

The former Duverjé House became the Third City Court, Fourth Recorder's Court and the Eighth Precinct Police Station. It also was a source of local pride and a landmark on the skyline. Photo by GF Mugnier, courtesy of the Louisiana State Museum



“Built with the strength of a fortress”

ALGIERS POINT'S DUVERJÉ HOUSE WAS A WEST BANK LANDMARK

BY Richard Campanella

FOR MUCH OF THE 19TH CENTURY, if you stood on the French Quarter levee and looked across the river, you would have seen a long linear village-like profile of trees and dwellings fronted by wharves, moored vessels and the occasional dry-dock. Aside from a few church steeples, your eye would be drawn to one major landmark, its symmetrical hipped roof breaking the horizon and standing salient. This was the Duverjé House, and most New Orleanians at the time would have identified it as the best-known building on what they called the “Right Bank,” today’s West Bank.

The property sat on a prominent “point bar” — a promontory within a sharp river meander called Pointe Saint-Antoine by the French, now Algiers Point — and it came into the colonial fold in a disputatious manner. The disagreement over ownership involved two of the most important figures in early New Orleans: city founder and Commandant General Jean Baptiste Le Moyne, sieur de Bienville, and his Assistant Engineer Adrien de Pauger, who would later lay out the French Quarter street grid.

Resolution of the dispute in 1724 put the property in the hands of their employer, the Company of the Indies, which would use it as a warehouse, workshop, lumber mill and a farm in service of the principal colony across the river. Its primary use, however, was as a deposi-

tory for captive Africans recently arrived from Senegambia as well as the Bight of Benin and Congo regions.

Known as the Company Plantation, the site in the 1720s had more than 30 cabins used for the temporary sheltering of slaves until they were sold to colonists, or for their permanent housing if they were owned by the Company itself — as were 154 people at one point, making present-day Algiers Point, according to historian Erin M. Greenwald, the location of “the largest single group of enslaved men, women, and children living in Louisiana.”

After the Company folded in 1731, the operation became known as the King’s Plantation and, by 1760, the King’s Domain. In that year, a contract was made to build more than 20 cabins for slaves owned by the French crown who toiled at various colony projects, including constructing fortifications around New Orleans.

The Spanish, upon assuming power in 1769, had a different vision for the Louisiana colony. Finding itself in charge of a vast but lightly populated territory, Spain endeavored to sell or grant land to pobladores (settlers), thus unburdening itself of defending the land while letting the new private landholders put it to work.

A colony, after all, is only as good as the wealth it produces. Where

better to start than the dormant King's Domain on Punto San Antonio? In 1770, after half a century of official control, Governor O'Reilly sold most of the holding (except a portion for a powder magazine, today's Powder Street) to Don Luis de Bearepos. Within the year, Bearepos sold the land to Jacques Rixner, who in 1777 sold it to Pierre Burgand, who willed it to his nephew Martial Lebeuf in 1786, who sold it to Barthélémy Duverjé in 1805 for \$18,000.

It took seven years for Duverjé to get around to building a plantation house, but perhaps it was worth the wait. Starting in 1812, he had constructed, in the center of his main parcel, an archetypal French Creole Louisiana country manse, with a steep, hipped shingled roof above 12 rooms within 72-foot-by-52-foot two-story walls, all wrapped within a spacious gallery including an outdoor staircase. Setting Duverjé's house apart from others of its type and era were its unusually stout spindle colonnades on the upper gallery, rising from even thicker square pillars on the ground floor, all of which made the edifice robust and sturdy as well as graceful.

It is unclear who designed and constructed the house, but an 1891 recollection in the *Picayune* stated that Duverjé himself "was a good mechanic [and] personally superintended the erection of the building." The main house, "built with the strength of a fortress" was adjoined not by vast stretches of sugar cane but gardens, orchards, a dairy and two rows of outbuildings. In this regard, the Duverjé holding was typical of the Right Bank in this era: most were no longer monocrop commodity plantations, but rather mixed-use farms entailing food production, brick-making, lumber-milling, orchards, pasture, poultry and dairy, as well as ornamental gardens and perhaps sugar cane or other income crops growing in the rear arpent. "From one of the galleries of the mansion," wrote the *Picayune*, "an excellent view of the river is obtained, [along with] the Plantations and orange groves [of] the surrounding country."

Given its commanding position across from New Orleans, American troops occupied Duverjé's compound as the British approached in 1814-1815. Had the enemy put more of an emphasis on a right-bank assault, the Duverjé House might have seen combat — and possibly destruction. Instead, the British made it no farther up the Right Bank than today's Leboeuf Street before news of the climactic battle across the river at Chalmette brought an end to the invasion. Nevertheless, occupying American troops managed to cause \$2,100 worth of damages to the Duverjé property, for which his heirs were indemnified by Congress in 1821, one year after the patriarch's death.

By that time, the main house had four pavilions surrounding it and a number of brick slave cabins directly behind it, plus a two-arpent brick yard and kiln. Duverjé's widow Alix Bienvenu Duverjé, herself from a family of Right Bank planters, decided to put the property up for sale so she could move to the city. "The houses and buildings," read her 1821 advertisement in the *Louisiana Courier*, "are new and well made, and shall if required be bartered for brick houses well situated in the city of New Orleans, or for slaves." Savvy to the drivers of real estate value, Bienvenu Duverjé pointed out that "the establishment of a steam ferry which has just been put into operation...presents a fair opportunity to speculate." She eventually decided to lease the house and farm instead of selling it, giving her a steady income for her retirement at 731 Royal St. The widow Duverjé proved right about the ferry, which had begun service in 1818: convenient city access made the rural tract, previously so close yet so far, ripe for residential development.

In 1821, state surveyor General C. N. Bouchon sketched an urban plat for the Duverjé parcel, marking, after a hundred years, the first arrival of urbanization to Algiers Point. Bouchon used the orientation of the Duverjé House to drive the entire street grid of future Algiers Point, starting



The current courthouse, which was built after the fire of 1895, is positioned on the same spot and at same angle as the Duverjé House. Photo by *Infrogmatation of New Orleans*

with four surrounding streets parallel to the building's walls: Villere (now Morgan), Seguin, Barthelemy (now Bermuda) and Delaronde. This was unusual; surveyors of this era would typically orient their subdivisions to existing property boundaries, rather than extant buildings. But perhaps due to the sheer prominence of the Duverjé House as well as its fortuitously centralized emplacement, Bouchon decided to spatially arrange the neighborhood around the house, rather than despite it.

The orientation of the Duverjé House, and of the French long lot which it occupied, thus explains the distinctive angle of Algiers Point's modern street grid. The new subdivision would be called Burg Duverjé or Duverjeville, and the stately mansion remained the neighborhood's central landmark.

After Alix Bienvenu Duverjé died in 1839, her daughter Evelina inherited the house, which continued as a residence until the Police Jury of Algiers acquired and renovated it in 1869 to serve as "the seat of justice of the right bank" of Orleans Parish. A year later, Algiers was annexed into New Orleans city limits, and the former Duverjé House became, according to the *Picayune* piece, "the third city court, fourth recorder's court and the eighth precinct police station." It was also a source of local pride and a landmark on the skyline.

At 12:45 a.m. on Sunday, Oct. 21, 1895, a fire of unknown origins ignited in a crowded tenement on Morgan Street. Northeasterly winds fanned the flames in the direction of the Algiers Courthouse, 300 feet away. Firemen arrived with pumps and hoses, but the nearest well ran dry, and the hoses could not reach the river. By 2 a.m., 300 Morgan St. and 200 Bermuda St. were one gigantic inferno. Shortly thereafter, flames began to consume the courthouse.

Reams of official records dating to colonial times added fuel to the fire, and "when the old roof fell in," wrote witness William H. Seymour, "it sent up a shower of sparks...windward" into more doomed houses. By dawn, 10 blocks were reduced to "a forest of chimneys." At least 193 structures were destroyed, including the former Duverjé House-turned-courthouse, and dozens more damaged.

Recovery came speedily. New houses were erected in such numbers that, by late 1896, according to Seymour, "a walk along those attractive streets makes it difficult to realize [they were] so lately in ashes and ruins." As for the courthouse, work commenced promptly on a replacement, positioned on the same spot and at same angle as the Duverjé House. Moorish in style and distinctive for its asymmetrical crenelated towers, the new Algiers Courthouse, like its predecessor, remains a prominent landmark today on the West Bank horizon.

streetscapes

Richard Campanella is a geographer with the Tulane School of Architecture and author of *Cityscapes of New Orleans*; *Bourbon Street: A History*; *Bienville's Dilemma*; and other books. Campanella may be reached through richcampanella.com, rcampane@tulane.edu or [@nolacampanella](https://twitter.com/nolacampanella) on Twitter.