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Detail of 1820 John Melish map showing network of military and other roads in Florida Parishes

Curious LOUISIANA

What is the history behind the St. Charles streetcar line?

BY JOHN POPE
Contributing writer

Whenever he comes to New Orleans from his home in Greenwell Springs, Dr. Herschel Dean makes a point of hopping aboard a streetcar.

"I like the looks of them," said Dean, whose office walls are adorned with pictures of streetcars. "I like the idea of riding the cars and looking at the scenery."

His passion for this mode of transportation isn't restricted to New Orleans. When Dean, 82, is in other cities that have streetcars, he rides them, and he's a train aficionado, too.

"Riding on a streetcar is something I just enjoy doing," he said. "I've gotten more involved as I've gotten older."

Green's fascination with streetcars led him to ask Curious Louisiana about the history of the St. Charles line, which is not just the oldest in the city but the oldest street railway in the world.

"I thought other people might be interested," he said, "because that's a unique thing in New Orleans."

The St. Charles cars first rolled in 1835. The fare was 25 cents, Louis C. Hennick and E Harper Charlton wrote in "The Streetcars of New Orleans." (That fare translates to $7.58 in today's dollars.)

Other lines sprang up throughout the city, as did a network of private companies that operated them — and competed for business. That prompted the city to create New Orleans Public Service Inc. in 1922 to streamline transit operation, as well as supply electricity to New Orleanians, according to experienceneworleans.com. The New Orleans Regional Transit Authority took over bus and streetcar operations in 1984.

When mules pulled streetcars

In the 1840s, when mules pulled the cars, the fare dropped to 15 cents (the equivalent of nearly $3 today), and then to a dime in 1893, when electricity powered the cars, said Edward Branley, who bills himself as "N.O. History Guy." (Electrification, incidentally, followed experiments with steam engines, which created soot and noise, as well as overhead cable propulsion, which
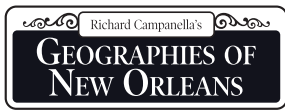
ROAD MAP

How old military roads helped develop St. Tammany and Florida parishes on the north shore

BY RICHARD CAMPANELLA
Contributing writer

Northeast of Covington runs a two-lane highway representing the last active segment of an influential road network built over 200 years ago. Officially numbered as La. 1082, the 8-mile-long road traces a trajectory that, if extended to 450 miles, would directly link Madisonville with Nashville, Tennessee. Locally, it is known as Old Military Road.

Richard Campanella's
GEOGRAPHIES OF NEW ORLEANS

Therein lies a clue to the original purpose of this larger road network: to deliver U.S. militias and matériel to newly acquired lands in Louisiana, should they be threatened by foreign forces, as had happened at the Battle of New Orleans in 1815.

'Fractious frontier'

The military roads linked seemingly disparate places: Nashville with Covington and Madisonville; Mobile, Alabama, with St. Francisville; Natchez, Mississippi, with Madisonville. They served not only to integrate Louisiana's Florida Parishes into the rest of the nation, but to ensure they would not revert to what historian Samuel C. Hyde Jr. characterized as a "fierce and fractious frontier" — a region of national rivalries, ethnic hos-

GRAPHIC BY RICHARD CAMPANELLA USING STATE LANDS OFFICE MAP

Mid-1800s map of Military Road overlaid on an aerial photo showing La. 1082

tilities, disputed borders, dubious treaties and even a rebellion.

Positioned between the Pearl and Mississippi rivers, the Florida Parishes (today's St. Tammany, Washington, Tangipahoa, Livingston, St. Helena, East Baton Rouge, and West and East Feliciana) had originally been the domain of the Tunica, Natchez, Houma, Bayogoula, Choctaw, Tangipahoa and other tribes.

Colonization brought French settlers and enslaved West Africans to the region, some of whom pro-

duced charcoal, tar, pitch and resin from abundant pine trees. But upon Britain's 1763 victory in the French and Indian War, the region became part of British West Florida, and a destination for Anglo-Saxon migrants from the Thirteen Colonies. Defeat in the war cost France its Louisiana colony, which was transferred to Spain.

For the next 20 years, enemy British and Spanish troops guarded

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the international border tracing along the Mississippi River, Bayou Manchac and the lakes of Maurepas and Pontchartrain. The tension led the Spanish to establish a number of defensive forts or garrisons, including at today's Monroe, Marksville and New Roads.

After American patriots won independence from Britain in 1783, the United States took possession of most former British colonies. The exception was West Florida, which, in recognition of its key support in the American Revolution, became Spanish.

For the next 17 years, all of present-day Louisiana pertained to Spain, as did vast lands stretching from the Pacific to the Atlantic, and from the Gulf of Mexico down to Tierra del Fuego.

It was one of history's largest empires, and that was just the problem. Spain stretched its resources too thinly and found itself battling internal discontent as well as imperial rivals.

In 1800, Spain, under pressure from Napoleon, secretly retroceded Louisiana to France. When France turned around three years later and sold the colony to the United States, Spanish West Florida, to most people's understanding, was not part of the deal.

In fact, Spanish West Florida had its own internal factions. Because it had previously been British, the colony had many English-speaking residents, particularly in Baton Rouge and St. Francisville. Spanish officials even granted land titles to British settlers, in the interest of economic development. But they would soon regret that policy, as many settlers came to resent Spanish rule, and some called for independence. In 1810, rebels declared the Florida parishes to be the Republic of West Florida.

Within a few months, however, the rebels acquiesced to control by the United States. To Americans' understanding, the annexation made the Florida Parishes part of the Louisiana Territory, and in 1812, part of the state of Louisiana.

Spain begged to differ. It spurned the West Florida Republic and refused to recognize its American annexation. Throughout the 1810s, once-amicable relations between Spain and the United States deteriorated to the point of possible violence. Making matters worse was the outbreak of the War of 1812, which brought back to the stage both nations' mortal enemy — the British.

Blazing the roads

That's when the U.S. War Department started funding military roads for the Florida Parishes. It did so to get troops and arms into the region, given its volatile history, and to plug potential enemy ingresses. Rivers would not suffice, being only partly navigable, so roads were the only option.

To be sure, intricate networks of game trails and Indian paths already crisscrossed the region. Federally funded workers widened those existing treads, blazed new sections and installed bridges or ferries across bayous too deep to ford.

The main military road, which came to be known as Gen. Jackson's Road because it was proposed by Old Hickory himself, began at Nashville, crossed the Tennessee River at Muscle Shoals, Alabama, ran through Columbus, Mississippi, and proceeded southwestwardly down to Madisonville. It was funded in 1816, completed in 1820 and survives today as part of La. 1082.

Another artery, constructed in 1812 and known as Gen. Wilkinson's Road, connected Mobile in Alabama with St. Francisville in today's West Feliciana Parish. It intersected Gen. Jackson's Road near present-day Bogalusa, and together they enabled overland transit in four directions.

A third road, blazed in 1815 and known as Gen. Carroll's Road, ran from Madisonville northward to what would later become Jackson, Mississippi.

Impact on Florida Parishes

Maps of the era reveal that an intricate spider web of spurs and shortcuts developed among the main military roads. Because none were formally named or consistently labeled, it's tough to say exactly which road or offshoot went where, but it is safe to say the network greatly influenced early settlement of the region.

Gen. Wilkinson's Road, for example, helped site the first St. Tammany Parish courthouse. The road happened to cross the Bogue Chitto River roughly near the center of the original parish, which at the time included all of present-day Washington and much of Tangipahoa. Marked on maps simply as "St. Tammany Court House," the new parish seat became a ferry crossing and crossroads, with the potential to become a sizeable town. But it only lasted until 1819, when the parish was reconfigured and the courthouse was moved to the Covington area. Today, the site of the original St. Tammany Parish courthouse lies by riverside forest 4 miles west of Enon.

Gen. Wilkinson's Road also gave rise to what would later become a major industry in St. Tammany Parish — health tourism, particularly at upwellings of clear, cool water. Maps from the 1820s show "Mineral Springs" near the intersection of Gen. Jackson's Road, not far from today's Sheridan. While Mineral Springs never developed into a resort, it was a predecessor of a number of Florida Parish communities that did become health-tourism destinations, such as Abita Springs and Denham Springs.

Taking a western spur of Gen. Wilkinson's Road got you to Springfield on the Natalbany River, which would later become the seat of justice for Livingston Parish.

Another fork on the same road gave rise to a place marked as St. Helen Courthouse on an 1820 map, which in time became today's Montpelier. The courthouse was later moved to yet another spot made accessible by Gen. Wilkinson's Road, today's Greensburg.

A premier beneficiary of the military roads was Madisonville, which had been founded in the early 1810s on the banks of the Tchefuncte River. Using either the main roads or spurs, one could travel from Madisonville to most cities in Mississippi, western Tennessee and Alabama. And of course, the South's largest city, New Orleans, was just a day's sail away, across Lake Pontchartrain.

Decline of the military roads

Tensions between Spain and the United States had been resolved in 1821, when the two nations ratified the Adams-Onís Treaty. Also known as the Florida Purchase, the agreement settled numerous border disputes and officially made the Florida Parishes American.

As the region's roguish history

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faded into the past, the old military roads lost funding for maintenance and steadily lost traffic to new and better roads.

By the 1850s, smooth-rolling trains proved superior in every way to bone-rattling stagecoach or wagon rides on washed-out gullies, furthering the decline of the military roads. Railroads triggered new settlements, as well as timber mills and other industries, giving rise to Slidell, Bogalusa, Hammond, Pontchatoula, Amite City and other places.

Some of the old roads remained part of the cultural landscape into the 1920s, when, according to historian Powell A. Casey, "a traveler in the Florida parishes, upon asking for highway direction, would likely have heard mention of 'The Military Road.'"

Nevertheless, when engineers began designing modern high-speed highways, they were far more inclined to establish new direct routes to growing population centers than follow twisting dirt roads to places of the formerly "fierce frontier."

In the century since, most of the old military road network has returned to fields and forest. "It is only when one crosses the Tchefuncte River at Covington and travels northeast along Louisiana Highways 21 and 1082," wrote Casey in a 1974 Louisiana History article, "that he is on the Military Road."

"To be reassured on this point," Casey added, all one had to do was "stop at any farmhouse … and ask any gray-haired resident."

Richard Campanella, a geographer with the Tulane School of Architecture, is the author of "Draining New Orleans," "Bienville's Dilemma," and other books. This topic comes from his upcoming book with LSU Press, "Crossroads, Cutoffs, and Confluences: Origins of Louisiana Cities, Towns, and Villages," due out in 2025. He may be reached at richcampanella.com, rcampane@tulane.edu or @nolacampanella on X.