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1D

QUEEN OF THE MYSTIC CLUB

Mrs. Frederick  
Theodore Le Clerq



PHOTO BY JEFF STROUT

Explore facts about New Orleans' most famous thoroughfare — Bourbon Street



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WORD  
on the STREET

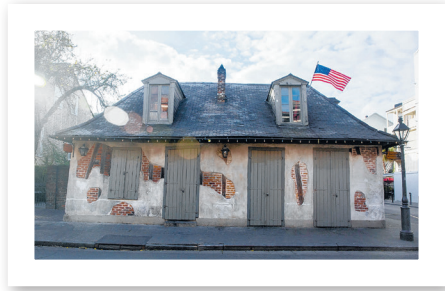
Richard Campanella's  
GEOGRAPHIES OF  
NEW ORLEANS

BY RICHARD CAMPANELLA | Contributing writer

In the glare of its notoriety, we sometimes lose sight of the fact that Bourbon Street is a neighborhood street — with homes, residents and culture. What may be particularly surprising, especially during this Carnival weekend, is just how ordinary Bourbon Street was during the first half of its three-century history.

That history began in late 1722, when Bourbon and most other present-day French Quarter streets were laid out after a September hurricane wiped away four years of provisional development in the original city of New Orleans.

As the middle of the city's seven river-parallel streets, Bourbon ran at a constant elevation (about 5 feet above sea level) from present-day Iberville to Barracks Street, bracketed by rudimentary fortifications running through what are now the 100 and 1300 blocks.



STAFF FILE PHOTO BY SOPHIA GERMER  
Early buildings on Bourbon Street may have resembled Lafitte's Blacksmith Shop, shown here in 2020.

Mystic Club  
presents  
queen  
to reign over  
royal ball

Advocate staff report

The Mystic Club, one of the highlights of the annual Carnival season, turned back the clock to 1907 and traveled to the Río de la Plata in Argentina's Buenos Aires for a royal revel in honor of Spain's King Alfonso XIII and Queen Victoria Eugenie of Battenberg, youngest grandchild of Queen Victoria.

The visiting Spanish monarchs were fêted in the great Latin American city at a number of events, many attended by notable leaders from other countries. It was that storied visit that was recreated for the club's 103rd anniversary.

Reigning as Queen Victoria Eugenie was Courtney Johnson Le Clercq, married to Frederick Theodore Le Clerq. She wore an empire-waisted gown of Wedgwood blue with a beaded and embroidered overdress of ombre blue lace with draped sleeves. Vertical drapes highlighted the dress, with the longest falling to a train.

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What's the piece  
of art in front  
of Southern's  
Mini-Dome?

BY ROBIN MILLER  
Staff writer

The sculpture hasn't always been yellow, but it's always been unusual.

Maybe that's an understatement. The abstract piece stands in full view in front of the F.G. Clark Activity Center at Southern University's entrance, and passersby, no doubt, have given it consideration at one time or another.

Is it a paperclip? Or could it be the metal spring for a clothespin?

Then again, who would dedicate a sculpture to those things? Not Al LaVergne.



LaVergne

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# BOURBON

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Like the rest of the gridded urban plan, most of its squares measured 50 *toises* (320 feet) on each side, a *toise* being six *pieds*, the French foot.

Most street names paid homage to the French monarchy, either directly or indirectly. The name Bourbon was particularly clever in that it flattered any number of Louisiana-involved members of that royal dynasty.

## Cottages and chimneys

Early Rue Bourbon did not look anything like its regal aspiration. A pedestrian strolling down the muddy colonial street would have seen simple cross-timber cottages with double-pitched hipped roofs and center chimneys — a bit like Lafitte’s Blacksmith Shop at 941 Bourbon (which probably dates to the 1770s), only set back, surrounded by gardens and chicken coops or rabbit hunches, and encircled by *pieux* (picket) fences.

Residents of Rue Bourbon were a crosscut of early Louisiana society. Within the free White caste, they included empowered colonials, company employees, soldiers, hunters, artisans and skilled workers, as well as *engages* (indentured servants) and *forçats* (forced immigrants). Within the enslaved caste were West Africans brought through the Middle Passage during the 1720s, plus a small number of enslaved Indigenous people. In between was a small but growing caste of free people of color.

According to a census conducted in 1732, some of the residents on Rue Bourbon were La Roche Castel (a blacksmith), Becquet (a locksmith), Barbaud, La Clef (a commander), Canelle (a carpenter), Belhumeur, Gautier (a mason), La Rose (a brewer), Brosset (a surgeon), Rafflot (a roofer); La Pierre (a hairdresser), Commercry (a knife-maker), Angebaud (a carpenter specializing in joinery), La Riviere, Marie, and Xavier, those last being the only Bourbon property owners who were free people of color.

## A devastating fire

The Spanish, who came into power in 1769, called Rue Bourbon Calle Borbon, but otherwise the street retained its French appearance — until Good Friday 1788, when a fire destroyed all squares from Conti to beyond Dumaine, making it the most-devastated street in the city.

After American dominion began with the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, Bourbon Street found itself intermediary in every way — half-way between the front and back of town; neither the highest or lowest in elevation; and demographically mixed, though it was predominantly Creole in ethnicity, French in tongue and Catholic in faith.



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Old French Opera House in early the 1900s

In terms of infrastructure, Bourbon Street had deep gutters for drainage, some wood planking or brick paving, and oil lamps followed by gas illumination in the 1830s. The 1840s saw the construction of the plurality of the buildings that are still standing today.

By my count, of the roughly 170 extant buildings on Bourbon Street within the French Quarter, their median era of construction is circa 1840, while their two most common architectural styles are Creole and Greek Revival. In terms of building type, 40% of Bourbon’s extant structures were originally designed as townhouses; 26% as cottages; 18% as storehouses; 11% as shotgun houses.

## The French Opera House

Perhaps the most magnificent night on antebellum Bourbon Street was the December 1859 opening of the French Opera House.

Designed by Gallier and Esterbrook on the corner of Toulouse Street, the “handsome structure of the Italian order” rose “like a Colossus over everything in that vicinity,” according to one reporter. “Superb ... magnificent ... a spectacle richly worth viewing,” raved another of the featured performance of Rossini’s Guillaume Tell.

In retrospect, that night may have marked the high point in Bourbon Street’s repute. After the Civil War, downtown divestment incurred the rise of a raffish entertainment economy.

Grog shops and cabarets had long been a part of French Quarter scene, but now gambling dens and brothels began to proliferate, as did concert saloons, which were music halls where women entertained exclusively male patrons.

Among the most popular was Wenger’s, a concert saloon and beer garden opened in 1868 at what would now be 119-125 Bourbon. Featuring liquor, music, attractive women and exotic décor, Wenger’s was the harbinger of modern Bourbon Street.

## The birth of Storyville

In 1897, aldermen fed up with widespread prostitution passed an ordinance banning the sex trade everywhere except a 16-block area behind upper Bourbon Street.

Sardonically nicknamed Storyville after the sponsor of the ordinance, the legal red-light district cinched New Orleans’ reputation for hedonism until its closure in 1917 by order of the U.S. Navy. By then, the revelry had shifted to upper North Rampart and Burgundy streets, an area dubbed the Tango Belt.

Bourbon had its share of nighttime action, but otherwise remained relatively undistinguished. The Old French Opera House continued to bring Franco-phone performances to Creoles in the neighborhood until its destruction by fire in 1919, an event viewed by many as a cultural turning point.

The neighborhood changed additionally during Prohibition, when a French entrepreneur introduced to Bourbon Street a social innovation from the Belle Epoque known as night clubs or supper clubs. These venues offered fine dining and tasteful entertainment in an exclusive atmosphere, with a tuxedoed emcee and a doorman. Unlike concert saloons, night clubs catered to couples during in an era, the 1920s, when women were claiming new rights and seeking new pleasures.

Other nightclubs opened adjacently, as did bars and restaurants, especially after police raided the Tango Belt on Rampart. Bourbon Street began to become locally famous.

## The long and the short of it

Bourbon Street had also lengthened — first into the Faubourg Marigny, and after drainage of the backswamp in the early 1900s, all the way to the Lake Pontchartrain shore. For a while there were even two dairies with addresses on Bourbon Street, at 3325 and 4100, which today would be near Brother Martin High School.

In 1924, a city ordinance renamed Bourbon’s semi-rural lake-side segment as Pauger Street. Ever since, Bourbon Street has measured 5,000 feet in length, from Canal Street to Kerlerec Street, with 13 blocks in the French Quarter and 1.5 blocks in the Faubourg Marigny.

During World War II, servicemen training at Southern boot camps took their leave at New Orleans and quickly learned where all the fun was conveniently clustered. After the war, they took home their New Orleans memories and spread the word about Bourbon Street. The strip responded in kind, opening venues designed to satisfy visitors’ expectations. Bourbon became nationally famous.

Many consider the subsequent years as a sort of golden age, when lavish burlesque clubs and colorful characters dominated the strip. But many venues trafficked in illegal gambling, B-drinking scams and other organized crime, and nearly all were strictly segregated by race.

## A crackdown on Bourbon

In 1962, District Attorney Jim

Garrison cracked down on Bourbon Street vice, which led to numerous closures.

Later in the 1960s, three large hotels opened on Bourbon, positioning hundreds of tourists directly on the strip.

Locals had less reason to go to the glitzy strip, and many began to disdain it. Yet Bourbon Street still retained interesting cultural aspects, including a small Chinatown on the 500 block, the city’s top Catholic school for African American girls, a tight-knit Sicilian community, and venues catering to the Quarter’s bohemian and gay communities.

By the late 1960s, “hippies” sauntered Bourbon Street with neither the money nor the desire to patronize clubs that catered to the tastes of their parents. More venues closed, and Bourbon Street found itself in trouble.

## A window into good times

Around that time, a merchant had the idea to sell drinks directly to strollers outside, rather than cajole them into coming indoors. Other owners followed suit, opened up windows and doors. “Window hawking” gave rise to a parade of pedestrians, each with drink in hand.

Judges ruled window-hawking to be legal, which the city accommodated by turning the street into a nightly pedestrian mall. Realizing the action had moved into the street, businesses threw open their doors despite summer heat or winter cold, while eateries offered to-go fare and discarded their tables for counters and bar stools.

For better or worse, ambulatory inebriation became the Bourbon Street experience, and its nightly distribution up and down the strip remains remarkably consistent.

Thongs begin to form in the 100 block, increase dramatically in the 200 block, crest around the 400 block, level off in the 600-700 blocks, and peter out past Dumaine.

The number of pedestrians varies — I measured peak rates of 40-50 people per minute on weeknights, over 100 on weekends, and well over 200 on Mardi Gras — but their distribution remains the same.

And then parade ends, like an exclamation point at the end of a sentence, at the ever-popular Lafitte’s Blacksmith Shop. In the blocks beyond, Bourbon returns to the tranquil neighborhood it had originally been — a street of homes, residents and culture.

*Richard Campanella, a geographer with the Tulane School of Architecture, is the author of “Bourbon Street: A History” (LSU Press, 2014), from which this content was drawn. He may be reached at <http://richcampanella.com>, [rcampane@tulane.edu](mailto:rcampane@tulane.edu), or @nolacampanella on X.*

# MYSTIC CLUB

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Ladies-in-waiting, representing the first ladies of several countries, including Mmes. Hardie Christian French as Ana Paredes y Arosemena of Ecuador; Joel Malone Funderburk Jr. as Carmen Romero Rubio y Castelló of Mexico; John Thomas Paige as Sara del Camp Yávar of Chile; and Robert Bruce Worley Jr. as Zoila Rosa Martinez of Venezuela.

A select number of debutantes of the season were presented, including Misses Carolyn Taylor Bienvenu, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Albert Bienvenu IV; Marguerite Lisette Breaux, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Ralph Gerard Breaux; Elizabeth Shaw Feirn, daughter and stepdaughter of Mr. and Mrs. Gregory Charles Feirn and daughter of Ms. Amy Shaw Feirn; Sarah Elizabeth Fitzpatrick, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Brian Christopher Fitzpatrick; Flora Elizabeth French, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. John Fenner French; Celia Louise Funderburk, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Joel Malone Funderburk Jr.; Charlotte Anne Galloway, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. William Rudolph Galloway; Serena Elizabeth Klebba, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Brian Marshall Klebba; Alden Ann Laborde, granddaughter of Dr. and Mrs. James Monroe Laborde; and Fiona Hanna Marks, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Everard William Marks III.

Also presented were Misses Morgan Elizabeth Nalty, daughter of Mr. Morgan Shaw Nalty and Ms. Jill Knight Nalty; Charlotte Heyward Parrino, daughter of Dr. and Mrs. Patrick Eugene Parrino; Tatum Lady Reiss, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. James Joseph Reiss III; Elizabeth Talbot Rogers, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. James Ted Rogers III; Eugenie Gardiner Selser, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. John Michael Selser; Laura Elise Vickery, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Eugene Benton Vickery III; Marianne Pratt Villere, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. St. Denis J. Villere III; Ava Renee Wilkes, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Forrest Ren Wilkes; and Caroline Burke Zvonek, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. John Joseph Zvonek.

The mother of three (Douglas, William and Susan), the queen is an alumnus of the Academy of the Sacred Heart and Vanderbilt and Tulane universities. She recently retired from Johnson Rice & Company, a firm founded by her late father, Mr. E. Douglas Johnson Jr.

Currently the president of the Garden Study Club of New Orleans, she has served with the Trinity Parents’ Group, worked with Louisiana Children’s Hospital, Louisiana Children’s Museum, New Orleans Museum of Art, Preservation Resource Center, Second Harvest Food Bank, Audubon Zoo and the Youth Empowerment Project, and she currently volunteers with the Arthur Blank Stuttering Institute at the University of Texas.

# CURIOUS

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He was the sculptor of this steel configuration that piqued Mark Jeffers’ curiosity.

“What’s the story behind this sculpture?” the Baton Rouge resident asked. “I’ve passed it several times. It stands in a prominent place, so I know it must have some meaning.”

## Positive change

LaVergne was a professor of art at Southern University when the university commissioned him to create a piece to front the newly built activity center, nicknamed the “Mini-Dome” by the Southern community because of its resemblance to the Caesars Superdome in New Orleans.

The Mini-Dome officially opened its doors in 1975. LaVergne’s sculpture was installed and dedicated in 1976, and as Southern University Professor of Art Randall Henry remembers it, LaVergne was working in geometrical shapes at the time.

“So, he chose geometrical shapes for the sculpture,” Henry said.

LaVergne called the piece, “Awakening,” explaining that it was a “representation of a facet of positive changes in America.”

The political climate may have reflected the title at the time with the Water-gate scandal era ending with Jimmy Carter’s presidential win. Still, the idea of awakening represented more.



STAFF PHOTO BY ROBIN MILLER

Al LaVergne’s sculpture ‘Awakening’ stands 17 feet high and weighs 3 tons.

“He told me that it was like waking up in the morning,” Henry said. “The sculpture looks like a plant opening to the sun or an animal waking up and stretching. It’s like a new awakening in the morning.”

## Henry watched the work

Henry was a senior at Scotlandville High School when he first met LaVergne, along with LaVergne’s fellow art professor, Frank Hayden. The two sculptors taught and created work in the same classroom in the art building, now called Frank Hayden Hall.

LaVergne worked on one side, while Hayden worked on the other.

“I would ride my bicycle over to Southern and just sit and observe in the classroom,” Henry said. “It was called the Sculpture Lab.”

LaVergne would later help Henry land a teaching job at Southern. The two worked together a year, between 1989 and 1990, after which LaVergne left Baton Rouge for a professorship at Western Michigan Uni-

versity in Kalamazoo.

## LaVergne leaves legacy

Before leaving, LaVergne would leave his own artistic mark on Baton Rouge with his 1980 sculpture, “Les Musicians,” installed on the grounds of the Capitol Park Museum; and also with the 1987 installation, his bas relief, five-panel façade on the Louisiana State Archives building on Essen Lane.

LaVergne called the panels a “study in stone” of Louisiana’s history as a colony and state. Each panel measures 10 by 12 feet and weighs in excess of 12 tons.

The artist later said he liked working on big pieces, and one reason he accepted the job at Western Michigan University was its warehouse-sized studio space.

As for “Awakening,” LaVergne sculpted it from fabricated steel. He said in past interviews that he worked from found steel he collected along the way.

His work often was improvised, meaning he didn’t plan or draw it out ahead of time. “Awakening” was one such piece.

“Southern commissioned the work for \$15,000,” Henry said. “He was working on it just as I was beginning college. He would normally work on his sculptures in the art building, but he worked on this one in the livestock building next to the Mini-Dome.”

The finished sculpture is 17 feet tall and weighs 3 tons.

“Imagine trying to drive that from the art building to the Mini-Dome park-

ing lot,” Henry said. “At the livestock building, all they had to do was pick it up with a crane and put it down in the parking lot.”

The sculpture originally was painted black, but the university later asked Henry to contact LaVergne about a change in color.

## Painted it yellow

“They wanted to paint it yellow,” Henry said. “I asked Al about it, and he said it was OK with him. He said the sculpture belonged to the school, so the school could do what they wanted.”

At the time, the school was painting the parking lines yellow in the lot.

“Maybe they wanted the sculpture to match the parking lines,” Henry said.

Actually, the sculpture is the same shade as that in the school’s colors of gold and Columbia blue.

Still, it’s a good legacy for an artist who was born the son of a sharecropper in 1943. LaVergne grew up in the southwest community of Basile, earned his bachelor’s degree at Southern University and his master’s degree from the University of California at Berkeley, where he began sculpting in steel.

LaVergne passed away in 2020.

*Do you have a question about something in Louisiana that’s got you curious? Email your question to [curiouslouisiana@theadvocate.com](mailto:curiouslouisiana@theadvocate.com). Include your name, phone number and the city where you live.*