



PHOTO FROM THE COLLECTION OF RICHARD CAMPANELLA

Awnings along Canal Street invited shoppers to stroll in front of shops in the 1950s.



PHOTO BY RICHARD CAMPANELLA

An orderly row of brackets supports wooden canopies along Magazine Street.

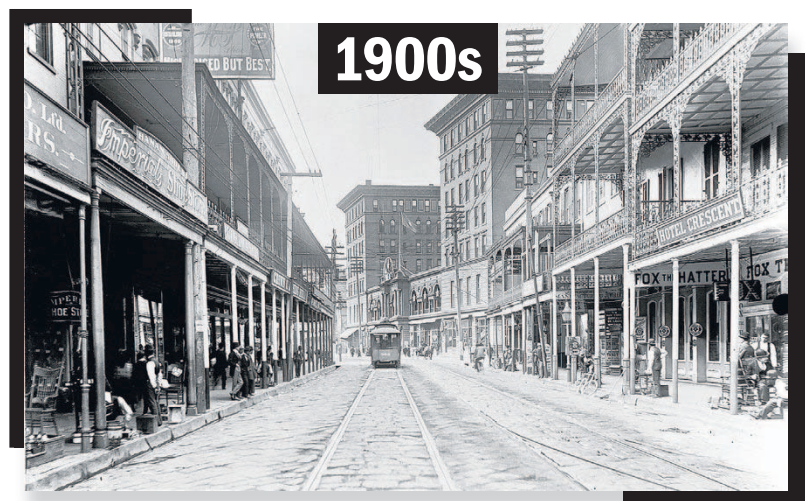


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In the 100 block of St. Charles Avenue about 1900, pedestrians could stroll from shop to shop while mostly avoiding the brutal New Orleans sun or the driving rain.

Casting shade

Once a standard fixture, canopies and awnings are less common today

BY RICHARD CAMPANELLA
Contributing writer



Take a close look at old photos of downtown New Orleans, and you'll notice something ubiquitous which has since grown scarce: awnings and canopies protruding from building façades, covering extensive stretches of sidewalk.

Offering refuge from sun and rain, these friendly fixtures provided a public as well as a private service, benefiting all pedestrians while attracting potential patrons to participating businesses. Some lengthy canopies practically formed arcades, and many awnings were festooned with ornate typeset and colorful iconography, bringing character and distinction to streetscapes.

To be clear, I am not speaking of our famous iron-lace galleries and balconies, which have similar attributes and are well-preserved in today's French Quarter. Rather, I am referring to those gently sloping shelters positioned 10 or so feet above the sidewalk, covering most of its width, and usually supported

by cast-iron brackets or columns. Some were made of canvas and retractable, others were fixed and topped with sheet metal or wooden planks.

While the terms are defined variously, I will use "canopies" to mean hard-surface fixed shelters, and "awnings" to mean retractable canvas shades.

Examples of historical canopies in the Central Business District may be seen today along 400 to 412 Magazine St., and 600 to 610 Tchoupitoulas St., wrapping around the corner of Lafayette. Lower Tchoupitoulas is of particular interest because a circa-1864 photograph taken by Marshall Dunham shows canopies and awnings nearly completely covering the sidewalk along this busy commercial corridor.

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Did Jean Lafitte and crew spend time in Lake Charles?

BY SERENA PUANG
Staff writer

Pirate, privateer and slave smuggler Jean Lafitte is a notorious outlaw in Louisiana. Today, he's the inspiration for characters in multiple novels, the namesake of both Lafitte and a national historic park with six locations in Lafayette, Marrero, Chalmette, New Orleans, Eunice and Thibodaux. His name even makes a cameo in pop culture institutions like the "Pirates of the Caribbean" ride at Disneyland.

Lafitte and his older brother Pierre are documented to have spent time between 1805 and at



least 1815 in New Orleans and Barataria before eventually making their way to Galveston, Texas.

But did he and his pirate crew really spend time near Lake Charles? That's the question posed by Michael Smith, a Baton Rouge resident who works at the Louisiana Art and Science Museum.

When Smith was growing up near Lake Charles, people cel-

ebrated Lake Charles Contraband Days — now known as the Louisiana Pirate Festival. Legend has it that Lake Charles, Contraband Bayou specifically, was one of Lafitte's favorite hideouts. That's why it's named Contraband Bayou. Some have even speculated that he hid his treasure there.

"I never knew if it was necessarily true or not," Smith said. Short answer: Most likely, yes, but it's hard to prove.

Adley Cormier, a Louisiana historian and author of the book "Lost Lake Charles," believes Lafitte was active at Lake Charles.



IMAGE PROVIDED BY HISTORIC NEW ORLEANS COLLECTION

► See **CURIUS**, page 9D Jean Lafitte and his men clear a ship's deck after commandeering it.

SHADE

Continued from page 1D

“Along with drapes, curtains, shutters, and blinds,” awnings and canopies “provided natural climate control in an age before air conditioning and tinted glass,” wrote architectural historian Chad Randl for the National Park Service. “By blocking out the sun’s rays while admitting daylight and allowing air to circulate between interior and exterior, they were remarkably efficient and cost-effective. Awnings permitted window-shopping on rainy days (and) protected show window displays from fading.”

Urban advocates today herald such sidewalk coverings as low-cost ways to encourage walking, support local commerce, reduce urban heat-island effects, and make cities more inviting.

And yet, over the past century, we’ve lost much of our sidewalk shelter.

To estimate its disappearance, I analyzed the heart of the Central Business District using maps made in 1876 by the Sanborn Map Company. Updated through the 1890s and 1900s and sold to insurance underwriters, these remarkable maps provide sufficient detail to discern canopies, galleries, balconies and other architectural accoutrements, in addition to the shape, size and construction material of buildings.

The analysis revealed that 95% of all sidewalks between Tchoupitoulas Street and the river, from Canal Street to Poydras, were fully or mostly covered. That is to say, pedestrians nearly 150 years ago would have been able to walk all around these 12 blocks almost entirely sheltered from the elements, except when crossing streets.

Today, that percentage of cover is under 10% — and half those blocks are unwalkable anyway, having been subsumed by the casino.

Now let’s look from Camp Street to Tchoupitoulas, again from Canal to Poydras. In 1876, nearly 60% of those nine blocks had fully or mostly covered sidewalks, whereas today only 15% of them do. Similar declines are evident in most other blocks of the Central Business and Warehouse Districts.

More drivers, fewer walkers

Why would such a clearly beneficial feature disappear from our public space?

Topping the list of reasons is



PHOTO BY MARSHALL DUNHAM FROM LSU SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

Sheltered sidewalks protected pedestrians on Chartres Street from the elements, about 1864.

the rise of automobiles, the decline of public transportation, the suburban exodus and the closure of many old-line shops and department stores. These factors all conspired to reduce the number of pedestrians — and along with it, the incentive of building managers and shopkeepers to accommodate them.

Look at any workday photograph from the early to mid-1900s and you will see downtown sidewalks crowded with workers, commuters, shoppers and strollers. Merchants catered to them, and one way to do so was to make their frontage shady, cool and dry. Some merchants even put their wares out on the sidewalk — a practice no longer permitted, but indicative of just how much value a shelter imparted to urban space.

Another reason for the decline of sidewalk coverings comes to light from the difference in land use between the commerce-dominated blocks closer to the river (95% shaded in 1876) and the office-dominated blocks further inland (60% shaded in 1876).

Back in those days, the river-front blocks abounded in wholesalers, retailers and service providers, all of whom depended on walk-in customers. Canopies and awnings were good for business. The interior blocks certainly had their share of stores and services, but here, professional offices and institutions tended to prevail. Less dependent on foot

traffic, their building managers were less likely to accommodate pedestrians.

Fast-forward a century, and many downtown shops and department stores had closed, while entire blocks of pedestrian-scale historical structures had been razed for high-rise office towers. Along with them went the old canopies and awnings, as well as the incentive for private property owners to cater to people in the public space.

The rise of the parking lot

Other edifices were razed for parking space, which maximized exposure to sun and rain both on the lot and along adjacent sidewalks. Worse yet, the impervious blacktop surfaces of parking lots made things worse for stormwater management as well as urban microclimates.

Additionally, the installation of modern lampposts, traffic lights and utilities poles may have led to the removal of façade protrusions, which some people came to view as antiquated encumbrances.

Among them was Morgan Hite, an architect who served on the Committee on City Planning. “Balconies have little appeal to the mind seeking efficient and usefully planned building,” Hite told the Times-Picayune in 1916. “The average gallery is out of repair, leaky in rainy weather, and so planned as to shut out daylight from the stores behind them.” As



PHOTO FROM THE COLLECTION OF RICHARD CAMPANELLA

Awnings along Baronne Street kept pedestrians out of the sun and rain in the 1950s.

for the posts upholding canopies and galleries, Hite thought they “act as obstacles to pedestrian traffic ... and cause undue congestion. Business sidewalks are narrow enough as it is.”

Scrap-metal drives during the two world wars claimed many historic cast-iron features, although this would have affected galleries and balconies more than canopies and awnings.

As for interior spaces, air-conditioning completely changed people’s climate tolerances, steering them indoors to seek relief from summer heat and humidity.

Why maintain a shelter outside your business when cool air might lure patrons inside?

As for new buildings, Modernist designers tended to prefer clean, minimal façades and devised other ways of blocking the sun, such as brise soleil (“breaks the sun”) louvers and deflectors, like those on the New Orleans Public Library Main Branch.

Given the diminishing number of shoppers and seemingly growing number of loiterers, building managers became more inclined to remove canopies and awning rather than pay for their upkeep. Their disappearance is not unique to New Orleans; most other American cities have seen the same trend, even in the Sun Belt and desert regions.

A place out of the sun

There are some bright spots — or rather, shady spots. Since the 1990s, scores of hotels and condo complexes have opened in the CBD and Warehouse District, bringing a new generation of pedestrians to the streets, both local and visiting. In evidence of

the relationship among foot traffic, cash flow and sidewalk shade, a number of hotels and other pedestrian-friendly enterprises have installed new awnings and canopies over their entrances. And we can proudly point to the French Quarter and adjacent faubourgs for retaining more galleries and balconies than just about any equivalent neighborhood in the nation, thanks to preservationists who saw their value a century ago.

But elsewhere, our downtown sidewalks remain a lot more sun-drenched and rain-soaked than they used to be or need to be. Referring to the disparity of shade elsewhere in American cities, be it by trees or shelters, journalist Sam Bloch, writing in *Places Journal*, suggested “we ought to start talking about shade deserts, just as we talk about neighborhoods without grocery stores as food deserts.”

Planners agree, and designing for shade has increasingly become part of urban sustainability and climate resilience efforts.

They would be inspired by the streetscapes of historic New Orleans, where a pedestrian could have walked miles in the heart of the city, with minimal exposure to subtropical sun and rain.

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