

## A Matter of Time:

# Past as Prelude at the Foot of Elysian Fields

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A newcomer shown a map of downtown New Orleans might presume the foot of Elysian Fields Avenue to be bustling with action. This multi-artery crossroads, conveniently accessible to I-10, is within steps of Frenchmen Street and Crescent Park, and sits on high ground between the city's original neighborhood and first lower faubourg. Historical architecture abounds, and real estate values are high.

And yet much of lower Elysian Fields remains underutilized, even bleak.



*1922 aerial view showing intermodal and industrial nature of lower Elysian Fields, from Army Air Corps*

That may change soon. A hotel is reaching completion at 501 Elysian Fields; bike lanes and pedestrian crossings have been installed to calm traffic; and the Gov. Nicholls Street Wharf, now in city hands, is well-positioned for possible incorporation into Crescent Park.

Recently, the French Market Corporation, the city agency that oversees riverfront properties, announced it will solicit ideas of how to better utilize its two large surface parking lots fronting 400 and 500 Elysian Fields.

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The pending changes beg the question of why a place with so much potential has ended up so barren.

The answer is because the land uses that once prevailed here lost their geographical rationale. To understand why, we have to go back in time.

This spot began its transformation 300 years ago, as enslaved workers cleared vegetation for a fortification along the lower flank of New Orleans, today's French Quarter. The toil proceeded downriver, steadily turning forests into plantations.

By the 1740s, the first plantation below the fortification's esplanade (open firing line) came into the possession of Claude Joseph Villars Dubreuil, a shipbuilder and construction contractor who owned timberlands across the river. Needing lumber, Dubreuil noted the sharp river bend fronting his property would be ideal to tap for hydropower to saw logs felled from his west bank holdings and floated across the river.

Around 1750, he directed his enslaved workers to cut the levee, install a gate, dig a canal and erect a *moulin à planches* (sawmill) powered by outflow whenever the river was sufficiently high. The lumber stacked by Dubreuil's mill, plus bricks and other materials made nearby, imparted industrial and warehousing uses to this riverfront land which would continue for centuries.

Areas further inland, meanwhile, became increasingly valued for residential expansion, something readily understood by Bernard Marigny, whose family had acquired the Dubreuil plantation.

In 1805, Marigny hired engineer Nicolás de Finiels to design an urban plat for the land, which surveyor Barthélemy Lafon laid out in the landscape. Because the mill race, now known as the Marigny Canal, had already formed a straight line upon the land, Finiels repurposed its trajectory as the subdivision's grand boulevard. As for the other streets, he devised a clever array of irregular blocks to negotiate the curving natural levee between the city proper and what is now Bywater.

What resulted was today's Faubourg Marigny, specifically the "Marigny Triangle" and the "Marigny Rectangle," between which ran the old mill race and its capacious new avenue, which Finiels named *Champs Elisées*, or Elysian Fields.

The duo also eradicated the obsolete fortification, transformed its open firing line into today's Esplanade Avenue and conflated the new blocks with those emanating off Elysian Fields.

A decade later, the bastion by the river, Fort St. Charles, was razed, clearing the way for the foot of Elysian Fields to become the doglegged-shaped multi-artery junction it is today. With the public road running along the levee, maritime activity along the riverfront, Esplanade and Elysian Fields avenues both heading inland and light industry all around, this spot became a key arterial node in the lower-city economy.

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The avenue had yet another attribute. It so happened that, if extended northward, it traversed the shortest distance to Lake Pontchartrain, whose basin abounded in natural resources. In 1831, investors acquired the necessary right-of-way, shored up a trackbed through the swamps and built the Pontchartrain Railroad, the first to complete its charter west of the Appalachians.

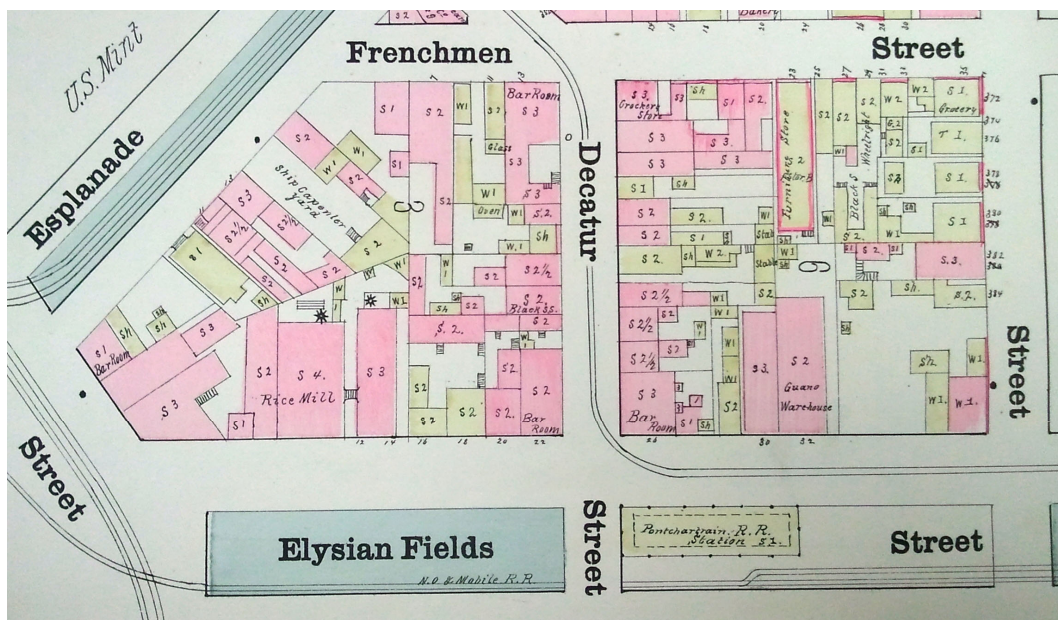
With a station on the neutral ground, the train made the foot of Elysian Fields into the region's first intermodal transportation hub. This being a freight as well as passenger line, it brought cargo as well as people to the area, and entrepreneurs responded accordingly, opening warehouses and workshops as well as hotels and saloons.

The foot of Elysian Fields Avenue became known as "Sanctity Row," known for rollicking venues such as The Lion's Den, Stadt Amsterdam, The Pontchartrain House and Tivoli Gardens.

The surrounding faubourg, meanwhile, was home to a predominantly French-speaking Creole population, along with many Irish, German and other immigrants. Most pertained to the working class, apropos of a riverfront neighborhood replete with dock jobs, light manufacturing, cotton presses and warehouses.

Maps from the late 1870s catalog the mixed land uses. Where the French Market Corporation parking lots now operate, there were the Perseverance Rice Mill, two barrooms, coal yards, and a depot for guano (bird excrement valued as fertilizer and explosives). Across the street were the Crescent City Icehouse, an undertaker, and the open-stall Port Market.

Maps from the 1880s and 1890s show woodworking shops, two blacksmiths, a paint shop, a cooper and barrel warehouse, a livery station and stores for hardware, furniture, and drugs. The Port Market by this time had been replaced by Morgan's Louisiana & Texas Railroad Platform, adding yet another element to the intermodal access.



1877 map of the two present-day FMC parking lots facing Elysian Fields from NOPL

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By the early 1900s, the foot of Elysian Fields became even more industrial. The enormous Columbia Brewing Company had opened at 518-536 Elysian Fields, complete with a boiler house, beer cellars, a smokestack and a four-story dome and cupola. The 400 block hosted the corrugated-iron, concrete-floored Elysian Fields Warehouse.

Across the street, at 410-431 Elysian Fields, was the coal-fired powerplant of the New Orleans Power & Light Company. It produced electricity for the streetcars housed in the car barn at 2300 Decatur, between a hosiery factory and another power plant.

Along the riverfront were freight trains, and down the neutral ground rolled the venerable Pontchartrain Railroad, pulled by a steam locomotive locals had affectionately nicknamed Smokey Mary.

The foot of Elysian Fields Avenue, in sum, was one gritty, churning wheelhouse of economic production.

Within a generation, it was all gone.

As oil-powered cargo ships replaced steam and sailing vessels on the river, port activity shifted downriver, to today's Bywater, which became the tropical fruit wharf. The freight trains followed, as did the dockworker jobs and warehousing opportunities.

By 1922, the Elysian Fields Warehouse had been demolished and later became an auto-wrecking yard. Today, it's the first of the two French Market Corporation parking lots.

Also in 1922, the New Orleans Public Service, Inc.—NOPSI, the predecessor of Entergy—took over the private streetcar lines, and in doing so, centralized power production and distribution. The powerplant on Elysian Fields became a substation, and while its hulking brick building still fronts the substation transformers, it no longer has any permanent on-site jobs.

In 1927, the Columbia Brewery closed, thanks largely to Prohibition, and later became the Southern Products Corporation boiler manufacturer. The complex was demolished in the early 1940s, leaving behind only a façade fragment at 2121 Chartres Street; the rest is now the second French Market Corporation parking lot.

Starting in 1929, NOPSI began replacing streetcars with “trackless trolleys”—that is, electrified buses—which in turn got replaced with modern gas-powered buses. That killed the old car barn, and further reduced activity on lower Elysian Fields.

Likewise, in 1932, after 101 years of service, Smokey Mary made its final run on the Pontchartrain Railroad. The passenger service had been in decline for years, rendered obsolete by automobiles, and the Louisville & Nashville Railroad Company kept it running only to retain its franchise on the freight tracks—which themselves were soon removed.

As for the Faubourg Marigny neighborhood, it too went into decline, losing population, property values, and even its historical name, until a revival began in the 1970s.

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Today, the foot of Elysian Fields is, at best, a place to pass through or to park and vacate. At worst, it is bleak, dirty and dicey.

Formally a lively junction of productive activity, the foot of Elysian Fields Avenue went dormant when it lost its geographical rationale. Like a sentence stripped of its verb, it went static, and like a noun without an adjective, it became colorless.

Reactivating the foot of Elysian Fields Avenue entails establishing new rationale and meaning—making it a destination for locals and visitors; mixing residential, commercial, and recreational land uses; and making it a junction for pedestrians, cyclists and motorists while still providing safe and convenient parking.

It might mean connecting the Riverfront and soon-to-reopen St. Claude streetcar lines, which would bring passenger rail service back to Elysian Fields.

It might even mean making the spot singular and iconic in the cityscape, as Smokey Mary and the *moulin à planches* once did.

The French Market Corporation plans to solicit proposals in early 2023.

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