

Geographies of New Orleans

Cosmopolitan Conceptions

Original Designs for Gretna, Harvey and Milneburg Were Sophisticated, Enlightened

Richard Campanella

Geographer, Tulane School of Architecture rcampane@tulane.edu

Contributing writer, "Geographies of New Orleans"

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Detail of Springbett and Pille map of 1839 showing Cosmopolite City; Tulane Louisiana Research Collection

Harvey, an unincorporated community on the west bank of Jefferson Parish, blends almost seamlessly with Gretna and Marrero. Its streets are interrupted only by the Harvey Canal, and its older blocks form a standard rectangular grid. Unlike Old Gretna, Harvey does not have a centralized historic square, nor does it have an original axial “main street,” like Sala Avenue in Westwego or Barataria Boulevard in Marrero.

But if its founder had his way, it would have had all that and more—and it would have been called Cosmopolite City.

The founder was Nicholas Noël Destréhan, a descendant of French colonial treasurer Jean Baptiste Honoré d’Estréhan. Members of this family would amass land and wealth in St. Charles Parish, where the Destréhan Plantation House, built in 1787, still stands today.

In the 1820s, Guy Noël Destréhan purchased land on what at the time was called the “right bank,” today’s west bank. After his death, that holding passed to his son Nicholas Noël, who controlled another parcel a mile upriver, in today’s Harvey.

Like adjacent plantations, which all depended on enslaved people for labor, Destrehan's holdings were mostly under sugar cane cultivation, while the riverfront sections were dedicated to vegetable gardens, orchids, dairies, barns, pastures, brickyards and saw mills.

With new ferries crossing the Mississippi daily, opportunities arose for new land uses, namely residential villages. Populations in New Orleans proper and adjacent Lafayette (now the Irish Channel and Garden District) could now live on the west bank, and ferry back and forth to jobs and resources on the "left" (East) bank.

Landowners like Destrehan were thus motivated to subdivide parts of their parcels for residential development. His peers, such as the Durverge and Mossy families as well as John McDonogh, had done the same during the 1810s and 1820s, giving rise to today's Algiers Point and McDonoghville neighborhoods.

Destrehan had experience in launching subdivisions. A few years earlier on the East Bank, he developed his family-owned land behind the Faubourg Marigny as its value rose, thanks to the new Pontchartrain Railroad on Elysian Fields Avenue. "Faubourg New Marigny," today's Seventh Ward and St. Roch neighborhoods, proved profitable, and Destrehan wanted to replicate that success on the west bank.

So in 1836 he hired surveyor Pierre Benjamin Buisson to lay down a street grid near the new ferry landing connecting with Lafayette at the foot of Jackson Avenue, which had a large immigrant population. Destrehan named the new subdivision Mechanickham, drawing on the German word for skilled workers, and aimed to advertise the new real estate to German immigrants, many of whom were tradesmen.

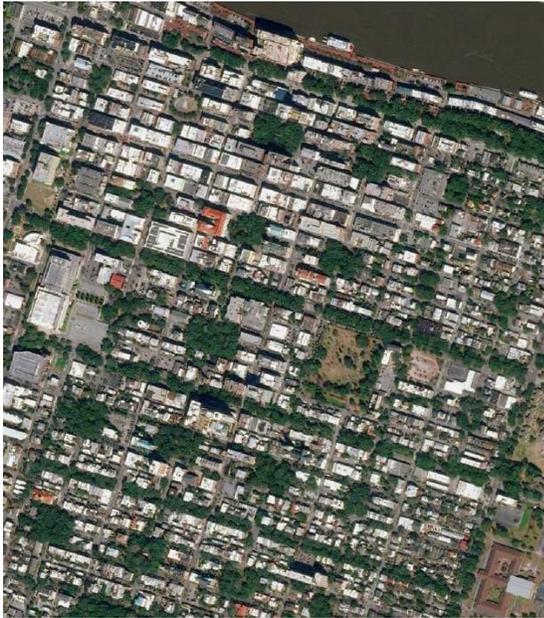
Mechanickham's layout was no ordinary street grid. It was an inspired urban vision for a civic community, featuring a scenic commons paralleled by twin boulevards (now Huey P. Long Avenue) addressing the river. It had space for a church and a courthouse or college to the rear, and provisions for a railroad right-of-way, a foundry and a ferry landing. Two years later, a ferry company paid to subdivide additional land immediately adjacent to Mechanickham, with the hope of increasing ridership and profiting from real estate sales. That three-block annex gained the name Gretna, probably for Gretna Green in Scotland. In time, the identity of the two subdivisions would merge, and the clumsy name "Mechanickham" would disappear in favor of the pithy "Gretna."

Parcels sold well, and by the late 1830s, Gretna became a bustling little village. Its thoughtful urban design remains largely in place today as Old Gretna, home to scores of historic buildings, leafy green space, a scenic riverfront and the German American Cultural Center.

In the meanwhile, Nicolas Noël Destrehan turned his attention to upriver land he had acquired from his brother-in-law Stephen Henderson. In 1836, fresh off his New Marigny and Mechanickham successes, Destrehan envisaged a bold new project. Inspired by the growing global importance of New Orleans, he named his subdivision "Cosmopolite City" and gave it a look worthy of the name.

The design was a rendition of James Edward Oglethorpe's famous plan for Savannah, Georgia, in which broad orthogonal boulevards were separated by six smaller cellular "wards," each positioned around a central park nested within major street intersections.

The Oglethorpe Plan represented Enlightenment-era urban design for social equality, aiming to distribute the amenity of green space evenly throughout the community. Cosmopolite City represented an early attempt to introduce the progressive city plan to Louisiana.



Aerial photo of Savannah's system of green squares, from USGS

Destrehan didn't stop there. He used worldly references for streets, naming them Turk, Persian, English, Spanish, Italian and Russian, and called his grand axial boulevard Paradise Avenue. He also sought to build a ferry line connecting with the foot of Louisiana Avenue.

Cosmopolite City's plan appeared on the 1839 Springbett and Pilié *Topographical Map of the City and Environs of New Orleans*, digital copies of which were generously provided to me by Leon Miller of Tulane's Louisiana Research Center. Had the plan been laid out as shown, Cosmopolite City would have spanned from today's Grefer Avenue to 2nd Avenue in Harvey, and from the riverfront to just south of the West Bank Expressway.

Perhaps Destrehan got his vision for Cosmopolite City directly from Savannah, Georgia, which Oglethorpe had laid out a full century earlier. Alternately, he or his surveyor P. B. Buisson may have gleaned the idea locally. Just a few years earlier, after the Pontchartrain Railroad opened on Elysian Fields Avenue to connect with Lake Pontchartrain, Scottish landowner Alexander Milne had a lakefront subdivision designed for his newly accessible land.

An 1834 map by Charles Zimpel shows "Milneburgh" with features comparable to Destrehan's Cosmopolite City: the worldly avenue names (Paris, London and Edinburgh, among others), a grand boulevard leading to waterfront wharfs, and four corner parks positioned around major intersections, named Foreign Square, Rome Square, National Square, and Amsterdam Square.

However enlightened the inspiration, Destrehan's Cosmopolite City was ultimately subject to the volatile national economy following the Panic of 1837. Local geography didn't help: sitting across the river from a rather unpopulated part of modern-day Uptown, and with that ferry line not yet in place, parcel sales could not compete with those in better-connected Gretna.



Detail of Zimpel map of 1834 showing Milneburgh, from Tulane Louisiana Research Collection

Destrehan shelved his subdivision project and turned his attention to another entrepreneurial idea: a waterway to connect the Mississippi River with Bayou Barataria.

Starting in 1839-1840, Destrehan secured laborers, probably low-paid Irish “ditchers,” and oversaw the excavation of the Destrehan Canal, today’s Harvey Canal.

By the mid-1840s, the Destrehan Canal was doing well, and the operation had partially supplanted the footprint of the planned subdivision. Destrehan focused on running the waterway, and abandoned Cosmopolite City altogether, Oglethorpe Plan and all.

Perhaps it was for the better. In 1858, high river water ripped a 250-foot rupture in the levee and caused extensive damage. Known as the Bell Crevasse, the high-velocity deluge tore up much of the space for what would have been Cosmopolite City.

Over the next half-century, Gretna would expand from the east, while Westwego formed to the west and a community named Amesville, today’s Marrero, developed in between. Streets in those adjacent subdivisions were gradually extended up to the Harvey Canal, forming the present-day community of Harvey.

Because Harvey inherited the street grids of neighboring developments, it never got its own “main street” or town square, much less Savannah-style green spaces.

As for Milneburg, it developed into a lake port and popular recreational community, though its meager levee and undrained marsh soils precluded the full realization of Alexander Milne’s 1830s plan.

After the Lakefront Project of the 1920s reduced the risk of flooding and turned the old resort into an inland Gentilly neighborhood, the original layout lost many of its details, although it still retains some cosmopolitan names, such as Paris Avenue, the London Avenue Canal, and streets named for Madrid, Vienna, Mexico and New York.

As for those Savannah-style parks, you won’t find them on our modern metropolitan map. But if you look closely at the intersection of Allen Toussaint Boulevard and St. Roch Avenue, you’ll see four city-owned corner green spaces known as Rome and National Square.

Imagine a leafy green square embedded in the middle of that intersection, and that’s the closest we can get to two enlightened urban designs envisioned for both banks of our metropolis, some 190 years ago.

Richard Campanella, a geographer with the Tulane School of Architecture, is the author of “Cityscapes of New Orleans,” “Bienville’s Dilemma,” and “Bourbon Street: A History.” This material was drawn from his book “The West Bank of Greater New Orleans—A Historical Geography.” Campanella may be reached at <http://richcampanella.com>, rcampane@tulane.edu, or @nolacampanella on Twitter.