Envisioned "River District" was Cotton Press District of the 1800s

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The coming years will likely see massive new development within the largest contiguous open space in historic New Orleans.

This spring, after years of debate, the Ernest N. Morial New Orleans Exhibition Hall Authority selected The River District Neighborhood Investors to build workforce housing and living amenities, followed by retail and entertainment facilities, on 39 acres on either side of Tchoupitoulas Street**,** just upriver from the Crescent City Connection.

The rare opportunity to develop so large an area so close to the urban core can be explained by a particular industry that had dominated this area two centuries ago.

Industry Districts
While New Orleans may be thought of as a city of neighborhoods, historically its commercial core abounded in industry districts, where competing firms of certain trades co-located to gain access to shared resources, labor pools, and supply and distribution chains.

To wit, there was a "newspaper row" on Camp Street, a financial district around Carondelet and Gravier ("the Wall Street of New Orleans"), a wholesale grocery district on Poydras at Tchoupitoulas, dry-goods merchants along lower Magazine Street, and high-end retailers on Canal Street, whose intersection with Rampart formed something of a "theater district."

Along the upper French Quarter riverfront, there was a "sugar and rice district," where every conceivable aspect of these two Louisiana crops, from financing and processing to packaging and shipping, played out.

Then there was the "cotton press district" — or rather, districts. Gigantic cotton-press warehouses blanketed the riverfront blocks of what we now call the Lower Garden District, within two to three blocks of Tchoupitoulas, roughly from today's Crescent City Connection to Felicity Street. This was the upper cotton press district, future home of The River District development. A smaller "lower cotton press district" operated in the 3rd Municipal District, where the present-day neighborhoods of Marigny and Bywater adjoin along Press Street (hence the name), now Homer Plessy Way.

The cotton districts formed because of an important process that cotton bales needed to undergo before transshipment— compression, to reduce volume and maximize the number of bales that may be fitted onto vessels. Inside each of these huge cotton warehouses, gigantic steam-driven presses exerted frightful power in condensing fibers until they were as hard as soft wood, yielding a bale three-quarters to one-third its original size. Storage space within the same capacious structures allowed the compressed bales to be warehoused until the price was right for sale and shipment to distant fabric mills.

King Cotton

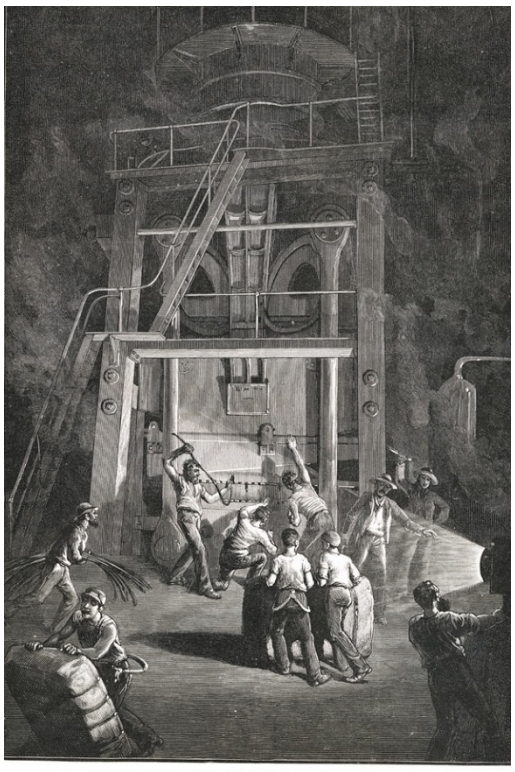
The press industry began in New Orleans after cotton cultivation took hold in the lower Mississippi Valley, driven by various factors.

For one, Eli Whitney's 1793 invention of the cotton engine ("gin") sped the separation of lint from seed, making cotton far more profitable. In the same era, planters from the Northeast arrived into the lower Mississippi region, and found the region to be favorable for cotton cultivation. During 1803 to 1819, these lands shifted from French and Spanish to American political control, making them more conducive to agricultural development.

In the decades to come, the domestic slave trade developed between the upper and lower South, and would eventually sent hundreds of thousands of African Americans in chains from states like Maryland and Virginia through New Orleans and into the plantation fields of Louisiana and Mississippi.

Those same decades would also see a solution to the problem of contra-current navigation, as inventors and investors adapted steam engines to shallow-draft vessels. By the 1820s, a fleet of steamboats plied the Mississippi and tributaries, transporting ginned cotton bales to be compressed and exported through New Orleans, and returning upriver with imports.

Production skyrocketed. The 2 million pounds of cotton raised in Louisiana in 1811 grew to 38 million by 1826 and to 62 million pounds in 1834. Mississippi's output rose from 10 million pounds in 1821, to 85 million in 1834.



INTERIOR OF A SOUTHERN COTTON PRESS BY NIGHT.—Drawn by J. O. Davidson.—[See Page 581.]

New Orleans became the critical financial link between the cotton fields and the fabric mills. Professional middlemen set up offices on Carondelet and Gravier streets, where the New Orleans Cotton Exchange would later arise. By 1822, the city directory listed 364 cotton brokers, factors, merchants and commercial agents coordinating this epic trans-Atlantic economy, with profits rising to the top and human suffering at the bottom.

All those bales in transit made for a striking sight. "A prodigious number of schooners and large steamers sail down from the Ohio and Red rivers, heavily laden with cotton," wrote Charles Lyell in 1846, who estimated that in just seven hours of transit, he had passed 10,000 bales worth over $350,000, or $12 million today. "This cotton has already been much compressed," Lyell explained, "but it undergoes, at New Orleans, still greater pressure, by steam power, to diminish its bulk before embarkation for Liverpool."

Formation of Cotton Press District

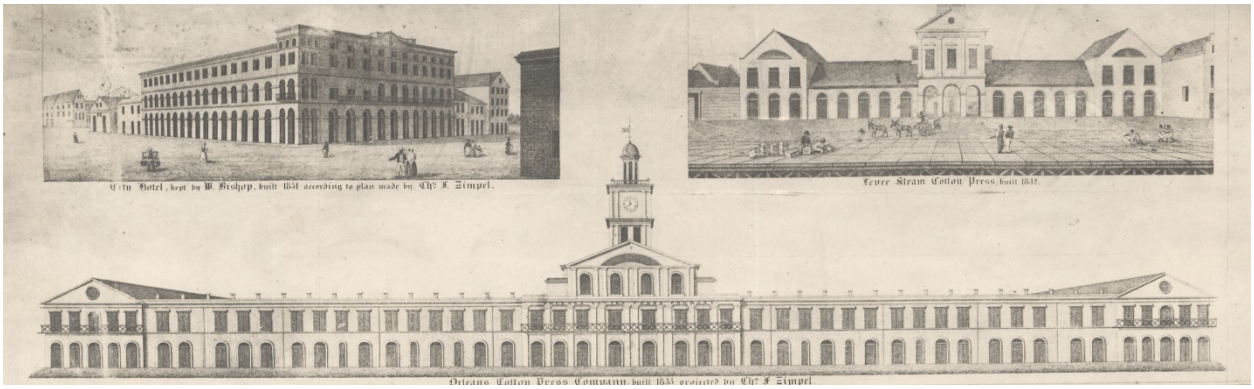
That need for a second squeeze gave rise to the city's cotton press industry. One of the first presses, started in 1805 by James

Pitot, operated on the corner of Toulouse and Burgundy Street in the French Quarter. As more presses formed, it became clear that geography abetted profitability. Cotton-press warehouses needed to be big, near the river, and close to residential neighborhoods, for their labor supply.

Those spatial exigencies drove investors to build presses in the upper faubourgs (today's Lower Garden District) and lower faubourgs (Marigny and Bywater), which had just the right mix of space, access, land values and labor.

What helped create the world's largest cotton district was the 1832 construction of the Levee Cotton Press, a $500,000 operation that could process over 200,000 bales annually. The next year, work began on the adjacent Orleans Cotton Press, on what is now South Front Street between Terpsichore and Thalia. Designed by Charles Zimpel and costing over $753,000, the Greek Revival-style complex had two floors, 48 bays, and a six-story clock tower visible for miles. It could store 25,000 bales and compress well over 150,000 bales per year.

The operation was called the "largest of the kind in the world," according to the 1838 City Directory; "finest…in the world," according to *Bishop Whipple's Southern Diary* (1844); and the largest edifice in the city, with nearly four and a half acres under one roof.



Sketch of Orleans Cotton Press and Levee Steam Press, by Charles Zimpel 1834

Dozens more cotton presses, warehouses and "pickeries" (where workers salvaged and re-baled loose lint) operated nearby. Wrote T. K. Wharton in 1854, "Long ranges of 'Cotton presses' & 'pickeries'…occupy block after block in this section of the city," meaning the river end of Race Street, in the heart of the envisioned River District development.

With all those hot engines and combustible lint on hand, cotton presses were notorious fire hazards. Among the more spectacular conflagrations were those of the Orleans Cotton Press in 1844, the Alabama Cotton Press in 1853 and the Planters Cotton Press in 1859.

Yet owners usually rebuilt after each fire. It was a high-risk, high-reward industry.

The 1860 *Map Locating New Orleans Cotton Presses* depicted two dozen presses between Calliope and Market Street, many of them completely filling the river side of Tchoupitoulas. Here were handled well over a million bales per year, each of which took up to five days for a single slave to pick during the autumn harvest.

It took a number of years for the cotton industry to recover after the Civil War, but bales soon reappeared on the wharves and at the presses. A trip down Tchoupitoulas Street in 1883, from Market to Calliope, would have passed cotton presses named the Virginia, the Texas, the Fire Proof, the Louisiana, Kentucky, Anchor, Alabama, Memphis, Crescent, Factors, Shippers, Herrick, Union, Penns, Orleans, Coopers, Empire, Johnson & Randolph & Liverpool, International, and Merchants. And then there was the lower cotton press district, impressive in its own right.

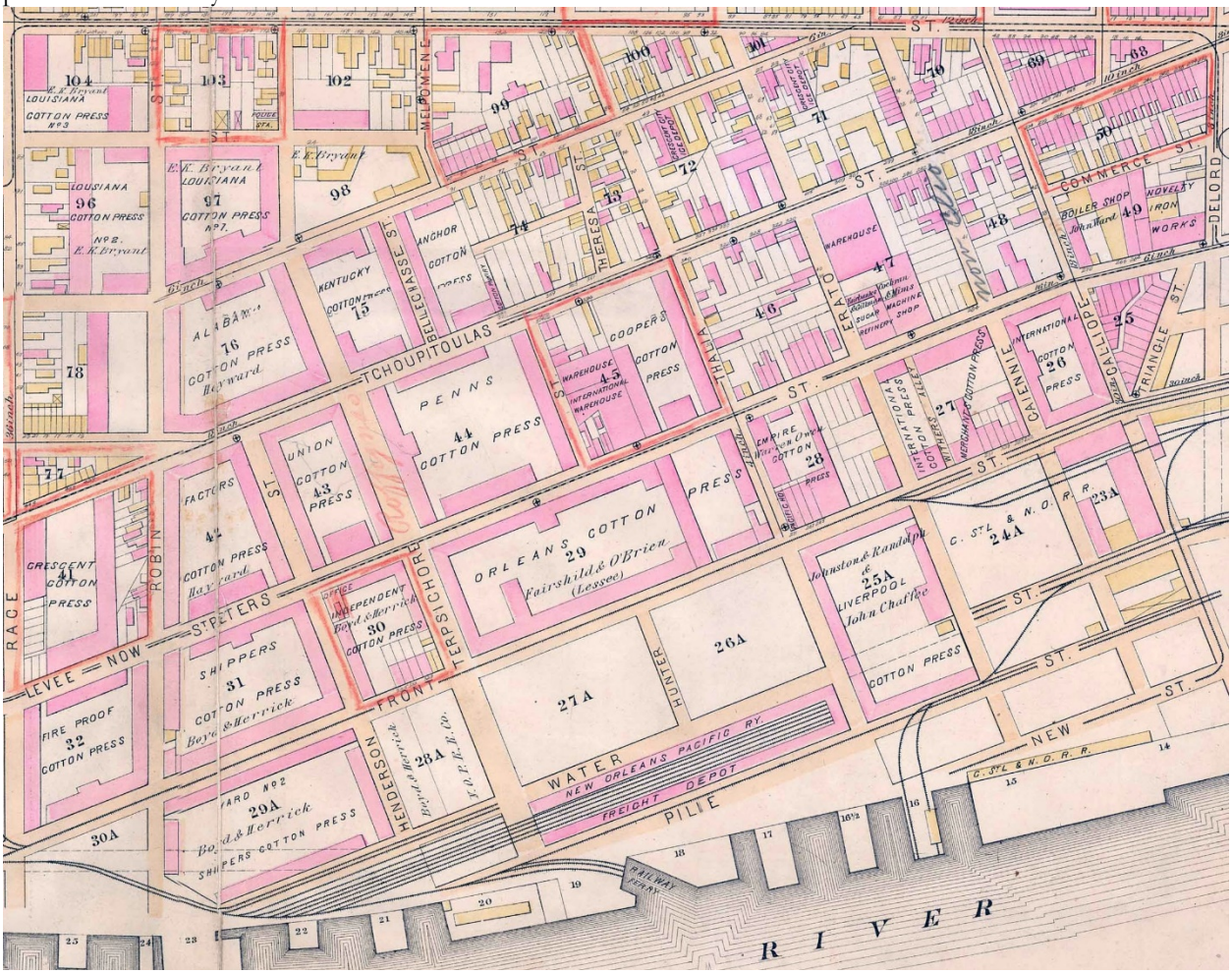
The Daily Grind

The daily grind began when "roustabouts," who handled the bales aboard steamboats, docked at the wharf. "Screwmen" took over from there, extracting the bales and passing them to longshoremen, who organized the shipments for "draymen" to haul to the cotton presses. There, "cotton rollers" got the bales to "scalemen" for "weighers" to measure and pull samples for "classers" to grade for the amount of debris in the lint.

While all this transpired along the riverfront, the professionals on Carondelet negotiated the destiny of their allotments — eventually sending word to the pressers, who compressed the bales and "struck" (marked) them for their destinations.

Then the draymen got the bales to the longshoremen, who got them to the screwmen, who used jackscrews to load the bales for roustabouts to ship them to the fabric mills, for weaving into skirts, shirts, socks and other cloth products. A 480-pound bale typically yielded about 500 skirts, 1,000 shirts, or 4,000 socks.

Why not do the weaving here, and keep the earnings local? New Orleans has long struggled to build value-added industries, but it didn't entirely miss this opportunity. The Lane Cotton Mill first opened in 1864, followed by the Maginnis Cotton Mill in the 1880s. Along with a number of other manufacturers, these local enterprises made clothing, sheets, bags, hosiery, yarn and twine, while across the river in Gretna, the Southern Cotton Oil Co. extracted cotton seed oil used in soap, cooking and illumination. It became the largest such plant in the country.



Upper Cotton Press District, from detail of 1883 Robinson Map

Dethroning King Cotton

Two developments signaled the end of New Orleans' antebellum cotton districts. One was the restructuring of the Port of New Orleans as a state agency in 1896, which was followed by an ambitious modernization campaign as well as the launch of the city-owned Public Belt Railroad in 1904.

Port officials sensed the old cotton press districts, with their disparate arrays of competing warehouses accessed by mule carts, had become obsolete. Better to bring everything under one roof, managed by one entity, located closer to the river, accessible by rail. No such space existed, so the port created one, by realigning the levee outwardly from Louisiana Avenue to State Street and in-filling the gap with sediment, converting hundreds of acres of shallow river into valuable wharves.

In the heart of this sliver was erected in 1915 the Cotton Warehouse and Terminal, covering 62 acres, holding up to 2 million cotton bales, and featuring the latest electric trucks, high-density presses and special contraptions to extract bales without disturbing those stacked upon it. The new terminal put many old district warehouses out of business. This occurred at the same time that "King Cotton and its retainers," as historian Harold Woodman described the industry in 1915, started to get dethroned. Weevils threatened the crop; competition mounted from foreign markets; domestic production shifted westward to "dryland cotton;" and railroads and trucks reduced the need to ship on the river to New Orleans. Cotton acreage in Louisiana declined from nearly 2 million acres in 1930 to under 200,000 acres by century's end.

Into the 1950s, cotton remained a major commodity handled at the Port of New Orleans, and bales continued to be a common sight. But decline was imminent. The New Orleans Cotton Exchange closed in 1964, by which time leaseholders at the Port of New Orleans had switched to tropical fruit, coffee, lumber, rubber and metals, and the 1915 facilities were repurposed or replaced. Most old district warehouses were razed, resulting in the open fields along Tchoupitoulas today.

The last cotton pickery operated at 4811 Annunciation into the late 1960s; it's now the den for the krewes of Proteus and Chaos. The last cotton press warehouse, the Port Compress at 1421 S. Peters St., appeared in the city directory of 1983 — same year the last listing appeared for a Carondelet Street-based cotton dealer, in the former Cotton Exchange Building (now a hotel).

A number of former cotton-press warehouses still stand, wholly or partially. Some cotton sheds along Homer Plessy Way got incorporated into the New Orleans Center for the Creative Arts as it moved downtown in the 1990s and expanded in the 2010s. In the former upper cotton press district, preservationists in 2003 succeeded in saving the Amelia Street Cotton Press from demolition for the Walmart parking lot.

Around the same time, the pending demolition of the circa-1915 cotton warehouse on the Napoleon Avenue Wharf brought to light one of the city's last presses. Made by the Webb Press Co. in Minden, the steel apparatus stood three stories high and weighed over 100 tons. Last-minute action by history buffs saved it from the scrap heap, although plans for its display at a museum have yet to come to fruition.

Obsolescence and demolition led to cleared fields, which in recent decades have become some of the most valuable open land in the metropolis—and a big question mark on the real-estate scene.

The next few years may reveal the destiny of what, 200 years prior, had been a defining element of the New Orleans economy — the largest district of its type in the world, a major contiguous land use both uptown and downtown, and a key cog in an industry that affected the lives of millions of people.

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