

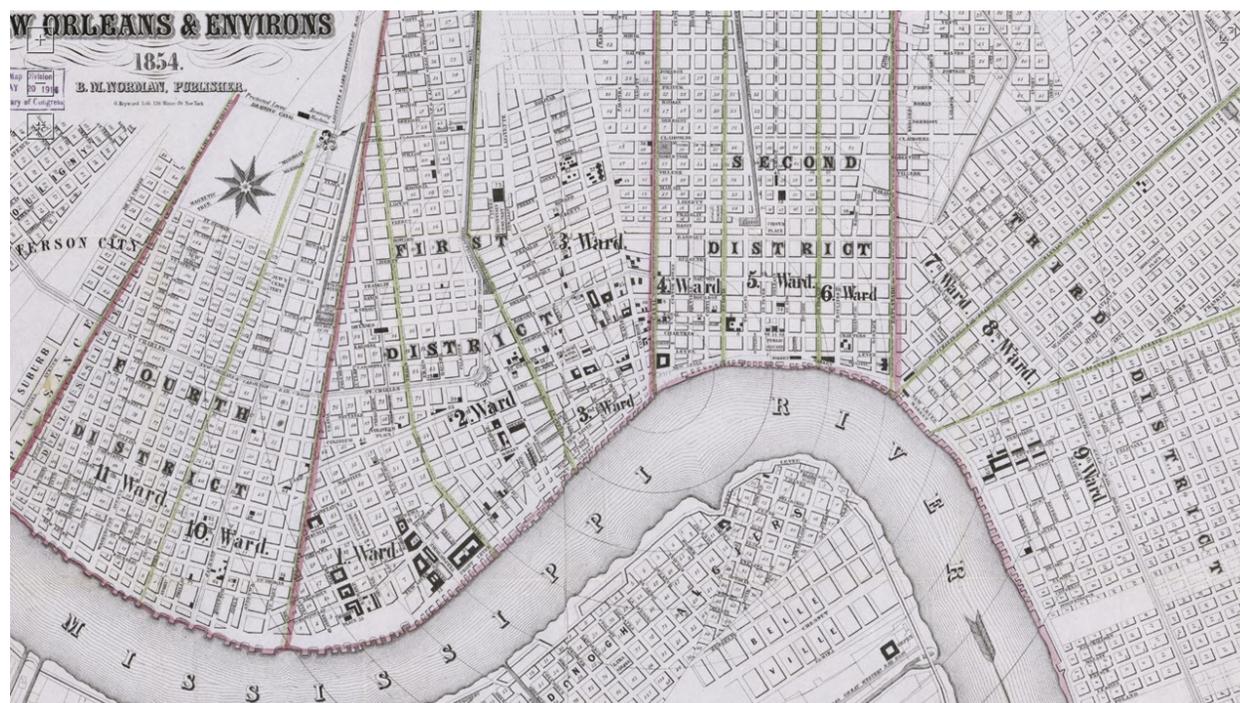
Charting the Course

From 9th Ward to 2nd District, the Story of the 1852 Remapping that Changed New Orleans Forever

Richard Campanella

rcampane@tulane.edu

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The city was reunified and reconfigured with new districts and wards in 1852, as shown in this 1854 map from LOC.

One-hundred seventy years ago, New Orleans underwent a reconfiguration which continues to shape our lives today.

To understand what happened in 1852, we have to go back to the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, after which New Orleans got its initial municipal charter (1805) and proceeded to transform in various ways.

Its urban footprint expanded. Its port bustled. Its economy developed. Demographically, its predominantly French Creole and West African populace diversified to include Caribbean refugees, European immigrants, enslaved African Americans from the upper South, and Anglo-Americans from points north.

In the decades ahead, New Orleans society increasingly bifurcated into two rivalrous factions, one French-speaking, generally Creole, and Catholic, and the other English-speaking, typically Protestant, and recently arrived. Members of other groups, be they free or enslaved, allied themselves with either faction, oftentimes uneasily.

The two cohorts vied for power in ways that were noticeable even to newcomers. English sociologist Harriet Martineau, who visited New Orleans in 1836, described “a mutual jealousy between the French and American.... The French complain that the Americans will not speak French (and) will not meet their neighbors even half way, (while) the Americans ridicule the toilet practices of the French ladies; their liberal use of rouge and pearl powder.”

The Creole cohort generally resided in the older half of town, in the French Quarter and lower faubourgs. English-speakers predominated upriver: in today’s Central Business District (“American sector”) and Lower Garden District, as well as in today’s Irish Channel, Garden District, and Central City, which starting in 1825 pertained to Jefferson Parish, and in 1833 became the City of Lafayette.

Such discord might have been resolved by capitalizing on commonalities and compromising on differences. But that’s hard to do. Instead, leaders took the easy way, by scheming to rework political borders around settlement patterns so that each cohort could govern themselves.

In 1826, councilmembers called for what one reporter described as the city’s “dismemberment” into Anglo and Creole sections. A subsequent proposal suggested creating “two cities, to be called the Upper and Lower City,” to separate “the opposing influence of American...and French interests.”

Finally, on March 8, 1836, partisans prevailed upon the State Legislature to divide the city “into three separate sections, each with distinct municipal powers.”

The Creole-dominant First Municipality would encompass the French Quarter and Faubourg Tremé—that is, from Canal Street to Esplanade Avenue. The Anglo-dominant Second Municipality entailed from Canal Street to Felicity Street, above which was Lafayette. The Third Municipality, which had many Creoles as well as immigrants, extended from Esplanade Avenue downriver.

For the next 18 years, the City of New Orleans comprised these three semi-autonomous municipalities, each governed by its own Council of Aldermen.

It was a complicated, confusing and costly system, with everything in triplicate and nothing consistent. It scared away investors and lowered the city’s credit rating, hindering its ability to fund improvements and deepening its debt.

It was a bloody mess.

Worse yet, instead of alleviating ethnic discord, the system exacerbated it by conflating cultural with political differences—the First and Third municipalities being predominantly Democratic, and the Second mostly Whig.

Wrote one editorialist in 1849, “had the Legislature sought, by the most careful efforts, to create a war of races, to make distinction between Creole and American, they could not have chosen a better means...than the present division operates.”

An observer from the late 1840s described “the First Municipality (as) the old city, left to the...French and Creole population,” and “the Second Municipality (as) the new city; with here a little of Boston, there a trifle of New York, and some of Philadelphia,” an allusion to its Anglo-American influences. The Third Municipality, he wrote, seemed “half village, half city, unmistakable in its French Faubourg look,” implying its Creole demographic, along with plenty of “Dutch and Irish,” the former meaning German (*Deutsch*).

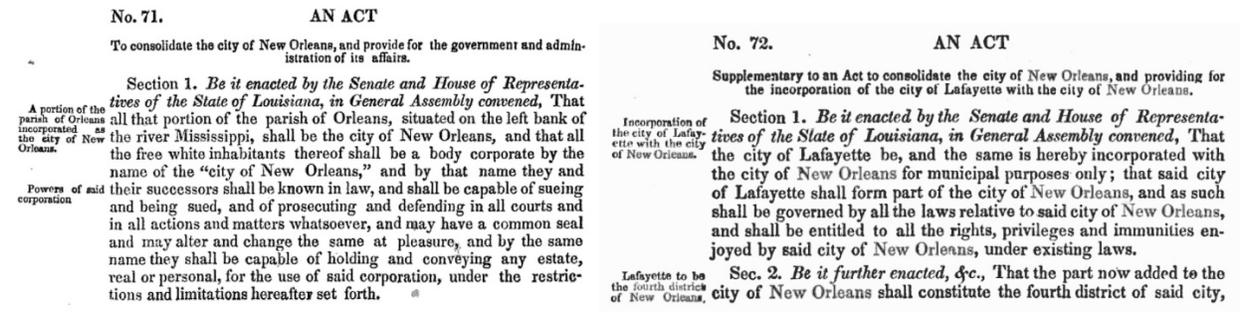
Free people of color, who were culturally Creole and linguistically French, predominated in the rear of the First Municipality, namely Tremé. Enslaved people could be found citywide, with those who were French-speaking prevailing again on the Creole side of town.

Lafayette also had a growing population, and like the adjacent Second Municipality, it was substantially Anglo and largely Whig. It also had many German and Irish immigrants, who were cajoled by Whigs to form political alliances with the Anglos against the Creoles.

By the early 1850s, the time was right, particularly from the American point of view, to finally do away with the municipality system, while also restructuring the new New Orleans to emerge more “American.”

How to do that? By annexing Lafayette.

On February 23, 1852, the State Legislature reconsolidated the three municipalities into a single City of New Orleans. In a separate act later that day, it removed the City of Lafayette—everything between Felicite Street and Toledano Street—from Jefferson Parish and annexed it into New Orleans.



The reconsolidation act completely revised city governance. It also reconfigured three geographical aspects of city management.

For one, the term “municipalities” was abandoned in favor of “municipal districts,” which we retain today for real estate purposes. The former First Municipality became the today’s Second Municipal District; the Second Municipality became the First Municipal District; the Third Municipality remained the Third Municipal District; and former Lafayette became the Fourth Municipal District.

Later, in 1870, Algiers got annexed into city limits and became the Fifth Municipal District. That same year, New Orleans annexed the City of Jefferson City, making everything from Toledano to Lowerline Street into New Orleans’ Sixth Municipal District. Finally, in 1874, New Orleans annexed the City of Carrollton, and once again, Jefferson Parish’s loss became New Orleans’ gain, enumerated as the Seventh Municipal District, from Lowerline to Monticello.

Look at today’s seven municipal district borders, and they align perfectly with the three antebellum municipalities and the four subsequent annexations—all thanks to the reconfigurations of 1852.

And then there were the wards.

First designated in 1805, wards initially served as electoral districts, and were adjusted as populations spread. The 1836 trifurcation forced new wards, all in triplicate, while the separate cities of Lafayette, Jefferson, and Carrollton each had their own wards.

The 1852 changes forced yet another remapping of wards.

Because Felicite Street up to that moment had formed the Jefferson/Orleans parish line, the new wards were enumerated starting from Felicite (First Ward) and proceeding downriver. The Second and Third wards were delineated through today’s Lower Garden District and CBD; the Fourth through Sixth wards sliced through the French Quarter; and the Seventh through Ninth wards spanned from Esplanade Avenue downriver.

Its division into nine wards.	Sec. 2. That the city of New Orleans shall be divided into nine wards, as follows, to wit:
1st ward.	1. The first ward to extend from the line of the parish of Jefferson, to the middle of Benjamin, Estelle and Thalia streets.
2d ward.	2. The second ward to extend from the last mentioned limits to the middle of Julia street, until it strikes the New Orleans canal, thence down the middle of said canal to Lake Pontchartrain.
3d ward.	3. The third ward to comprise the residue of the Second Municipality.
4th ward.	4. The fourth ward to extend from the middle of Canal street to the middle of St. Louis street, until it reaches the Metairie road, thence along the middle of said road to the New Orleans canal.
5th ward.	5. The fifth ward to extend from the last mentioned limits to the middle of St. Philip street, thence down said street until its intersection with the Bayou St. John, thence along the middle of said bayou until it intersects the Metairie road, thence along the middle of said road until it reaches St. Louis street.
6th ward.	6. The sixth ward to be composed of the residue of the First Municipality.
7th ward.	7. The seventh ward to extend from the middle of Esplanade street to the middle of Champs Elysees street.
8th ward.	8. The eighth ward to extend from the middle of Champs Elysees street to the middle of Enghien street and Lafayette Avenue.
9th ward.	9. The ninth ward to extend from the middle of Enghien street to the lower limits of the parish of Orleans.

To equalize populations, highest-density areas got the narrowest wards, while less-populated wards got laid out the broadest. This explains why today's Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth wards are so slender, while the Ninth Ward is so large: these were the city's highest- and lowest-density areas as of 1852.

As Lafayette was annexed hours after the reconsolidation law, legislators swung around with their one-through-nine sequencing and made former Lafayette into wards Ten and Eleven.

That decision set the precedent for enumerating future annexations. In 1870, the former City of Jefferson became wards Twelve, Thirteen, and Fourteen when it was annexed into New Orleans. At the same time, Algiers, a hitherto unincorporated section of Orleans Parish across the river, was annexed and

became the city's Fifteenth Ward. Four years later, New Orleans annexed Carrollton and made it into its Sixteenth and Seventeenth wards.

Though their borders have since been extended into lakeside neighborhoods, we've had the same 17 wards ever since 1874, with their origins traceable to 1852.

Perhaps the most symbolic change from 1852 was the relocation of City Hall.

Since Spanish colonial times, the seat of city governance had been the Cabildo in the French Quarter, a source of power and prestige for the Creole side of town.

As if to outdo the Creoles, Anglo-dominated interests in the Second Municipality commissioned architect James Gallier Sr. to design a bigger, better home for their government. Fronting Lafayette Square, Gallier completed his Greek Revival masterpiece, today's Gallier Hall, in 1851.

Then came the changes of 1852, which brought new voters into the electorate, particularly in former Lafayette, with its larger Anglo, German, and Irish populations. That tilted political power to the American side of town—and what better way to mark that victory than to relocate City Hall out of the French Quarter and into the American sector.

It was not mere symbolism. With each passing year, New Orleans would count fewer French speakers, and more English speakers. It would expand more stridently upriver than downriver. Its architecture would increasingly reflect national trends rather than local traditions. Its legal system, rooted in Roman civil law, would mix more and more with English common law.

New Orleans was Americanizing.

Swedish visitor Fredrika Bremer observed as much during her 1852 visit. "The Anglo-American people obtain sway in the city," she wrote the next year, "and their influence grows even here rapidly. The French population, on the contrary, does not increase, and their influence is on the decline." The Americanization of New Orleans took generations to play out, lasting practically into modern times. But there were inflection points, and few were more pronounced than the year 1852.

Richard Campanella, a geographer with the Tulane School of Architecture, is the author of "The West Bank of Greater New Orleans," "Bienville's Dilemma: A Historical Geography of New Orleans," "Bourbon Street—A History," and other books. He may be reached through <http://richcampanella.com>, rcampane@tulane.edu, or @nolacampanella on Twitter.