

Eads Plaza

THE PLAN, THE PLACE, AND THE MAN BEHIND THE NAME

BY Richard Campanella

ONE HUNDRED and fifty years ago this spring, Congress tepidly authorized a courtly gentleman from St. Louis to save what had been the nation's second port, now the ninth. Sedimentation at the mouth of the Mississippi had impeded navigation to the point that scores of ships now ran aground or had to anchor, stalling coastwise traffic at New Orleans and river commerce clear up to St. Louis. The Corps of Engineers recommended digging a costly bypass canal, a solution wholeheartedly supported by port officials and shipping firms.

Imagine their scorn when an uncredentialed autodidact from the hinterland, 55-year-old “Captain” James Buchanan Eads, suggested an idea that had failed before — jetties, which would narrow the channel, increase flow speed, and scour out the bedload, in theory. Everyone understood that. What Eads alone understood was that the jetties had to be specially designed not just to withstand sediment dynamics, but to benefit from them, and that they had to be extended long enough to discharge the alluvium off the continental shelf. Through patient explanation, persistence, and supreme confidence, Eads convinced more and more skeptics. What won over ambivalent congressmen was his bold “no cure, no pay” clause: if his jetties did not work, the government owed him nothing.

On March 3, 1875, Congress gave Eads the nod. On June 14, he got to work on South Pass, which had only eight feet of draft. By July, he and his workers had installed twin rows of pilings 1,000 feet long, and progressed by 200 feet per day. A year later, Eads’ jetties had deepened South Pass to 26 feet, then to 30 feet. By the time work completed in 1879, everyone knew Eads had cured the problem and earned his pay. He became a national hero, including among those local officials who had previously disparaged him. New Orleans returned to its rank as the nation's second port, behind New York.

it never had before: a purpose-built headquarters befitting one of the world's busiest harbors. Some officials envisioned a “water gate” — that it, an iconic portal, like the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor or the Ferry Building overlooking San Francisco Bay. “[For] some 200 years,” noted a port advocate in 1932, “New Orleans has been striving for a water gate suited to its commercial and esthetic needs. Bienville and his immediate successors toyed with the idea, and it persisted in colonial days,” but it got lost amid all the subsequent boom and bustle, as port facilities sprawled out rather indistinctly.

Now, a consensus formed that the foot of Canal Street ought to be the address of the Port of New Orleans. “Our Water Gate,” read a Times-Picayune headline, would be called Eads Plaza, in honor of the man who saved the port city. It would front the new headquarters for the Board of Port Commissioners, and open up like a gateway to the Mississippi, with the matching Poydras Street Wharf façade on one side and a pedestrian viaduct to the ferry terminal on the other. Planned by Moise Goldstein, Louis Livaudais, and N. C. Curtis and designed by Allison Owen, the Eads Plaza ensemble, built in stages between 1933 and 1938, featured a stucco-covered modernized Neoclassical design fronted by balustrades and gardens. The headquarters itself was shaped somewhat like a streamlined vessel, pointed at the two ends facing Canal and Gravier streets. It opened in time to commemorate “the wedding of the waters” — valley-wide celebrations marking the completion of the Lakes-to-the-Gulf Waterway, enabling barges from the Great Lakes to flow through Chicago and across Illinois down to New Orleans. On Eads Plaza on May 31, 1933, bands played, leaders orated, children enacted a homage to explorers Robert La Salle and Hernando De Soto, and a beauty queen “[broke] a bottle containing the mingled waters of Lake Michigan and the Gulf of Mexico across the prow of a leading barge.”

After World War II, the Port of New Orleans braced



Eads Plaza as seen from the river, circa 1950. Photo courtesy of New Orleans Public Service, Inc.



Entrance gate to Eads Plaza, circa 1950. Photo courtesy of New Orleans Public Service, Inc.

itself for a steep drop-off in government spending and shipping. To keep the wharves busy, it sought to increase international commerce by creating a foreign trade zone, where international cargo could be deposited, sorted, stored, and reshipped without payment of duties. Opened in 1946, the FTZ abetted the 1943 creation of an International House at 221 Camp St., a sort of clubhouse for foreign and local traders to intermingle and make deals. Their success led to the 1948 establishment of the International Trade Mart, across the street on 100 Camp, where manufacturers could meet, exhibit, and sell goods to domestic and foreign purchasers in a spacious five-story showroom. By the mid-1950s, port planners once again contemplated their architectural environs, and came to the conclusion that their Depression-era headquarters at Eads Plaza did not do justice to their global destiny.

In 1957, as the Civil Center opened, Mayor Chep Morrison suggested that the port move its headquarters to join the various new government offices and courthouses on Loyola Avenue. Victor Schiro, who served as acting mayor for a while, suggested instead to build a high-rise overlooking the Mississippi River, wherein the port headquarters, International House, and International Trade Mart would all be co-located, along with other offices to be leased out as a revenue stream. Here also was another opportunity to create an iconic “water gate” for the port and city.

In 1958, port officials secured the services of renowned Modernist architect Edward Durell Stone, and in 1959, contracted a New York developer to finance and build a \$30 million high-rise at the foot of Canal Street. Stone sketched a 19-story rectangular cuboid, shaded by aluminum screens, paired with a separate exhibition auditorium, and fronted by an enlarged Eads Plaza, all straddling South Delta Street between Canal and Poydras. In a second iteration, Stone reworked his design to take advantage of newly invented spiraled and coupled pilings that could extend down to hard sub-alluvial clays, thus enabling a true skyscraper to be built on soft deltaic land. Stone upped the number of floors to 33; reworked the plain cuboid into a striking cruciform pointing to the four cardinal directions; extended the platform roof well beyond the tower; and topped it with a rotating

penthouse. Construction began on March 11, 1964, with now-Mayor Victor Schiro driving in the first piling, and ended with a topping-off ceremony in July 1965, where Trade Mart president Lloyd Cobb declared, “New Orleans can [now] be the focal point of hemispheric solidarity [with] a great destiny to fulfill for world peace, trade and understanding.”

About the only thing that could match such grandiloquence came into shape across South Delta Street, where Curtis & Davis Architects took the muse of the water gate to conceive a stunning Expressionist pavilion heralding the gateway of the Mississippi. Officially known as the Port of New Orleans Rivergate Exhibition Hall, the freeform space accommodated trade shows and conference exhibitions where importers, exporters, and manufacturers, some of which might have offices at the Trade Mart, could display merchandise, demonstrate services, and make transactions. The Rivergate and the Trade Mart, known together as the International Center, were dedicated in an elaborate April 1968 ceremony coinciding with the 250th anniversary of the founding of New Orleans.

There was one notable change, however. Eads Plaza had been renamed Spanish Plaza, in recognition of the bicentennial of Spanish dominion in Louisiana. The name “Eads” had fallen out of familiarity among the local populace, whereas the new name spoke to the sort of cosmopolitanism to which the whole project aspired. It particularly resonated after Spain gifted the city with heraldic tiles and fountains to mark the bicentennial of the United States in 1976, giving us the Spanish Plaza of today.

Greater changes were to come in the 1980s and 1990s, some of which would roil the preservation community. Events at the Superdome (1975) and the new Convention Center (1985) outcompeted the offerings of the Rivergate, and despite a heroic effort to save the landmark, it met the wrecking ball in 1995 to make room for Harrah’s Casino (1999). The Trade Mart also declined when many cities opened similar “world trade centers,” and corporations found ways to do business without opening an office at every port. In 1996, the Port of New Orleans moved out of the 1965 structure, by now named the World Trade Center, to occupy its beautiful new Waggoner &

Ball-designed headquarters positioned dramatically beneath the Crescent City Connection. The World Trade Center emptied out in the early 2010s, and after a decade of debate and delays, finally reopened as the Four Seasons Hotel in 2021.

Today, the name of Captain James Buchanan Eads remains on the map of the City of New Orleans in the form of Eads Street, deep in the Eighth Ward. But the gentleman from St. Louis, who died in 1887, keeps the Port of New Orleans on the map through the jetty designs he first installed 150 years ago this spring.

They enabled ship traffic and vessel size to increase so dramatically on South Pass that Congress in 1902 authorized Southwest Pass to get the same “Eads’ jetties,” which the Corps carried out in 1908. South Pass was finally retired as an oceanic ship channel in the 1970s, a century after Eads’ intervention, and vestiges of his original installations may still be seen today. Ships now use Southwest Pass to come in and out of the Mississippi River, and while the Corps dredges to a depth of 45 feet, it still relies on Eads-style jetties to keep the sedimentation at bay.



streetscapes

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Eads Plaza as seen from the river, circa 1950. Photo courtesy of New Orleans Public Service, Inc.

