

## A Legacy of Luxury Lodging:

# The Original Cosmopolitan Hotel

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**F**OR THE THIRD TIME in a decade, a developer has floated outsized plans for 121 Royal St., this time for a high-rise hotel and condominium complex to be called the Royal Cosmopolitan. Although technically outside the jurisdiction of the Vieux Carré Commission, the proposed building's height — two towers measuring 164 and 190 feet, well above the 70-foot height limit for this zone — and adjacency to New Orleans' showcase French Quarter historic district have raised the ire of preservationists and neighborhood advocates. As of this writing (December 2015), a coalition of organizations including the Preservation Resource Center have filed suit to stop the City Council from considering the proposal on the grounds that it violates the city's recently approved master plan.

I will leave it to my colleagues to critique the proposal. This article instead recounts the legacy of lodging at this site, which, I argue, helped usher in a new age of luxury hotels in the late 1800s and laid the groundwork for the pleasure-tourism economy that came to dominate the upper French Quarter in the 1900s and 2000s.

That story begins in the years after the Civil War, when residential wealth in the urban core began shifting uptown, leaving downtown more commercial in its land use and grittier in its street environs. A rambunctious nocturnal entertainment scene had developed, in which a man on the town could find concert saloons, keno halls, coffee houses, restaurants, clubs and theaters catering to every taste, particularly on upper Bourbon and Royal streets. Elegant retail emporia operated on the main arteries, principally Canal Street, even as the ubiquitous sex trade carried on its business but steps away. Streets teemed with pedestrians, and ships and trains arrived at all hours of the day and night, depositing travelers with pent-up desires into a city more than willing to accommodate them.

Part of the action could be explained by emerging trends nationwide in the *fin de siècle*. Postbellum industrial growth in the Northeast had expanded the ranks of the middle class, and larger amounts of disposable income and higher education levels made many Americans increasingly curious about their rapidly developing country. Folks ventured farther from home, enabled by an ever-growing network of railroads with increasingly fast and comfortable trains. Gone were the frontier days of old: these new leisure tourists were now exploring new national parks and playing cowboy at dude ranches, while readers of nostalgic local-color literature grew intrigued about seemingly exotic places like Louisiana and New Orleans.

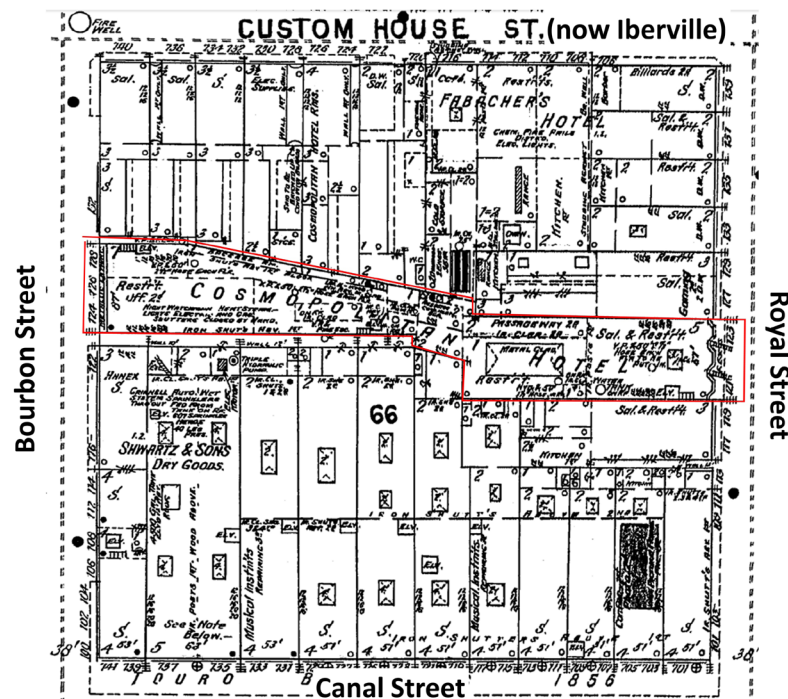
The 1885 World's Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exhibition at present-day Audubon Park had particularly abetted New Orleans' nascent tourism



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industry, and entrepreneurs took note that profits could be made from hospitality, namely luxury lodging. In the early 1890s, investors made plans for a fancy hotel at the heart of the action, what is now 121 Royal, and hired noted architect Thomas Sully for the designs. It would be called the Cosmopolitan.

The selected parcel happened to occupy the footprint of the old colonial fort line, which like all French defenses had slightly angled ramparts to maximize firing lines. The primitive fortification had been obliterated by the early 1800s, after which its angled interstice found a new use as a *corderie* — a ropewalk, for the laying and twisting of twine. The swath was finally subdivided in 1810, creating Canal Street and adjacent parcels, but remarkably, the angled line persisted, yielding odd-shaped lots with oblique rears.



ABOVE: 1896 Sanborn Map showing footprint of Cosmopolitan Hotel within angled parcel, courtesy Sanborn Map



Over the years, owners of most such parcels had them rectified to more manageable 90-degree angles. But not the Cosmopolitan's, with its 150-foot-long flank awkwardly tilted 20 degrees off plumb. Undaunted, architect Sully skillfully fitted into that idiosyncratic space a handsome five-story structure with a cast-iron façade of twelve bay windows, a design highly reminiscent of Manhattan but strikingly modern for Royal Street. With the Café Restaurant on the ground floor and 125 well-appointed rooms upstairs, the Cosmopolitan Hotel aimed to live up to its name as it prepared to open in early 1892.

Then disaster struck. On the night of February 16, 1892, amid what the *Daily Picayune* described as “a ceaseless procession [of] merry, happy” people patronizing “saloons [and] restaurants,” a fire started one block from the Cosmopolitan, “crossed [Bourbon] street in a bound” and enveloped half the block. Crowds fled;

steam pumps arrived, and plumes of water arched into the sky. By morning, both sides of 100 Bourbon were reduced to smoldering embers. Damages exceeded \$2 million, and 13 major enterprises were out of commission. Not among them was the Cosmopolitan on Royal Street, which had only its rear wall seared.

One person's disaster, the adage goes, is another person's opportunity. Owners of some burned lots found they had an eager buyer in the form of famed Canal Street department store D. H. Holmes, which purchased the parcels at the corner of Customhouse (now Iberville) and expanded its enterprise onto Bourbon Street. Owners of the river side of the Bourbon ruins, meanwhile, had an equally eager neighbor: the Cosmopolitan on Royal, whose owners envisioned a valuable second entrance on Bourbon. They purchased the parcel of an old piano store, cleared the wreckage, and commissioned Sully to design an annex.

Sully's Bourbon annex to the Cosmopolitan would rise seven stories high and boast an imposing granite façade with a grand entrance for long-term residency guests, while the main entrance on Royal would continue to welcome short-term guests. Sully also added a third wing opening onto Customhouse Street for service workers.

Now the tallest structure in the vicinity, the enlarged Cosmopolitan Hotel would attract a steady flow of moneyed visitors who in turn would accelerate the formation of a nocturnal entertainment district in the upper French Quarter. The complex's Royal-to-Bourbon lobby, not unlike the Roosevelt's lobby connecting Baronne and University Place today, became a famed rendezvous of local and state politicians. Other visitors created demand for dining, entertainment, potations, games of chance, and “Turkish bathes” (saunas, a new fad in this era). New enterprises specializing in food and drink opened nearby, among them what is now Galatoire's (1905).

The mounting bustle inevitably attracted sex workers. Prostitutes in this era tended to live in group quarters up Customhouse Street toward Franklin (which would become Storyville after 1898), and found johns a-plenty in the sundry venues of the upper French Quarter. Women “notoriously abandoned to lewdness” would visit the Cosmopolitan Hotel so regularly that the Customhouse doorway became a segregated women's entrance.

One evening in 1914, a curious 15-year-old girl ventured through that doorway. “I could see all these girls decked out in diamonds and beautiful clothes,” she recalled later in life, “eating sumptuous meals in the dining room, having drinks, having a ball.” Intrigued, she sought entre into their demimonde, only to be dissuaded — on account of her young age, they said, but more likely because “they weren't about to let me hustle on their territory.” Instead the women pointed her to the “landlady” of a house on Dauphine Street. “Why don't you go [there], learn how to do it?” She did, and later became the French Quarter's last and longest-working madam, subject of Christine Wiltz's book *The Last Madam: A Life in the New Orleans Underworld*. Norma Badon Wallace's career in the downtown sex industry lasted over half a century, and it began at the ladies' entrance to the Cosmopolitan Hotel.

The Cosmopolitan's success ushered in a new era of handsome high-rise hotels



ABOVE: View of Cosmopolitan Hotel complex from the Maritime Building, 1905. Courtesy Library of Congress, annotated by the author

appealing to affluent leisure travelers. Among them were the Grunewald (1893) on Baronne (now the Roosevelt), the Denechaud on Perdido in 1907 (now Le Pavillon) and, five years later, the Monteleone, towering 12 stories above 200 Royal and family-owned to this day. On a smaller scale were the Country, the Commerce, the Henrietta and the Planters hotels, all within two blocks of the Cosmopolitan. At least 16 additional luxury hotels were operating downtown by 1920, among them the older exchange (business) hotels such as the venerable St. Charles, which had to adapt themselves to the new leisure market.

All the competition cost the Cosmopolitan its marketplace advantages, as did the turmoil of the Great War in Europe, which sapped the high-end leisure travel trade. In 1919, the owners sold part of the Bourbon annex for \$215,000 to the Chess, Checkers, and Whist Club. One year later, the Eighteenth Amendment passed, forcing a popular drinking hole named The Gem to close its doors on the ground floor of the Cosmopolitan. In an attempt to reposition itself in the new marketplace, the Cosmopolitan in 1920 underwent a complete interior renovation, including an elevator, telephone exchange, steam heat, and new décor. It reopened as the Hotel Astor.

While the Royal side of the Astor survived structurally, the Bourbon annex met a different fate. Older members of Chess, Checkers, and Whist had died off, and new members failed to fill their shoes. In 1935, the club closed its books and auctioned off its property. The now-vacant Bourbon annex came to be viewed as valuable real estate, especially after the 1937 legislative preservation of the French Quarter. That constitutional amendment designated Iberville Street (formerly Customhouse) as the district's boundary, which consequently made parcels immediately outside the protected zone that much more attractive for new construction. Developers purchased parcels on the 100 block of Bourbon throughout the 1940s, and in 1953, Sully's 1892 annex finally met the wrecking ball for the expansion of Woolworth's, formerly Kirby's. The Royal Street end of the old Cosmopolitan/Astor, however, managed to survive.

Economic pressure to accommodate modern New Orleans' ever-growing tourism sector in the more recent *fin de siècle* attracted the attention of a new generation of corporate hoteliers to the tempting space of the old Cosmopolitan's Bourbon annex. In 2000, work began on a massive new Astor Crowne Plaza Hotel, which not only revived the Astor name and used portions of its space, but also replicated the profile of the old Bourbon annex. Skyscraper hotels had previously opened on adjacent blocks fronting Canal starting as far back as 1973, to the dismay of preservationists but to the delight of the tourism economy—an economy traceable in part back to the original Cosmopolitan.

The current Royal Cosmopolitan proposal is the latest front in this battle. But it likely will not be the last.

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