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Higher education reporter Ashley White and her mom Melinda spent Ashley's 31st birthday in June 2024 exploring Joshua Tree National Park in California. | **Ashley White, higher education reporter**



This is me and my wife, Vicki, at Segoe Canyon in Utah near the Colorado border last October. The canyon features ancient rock art that's thousands of years old and remarkably well-preserved. | **Bob Warren, St. Tammany bureau chief**



Mary Theresa and Eddie DiColo, from New Orleans, stopped in Times Square on their way to Yankee Stadium during a vacation last summer. | **Jerry DiColo, metro editor, New Orleans**



Reporter Lara Nicholson scuba dives in the coral reefs off Hawaii's coast in Hilo, where she spotted a moray eel and swam alongside a sea turtle. | **Lara Nicholson, staff writer, Baton Rouge**

DESTINATION VACATION

Share summer travel photos from Louisiana and beyond

BY JAN RISHER | Staff writer



► View more photos inside, PAGE XD.

To announce an opportunity for readers to share summer travel photos, we've asked our newsroom staff to share some of their travel photographs from the last year.

Now, it's your turn.

Whether you are exploring a new destination or a place you have loved for years — or indulging in a staycation or a Louisiana State Park, send us your best summer travel photos. We will look forward to receiving them and pick a variety of them to share later this year.

We welcome amateur and professional photographers to submit photographs and will choose from both categories.

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Richard Campanella's GEOGRAPHIES OF NEW ORLEANS

Venture fourth

Fourth Street sheds light on West Bank's history, geography — and trains

BY RICHARD CAMPANELLA
Contributing writer

Certain arteries are key to understanding the various subregions of our metropolis — where they developed, how they took shape, and what made them into the communities we know today.

Uptown, it's St. Charles Avenue. In Gentilly, it's Elysian Fields Avenue. In the 9th Ward, it's St. Claude Avenue.

It's Williams Boulevard in Kenner, and Veterans in Metairie. In eastern New Orleans, the key artery has shifted in the past century from Old Gentilly Road to Chef Menteur Highway to Interstate 10.

If you want to understand the historical development of the West Bank, I would argue, it's positively Fourth Street.

Fourth Street may seem like an odd choice. The street does not traverse Algiers or any part of Orleans Parish and gets off to a rather inauspicious start in the McDonoghville neighborhood of Jefferson Parish, where it feels a bit like a service road.

But things start to change in Old Gretna. Between Fried and Amelia streets, Fourth actually merges with itself — two separate roads, one paralleling railroad tracks, both with the same name — after which the unified street proceeds westward, with active railroad tracks running smack down the middle of its narrow two-way auto lanes.

Sharing the road

The shared right of way is a source of frustration to residents, who, several times a day, have to make way for lumbering freight trains heading to and from the Gouldsboro Yards.

"Occasionally a conductor rushes to nearby businesses to try to find the owner of a car

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PROVIDED PHOTO

Fourth Street runs through Westwego and ends in the Salaville district.

Was La. home to a religious German community famed for silk?

The Germantown Colony Museum stands on the spot where the colony once thrived outside of Minden and includes original cabins.



PROVIDED PHOTO BY LOUISIANA SECRETARY OF STATE

BY ROBIN MILLER
Staff writer



They came to Louisiana to build a community where they could freely worship God in their own way. They also were carrying a bundle of silkworms.

This is the simple answer to Dale Jarreau's Curious Louisiana question about a com-

munal colony in Minden.

"I read about the New Llano utopian community in Curious Louisiana, and I remembered reading about a similar colony near Minden," the Watson resident said. "I also heard that this colony spun its own silk. Is this true?"

Not only is it true, but proof

of the silk produced in the Germantown Colony still exists. A wedding dress of homespun silk is still proudly displayed in the Germantown Colony Museum, located about seven miles outside of Minden at 200 Museum Road.

The museum's name also reflects the colony's name,

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FOURTH

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blocking the track,” wrote Times-Picayune journalist Marie Fazio in April of the conflicting conveyances. “Rarely, cars have been hit and residents trapped in their homes. Once, a house burned down when a fire truck was stuck by a slow-moving train.”

That road/rail convergence speaks to the origins of Fourth Street, for it was those tracks that had initially streamlined transportation across the West Bank, made it a jumping-off point to western destinations, and catalyzed industrial development along the paralleling street to which it gave shape.

Historically, the West Bank was an agrarian landscape dominated by plantations where enslaved workers labored. Industry grew up along the riverfront (dry docks, ship-building, foundries, sawmills, brickyards) and extractive activities emanating from the Barataria Basin to the south (timber, shells, Spanish moss, fisheries, game).

Settlement on the antebellum West Bank had no urban nucleus, unlike the French Quarter on the East Bank, but rather took the form of a linear sequence of river-fronting bourgades, or villages, each one activated by a ferry landing connecting it with the city across the Mississippi.

Right bank, left bank

And that’s how most New Orleanians thought of today’s West Bank — as the rural countryside “across the river,” or “opposite the city.” Formally it was known as the “right bank,” as per the perspective of river traffic heading downriver, while the East Bank was called the “left bank.”

While Algiers Point saw colonial development as early as 1719, as the Company Plantation, the process of subdivision — that is, the surveying of streets with blocks and lots — did not begin on the West Bank until nearly a century later.

McDonoghville was the first area to be subdivided, in 1814, followed by Duverjéville in 1821 and Freetown later in the 1820s; Mossyville in 1833; Oliverville, Gosselinville, and Tunisburg in 1834; and Mechanickham/Gretna in 1836.

The fact that most of these names are now extinct testifies to just how bucolic the West Bank was 200 years ago, each bourgade being little more than a cluster of cottages set among plantations



PROVIDED IMAGE FROM THE USGS

1891 map of the railroad corridor that created Fourth Street

and pastures and linked by a muddy public road along the levee.

Enter the railroad

This began to change in the 1850s. The agent was the railroad, and its vector would become Fourth Street.

Seeking to tap into timber, cotton, and cattle regions, investors in 1851 launched the New Orleans, Opelousas & Great Western Railroad Company — and when they named it “Great Western,” they meant it.

According to an early company report, their ultimate destination was “a point on the Sabine River ... through the State of Texas to El Paso, (and) thence to the Pacific Ocean.”

Great Western trains would originate from a station near today’s Atlantic Avenue in Algiers, on tracks that would skirt the rear of Duverjéville and Mossyville (today’s Algiers) and McDonoghville.

In their acquisition of rights of way, engineers left plenty of riverfront space so as to avoid costly expropriations, yet still roughly paralleled the river, since that’s where all the economic action would be.

That trajectory steered the track bed through the lightly developed rear of Gretna — four blocks to the rear of its busy riverfront, to be exact. And that’s what put the tracks on Fourth Street, precisely where they remain today.

The tracks would then cross a drawbridge on the Destrehan (now Harvey) Canal, run through the vast Millaudon and Zeringue plantations of present-day Marrero and Westwego, and cut across the Nine Mile Point promontory toward Thibodaux, a segment that required wooden trestles to be

built over swampy soils.

Cost soar, an epidemic kills

Construction began in late 1852, after which costs soared amid arduous conditions made all the worse by a terrible yellow fever epidemic, which killed 300 of the 350 railroad workers. Yet enough of the tracks had been laid for the NOO&GW to hold an inauguration ceremony on Dec. 3, 1853, complete with music, speeches and “an elegant repast in the open air.”

According to a Bee reporter, “at 12 o’clock, [with] the aid of the locomotive ‘Natchitoches,’ we steamed ... the distance of seventeen miles ... in double quick time [on a track that] is admirably built, combing vast strength and solidity with entire ease and absence of jolting.”

The cleared right of way allowed for a road to form adjacent to the tracks, thus giving rise to Fourth Street, its name an extrusion of Gretna’s origin nomenclature, and later adopted by Harvey, Marrero and Westwego.

Today, Fourth Street’s pathway sometimes closely follows the circa-1853 railroad, and other times defers to the very industries the two arteries helped catalyze.

Together, the tracks and the street would form a sort of necklace linking together development across the West Bank — a necklace with no one pendant, since there was never a single urbanized “downtown” on this side of the river, but with a number of beads: Algiers, McDonoghville, Gretna, Harvey, Marrero and Westwego.

Finding higher ground

The railroad along the Fourth Street corridor had other effects on West Bank geography. In those

stretches where subdivisions had preceded the railroad, residential areas tended to occupy the high ground closer to the river — for example, in Algiers, McDonoghville and Gretna.

But in those stretches where the railroad preceded subdivisions, industry dominated the riverfronting high ground, leaving later-arriving residential communities to settle on the lower ground south of the tracks (for example, Harvey and Marrero).

Where the tracks happened to pull away from the river, so did the industry, which enabled residential blocks to form closer to the riverfront. Examples: Westwego’s Salaville district, as well as Bridge City.

In sum, in the century after its construction, the Fourth Street railroad corridor became a spatial driver and sorter of land uses, steering people and projects in certain directions across the West Bank. It served as an artery for intense economic activity, and an axis to which urban development arranged itself, even as it spread away from it.

The corridor even affected neighborhoods that Fourth Street never reached, such as Algiers, where by the late 1800s the original NOO&GW station had grown into the immense Southern Pacific Yards.

“Few people have an idea of the magnitude of the plant of the Southern Pacific Company,” wrote an observer in 1896, who compared it to “the famous town of Pullman, Ill,” and estimated it employed “3,000 or 4,000 men” in manufacturing rolling stock and locomotives, and in handling freight.

Into the automobile age

Fourth Street’s key arterial role

continued into the first 50 years of the automobile age, when it offered the only route to drive across the West Bank.

There was no West Bank Expressway, no Lapalco Boulevard, and no other way for motorists to drive over the Harvey Canal except for the drawbridge on Fourth Street — the same spot where that journalist back in 1853 first rode the NOO&GW.

Commuter traffic became so congested by 1950 that the Jefferson Parish Yearly Review called the Fourth Street drawbridge “one of the worst traffic bottlenecks in the State.”

The opening of the Harvey Tunnel in September 1957 relieved that congestion, but still left Fourth Street plenty busy, especially for riverfront workers at industries such as Avondale Shipyards.

But after the new downtown Mississippi River bridge and West Bank Expressway opened in 1958, the old necklace-shaped urbanization pattern steadily sprawled into modern suburbia.

A glimpse of history

The southward spread motivated the building of Lapalco Boulevard over the Harvey Canal in the early 1970s; a decade later, as construction proceeded on the second span over the Mississippi, the West Bank Expressway was elevated high over the earlier tunnel, giving commuters multiple ways to get over the Harvey Canal.

Traffic on Fourth Street further diminished as riverfront industries gradually closed, chief among them the Celotex plant in 2009 and Avondale Shipyards in 2013. Today, Fourth Street is a representative transect of the West Bank, variously historic, industrial, and suburban, with equal doses of problems and potential.

If you want a sense of what Fourth Street was like when steam locomotives rolled through the villages of the 19th-century West Bank, all you have to do is go to Old Gretna, between Amelia and Dolhonde streets, where the rails run right down the traffic lanes.

Just pay heed to that conductor.

Richard Campanella, a geographer with the Tulane School of Architecture, is the author of “The West Bank of Greater New Orleans,” “Draining New Orleans,” “Bienville’s Dilemma,” and other books. He may be reached at richcampanella.com, rcampane@tulane.edu, or @nolacampanella on X.