

Moving New Orleans City Hall: A History Across Three Centuries

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Mayor LaToya Cantrell recently announced plans to relocate New Orleans City Hall to the circa-1929 Municipal Auditorium by Congo Square in Armstrong Park. Her proposal aims to take advantage of a soon-to-expire \$38 million FEMA grant to renovate the historic city-owned venue, and rests upon an expectation that many city employees will permanently work from home, thus reducing space needs.

If her administration is able to overcome neighborhood resistance on grounds of traffic concerns and park impacts, the effort would mark only the third time in as many centuries that New Orleans has relocated its City Hall.

Each prior relocation reflected momentous shifts in the civic ethos — geographical, cultural, and architectural —and this pending move is no exception.



Municipal Auditorium at Congo Square; staff photo by Max Becherer

Seat of government in colonial times

French colonial New Orleans did not really have a city hall. Rather, it had a *Conseil Supérieur* (Superior Council), a panel of powerful colonists appointed to make judicial decisions for the entire Louisiana colony.

Over time, the Superior Council's duties merged with those of an Administrative Council, and of individual officials such as treasurers and engineers, to become a de facto local government.

Their offices were located on the *Place d'Armes*, today's Jackson Square, but not in a centralized position nor in a prominent structure. They were off to the side, where the Lower Pontalba building now stands, in a standard French-style structure of cross-timbered walls, much like the rest of the city at that time.

One may surmise from its offset position and functional architecture that this was more of a bureaucratic headquarters than a "house of the people" aimed at uplifting the civic spirit.

After Spain took full control of Louisiana in 1769, Spanish Gov. Alejandro O'Reilly formed a council known as the Very Illustrious New Orleans Cabildo to advise him on colony affairs.

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Among other policies, the Cabildo councilors endeavored to turn village-like New Orleans into more of a city, with better infrastructure, stricter codes and regulations, and improved services.

This put the councilors in the position of acting like urban planners and managers — Louisiana’s first city government, in other words — and effectively made their meeting place into a city hall, which is what *cabildo* means in Spanish.

Their detailed “Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo” are a fascinating record of all-too-familiar urban issues and citizen complaints, ranging from poor drainage and sanitation to loitering, illegal food vending, broken oil lamps, and, in 1799, too many “taverns, inns (and) a very large number of cabarets.”

By that time, a new building had been completed to house the Illustrious Cabildo, the previous edifice having burned in the Good Friday Fire of 1788. Its stately Spanish Colonial architecture and prominent geographical position, adjacent to the church and fronting the *Plaza de Armas*, spoke to the newfound importance of city government.



The Cabildo; photo by Kathy Anderson.

That building still stands, and while its original function has long since moved elsewhere, we still call it the Cabildo.

After Spain retroceded Louisiana to France in 1800 and France sold it to the U.S. in 1803, the Cabildo continued to serve as the seat of government in the new American territory. Its role as City Hall became formalized when New Orleans gained its municipal charter in 1805, which set up executive and legislative branches of city government.

The Cabildo soon bustled with a growing number of political, administrative and judicial offices, to the point that the city had to lease extra space in the Presbytère. The city itself had been expanding commensurately, into adjacent faubourgs up through what is now the Lower Garden District and down to present-day Bywater.

The city’s culture was changing as well. Thousands of refugees from Haiti arrived in 1809 and generally settled on the Creole side of town, followed by a growing number of Anglo-Americans, who gravitated to the upper side of town.

Starting in the 1820s, large numbers of immigrants arrived from various nations, each forming enclaves in and among the two predominant ethnicities: the Catholic, French-speaking Creoles in the lower part of the city, and the mostly Protestant English-speaking Anglos in the upper sections.

The Creole/Anglo rivalry led to discord and eventually resulted in an 1836 state-legislated trifurcation of New Orleans into three semi-autonomous “municipalities” delineated along ethnic lines. Each municipality had its own council and staff, not to mention regulations and taxes, and wherever their offices were effectively became that neighborhood’s “city hall.”

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Nominally, the three municipalities remained unified under a single mayor and General Council, which continued to meet in the Cabildo in the First Municipality—that is, the Creole-dominant French Quarter and Tremé. New Orleanians continued to view that aging colonial landmark as their City Hall.

As if to outdo the Creoles in that regard, Anglo-dominated interests of the Second Municipality (the “American sector,” today’s Central Business District) commissioned Irish-born architect James Gallier Sr. in 1845 to design a bigger, better hall for their government.

Gallier devised a magnificent temple-like edifice of the Greek architectural idiom, the likes of which had been popular in the Northeast since the late 1700s but **remained** little known in New Orleans until the 1820s. “Municipal Hall,” perched dramatically on Lafayette Square, was completed in 1851.

The next year, the wasteful and confusing municipality system came to an end when the state Legislature passed an act to reunify the city. But this happened only after Anglo interests had established political alliances among Irish and German immigrants, and together they garnered enough votes to start winning elections.

The First Relocation

The 1852 reunification was promptly followed by another state act annexing into New Orleans the adjacent Jefferson Parish city of Lafayette, today’s Irish Channel and Garden District, with their share of immigrant and Anglo voters. The two acts pushed the new New Orleans further away from its Creole past and more towards its American future.

What followed was a wholesale reconfiguration of urban geography. Ward lines were redrawn; house addresses reassigned; and most significantly, city government got relocated, out of the old Spanish Cabildo in the French Quarter and into the former Municipal Hall in the American sector.

The location of the new City Hall — today’s Gallier Hall — tracked the uptown shift in the city’s center of gravity, while its neoclassical design heralded the growing American cultural influence.



Gallier Hall, formerly Municipal Hall and City Hall.

A half-century later, New Orleans had more than doubled in size, and city management had become that much more complex, what with modern needs like drainage, sewerage, electrification and automotive traffic. Some departments got their own offices elsewhere downtown, while other city workers were located in an annex built in 1908 directly behind City Hall, at 546 Carondelet (now the Maison de la Luz Hotel).

Further growth prompted new proposals to house city government. One came in the 1920s from St. Louis-based consulting firm Bartholomew and Associates, which recommended razing the middle-rear of the French Quarter to build an elaborate “civic center.” Sketches show a towering Art Deco-style City Hall, not unlike the state Capitol in Baton Rouge, around the Orleans/Burgundy Street intersection, flanked by government buildings extending back along Congo Square. Only one part of

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Bartholomew's plan got built—the Municipal Auditorium, the very structure now planned to become the next City Hall.

Another vision from 1941 aimed to keep city government at Lafayette Square, by building a replicate of Gallier's 1851 structure on the corner of Poydras Street and filling the intervening space along St. Charles Avenue with a monumental pavilion-like edifice.

The outbreak of World War II derailed that plan.

The Second Relocation

After the war, the spirited young reformer deLesseps "Chep" Morrison became mayor, championing modernization of transportation and city services. His chief planner, Brooke Duncan, had long envisioned a centralized government complex of city and state offices and courts, a notion in vogue at that time.

This was an era when planners nationwide saw "slum clearance" and "urban renewal" as two sides of the same progressive coin. Impoverished old neighborhoods near downtowns were seen as prime opportunities to turn into gleaming new Modernist facilities that would revitalize inner cities.

To make space for New Orleans' new civic center, city planners eyed a working-class section of the Third Ward that Louis Armstrong, who grew up there, called the "back o' town."

According to the plan, residents (mostly African American) would be displaced, properties expropriated and streets obliterated to make room for a superblock of governmental offices, courts, and new library ringing a green plaza, today's Duncan Plaza.

Fronting it would be a new International-style City Hall positioned to face straight down a widened **South** Saratoga Street (today's Loyola Avenue), where in the distance down Basin Street would be a matching cultural center, comprising the Municipal Auditorium, the later-built Mahalia Jackson Theater for the Performing Arts and, ironically, Louis Armstrong Park.

After 11 years of planning and construction, the new City Hall opened on May 6, 1957, followed by the library and ancillary offices and courts. Their bold Modernist designs symbolized the city's forward-leaning posture and internationalist aspirations — Morrison aggressively promoted New Orleans as "the gateway to the Americas" —just as its new location behind the CBD mirrored the city's steady lakeward expansion.



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A Third Relocation?

Now, after decades of deferred maintenance, the gleam has come off the 1957 City Hall, and nearly everyone agrees it's time for a change—though few agree on what, or where.

In addition to renovating the extant structure, at least three other buildings have been proposed as new homes for city hall in the past dozen years, including the former Chevron Building at 935 Gravier St., the old Charity Hospital, and the former Veterans Administration hospital.

If Cantrell's plan to relocate into the Municipal Auditorium prevails, it will be the first time City Hall will have shifted back toward the original city. It will be the first City Hall to be retrofit into a historical building designed for a different use, rather than a contemporary purpose-built structure conceived as a civic symbol.

The project will be the first to assume the spatial dispersion of workers and services — i.e., that government offices, courts, and facilities such as the library need not be near City Hall, quite contrary to the centralization model at play in 1957.

If this third relocation happens, it will also be the first to occur during a prolonged period of population decline. The first two coincided with New Orleans' greatest growth spurts, in the 1850s and the 1950s. After peaking in 1960 at over 627,000, the city's population declined steadily for the next 45 years, plunged right after Katrina, partially recovered in the subsequent dozen years, and has now flat-lined around 390,000, roughly where we were a century ago.

A reduced population means, among other things, a smaller tax base and limited resources — and a greater need for fiscal pragmatism. Thus, a main driver of the current proposal is that ticking \$38 million FEMA grant, though more federal support might be required to fund the \$100 million-plus move.

The next year or so will tell if the mayor's plan will move forward. In the meanwhile, it's worth noting that all three of New Orleans' city halls still stand, going back to the 1790s, and each, including the possible next one, overlooks green spaces: Jackson Square, Lafayette Square, Duncan Plaza and potentially Congo Square and Louis Armstrong Park.

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