

# Policy Shift

## ***Proposed Move of NOPD Headquarters Marks Reversal of Century-Long Trend***

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City officials have recently proposed relocating the New Orleans Police Department from its longtime headquarters at 715 South Broad to the DXC Technology Building at 1615 Poydras Street. The proposed move from Mid-City to the Central Business District involves only administrative offices, not interrogation or lineup spaces, and awaits approval by the City Council.

Motivations for the mile-and-a-half relocation include both “push” and “pull” factors. Costly repairs, decrepit conditions and obsolete facilities have been cited as reasons to leave the South Broad building, and a desire to boost morale, save money, and invigorate the Poydras Street corridor have made the downtown location attractive.

If the proposal wins approval, it would mark the latest chapter in the city’s historical geography of policing—a story in which centralization, consolidation, and architectural modernization have been recurring themes.

During New Orleans’ French era, the constabulary comprised soldiers whose charge largely consisted of patrolling the enslaved population. Colonial officials positioned the city’s first jail directly on the *Place d’Armes*, where in 1732 architects Pierre Baron and Alexandre de Batz designed a Tuscan-style *bariment des prisons* (prison barracks).

Not until the late Spanish colonial period did the city establish something resembling a civilian police force. In 1792, Gov. Hector de Carondelet called for night patrolmen and better nighttime illumination, and in 1796, he proposed funding both efforts through land sales and a tax on chimneys.

Three years later, when the present-day Cabildo was completed, it included rear dependencies where a series of *calabooses* would operate. Their entrance onto St. Peter Street (now the Arsenal) served as the headquarters of patrolmen and night guardsmen. Anyone who ran afoul of the regime, from petty criminals to murders, from runaway slaves to political opponents, would be locked up within steps of the constabulary and the judiciary; policing in this era was both centralized and consolidated.

After American officials took control of Louisiana in 1803, new laws were established for the territory and the city proper, and a Commissioner General of Police was appointed to oversee a force of 25 patrolmen. When New Orleans gained its city charter in 1805, a Sub-Inspector of Police

oversaw a Militia Guard and a City Patrol based out of an office in the Cabildo, which became City Hall. A subsequent ordinance stipulated “the jailer shall have his private apartment in the building of the prison...opening on St. Peter street,” suggestive of the need to co-locate law enforcement. As before, much of policing in this era entailed enforcing slave codes, and emphasized patrolling and illuminating the city at night, using oil lamps, and later gas lights.

Subsequent years brought several attempts at professionalizing the police force, which was known variously as the *Gendarmerie*, *Garde de Ville*, City Guard, or City Watch, by adopting uniforms and badges and setting salaries and policies. An 1817 ordinance expanded the force to 46 men and, according to an NOPD historical overview, “divided the city for the first time into police districts,” with “a guard house...in each district.”

By the 1820s, the city’s population had tripled since the Louisiana Purchase, and the urban footprint extended from today’s Lower Garden District to Bywater and back to Tremé and Bayou St. John. The police force now comprised 50 bilingual men bearing arms who patrolled in small squads. With their headquarters and main prison still in the Cabildo complex, most policemen now operated out of district stations, each supervised by a commissary and with their own jails.

By the late 1830s, those convicted of crimes were sent to a much larger prison sited further back from the urban core, on Orleans Street in the Faubourg Tremé. Designed by architects Joseph Pilié and A. Voilquin and completed in 1836, the Orleans Parish Prison had an ominous look, with thick stucco-covered walls, separate cell blocks depending on offences, and interior courtyards used for executions. Compared to the calaboses of colonial times, the big new Tremé prison signaled an era when jailing became incarceration, and when punishment became institutionalized.

It also meant the constabulary, judiciary and penitentiary were all in different locations. Policemen were stationed in various districts (later precincts), and the outlying communities of Lafayette, Jefferson and Carrollton each had their own forces and courts. Adding to the confusion was New Orleans’ internal division in 1836, when three semi-autonomous municipalities each developed their own law-enforcement apparatus. People arrested for the same offence anywhere between today’s Ninth Ward and Carrollton could be subjected to six different police proceedings, depending where the offence occurred.

After the city reconsolidated and annexed Lafayette in 1852, City Hall moved from the Cabildo on Jackson Square to present-day Gallier Hall on Lafayette Square, and the three municipality forces reunited under the command of a Chief of Police. According to Henry C. Castellanos, who recalled the 1850s in a book published in 1895, the new City Hall’s “lower floor was occupied by the Department of Police, the captain’s office directly fronting St. Charles street, while the rear was used as a station or temporary prison.” The uptown shift in the police headquarters represented a recentralization amid the growing city’s new population distribution, even as the courts and parish prison remained in the lower part of the city.

During Reconstruction, the biracial Metropolitan Police has its Central Department on the corner of Carondelet and Girod, a block behind City Hall, while eight police precincts covered neighborhoods on both banks, and penal “workhouses” were built in the rear of town.

Having annexed Algiers and Jefferson in 1870 and Carrollton in 1874, New Orleans increasingly realized its dispersed facilities made law enforcement more difficult.

Thus arose a call for consolidation.

In 1892, the city invited architects to design an integrated criminal-justice complex on the block bounded by Gravier Street, Common (now Tulane Avenue), Basin (later South Saratoga, now Loyola Avenue) and Franklin (now gone). This spot roughly marked the center of the expanding metropolis, where the wealthier front of town gave way to the beleaguered back of town.

With a budget of \$350,000, city leaders wanted a new Police Department headquarters; a local precinct station; an enlarged parish prison capable of incarcerating 300 men and 50 women (plus cells for the “condemned”); a criminal courthouse with courtrooms and chambers for judges, juries, attorneys and clerks; a Recorder’s Office to handle all the paperwork; and finally a chapel and mortuary.

The winning proposal came from Dallas architect Max A. Orlopp Jr., who specialized in Southern courthouses. Orlopp’s imposing design, which featured a soaring clock tower, struck a *Daily Picayune* reporter as “a mixing of the Romanesque (and) Gothic,” with “circular towers rising in the center,” each “castellated, with turrets, battlements and slits for the archers.” The adjacent parish prison had a similar look, and when the new complex was completed in 1893, it seemed to solve the dual problem of centralization and consolidation—and with striking architecture to match.

In fact, problems beset the whole project. City council members had been indicted for bribery and graft in the contracting process, while a change of mayoral administrations led to miscommunications and confusion. The courthouse itself began to crack and settle, so much so that the tower eventually had to be removed.



Consolidated courthouse, police headquarters, and parish prison in 1922, at what is now Loyola at Tulane Avenue. *Author collection.*

Larger problems loomed. In the early 1900s, swamps were drained and urbanization expanded toward the lake, making the new complex less centralized. Electrification, telephony, and modern water and sewerage required the buildings to be retrofit, and when officers began patrolling in cars in the 1920s, there was no place to park. Folks began to call the edifice the “Old” Criminal Courthouse, and together with the ominous prison, the medieval-looking complex stigmatized this part of the central business district.

Hoping to enhance downtown by recentralizing criminal justice, the City Planning Commission recommended building new consolidated facilities in the middle of the lakeward-leaning population distribution—in what we now call Mid-City, specifically to the site of an old House of Detention on Tulane Avenue at South Broad.

In 1931, a monumental new Criminal Courts Building, designed by architect Allison Owen in an Art Deco style, opened on Tulane and Broad. Inside were courtrooms and chambers as well as the new police headquarters, and a new prison was built adjacently.

As for the circa-1890s complex, it became the butt of jokes in 1948 when officials discovered that “hoboes” had been living amongst “the ancient catacombs under the old criminal courts building at Tulane and S. Saratoga,” which a *Times-Picayune* journalist dubbed “Hotel de Bastille.” Within a year, the Romanesque landmark had been cleared away for the widening of Loyola Avenue and new Civic Center; its former footprint now underlies the Main Branch of the New Orleans Public Library.

By the 1960s, NOPD had outgrown its section within the 1931 courthouse, and construction began on a new Police Administration Building for a city of over 600,000 people. Opened in 1968, the new Modernist-style headquarters on 715 South Broad represented the city’s first purpose-built structure entirely dedicated to housing the police headquarters, all previous ones having been repurposed and/or shared spaces. “The new Administration Building,” stated a department history, “was modern and employed at that time the necessary space and equipment to operate a large metropolitan force.”

But the new headquarters began service just as the city’s population began to decline, and its crime rates rose. With a diminishing tax base and growing demands on the criminal-justice system, maintenance got deferred and facilities fell into disrepair. The 1930s prison had to be replaced in the late 1970s, and again in the 2010s. Similarly, the 1968 Police Administration Building grew shabby, to the point of needing millions of dollars to repair elevators and air-conditioning—and once again becoming the butt of jokes for a rat infestation in the evidence room.

Out of this came the recent proposal to move the NOPD’s administrative offices to Poydras Street.

If the City Council approves the relocation, it would represent a reversal of the centralization and consolidation efforts of the past century—and a continuation of the tendency to vacate buildings that had been left to deteriorate.

More moves might be forthcoming. In a recent interview, the city’s chief administrative officer, Gilbert Montaña, described discussions “reevaluating the location of the entire criminal justice system. Right now, it’s pieced out in decaying and dying buildings.”

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