

Pedestrian Mall Debate Echoes City's Alley-Building Efforts of 200 Years Ago

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With COVID-19 restrictions continuing on businesses, city officials have proposed to turn certain French Quarter streets into pedestrian malls, and permit commercial uses on selected sidewalks and curbs.

Pedestrian malls are a familiar topic in urban planning, and reliably controversial. In the French Quarter, visitors love them, while residents tend to disdain them, for their impact on home access and quality of life. Merchants like or dislike them precisely to the degree they help or hinder business.

Sustainability advocates generally support any effort that, after a century of prioritizing for autos, turns over space to walkers and cyclists. Professional planners take a case-by-case approach, having noted how some pedestrian malls ended up deadening vital commercial arteries, or led to their “boutification” and gentrification.

While this debate plays out locally, it’s worth looking back on how surveyors, engineers and architects historically planned for pedestrian spaces in New Orleans.

Note, for example, the ratio allotted to sidewalk space versus street space in the Quarter, New Orleans’ first neighborhood. When French colonial assistant engineer Adrien de Pauger first laid out the street grid in 1722, four years after the city’s founding, he allotted roughly 40% of each arterial space for sidewalks. That is, most French Quarter streets measure 22 feet across, while their sidewalks are typically up to 8 feet wide each. That’s around 16 feet of the 38-foot span, measured from property line to property line, dedicated to pedestrian movement.

The main motivation was to separate people from horses, mules, wagons and carriages. But the allocation had hydrological purposes as well. According to Dumont de Montigny, writing in 1722, property owners were instructed to “leave all around a strip at least three feet wide, at the foot of which a ditch was to be dug, to serve as a drain for the river water in time of inundation.” Wooden footbridges were built for people to step over the deep gutters.

The sidewalks themselves were built up as raised wooden walkways, giving rise to the distinctive New Orleans term *banquettes*, meaning “little benches.” In Spanish colonial times, officials spoke at length of *puentes* (bridges), meaning the wooden planks that extended the *banquettes* over drainage ditches at intersections, for pedestrians to “avoid the odor of corrupted and stagnant waters.” Records of the Cabildo, the city’s Spanish governing body, abound with discussions of street and sidewalk conditions, evidencing that officials actively grappled with pedestrian movement and traffic management.

In 1788, city surveyor Carlos Trudeau devised a new street grid for the former Gravier plantation immediately upriver from the city proper. This being a suburb, Trudeau had more space to work with, especially since, unlike the original city, it would not be constrained by surrounding fortifications.

Naming it the *Suburbio de Santa Maria*, Trudeau laid out arteries that, in many cases, were nearly double the width of those in the old city, while sidewalks remained the same size. It suggests he was expecting more conveyance traffic here, and a lower population density. The *Suburbio de Santa Maria* became

known to French speakers as the *Faubourg Ste. Marie*, and to English speakers as St. Mary, or the American Sector. In the early 1800s, its population grew, its density increased, and its commerce bustled, setting the neighborhood on a path to becoming today's Central Business District.

The upper Quarter, too, became congested, and city had a conundrum on its hands. How do you create more urban space for a growing population, given the limited amount of high ground, while at the same time keeping things conveniently proximate, for want of mechanized transportation?

The answer was the early 19th-century equivalent of pedestrian malls: alleys.

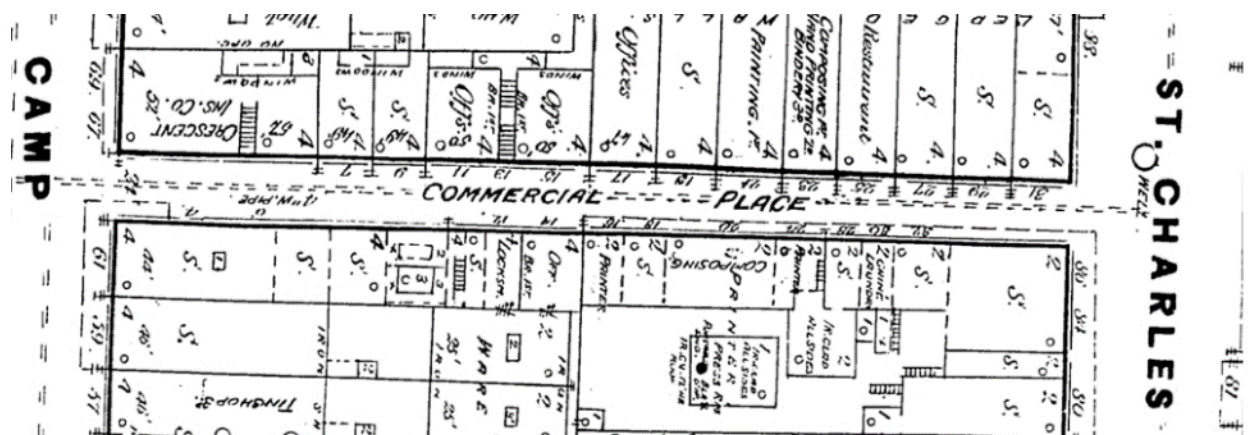
From the 1810s through the 1840s, corresponding with the city's greatest growth spurt, surveyors and architects created about two dozen narrow alleys, passageways, short streets, or pedestrian promenades throughout the urban core.

They tend to fall in three categories, each with a different purpose.

One major motivator was to create lucrative new storefront space. Whereas it might be tough to squeeze a new street into a congested area, it's easier to identify some key lots behind buildings, gain legal rights to them through buyouts or eminent domain, and clear them out for a pedestrian passageway.

Wide enough to handle crowds but narrow enough to preclude heavy traffic, these passageways were popular for perambulating or lingering, offering shade from the midday sun and fresh air to office workers. The foot traffic attracted vendors, merchants and business-to-business enterprises, which in turn attracted more pedestrians.

Among the best examples in the present-day CBD was Commercial Place, also known as Commercial Alley ("place" and "alley" were used interchangeably in this context). This pedestrian walkway split the large block now bounded by St. Charles Avenue, Gravier, Camp and Poydras streets, and formed a popular stroll lined with bookstores, tailors, and other small businesses. Still city-owned, the space is now partly occupied by the atrium of the Pan American Life Center.



Commercial Place in 1885, courtesy Sanborn Maps.

During the 1850s through 1920s, Commercial Place was one of three narrow streets that helped turn the area around 300 Camp Street into the city's nationally influential publishing district. Nicknamed "Newspaper Row," this cluster of news offices, printers, publishers, binderies, and affiliated business spilled over into another narrow passage known as Bank Place.

Also known as Bank Alley and now named Picayune Place, this one-block street provided rear access to the newspaper offices on Camp Street (including the former *Picayune* office, built in 1850 and still standing

at 326 Camp St.) and to Natchez Alley (Natchez Street), once home to the *City Item*, where famed journalist and writer Lafcadio Hearn once worked.

Natchez Alley continued across Tchoupitoulas Street to South Peters Street in an even more narrow form, which endures today as what appears to be a service lane between the Windsor Court and Le Méridien hotels. It too is technically a public passageway.

During the heyday of Newspaper Row, journalists, typesetters, editors, lithographers, press operators, and newsboys spilled out into Commercial Place, Bank Place, and Natchez Alley, sharing information, having a smoke, or awaiting the latest edition “just off the press.”

The pedestrian passages that helped make Newspaper Row also worked well for the Cotton District, at Carondelet and Gravier streets. There stood the New Orleans Cotton Exchange, and right behind it, connecting Gravier Street with Common Street, was Varieties Alley, also known as Theater Alley, having been cut to make room for crowds awaiting entry into the popular Varieties Theater on Gravier Street.



Varieties Place (Alley) in 1885, courtesy Sanborn Maps.

Varieties Alley bustled with brokers, financiers, lawyers, merchants and clerks from the Cotton Exchange and the adjacent Mechanics, Dealers, and Lumbermen’s Exchange. Serving them in or near the alley were “coffee houses” (saloons), tiny retail outlets, and other services. The alley is no longer passable, but it is still discernible. Look for it around 815 Gravier or 810 Common, where it is now occupied by part of the Merchant Coffee Shop.

Comparable to Varieties Alley in bustle, but unique in design, was an elegant passageway known as Bank’s Arcade. Transecting the block bounded by Magazine, Gravier, Tchoupitoulas, and Natchez streets, this alley had been a glass-covered interior corridor that was incorporated into the well-known exchange hotel known as Bank’s Arcade. It later became Board of Trade Place, still sometimes known as Arcade Place, and is well-preserved today, though not regularly accessible to the public.

Being ensconced spaces where men talked shop, drank, spit and smoked, “proper” women and families tended to steer clear of alleys and passageways. An exception was the pair of narrow streets cut through from Tchoupitoulas to South Peters Street in the 1820s, to make space for St. Mary’s Market, the premier food emporium for this part of town.

Public markets were major generators of foot traffic and cash flow, and this particular open-air pavilion, nicknamed “the Irish French Market,” was as busy as any. The two narrow streets became North and South Market, and are now North and South Diamond streets.

Alley-building peaked in the 1810s-1840s, during which time city engineers cut short streets or narrow passages through 10 different blocks just in the French Quarter. What resulted were today's Dorsier, Clinton, Jefferson (now Wilkinson), Madison, and Gallatin (now French Market Place) streets.

Most famously, the effort produced Passage de la Bourse, or Exchange Passage, later Exchange Place and now Exchange Alley. Built in increments throughout the 1830s and 1840s, Exchange Alley aimed to steer Canal Street foot traffic into the heart of the Quarter, while creating prime commercial space in the process.

Exchange Alley became hot property, and storehouses along it were built wall-to-wall, their ground floors home to notaries, lawyers, printers, merchants, coffeehouses, and eateries. One segment weaved through the St. Louis Exchange Hotel, and there were plans to cut it all the way to the Cabildo. Like other alleys, Exchange tended to be "stag"—mostly male.

Exchange Alley was so successful that some hoped to replicate it elsewhere. When in 1849 the city considered cutting a new street between St. Charles and Camp, the editors of the *Daily Picayune* felt "the better opinion is that Exchange Alley should be made the model of the projected improvement; that only a narrow passage is required...for foot passengers, and access denied to carriages and horses."

Although its 400 block was destroyed in 1903 for the later construction of the Louisiana Supreme Court, Exchange Alley's other three blocks rank among the city's best surviving examples of a planned historic pedestrian passageway. Other examples include Pirates Alley, Pere Antoine Alley, and Cabildo Alley, the last of which was intended as the culmination of Exchange Alley. All four places feel far more like a European or Latin American city than one in the United States.



Now-demolished 400 block Exchange Alley looking to St Louis Hotel, c1900, Library of Congress.

Another reason for creating pedestrian malls was for recreation. Called "walks," these designed promenades tended to parallel waterways that had been landscaped with gardens and small parks. Among them was the Carondelet Walk along the Carondelet (Old Basin) Canal, today's Lafitte Greenway; the Florida Walk, where the Florida Avenue Canal intersected Elysian Fields Avenue; and Tritons Walk, which was supposed to parallel the landscaped drainage canal slated for today's Howard Avenue. It's unclear if and how Tritons Walk ever came to fruition, but it explains Howard's great width.

A third reason for creating alleys was to provide rear access to large common-wall buildings fronting busy arteries. Pedestrians may have used them as shortcuts, but these gritty back alleys had no storefront

businesses and no formal names; they tended to result from the private decisions of property owners and their commissioned architects, rather than from official decisions executed by the city surveyor.

One such nameless alley ran between Baronne Street and today's Roosevelt Way, and may still be seen between the Roosevelt Hotel and Walgreen's.

Another narrow alley at 731 Common St. jutted into the block bounded by Common, Carondelet, Canal, and St. Charles Avenue, giving access to an interesting interior courtyard. Both are still in place.

If you look behind the First Bank and Trust headquarters at 909 Poydras St., you'll see a narrow gap separating it from its parking garage—also a 19th-century back alley, connecting O'Keefe with Penn.

Likewise, an unusual diagonal alley once sliced through the block bounded by Julia, Tchoupitoulas, Notre Dame, and Commerce street. While it is mostly gone now, its slant explains the angled shape of the Julia Place Condominium Building.

What became of New Orleans' historical pedestrian malls? Successful as they were 200 years ago, their competitive advantages diminished as soon as people took to wheels. The only ones that survived were those that were wide enough for automobiles, or that were located in high-pedestrian districts, namely the French Quarter.

Other back alleys were closed off, leased out, privatized, or converted to driveways or service lanes. All three of the old recreational "walks" are gone.

What we learn from the city's historic pedestrian malls is that they explicitly aimed to create mixed-use space for pedestrian access. They were not traffic-closure policies, but rather permanent structural interventions cut through already commercialized blocks.

That's what made them work. Those who invested along alleys bought into the idea of living and working with foot traffic.



Commercial Place in the 1940s, courtesy Library of Congress.

But that's also what made them inflexible to change. With the rise of the automobile, and a subsequent century of prioritizing for vehicular traffic, most of these historic alleys went dormant, and some became "skid row."

Today's pedestrian malls, on the other hand, are flexible. If priorities or technologies change, the street-closure policies may be altered or ended accordingly.

But for property owners and residents who did not necessarily buy into the idea of living and working exclusively with foot traffic, the imposition of such a policy is precisely what makes pedestrian malls controversial.

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