

# Faubourg Revival

Old French Term Nearly Went Extinct, Until 1970s

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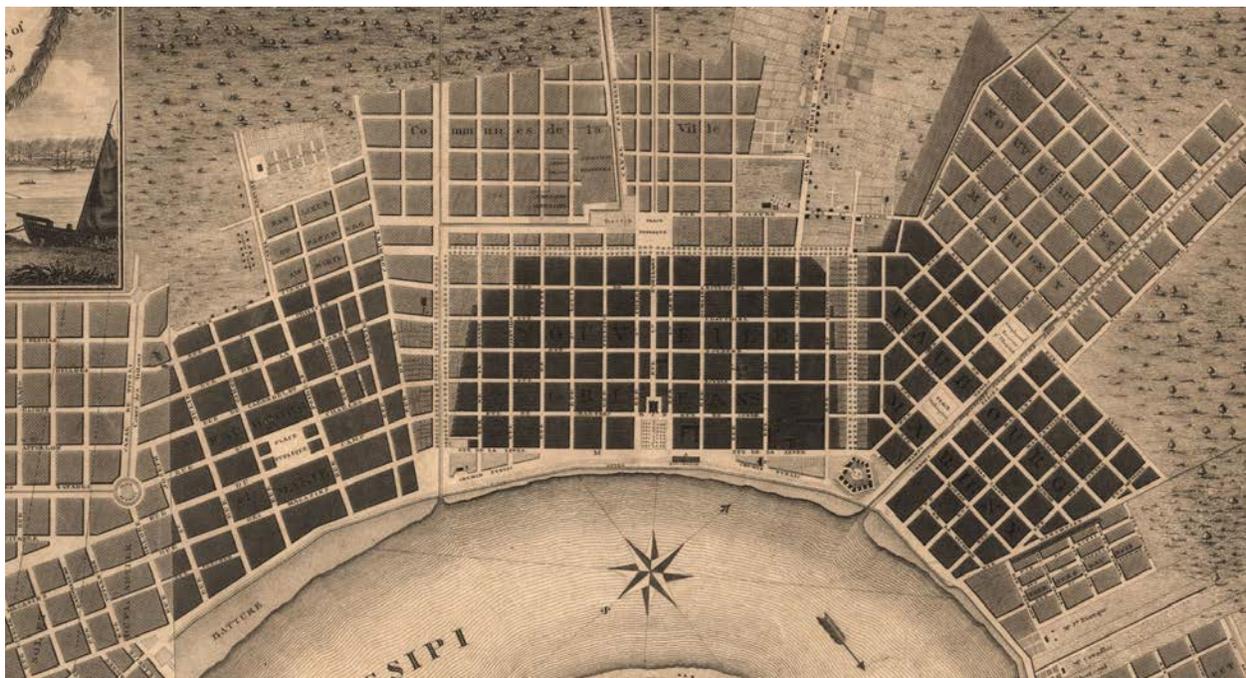
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This spring, Faubourg Beer will start to appear in regional stores and bars, following a decision last November by New Orleans’ oldest operating brewery, founded in 1907, to retire the name “Dixie” for its Old South connotations. “The brewery was renamed Faubourg Brewing Co.,” the owners explain on their [website](#), “as a tribute to the diverse neighborhoods that flavor our gumbo-pot home. Faubourg—pronounced “FO-burg”—is a French word that we New Orleanians often use interchangeably with ‘neighborhood.’”

The linguistic story of “faubourg” is something of a microcosm of the city’s cultural geography.

Many believe the term is a compound of “faux” and “bourg,” especially since some old documents spell it as “fauxbourg.” This interpretation contends that the term implied settlements not being in the town proper, i.e., “false towns.” But evidence indicates “faubourg” in fact comes from the Latin *foris*, meaning “outside,” and described settlements just outside town or city limits.



*Map by Jacques Tanesse in 1815 shows faubourgs laid out above and below old fortifications surrounding French Quarter*

“Faubourg” is commonly translated as “suburb” in English, which literally means “nearly urban” — that is, near the city proper, and lower in population density. Faubourgs were certainly that. But “faubourg” was not used to describe just any suburb. Rather, it meant those laid out immediately beyond the gated walls surrounding many French cities and colonial towns, across a demarcated boundary, such as a fortified rampart or esplanade.

Not all cities and towns in Francophone regions had this condition, thus occurrences of “faubourg” tend to be sporadic. The term is still used in Paris for some historical place names, though it is somewhat archaic in everyday speech. One is far more likely to hear words such as banlieues (outskirts), agglomerations (urbanized areas), or communes (municipalities) to describe comparable urban spaces.

Similarly, Montreal and Quebec City historically had faubourgs abutting their original city grids, but while the term is still heard there today, it’s not particularly common. As in Paris, you’re more likely to hear of quartiers (districts) and arrondissements (boroughs).

Within the U.S., “faubourg” is exceedingly rare. The term never gained traction in the former French outposts of Detroit, St. Louis, Natchitoches, Natchez, Biloxi or Mobile, perhaps because these once-small cities did not quite have the right urban geography along with a substantial, lasting French-speaking population.

Which brings us to New Orleans — which had both.

Surrounded by primitive fortifications and moats, the bourg (town) of New Orleans in the 1700s had a distinct sense of “inside” and “outside.” The inside extended from present-day Iberville Street to Barracks Street, and from the river to North Rampart Street. The outside lay just beyond the fortifications surrounding the street grid, which were paralleled by moats and fronted by esplanades, providing open firing lines. There were three such fortifications: one each along the aptly named Esplanade Avenue and North Rampart Street, and a third between Iberville and Common, indicating the commons that fronted the upper fort line.

Beyond this militarized perimeter, there was plenty of life —on plantations, on small farms and at depots, and in outlying communities such as Bayou St. John. But there was no urban life — that is, no neighborhoods with house-lined streets. For that, you had to go through guarded gates into the bourg itself — the city proper. The upper gate stood near present-day Tchoupitoulas at Canal; the lower gate was by the Old U.S. Mint; and the rear gate was near Congo Square.

Given these spatial conditions, one can understand how, in this mostly French-speaking community, a new neighborhood would come to be called a faubourg.

The word, spelled “fauxbourg,” first appeared on a local map in 1763, despite that no suburb would be laid out for another 25 years. It took a fiery disaster for that to happen. On Good Friday 1788, wind-driven flames destroyed 856 of the city’s 1,100 buildings. To speed the recovery, the Gravier family decided to have their plantation subdivided just outside the upper fortifications. French speakers called the new development a “faubourg,” because it fit the definition perfectly.

That's probably the how Surveyor General Carlos Laveau Trudeau thought of it as well, as he designed its street grid in April 1788. But because Trudeau worked for the Spanish government, which required all official business to be in Spanish, at least one map has it labeled as the *Suburbio de Santa Maria*. Everyone else called it the Faubourg Ste. Marie, and most subsequent maps labeled it as such. Anglophones later called this area "St. Mary" or "the American Sector," and today we call it the Central Business District.

### **Faubourg Heyday**

The heyday of the New Orleans faubourg came during the urban expansion following the Louisiana Purchase in 1803. In every case, former plantations became new suburban neighborhoods.

The Faubourg Marigny was the first subdivision to be laid out below the lower esplanade, in 1805, while in 1810, the city laid out the Faubourg Tremé as the first development behind the city proper. During 1806 to 1810, surveyor-engineer Barthélemy Lafon created four faubourgs above the Faubourg Ste. Marie, roughly from today's Howard Avenue to Felicity Street. We call this area the Lower Garden District today, but 200 years ago, it comprised the Faubourg Duplantier (or Delord), Faubourg Saulet (Solet), Faubourg La Course and Faubourg Annunciation.

From 1810 through the 1840s, nine more subdivisions were laid out farther upriver, and they too got the "faubourg" nomenclature. Starting from Felicity Street, they were the faubourgs Nuns (or des Religieuses), Lafayette, Livaudais, Delassize, Plaisance, Delachaise, St. Joseph, Boulogny, and Avart, which ended at Valmont Street.

Likewise, downriver from the Faubourg Marigny to today's Lower Ninth Ward, faubourgs were made out of former plantations, among them the Daunois, Montegut, Montreuil, Duralde, Macarty, Caraby, Lesseps, Andry, and Ursulines.

Toward the backswamp and out to Bayou St. John, meanwhile, were faubourgs with names like Nouvelle Marigny, Franklin, Hagan, Gueno, and St. John.

### **Peak and Decline**

Yet as New Orleans further expanded, and as its culture gradually Americanized, usage of "faubourg" fell. For one, the term no longer made sense. The latest subdivisions were far out in the banlieues and nowhere near the original bourg, whose fortifications were long gone. Many of the new subdivisions technically weren't even in New Orleans; they were in the cities of Jefferson and Carrollton, then part of Jefferson Parish.

Furthermore, as more newcomers arrived, the proportion of French speakers dwindled. English speakers were more apt to say "suburb" than "faubourg," or use other anglicized terms. By the 1830s through 1850s, developers in what is now the heart of Uptown were choosing names that sounded straight out of New England, such as Rickerville, Hurstville, Bloomingdale, Burthville, Greenville, Friburg and Carrollton. There was even a Borough of Freeport.

As if to prove that "faubourg" was not used willy-nilly, the West Bank had none, because it never had an original fortified city. You can't have a faubourg if you never had a bourg. Instead, the

West Bank had a necklace of village-like subdivisions with names like Duvergeville, Oliverville, Gosselinville, Belleville, Brooklinville, Lebeoufville, Hendeeville, McLellanville and Tunisburg. Today these are Algiers Point and neighborhoods heading downriver. Going up toward Gretna, there was Mossyville, McDonoghville, Freetown, and Mechanicksham. These villages later merged into urbanized areas, and most of their names have fallen out of circulation.

So too did the east bank's old faubourgs. Whereas city maps in the early 1800s carefully spelled out each faubourg, by the late 1800s those names had largely disappeared.

The word "faubourg" diminished in everyday speech, too. By the early 1900s, names such as Faubourg Tremé and Faubourg Marigny rarely appeared in local newspapers, except for articles recounting local history.

Why? "Faubourg" had gone the way of the French language in New Orleans — that is to say, it was in gradual decline. By midcentury, most new subdivisions, with their lawns and driveways, could only be described as quintessential American suburbs.

### **Faubourg Revival**

"Faubourg" reentered the local lexicon thanks to the historical preservation movement. Starting in 1971, the authors of the influential *New Orleans Architecture* series played a critical role in reframing citizens' understanding of their urban history. Its stately volumes focused on threatened historical areas outside of the French Quarter, among which were the titles "The Creole Faubourgs" and "Faubourg Tremé and the Bayou Road." History buffs and newfound admirers of historic architecture devoured the meticulous documentation, and one of the many things they absorbed was the old faubourg nomenclature.

Other preservationists published new studies of old faubourgs, and neighborhood associations made a point of reviving the extinct names, sometimes to the bemusement of older residents who came of age when "faubourg" had faded.

The Faubourg Marigny Improvement Association, formed in 1972, helped re-instill that name for the rejuvenating neighborhood below Esplanade Avenue. By decade's end, the Faubourg Marigny had become both a National Register Historic District and a city-recognized local historic district — which themselves played big roles in re-normalizing the term.

"Faubourg" caught on in popular use. Whereas occurrences of "Faubourg Marigny" and "Faubourg Treme" were negligible in the *Times-Picayune* in the 1960s and prior decades, those terms appeared by the thousands during the 1970s and afterwards.

More recently, a number of businesses have adopted the name "Faubourg," including a wine store, food markets, a restaurant, some condominium complexes, and a wealth management firm. Developers and real-estate agents especially love "faubourgs," sensing that a house in "the Faubourg Bouligny" sounds more appealing than one in the Twelfth or Thirteenth Ward. Relatedly, the now-reconstructed Lafitte housing project is now named the Faubourg Lafitte.

Not all efforts to reinstitute the old names have succeeded. Revivals of “Faubourg Lafayette,” “Faubourg Livaudais” and “Faubourg Delassize,” for example, can’t seem to make it beyond Google Maps and a few Facebook pages.

But compared to other places, New Orleans is the nation’s only city of faubourgs, as it was two centuries ago.

To be sure, that archaic French word circulates here today in revival form. It is the linguistic equivalent of réveillon dinners, rice calas, and certain aspects of Creole, Isleño, and Cajun culture, which also went through the decline/revival cycle.

Today, “fauboug” is more common in the language of New Orleans than it was a century ago. You’re more likely to hear it here than in Paris or Montreal. And starting this spring, you’ll be able to have a Faubourg in your faubourg.

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*French Quarter and the Faubourg Marigny in 1922.*