

Claiborne Avenue: The First 200 years

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Fifty-five years ago this winter, work began on building the Claiborne Expressway through 2.5 miles of New Orleans neighborhoods.

Since traversed by countless motorists, the overpass has taken on decidedly negative connotations — as an intrusion, a barrier, a destroyer of Black businesses, a trigger of community divestment and an example of racist urban planning.

Those were the sentiments channeled by President Joe Biden’s administration when it mentioned “the Claiborne Expressway in New Orleans” as a possible project for “the President’s plan (of) \$20 billion for a new program that will reconnect neighborhoods cut off by historic investments and ensure new projects increase opportunity, advance racial equity and environmental justice, and promote affordable access.”

For locals, the mention promises to reopen a conversation from 2012, when the city held workshops to imagine Claiborne with its overpass removed.

This time, federal funding may transform Claiborne’s future, and at the center of upcoming conversations is an understanding of Claiborne’s past.

Borne of the 1820s

Claiborne Avenue is a product of the 1820s, a decade during which the city’s population nearly doubled, and surveyors expanded the Faubourg Tremé to create more living space. More life meant more death, for which the Archdiocese in 1823 created St. Louis Cemetery No. 2. The rear edge of the cemetery’s three sections formed the initial trajectory for the future avenue.

In 1826, the newly laid out “Rue Claiborne” appeared in a map by City Surveyor Joseph Pilié, its name honoring Louisiana’s first American governor, William C. C. Claiborne.

By 1834, “Claiborne Street” extended from today’s Tulane Avenue to Gov. Nicholls Street, its capacious width (over 165 feet) matching that of Basin and Canal streets, and accommodating drainage ditches for runoff from Tremé and French Quarter. That ample width, as well as its location through Creole-dominant downtown, would impart a distinct character to Claiborne — or rather, characters, because a highly diverse population lived here.

Free people of color, most of them French-speaking Black Creoles, predominated in Tremé. There were also enslaved African Americans, a large number of Haitian refugees and their descendants, and many white Creoles, as well as immigrants from the Caribbean basin and Europe. Catholicism was the predominant faith, but by no means the only one.

Most residents pertained to the working or lower-middle class, and there were more than a few pockets of poverty. The area had its share of environmental nuisances, being close to the flood-prone backswamp, and intersected by the stagnant Carondelet (Old Basin) Canal. That circa-1790s canal, today’s Lafitte Greenway, brought in commerce, affording opportunities for lumber yards, mills, firewood storage and other light industry. But it also formed a traffic obstacle, requiring a drawbridge to be built on Claiborne, which itself became a bottleneck.

Claiborne had some pockets of wealth, particularly around its intersections with Esplanade Avenue and with Tulane Avenue. A photograph taken in 1858 shows a dozen newly built double-gallery Greek Revival townhouses, fronted with trellised gardens around what is now 300 South Claiborne, a scene that could easily pass for Coliseum Square or the Garden District.



Claiborne at Tulane, 1858, by Jay Dearborn Edwards, courtesy THNOC

Good Urbanism

What's also visible in that 1858 scene is newly planted oak trees on the Claiborne neutral ground. In subsequent decades, many more oaks would be planted all the way down to Elysian Fields Avenue. By the early 1900s, some stands practically formed urban forests, offering a shady respite from summer heat.

By this time, early drainage projects had enabled Claiborne to be extended in both directions. In the 1870s, the city broke Claiborne into "South" (uptown) and "North" (downtown) sections, and in the 1890s, redesignated the artery as an "avenue" rather than a "street."

Claiborne's most bustling section corresponded to where the oaks had been planted, namely from Tulane Avenue to St. Bernard Avenue. At one end was the Claiborne Market, and at the other the St. Bernard "Circle" Market, nicknamed for the landscaped rotary that allowed traffic to flow smoothly around a busy intersection.



North Claiborne at Ursuline Street 1947 courtesy THNOC

North Claiborne Avenue, in sum, was good urbanism. It had trees, space for water, public food markets, fine architecture, walkability, convenient access to downtown, schools, even an institution of higher learning (Straight University, for African Americans, now Dillard), by the corner of Esplanade and South Claiborne.

Most importantly, it was affordable for a diversity of people to live and work, in an era when racial discrimination precluded Blacks from operating or patronizing businesses elsewhere. No wonder North Claiborne would earn the nickname “the Main Street of Black New Orleans.”

Claiborne also had a diversity of land uses. In comparing city directories from 1938 and 1965, researcher Karen Armagost found that “while Claiborne Avenue is widely discussed as a former ‘thriving commercial corridor,’ it was truly a mixed-use street.... People generally lived, walked, worked, and shopped close to home.”

The North Claiborne blocks of the Sixth and Seventh Wards were remarkably stable, with 348 active addresses in 1938 and 376 in 1965, over half of which were homes and over a third businesses. The enterprises had grown in size over the years, suggesting a vibrant economy. Among them in 1938 were “dress makers, clothes pressers, shoe repairers and food vendors.” By 1965, wrote Armagost, there were “Heckmann’s Shoe Store, Claiborne Hardware, the LaBranche Pharmacy, and Gus Betat & Son Bicycles,” which operated from 1886 until 1992.

The 1946 Plan

Changes were afoot during Claiborne’s midcentury heyday. Following World War II, the city had embarked on a modernization campaign, and worked with the Louisiana Department of Highways to streamline its transportation system.

As an advisor, the state agency hired the nation’s best-known urban planner, Robert Moses of New York, who along with consulting engineers Andrews & Clark produced the *Arterial Plan for New Orleans* in 1946.

Many of Moses’ suggestions eventually came to fruition, among them Union Passenger Terminal (1954), the first span of today’s Crescent City Connection, and both the Pontchartrain and West Bank expressways (1958). But the 1946 plan is best remembered today for its notorious suggestion to build what Moses called a “waterfront expressway,” taking traffic down Elysian Fields Avenue and along the French Quarter riverfront to reach the envisioned bridge to the West Bank.

The French Quarter at that time was a predominantly White and mostly working-class neighborhood, with a small but growing population of better-educated and wealthier residents, many of them preservationists. Moses viewed its gritty, wharf-lined riverfront as ideal for an expressway.

As for an elevated expressway on North Claiborne, which traversed a mostly African American working-class neighborhood, Moses went out of his way to discourage such a project. “From the point of view of intelligent city planning,” wrote Moses, “the waterfront elevated highway...will lift cars off the streets” of the congested French Quarter, and “facilitate modernization of the piers and give better access to them.”

“As compared to the proposed Claiborne Avenue viaduct,” Moses added, “an elevated highway in this waterfront industrial area is near the center of the city, presents no serious problems as to off and on ramps, deprives no one of needed light and air and has no depressing effect on real estate.”

Moses acknowledged that “heavy traffic would pulsate along the docks,” but that would mean fewer motorists on historic Quarter streets. “The Cathedral would still be wedded to the Mississippi, but its precincts would not be choked with needless through traffic.”

The 1957 Update

When the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956 authorized billions of dollars for interstates nationwide, officials in New Orleans dusted off Moses’ plan.

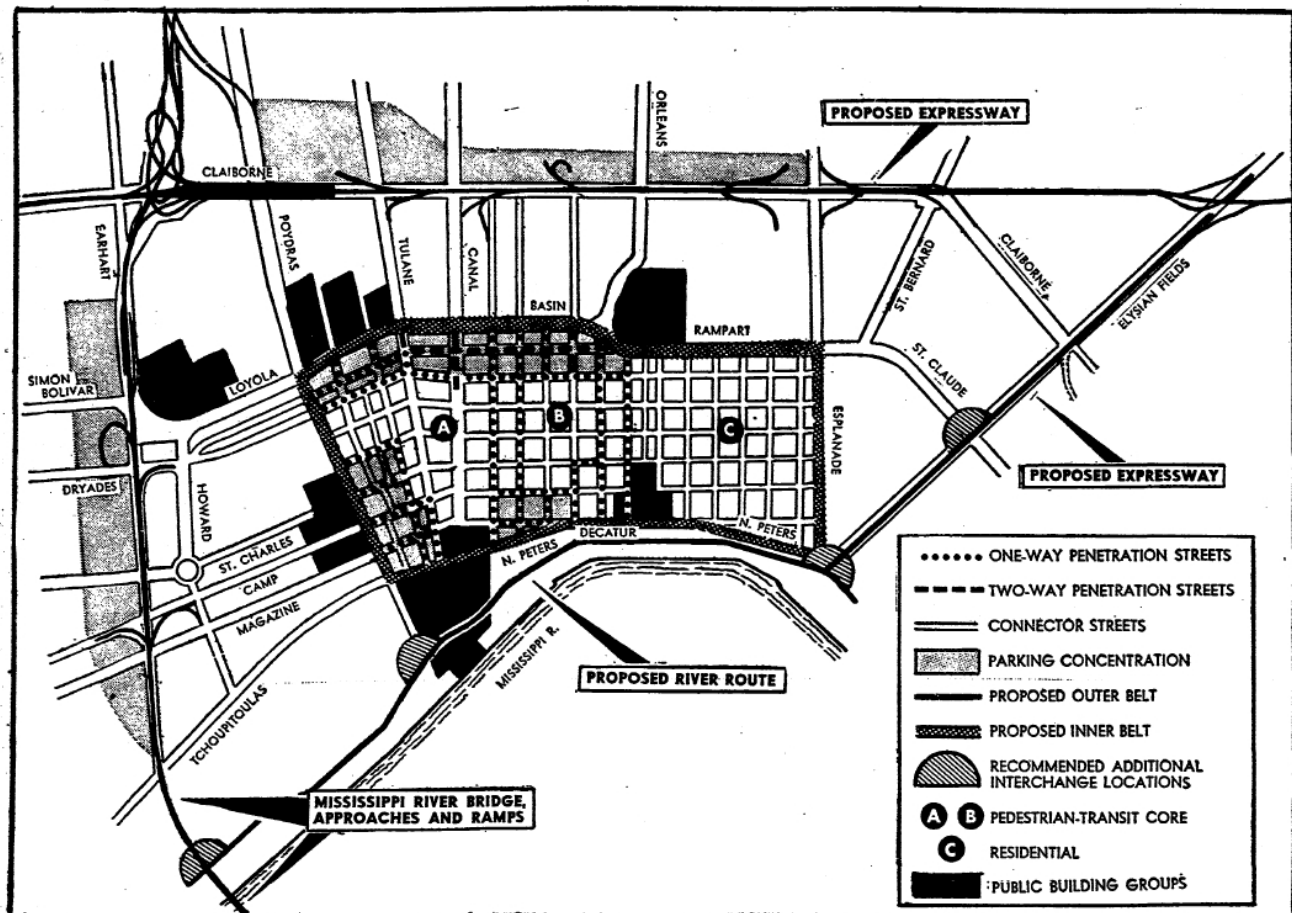
Some worried that his expressways would leave the Central Business District “strangled to death by traffic congestion,” as The Times-Picayune put it, yet also inconvenient to incoming traffic from the east.

Commercial interests met with city officials to devise an update. In November 1957, the City Planning Commission released a “prospectus” for an “outer belt” of elevated expressways completely ringing the urban core, which itself would see key arteries widened for grade-level traffic.

To close the belt formed by Moses’ Pontchartrain Expressway, now nearing completion, and his proposed highway on Elysian Fields leading to what planners were now calling the “Riverfront Expressway,” the commission recommended adding an elevated expressway on North Claiborne Avenue — the very viaduct Moses had dismissed in 1946.

What transpired over the next decade was not so much a tale of two concurrent plans, both of which would be considered heavy-handed and highly destructive today.

Proposal Would Ring Central Pedestrian Areas with Two Traffic Loops



CROSS-TOWN MOTORISTS WOULD AVOID BUSINESS DISTRICT VIA ELEVATED EXPRESSWAYS
Outer belt parking lots for all-day parking; inner belt lots for short-term parking.

Map of 1957 plan for Claiborne Expressway, Times-Picayune November 24, 1957

Rather, it was a tale of two very different levels of civic resistance. Though both expressways would be considered heavy-handed and highly destructive today, they were *both* slated to be built; it was not a question of one or the other. However, one would meet with very different levels of civic resistance than the other.

The nationally famous French Quarter, New Orleans' showcase historic neighborhood, had the most defenders. Among them were many dedicated preservationists who had the wherewithal to launch a first-of-its-kind opposition to a major federal expressway, a task that took time, money, expertise, and most of all, access to political power.

North Claiborne Avenue, on the other hand, lacked the iconic stature of the French Quarter, and the surrounding neighborhoods had no historic-district protection. Their mostly African American residents were in the midst of fighting for basic civil rights,

such as voting and equal access to public facilities, and their voices were all but unheard in the halls of power.

Furthermore, in this era before environmental impact statements and public hearings, few officials bothered to keep the community abreast of impending infrastructure changes.

Construction Begins

Many residents were thus taken by surprise when, one day in February 1966, workers with the New Orleans Parkway Commission arrived to the Claiborne neutral ground with chainsaws and backhoes, to cut down or transplant the oaks. “The Main Street of Black New Orleans,” neighbors soon learned, would become the elevated Interstate 10.

For the next three years, as in the prior nine years, the expectation was to build both the Riverfront and Claiborne expressways, not one or the other. Both would connect with the just-completed Pontchartrain Expressway to access Metairie or the West Bank.

Most city leaders vociferously supported the expressways, viewing them as lifelines keeping downtown relevant in an era of suburbanization. They did everything in their power to pave the way for their construction.

In 1965, for example, the city had Poydras Street widened for grade-level traffic, and in 1968, it preemptively built a tunnel so that the upcoming Riverfront Expressway could dip beneath another major downtown revitalization project: the International Trade Mart and Rivergate Exposition Hall at the foot of Canal Street, completed in 1968.

Neighbors along Claiborne were seeing none of this revitalization, as massive pilings were erected in 1968, followed by the roadbed in 1969. The disruption led to business closures along Claiborne, while new ramps severed street connections and community ties. Property values declined, and North Claiborne soon went into a downward spiral of divestment.

Advocates of the French Quarter doubled their efforts to prevent such a disaster to befall the riverfront, even as most pundits saw the Riverfront Expressway as inevitable.

On July 1, 1969, John Volpe, secretary of transportation under President Richard Nixon, shocked both sides of the controversy when he canceled the Riverfront Expressway.

He had been convinced it would indeed do irreparable damage to the French Quarter, and thus violate the National Historic Preservation Act.

The years of activism that had made the French Quarter an official historic district had paid off, as did the concerted resistance mounted by preservationists, planners, and lawyers. Among them were Richard Baumbach Jr. and William Borah, who wrote a book about the controversy, aptly titled *The Second Battle of New Orleans*.

Claiborne Today—and Tomorrow

Claiborne got no such attention, and no such sympathy from Washington; its expressway was half completed when the Riverfront Expressway was cancelled.

In the decades since, some Claiborne businesses and residences have managed to persevere, while neighbors have been able to make culture “under the bridge,” in community gatherings, in Sunday second-lines, and especially on Mardi Gras.

But few who remember old Claiborne and its lovely oaks would argue that things have improved. Blight and crime have come to characterize the corridor, and flooding during Hurricane Katrina only made matters worse.

In 2012, as the Claiborne Expressway reached its 40-year design lifespan, federal agencies awarded the city \$2 million to hold community meetings to envision “Livable Claiborne Communities” if and when the expressway were removed.

A number of scenarios were put forth, but the expressway remained in place, in part because of a lack of subsequent funding, but also because the infrastructure had its share of defenders. Among them were commuters as well as some neighbors, who had grown up with the overpass, participated in the culture that had formed beneath it, and worried that its removal would unleash gentrification, force up rents and lead to a different sort of social disruption.

Now, nearly a decade later, New Orleanians may again be asked to contemplate the future of Claiborne Avenue, and as they do, the past will loom large.

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