

The Fourth Ward Fire of 1844

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The Good Friday Fire of 1788. The Great Fire of 1794. The Algiers Fire of 1895, and the 1919 burning of the Old French Opera House. The lethal blazes at the Rault Center in 1972, and the Up Stairs Lounge in 1973.

Certain traumatic blazes have become enshrined in our collective memory, in part for their magnitude of destruction or death, but also because, looking back, we found meaning in them.

The 1788 and 1895 fires, for example, speak to urban transformation; the 1794 and 1972 blazes invoke the notion of improved building codes; and the 1919 and 1973 fires inform on cultural change and social prejudices.

Perhaps it is a conceit of historiography—that is, how we remember our past—that incidents must tell a meaningful story for us to remember them. If they didn't change history, the logic goes, they tend to get dropped from the historiography.

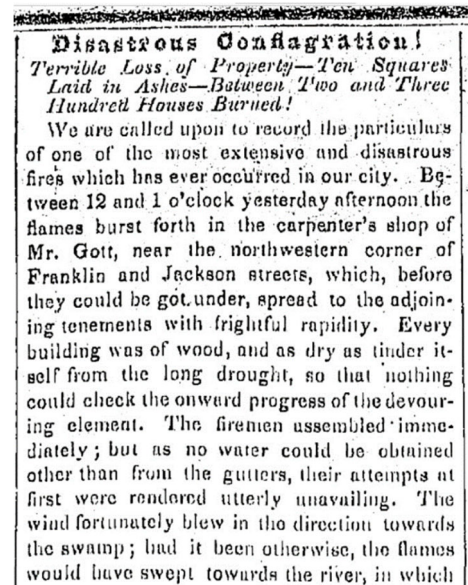
What this leaves out is the many traumas which simply cannot be shoehorned into a "teachable moment." If anything, they speak only to the sheer risk and uncertainty of everyday life—and that appears to be the main narrative of the frightful Fourth Ward fire of 1844.

Saturday, May 18, 1844, dawned hot and dry, as a hundred thousand New Orleanians went about their daily routine, in freedom and in bondage. A few thousand of them had settled in the newly developed blocks between Canal Street and Common Street, including today's Tulane Avenue, from Philippa (now Roosevelt Way) and Basin (now Elk Place) up to Claiborne Street (now South Claiborne Avenue).

Today this area is in the Third Ward of the Second Municipal District, located to the rear of the Central Business District, also described as the Medical District. But from 1836 to 1852, it was known as the Fourth Ward of the Second Municipality, in the rear of the Faubourg St. Mary, and, with two major hospitals and a medical college already in operation, it was already something of a medical district.

The two largest facilities in the Fourth Ward were Charity Hospital, fronting Common Street in its stretch now called Tulane Avenue, and just behind it, the New Orleans Gas Light and Banking Company plant, where coal was stockpiled, gasified and distributed citywide. Over on Canal Street, along the present-day 800 to 1400 blocks, were dozens of prosperous residential townhouses, and interspersed between Canal and Common were hundreds of working-class cottages, all wooden, with more going up every day.

One busy carpenter, F. D. Gott, worked with his hired hand at his woodshop on the corner of Franklin and Jackson, now South Saratoga and Cleveland Avenue. Taking a noontime break, the assistant lit a cigar with a *locofoco*—that is, a friction match, also known as a *lucifer*—and tossed it on the ground.

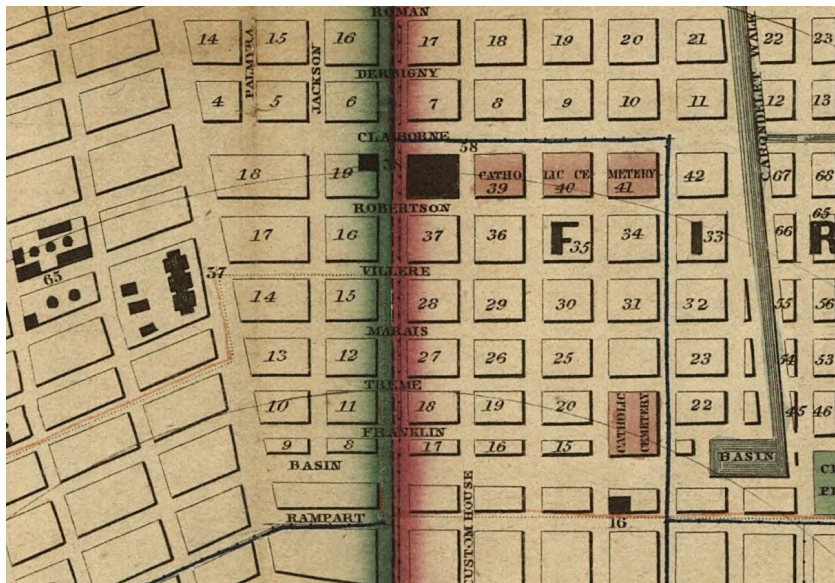


The ground was covered in saw dust. It combusted, and ignited nearby lumber. Flames soon enveloped Gott's workshop, then the Stringer family residence next door, and the next.

Winds spread the inferno straight up Jackson Street "with frightful rapidity," wrote a *Picayune* reporter the next day, "to the adjoining tenements, (all) as dry as tinder... from the long drought." *The Bee* described this part of the Fourth Ward as comprising "numbers of light frame dwellings, packed together and communicating by wooden fences"—all perfect kindling.

From the perspective of the broader population, it was fortunate that the winds were blowing lakeward, away from the dense urban core. But it spelled terrible news for this rear precinct and its "poor but industrious" denizens. They raced to remove "beds, bedding, furniture, groceries" from their "small but comfortable dwellings"—only to abandon everything as they fled for their lives.

The Fire Department arrived with horse-drawn steam pumps, but because these rear blocks had no hydrant system, the only water supply was the small tanks on the carriages. Firemen instead focused on evacuating patients in the hospitals. "It was a sorrowful sight," wrote the *Picayune*, "to see the numerous inmates peering from the windows (of Charity Hospital) at the... destruction raging before them."



Area burned appears at left center of this detail of the Norman Map of New Orleans from 1845

Staff soaked blankets and laid them out on the shingled roof to prevent sparks from igniting. Had the hospital caught fire, it might have detonated the adjacent gas plant. Luckily, the great width of present-day Tulane Avenue, plus the wind direction, kept the flames from making the jump.

The situation grew only more dire toward Canal Street, where the Maison de Santé, known as Dr. Stone's Infirmary, had to be hurriedly evacuated of those "laboring under sickness, (as) their eyes rolled wildly...amid the fierce crackling of the flames (and) loud screams."

The blaze spared the Maison de Santé, but not so its affluent neighbors. "Along Canal Street, between Trémé and Robertson streets, stood a number of large, elegant, and costly brick residents, all of which are destroyed."

By 4:00 p.m., the conflagration wound down, in part because firemen found water in Claiborne's gutters, but mostly because there was no city left to burn. By sunset, ten blocks had been reduced to fine ash, leaving behind what the *Picayune* described as a "forest of chimneys"—the exact same phrase used by another reporter a half-century later, when ten blocks of Algiers burned in 1895. The destruction spanned over twenty acres, from present-day South Saratoga to South Claiborne and from Canal to Tulane Avenue—all from a single *locofoco*.

Nearly 300 houses were lost, leaving over 2000 people homeless, “a greater portion of whom are of the poorer class of society,” wrote the *Bee*. (The Great Fire of 1794, by comparison, destroyed 222 houses, and the 1895 Algiers blaze destroyed 193 houses and left 1200 homeless.) One six-year-old girl perished.

The disaster made national news. The *Alexandria Gazette* quoted a local source saying the fire “was, we believe, one of the largest, if not the very largest which has ever spread ruin and desolation in our midst.” *The Bee* called it “the most distressing and destructive conflagration we have ever been called upon to record.”

Victims, half of whom had no insurance, camped out in the neutral ground of Canal Street by the Maison de Santé, one of the few surviving landmarks of their lost neighborhood. Another, the Fourth Ward Public School at what is now 1341 Tulane Avenue, became a recovery headquarters, where volunteers distributed cash stipends and emergency provisions. Aid came not from government but from charitable organizations, religious institutions, and private parties.

Who to blame? Some rebuked the Commercial Water-Work Company for not extending hydrants into the rear of the Fourth Ward, or for not maintaining “a constant flow of water beneath the streets of the Second Municipality.” Others defended the company, pointing out that a half-million gallons of water had flowed from riverfront reservoirs, and that, as a private firm, it should not be censured for not yet serving a new neighborhood.

As for the victims, they were on their own, especially the uninsured. The only action taken by the Council of the Second Municipality was to appoint a “Collecting Committee” and a “Distributing Committee,” each of citizen volunteers, “to call upon and receive the contributions of the benevolent...for the relief of the sufferers by the fire of the 18th.” The only action by the State Legislature was its passage, later that summer, of a law requiring city authorities to ascertain the cause of a fire immediately, for the proper filing of an insurance claim.

After the ashes were cleared, new construction commenced in the Fourth Ward, but it did so as if the disaster had taught no lessons. There were no new building codes, no fire-prevention regulations, nor extended water service or new fire houses.

If anything, the dreadful blazes continued. When French geographer Élisée Reclus visited New Orleans in 1853, he wrote that “the principal agent of change in the city is...fire.” The month of May, he noted, was particularly dangerous—“not one night passes in which the alarm does not call, [and] the purple reflections of four or five fires color the sky.... [In] New York alone, flames annually destroy as many buildings as in all of France. In New Orleans, a city five to six times less populated than New York, the amount of fires is relatively greater still.”

As bad as it was, the Fourth Ward fire of May 1844 went forgotten, barely earning a mention in later city histories. Even Thomas O’Connor’s thorough *History of the Fire Department of New Orleans* (1895) relegates it to a single sentence, stating that “a vast area was burned over, involving many hundred wooden buildings, and consuming property valued at \$600,000.”

O’Connor devoted six times more coverage to a much smaller 1850 fire “in the business centre” involving “most valuable buildings,” and even more wordage to the Fire Department’s participation in the 1845 funeral parade for Andrew Jackson. Lacking a pat narrative, the Fourth Ward fire of 1844 fell out of our collective memory.

No trace of the old neighborhood remains; most street names have been since been changed, as has the ward number. The oldest surviving historical structure in the fire footprint is the handsome circa-1860 brick townhouse where once lived famed writer Lafacadio Hearn. It is located at 1565 Cleveland Avenue, formerly Jackson Street, the main pathway for that wind-swept incendiary of two centuries ago.

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 “Draining New Orleans,” to be released by LSU Press this spring. He may be reached at <http://richcampanella.com>, rcampane@tulane.edu, or @nolacampanella on Twitter.