" meant to witness the utmost and live the experience to the fullest. Popular from the 1840s to around 1900, the expression may trace its origins to traveling carnivals which would hold out their most popular exhibit, a live elephant, as a climax. The phrase later took on darker connotations, meaning death or violence, but in this era, it was usually used salaciously, and young travelers often spoke of "seeing the elephant" in New Orleans' vice districts.)

Transient boatmen formed a substantial source of such demands. Venues gratifying their desires opened immediately along the flatboat wharf (present-day South Peters Street), in part because the lads utilized their docked vessels as rent-free basecamps. That custom became a flashpoint for merchants, citizens and authorities who saw the riverine encampments as both a physical and a moral nuisance. "The flat-boats permanently moored [on] the levee...are the dens of sharpers [cheating gamblers] by day, and robbers and murderers at night," complained the Bee in 1835, "yet not the slightest precaution is used." An earlier visitor reported seeing flatboats "used as huckster shops, dwellings [and] pigpens...." Others disdained the mile-long "line of gambling-shops" formed by the flatboats on Sundays, not to mention the boatmen themselves, who, by one springtime 1830 account, numbered "5000 or 6000," or ten percent of the entire city's population. Curious visitors in the early 1800s made a point of seeing the flatboat wharf in the same manner that even the most pious visitors today take a peek at Bourbon Street.

Once boatmen were finally crowbarred out of their floating lairs, they spilled into adjacent streets to seek affordable room and board. The high-rent arteries of the Second Municipality, such as St. Charles, Camp, and Magazine streets, generally eschewed the scruffy vagabonds. Back streets, however, were a different story: these semi-urbanized margins were a bit more forgiving, with their enticingly discreet and dimly lit shelters and refuges. To this area (mostly) young single male transients gravitated, with time on their hands, cash in their pockets, and anonymity in their identity. Phillippa Street bore witness to a remarkable concentration of brothels, particularly around Gravier, Perdido, and Girod, and with them were all the affiliated didoes, scams, and crimes.

The most adventurous males debauched in a sketchy purlieus known as "the Swamp." Located a dozen blocks inland from the flatboat wharf, where Julia and Girod petered out into the backswamp, this area took in all that civilized New Orleanians threw out: the eerie Girod Street Cemetery (1822); the smelly New Basin Canal (1832); Charity Hospital and its pestilential aura (1835), not to mention gas works, garbage dumps, shantytowns, prison work-yards, and the city stables. So it comes as no surprise that the boatmen's den of iniquity ended up here as well. Few first-person descriptions of this loathsome honkytonk survive. An 1828 editorial made reference to "the swamp and grog-shops, in the back parts of town" and bristled at the "tastes of the natives and frequenters of those places," while a more detailed account comes from a reminiscence of the 1820s-1830s reported in 1883. "The Swamp," it explained, "was a great rendezvous for the flatboatmen, and here they reigned supreme, the city police never caring to invade those precincts...." Today this area would be located between the U.S. Post Office and the Smoothie King Center.

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...."



**ABOVE:** Map of vice zones in New Orleans during the mid- to late-antebellum age, a halfcentury before Storyville. Map and analysis by Richard Campanella based on data from Judith Kelleher Schafer.

Detailed descriptions of the Girod vice scene come from an 1852 Picayune article. "Rows of low tenements...leaning against one another, [their] fronts shattered and broken, [with] a few crazy, creaky steps lead[ing] to each door," lined the infamous corridor. Each "tenement generally consists of three apartments, the drinking shop, about four feet deep and eight feet long, a larger or rather deeper room in the rear...used for a dining room and kitchen...and a loft [used] as common sleeping apartments..." Perhaps a "philanthropic stranger" might view the denizens therein as "the honest poor...induced to live in these miserable hovels by the low rates of rent; but the resident of New Orleans knows better...with the recollections of a cracked skull, a bloody proboscis, or darkened optics; and there are some who instinctively grasp their purses when [Girod Street's] famous localities are recalled...."

A closer look revealed the activity inside: "There is a red curtain in every window, and drunkenness and vice seem to peep through patched panes.... [E]ach of those rickety sheds brings to the owner a monthly payment of \$25 or \$30...raised by the sale of poisonous liquors, and by pilfering from the most degraded victims on intemperance. Whiskey is sold in all — an old table, a few dirty glasses, and a bottle [visible in every] open door...." The woman of the house — such enterprises were usually run by females, likely madams — "enlarges her business by accommodating boarders and lodgers." Upstairs, strangers paid a dime or a picayune for a rude bunk, depending on how cramped was the room, and endured "men in a beastly state of intoxication, with bloody clothes...a broken jaw, a stab in the body; while slovenly bloated women hang around them...." The "desperate rascal who would rob or murder, [with] police...in pursuit," found refuge in the hovels of Girod Street. "This is not a fancy picture," the article concluded.

## To be continued in next month's issue: Gallatin Street and the Lorette Law

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.