



# RAMPART

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Tanesse, who in 1810 laid out streets on the land adjoining the Bayou Road (now Gov. Nicholls Street), which the city had purchased from Claude Tremé.

That subdivision became the Faubourg Tremé, and in an 1812 map, Tanesse initially labeled the former fortification's right of way as a promenade projetée (projected promenade), suggesting he had in mind a landscaped walkway as well as a city street.

A detailed map later sketched by Tanesse, which he described as based on "an actual survey made in 1815," shows all three fortifications-turned-streets laid out with arcades of trees, two abreast, 12 per block, nearly 300 in all. The street in the rear of the city gained the aptly name Rue Rampart, today's North Rampart Street.

## Typical New Orleans

In the century ahead, Rampart from Canal to Esplanade became a quintessential city transect, redolent of everyone and everything that comprised New Orleans. It had the architecture of the French Quarter, yet the larger lots and commerce of Canal or Claiborne; its structures spanned from cottages to mansions; and its populace was diverse in race, class and ethnicity, though predominantly Creole in culture and French in language.

In addition to residences and businesses, Rampart between the French Quarter and the Faubourg Tremé was home to a Catholic mortuary chapel, a monastery, a Jewish synagogue, L'Union Française (the French Union), a Methodist church, and Congo Square, where populations who were enslaved in antebellum times rendezvoused on Sundays and performed African music and dance.

With further urban growth, engineers extended Rampart upriver, designating it "South" as it crossed Canal, the original stretch becoming "North" Rampart and extending downriver, eventually into Arabi.

As streetcar tracks were lengthened later in the 1800s, a number of lines



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Trees and the streetcar tracks are removed from North Rampart Street on Jan. 5, 1949.

capitalized on the axial convenience of North Rampart, among them the Canal Belt, the Esplanade Belt and the Dauphine Line.

In the 1910s, North Rampart's upper blocks gained the nickname "the Tango Belt" for their cabarets and clubs, a sort of antecedent to Bourbon Street, making it all the more quintessentially New Orleans.

North Rampart's neutral ground spanned over one-third the street's 85-foot width, and had two streetcar track beds with electrical poles and grassy strips alongside, much like St. Charles Avenue. Placed at regular intervals on both sides of the tracks were ornamental lampposts and plenty of trees — well over 200 oaks, palms and other species by 1940, judging from an aerial photo taken that year.

While they lacked the grandeur of the Claiborne oaks, North Rampart's trees made up for it in their arcade-like linearity, forming in sections a sort of verdant tunnel through two of the city's densest, oldest neighborhoods.

## Transit modernization

Times were changing, and few things evidenced it more than transportation technology. Since the late 1920s, the city and its newly formed planning commission had been steadily ceding more street space to autos and trucks, prioritized for their speedy passage, as well as accessibility and parking.

In 1927, for example, North Rampart's merge with St. Claude Avenue was streamlined with a curve named McShane Place for better

traffic flow along that corridor, parts of which would later be designated La. 46.

Concurrently, New Orleans Public Service Inc., the electrical utility which also ran the streetcar lines, looked to upgrade public transit. Streetcars were picturesque but inefficient, being married to rails, on which a single impedance could halt a whole line.

Transportation became even more of a priority after World War II, when plans were advanced for new expressways, a consolidated train station, new shipping facilities, a downtown Mississippi River bridge, and a new airport.

All these upgrades would take years, but streetcar lines were a different story; they could be replaced rather swiftly by electric trolleys with rubber tires ("trolley coaches") or gas-powered buses.

That's exactly what the

city did in the late 1940s. The Freret streetcar line was terminated in 1946, and the Jackson line in 1947, followed by the Magazine, Gentilly, and Desire lines in 1948 (just one year after Tennessee Williams' "A Streetcar Named Desire" made the last of those internationally famous). Each was replaced by a trolley coach or bus under the same route name.

On Aug. 13, 1948, the city passed an ordinance "to discontinue operations on and remove the existing ... double track on N. Rampart Street to Esplanade Avenue," which had been originally approved in 1893 and extended downriver in 1903 and 1925. In its place would be installed "a system of electric trolley coach transportation ... on N. Rampart to and through McShane Place to St. Claude Avenue."

Known as the St. Claude Line at the time of its demise, traditional streetcars

last rolled along North Rampart on January 1, 1949. Days later, workers began bulldozing the neutral ground and widening the auto lanes. Trolley coaches needed overhead wires, but they shared ordinary traffic lanes with other vehicles, so there was no more need for rails on a wide neutral ground. Its removal meant the loss of hundreds of beautiful trees.

Surely some neighbors lamented the loss of the emerald shade of North Rampart's "promenade," as Jacques Tanesse first envisioned it in 1812. But most folks probably saw the change as one of many such projects around town in this era, all the price of progress, so they said, and hardly any protests appeared in the local press.

Within a few years, trolley coaches were switched to gas-powered buses citywide, while motorists increasingly shifted onto the newly streamlined arteries, as they usually do, thus negating their initial advantage. Congestion won the day, while pedestrians and trees had lost. Progress.

In the decades ahead, the French Quarter blocks on the river side of North Rampart gentrified, while neighborhoods on the lake side, including the Iberville housing development and Tremé, went into decline.

North Rampart became one of those tense urban divides, with great social disparity on either side, each correlating to racialized settlement patterns. Tourists were discreetly warned not to cross North Rampart, which itself became seedy

and bleak, its multiple lanes sun-drenched in day and stark at night.

It was a far cry from the verdant arcade of times past.

## The new North Rampart

Now, generations later, new views on urbanism have brought more change to North Rampart, including the reinstallation of a streetcar line, an impressive line of ornamental lampposts and trees along the redesigned neutral ground, bike lanes and crosswalks, and new programming at Louis Armstrong Park.

All this has greatly increased pedestrian movement across North Rampart, as well as property values and rental rates, and likely furthered the gentrification of Tremé.

The recent investments on North Rampart present something of a testbed for what interventions may be made — and with what impact — on North Claiborne, as the city rethinks the price of progress it paid on both these quintessentially New Orleans arteries over a half-century ago.

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