



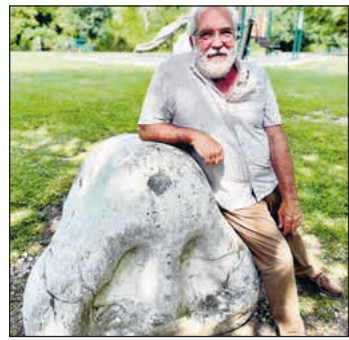
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# IT TRACKS

HOW **THE EARHART EXPRESSWAY** GOT ITS NAME — AND ITS CURVING ROUTE THROUGH METRO NEW ORLEANS



STAFF PHOTO BY BOB WARREN

Former Covington Mayor Keith Villere poses with the large nose sculpture at a park in Covington. The park is known to some as 'Nose Park.' Villere was mayor when the sculpture was commissioned.

## Sniffing out the story behind a big nose sculpture

BY BOB WARREN  
Staff writer

In the world of noses, there are some that are truly stand out.

Cyrano de Bergerac. Du-rante. Streisand. Nixon. Ormsby.

Ormsby? Yep, Al



Ormsby. The guy whose nose is memorialized in rebar and concrete at a park tucked into a leafy Covington neighborhood.

Ormsby, 88, still gets a kick out of it.

"Myself!" he responded with a laugh when asked who was the model for the schnoz.

Covington resident Elizabeth Moore recently asked about the "Nose Park" at East First Street and Jahncke Avenue. "Who did it, and why?" she wanted to know.

It goes back to the early 1990s. Keith Villere, who had become Covington's mayor, wanted a way to make the park, which is at the site of the old sewage treatment plant, look nicer.



Ormsby

Art, he thought.

"Al and I talked about First Avenue Park," Villere said.

"Why not make it into a sculpture playground?"

The honker was first on the list and Ormsby, an artist and sculptor, got to work forming it with lightweight concrete and rebar and then coating it with concrete.

This was around 1996 or 1997, Villere said.

The nose is actually just a small part of the playground, which also features swing sets and a wooden walkway overlooking the Tchefuncte River.

But, noses being noses, it tends to get the attention.

Through the years, Villere said, theories have sometimes emerged as to who was really the model for the snout.

But for as much as some have tried to sniff out a conspiracy, there is none, Villere maintains.

"It's Al's nose," Villere said. "Kind of ironic. The old sewer plant stunk."

Villere, who served three terms as mayor, said the nose was supposed to be just the start.

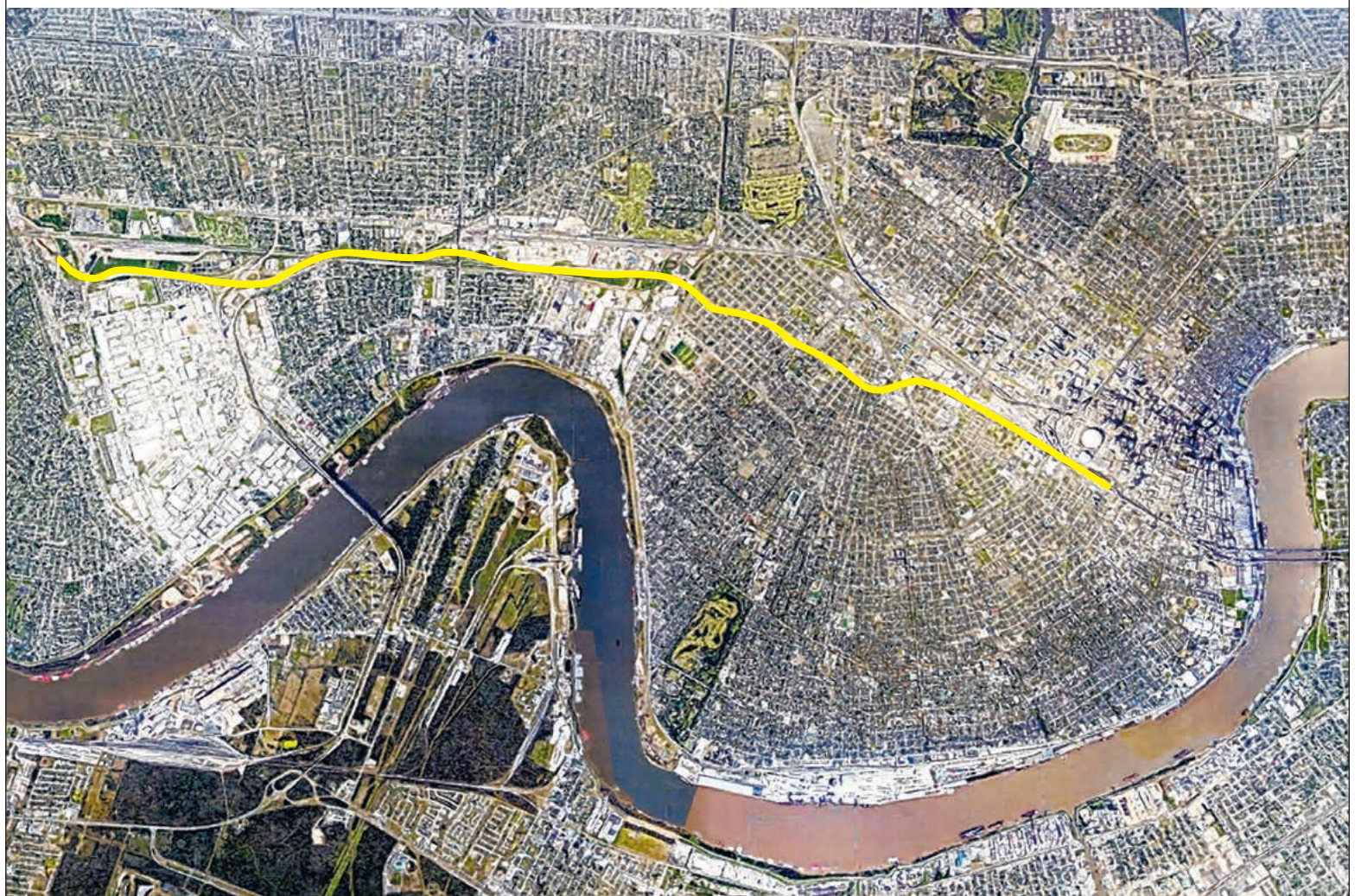
"We had intentions of a lot more," he said.

But money was tight and "the council wasn't real wild about it," Villere said. "So it never really took off."

Villere doesn't recall what the beak cost.

"I don't even know if we ever paid him," the former mayor

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GOOGLE EARTH IMAGE

The Earhart Expressway as it runs through Jefferson Parish and New Orleans today.

BY RICHARD CAMPANELLA  
Contributing writer

**I**n the urban geography of greater New Orleans, the Earhart Expressway is something of an anomaly, wending and bending through otherwise rectilinear street systems.

The 8-mile-long artery starts inauspiciously enough, extending from Calliope Street on the margins of downtown New Orleans. Emerging from the shadows of the Pontchartrain Expressway, it flanks scrappy spaces and gritty interstices, struggling to fulfill its tony designation as a "Boulevard."

In Gerttown, Earhart feels a bit like Airline. In Hollygrove, it feels more like an avenue. Then, crossing into suburbia, Earhart upgrades into an "Expressway," its lanes banking and traffic accelerating like a federal interstate, despite being a state highway, La. 3139.

Motorists here catch glimpses of things not designed to be seen, like light industry and wholesale



STAFF FILE PHOTO BY TED JACKSON

Looking west, traffic flows on Earhart Expressway as vehicles cross over the expressway on Causeway Boulevard, bottom, in 2006.

distributors, as well as things deserving more time to see, like that Public Belt Railroad facility appearing like a train station, and

the true beginning of the Huey P. Long Bridge, where its railroad tracks first rise off the ground.

Around the can of worms that is the Clearview intersection, there's some unexpected landscaping — lagoons, even fountains — followed by fragments of roadside forests, giving a fleeting sense you've reached the countryside.

Then, just as suddenly, Earhart Expressway seems to lose interest in itself, turning in entirely different directions, slowing in speed, melding into a Dickory here and a Hickory there, and ending who-knows-where.

But more often than not, Earhart got you there faster than any other option.

### Origins of a roadway

What explains capricious, efficacious Earhart? In a word, railroads.

Most of greater New Orleans' street network, in terms of its morphology, is traceable to piecemeal faubourgs surveyed in the 1800s

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## 'EXCELLENCE ISN'T FOR EVERYBODY'

# Kim Mulkey's children reflect and defend

Kim Mulkey, right, celebrates a Big 12 Championship win with her daughter Makenzie Fuller (then-Robertson).

PHOTO PROVIDED FROM THE MULKEY FAMILY



BY JAN RISHER  
Staff writer

Kramer Robertson believes his mother is misunderstood by most people.

His mother is Kim Mulkey, the Louisiana native and legendary basketball coach who won the national championship her second year at LSU. With four national championships as head coach, she

is the only person to have won an NCAA national championship as a player, an assistant coach and a head coach. Then throw in the gold medal she won at the Olympics and her induction to the Naismith Basketball Hall of Fame.

But for Robertson and Makenzie Fuller, she's just their mother. This basketball life is all they've ever

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into an array of plantations from the 1700s, else to auto-friendly subdivisions laid out in swamplands drained in the early 1900s.

Larger arteries were usually configured within and among these designed spaces, or were superimposed over them.

Earhart, on the other hand, followed the smooth, expedient contours of railroad track beds, paying no heed to 18th-century plantations, 19th-century faubourgs, or 20th-century subdivisions.

Its shape came upon the landscape in two stages.

The first began in 1851, when investors formed the New Orleans, Jackson, & Great Northern (NOJ&GN) Railroad Company, aiming to link the South's largest city with Mississippi and Tennessee. The next year, company officials secured a right-of-way tracing back from Calliope Street and proceeding along the rear of riverfronting plantations in the vicinity of today's Ochsner Hospital.

Most of that corridor ran through backswamp, unimpeded by urbanism, which freed the engineers to design a smooth arc for the track bed, ideal for trains on the move. The alignment would later curve westward through Kenner and northward across the Manchac land bridge.

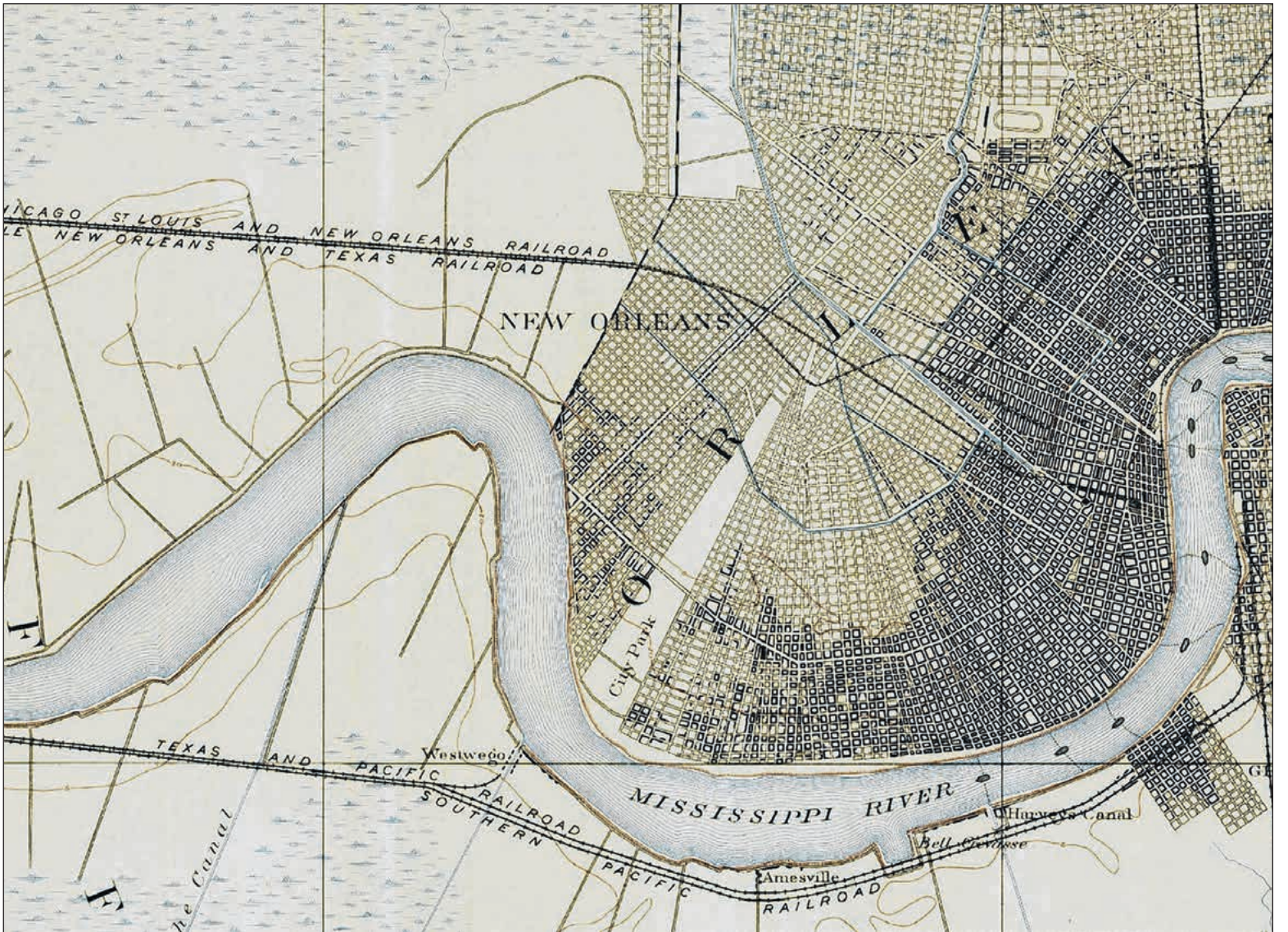
Workers built a depot at Calliope Street and, in 1853, began shoring up the raised track bed and laying rails. By 1854, trains were taking passengers and cargo northward, and bringing cotton down from Mississippi, making the NOJ&GN the first interstate railroad line serving New Orleans proper.

### The South struggles to catch up

After the Civil War, as the South struggled to catch up in railroad construction, investors in New Orleans planned to extend current lines and build new ones to connect with regional and national markets.

In 1874, the NOJ&GN was renamed the New Orleans, St. Louis, & Chicago Railroad, linking, according to a newspaper announcement, "the three great cities of the West and Southwest in a glorious trinity of combined and harmonious intercourse" (sic). In 1878, Illinois Central took over the line and rebuilt the tracks to the latest standards.

Over the next few years, investors built five additional lines connecting New Orleans to points in every direction. Among them was the Louisville, New Orleans &



PROVIDED IMAGE FROM USGS

Note the railroads at left in this map of New Orleans in 1891.

Texas (LNO&T) Railway in 1884.

Because the LNO&T had a freight yard on Poydras Street, and because recent urban expansion made right-of-way acquisitions more costly, its engineers had to lay out a curvaceous track bed, wending and bending to connect the depot with available properties. If you've ever driven Earhart, you know those curves and bends.

In 1892, the LNO&T line became the Yazoo & Mississippi Valley (Y&MV) Railroad. For the next half-century, steam locomotives pulled freight and passenger cars on these and competing tracks across a basin that would be fully drained by the 1910s, and fully developed by the 1920s.

### Dangerous crossings?

During this same era, automobiles were on the rise, and motorists came to view railroad crossings as dangerous impediments.

Passenger train ridership declined steadily after World War II, as highways expanded into

suburbia and more Americans took to their cars. Planners increasingly viewed old railroad corridors as pathways for modern highways to connect cities with growing suburbs.

New Orleans Mayor deLesseps "Chep" Morrison, elected in 1946, prioritized for modernizing the city's transportation system, particularly for vehicular traffic.

Grade crossings were to be separated into over- and underpasses; redundant passenger lines were to be unified; old train stations were slated for demolition; and freight lines were to be consolidated.

Morrison's man for executing this complex undertaking was Public Utilities Commissioner Frederick Adam Earhart. A pharmacist by profession and Navy veteran of the Spanish-American War, Earhart had advocated for these changes as early as 1930.

But they got sidelined by years of political infighting, followed by World War II. Now, with Morrison in City Hall, "the Earhart Plan"

finally gained speed.

### The Earhart Plan

The Earhart Plan had many projects. One was the removal of tracks from part of that curvaceous 1884 right-of-way that became the Y&MV line. Another was to relinquish parts of the right-of-way created in 1853 for the NJ&GN, later the Illinois Central.

The centerpiece of the Earhart Plan was the rerouting and unification of all passenger lines into the new Union Passenger Terminal, on today's Loyola Avenue.

How to get people to the new station from points west? That question had been contemplated by a 1945 report released by Earhart and the Railroad Terminal Board.

Wrote consultants Godat and Heft, "It is proposed to develop a boulevard on the Yazoo and Mississippi Valley right-of-way from Jefferson Parish to ... join the present-day Calliope street right-of-way." This was the kingpin of the Earhart Plan, to use the old railroad corridor for a modern

boulevard that would relieve congestion on Airline and Jefferson highways.

Fred Earhart died at age 73 in 1948, just before his plan started to go into action. In 1952, the commission agreed to name the boulevard in his honor, and in 1953, Calliope Street was officially renamed Earhart Boulevard, starting at the nearly completed Union Passenger Terminal.

Construction by 1957 extended along a widened path to the Jefferson Parish line. All the while, thousands of families were moving to Metairie suburbs, and planners pushed for better arterial access across parish lines. All eyes went to Earhart Boulevard, the clear and obvious contender for extension.

### Extension proposed

Various proposals were floated. A 1958 prospectus called for a six-lane highway to continue Earhart to Haring Road, and for four

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lanes out to continue to David Drive. A 1963 state report called for an extension all the way to Jefferson Highway.

In 1964, the Regional Planning Commission plus a number of Jefferson Parish organizations secured funds to extend Earhart Boulevard along that circa-1853 railroad right-of-way. Traffic here could accelerate unimpeded as a "high-speed through-artery," thus its name, "Earhart Expressway."

According to a November 1964 article in The Times-Picayune, the expressway would run "parallel to the Illinois Central Railroad tracks for about 7.2 miles, [with] interchanges built at Causeway Blvd., Central ave., Transconti-

mental dr., Hickory ave.," and as far west as Williams Boulevard in Kenner.

In 1966, authorities decided that Earhart Expressway would link not with Jefferson Highway nor with Williams Boulevard, due to resident resistance, but with Airline Highway at Hickory, via an exit that would get the whimsical name Dickory.

After years of delay over funding, Jefferson Parish ended up paying \$25 million for two-thirds of the right-of-way acquisition costs, and the state paid the rest.

Construction on Earhart Expressway proceeded in five stages. First came Clearview to Hickory, completed in 1977; then from the parish line to Monroe Street in New Orleans in 1981; Deckbar Avenue to the parish line in 1983; Deckbar to Cleary in 1984; and finally Cleary to Clear-

view in 1986.

### A quirky, yet pleasant drive

Earhart certainly had its quirks, but daily commuters found it to be a swift and pleasant driving experience, with fewer intersections and traffic lights, less truck-heavy through traffic, and little of the high-velocity stress of interstates.

The reason may be traced back to its historical geography. Earhart utilized a trajectory originally traced across what was practically a blank slate at the time — undrained backswamp, too wet for either plantation agriculture or urban development.

The railroads got there first, and when their time had passed, their corridors had just the right arc and orientation to make for an ideal modern motorway.

Unlike other new arteries,

Earhart was not shoehorned into preexisting neighborhoods, nor was it superimposed over neighborhoods. It did not displace people, ruin public spaces, nor necessitate massive expropriations and demolitions.

Earhart is expedient, at times gritty and at other times almost scenic. It is oddly underutilized and rather idiosyncratic, with no exit onto the Causeway and no clear terminus.

Wrote a Times-Picayune journalist in 1995, "The Earhart Expressway meanders west toward Harahan through loopy overpasses and unlit curves. At the streets called Hickory, Dickory and Dock, it fizzles out like an unfinished rhyme — a planner's dream turned road to nowhere."

In fact, Earhart's original shapers were railroad engineers working as far back as the 1850s,

and the tracks they laid were destined for places as far away as Jackson, Louisville and Chicago. Their project ended up affecting the modern metropolis in ways they would never have imagined, and it all began at that NOJ&GN Depot on Calliope Street.

Long since demolished, the space of the old depot is now home to another type of depot — Home Depot, on Earhart Boulevard off South Claiborne Avenue.

*Richard Campanella, a geographer with the Tulane School of Architecture, is the author of "Draining New Orleans," "The West Bank of Greater New Orleans," "Bienville's Dilemma," and other books. He may be reached at <http://richcampanella.com>, [rcampane@tulane.edu](mailto:rcampane@tulane.edu), or [@nolacampanella](https://twitter.com/nolacampanella) on X.*