

Carrollton’s “Main Street”

Home to Po-Boy Festival, Eight-Block Strip Had Just the Right Geography for Commerce

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Tomorrow’s Po-Boy Festival will bring thousands of people to Oak Street in Carrollton to enjoy food, music, friends—and Oak Street itself, with its small-town Main Street feel, lined with local shops, eateries, old banks and former department stores.

Yet Oak Street was never initially designed as a commercial artery, nor did it ever have a municipal market, which in this city often triggered the formation of business districts.

So why did commerce cluster along this particular artery? What made Oak Street “Main Street”?

1830s Origins

Oak Street originated as part of an 1831 development project by a group of investors including the New Orleans Canal and Banking Company, an “improvement bank” missioned to build and operate infrastructure for profit.

The investors had purchased the Macarty Plantation because its location and enormous expanse accommodated a variety of potentially lucrative land uses. Its rear flank provided space for a segment of a navigation channel the bank planned to excavate, which would become known as the New Basin Canal, today’s I-10 corridor from the Superdome to the cemeteries.

The Macarty Plantation’s riverfront flank, meanwhile, was slated to be connected with New Orleans proper by a railroad, making it accessible and therefore more valuable. That led to the third part of the plan: to lay out a subdivision at the terminus of the tracks, where parcels could be sold to New Orleanians seeking an alternative to city life.

German engineer and surveyor Charles F. Zimpel designed both the railroad, which would become today’s St. Charles Avenue Streetcar Line, as well as the subdivision, which would become today’s Carrollton. The name likely honored Gen. William Carroll, whose Kentucky militia camped here en route to the Battle of New Orleans.

Zimpel’s 1833 plan differed somewhat from Carrollton’s modern grid. He made his blocks four times the size of those today, and enumerated rather than named certain streets. Today’s St. Charles Avenue was First Street, and because of the supersized blocks, subsequent streets heading inland were enumerated at double the increment from their positions today.



Drone photo by Marco Rasi.

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Thus, present-day Maple Street was originally Second Street, Freret was Third Street, and Oak Street was Fourth Street. These enumerations remained for the next six decades, even as the super-sized blocks were divided up to create new streets such as Hampson, Burthe, and Zimpel (or Zimple, the misspelling arising recently from a city signage error).

As Carrollton developed in the mid-1800s, most commercial activity occurred at the riverfront, where steamers docked and cargo was unloaded. Carrollton's "Main Street" at the time was Levee Street, a commercial strip roughly along today's Leake Avenue, while its "downtown" centered around Dublin Street, home of the Carrollton Market. The economic bustle at Carrollton Landing did not leave much commercial action for interior blocks such as Fourth Street. Indeed, Zimpel's plan makes it clear he had no intention of making Fourth Street into a main avenue. But he did lay it out about ten feet wider than adjacent streets in its stretch from the Mississippi River to today's South Carrollton Avenue (originally Canal Street, because it led to the New Basin Canal).

That wider stretch of Fourth Street would become more centrally positioned among the residential population, as the Town of Carrollton (incorporated 1845) grew into the City of Carrollton and eventually got annexed into New Orleans in 1874. The annexation shifted the Orleans/Jefferson Parish line from Lowerline Street up to Monticello Street—and it so happened that Fourth Street connected directly with the River Road at Monticello, making Oak a key egress and ingress to Jefferson Parish.

Changes of the 1890s

The 1890s were future Oak Street's transformative decade. In 1891, the Orleans Parish Levee Board realigned the levee along the Carrollton riverfront, which necessitated the elimination of Levee Street and its many stores. Retail activity would have to find a new home, at a time when Carrollton residents increasingly lived in the blocks farther inland—around Fourth Street.

In 1893, the St. Charles Streetcar Line was electrified, putting Carrollton in easier reach of the rest of the city. Spur lines had been laid out throughout Uptown, expanding the catchment area for neighborhood shopping districts—like Fourth Street.

In 1894, the city passed an ordinance to rename streets to fix inconsistencies and eliminate redundancies. New Orleans had two Fourth Streets at the time, the one in Carrollton and another in the Garden District, and it also happened to have two Oak Streets, one aligning with Fourth Street in Carrollton's adjacent subdivision of Greenville, and the other in the Sixth Ward.

The ordinance renamed the Sixth Ward street as Orchid, and extended Greenville's Oak Street to be the new name for its continuation into Carrollton, thus ending Carrollton's Fourth Street. Alas, the ordinance spelled that new name as "Oaks Street," and it's unclear if that plural form was an intentional differentiation or simply a typographical error. (It's worth noting that "Oak Street" and "Oaks Street" sound identical when spoken—try it). In any case, we've been calling it—and spelling it—Oak Street ever since, all 1.12 miles and eighteen blocks of it, from Broadway to the river.

Another ordinance in 1894 updated the city's confusing house-numbering system and replaced it with a decimal system, incremented by 100 by block. By late 1894, addresses on newly renamed Oak Street became the same as they are now, with its commercial section spanning from 8100 to 8800.

In 1900, a streetcar spur line opened on Oak Street, taking advantage of its width and direct connection to Southport in Jefferson Parish. Known as the Southport Shuttle, the loop ran on South Carrollton up Willow Street to Gen. Ogden Street to Leake Avenue, then down eight blocks of Oak, making the 8100 to 8800 blocks even more attractive to set up shop.

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Automobiles later shared the road with streetcars, and found enough space on Oak to park, further enhancing the retail appeal of this inter-parish connector. “All out of town traffic is rout[ed] through Oak street,” advocates pointed out in a 1921 letter to the *Times-Picayune*.

Centrally located, well-accessed, sufficiently wide yet intimate in scale, with an electrified streetcar linking to downtown and its very own shuttle service to the parish line, all within walking distance for local consumers: these were the geographical factors that made Oak Street into “Main Street.” And it all happened more or less spontaneously, without any premediated design or top-down planning.

By the 1920s, however, such free-market forces were becoming unwieldy, and often led to land-use conflicts. When the city got its first planning commission in 1923 and passed its first zoning ordinance in 1929, planners surveyed the cityscape and designated existing commercial areas like Oak to be officially zoned for commerce. The spontaneous rise of Oak Street’s shopping scene in the late 1800s thus gained new legal life in the 1900s as a zone officially designated for commerce. Yet Oak’s quieter blocks closer to the river remained less dense, more green, and more residential, something still evident today.

The year 1929 also saw the replacement of the Southport Shuttle with the city’s first “trackless trolley”—that is, a rubber-tire bus drawing electrical power from overhead wires. The old streetcar tracks were removed in 1948, the trackless trolley became a bus, and the line was eventually terminated.

Much would change later in the twentieth century. New highways would supersede Oak as an inter-parish connection; city residents moved out in droves to the suburbs and took their spending power with them; and Oak Street saw its share of divestment, though it was not as bad here as other old business districts.

What saved Oak Street was its historic urbanism, and the people who valued it, both on the business side and the customer side.

Those assets include its pleasant pedestrian-scale blocks, its historic structures, its centralized location among stable neighborhoods, its access to the same streetcar line that helped form Carrollton in the 1830s, and its interesting mix of commercial and residential land uses, allowing neighbors to be customers and shopkeepers to be neighbors.

What resulted was an Oak Street that is local yet worldly, intimate yet accessible, and urbane as well as quaint—a city shopping and dining district with the ambience of a small-town Main Street.

You’ll feel it at tomorrow’s Po-Boy Festival.



This article was drawn from research conducted by the author for the Oak Street Merchants, Residents and Property Owners Association. Richard Campanella, a geographer with the Tulane School of Architecture, is the author of “The West Bank of Greater New Orleans,” “Bienville’s Dilemma,” and other books. He may be reached at <http://richcampanella.com>, rcampane@tulane.edu, or @nolacampanella on Twitter.