

# entertainment

# LIVING

NOLA.COM | SUNDAY, JANUARY 18, 2026

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## The eternal life of the Cairo Datum

BY RICHARD CAMPANELLA  
Contributing writer

New Orleans prides itself on its relics — home to the region's oldest building, for example, as well as the oldest family-run restaurant in the nation and the oldest continually operating urban railroad in the world. Cultural vestiges such as jazz funerals and St. Joseph's Day altars also endure locally, as do linguistic relics like lagniappe, jockomo and pocky-way.

Being something of an engineering marvel, New Orleans also preserves some technical artifacts that are, shall we say, a bit less prideful and a whole lot more problematic.

Some generators of the Sewerage & Water Board still produce 25 hertz electricity, a century after the rest of the world moved on to 60 hertz. Likewise, all too many service lines in our water-distribution system are made of lead, artifacts of a time when we valued the flexibility and durability of this heavy metal more than we understood its toxicity.



NEW ORLEANS SEWERAGE & WATER BOARD

A detail of the 1895 Linus Brown contour map shows Cairo Datum elevations of downtown and Algiers.

And then there is the more arcane engineering relic known as the Cairo Datum.

A datum, in the context of surveying and mapping, is an agreed-upon benchmark from which terrain is measured, in both the horizontal and vertical dimensions. Today, we generally understand sea level to be the vertical datum (baseline) from which we measure land elevations. But in the 1800s, as Americans moved westward, frontier mapmakers struggled to relate their terrain measurements to distance seacoasts.

So they instead adopted local baselines, such as valley floors or village greens, to measure river heights or surrounding hills. As government expeditions entered the picture,

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STAFF PHOTOS BY DAVID GRUNFELD

Dave Furano gets ready to dig in to boiled crawfish at Seither's Seafood in Harahan.

# HEAT WAVE

*'Ferocious demand' for early-season crawfish has some New Orleans restaurants stocking up*

**C**arnival season had just begun, with king cake on the table and purple, green and gold decorations flying again. Already though, we were seeing red, as in boiled crawfish red.

A friend caught wind of an impending early delivery of crawfish from Acadiana to one of the top local boilers in the game, Jason Seither at Seither's Seafood in Harahan, 279 Hickory Ave. And, just like picking up a whiff of an appetizing scent you've been missing, the suggestion swiftly became a compulsive craving.

There is a time and place for crawfish, and typically for me, that is a bit later in the year.

It's about more than the flavor. There are seasonal and social cues tied up with it. Crawfish season means backyard gatherings with full ice chests, or choice picnic tables outside on

seafood restaurant patios. It means festival time and trees sprouting green again and gardens in bloom after whatever kind of winter we had.



But after I agreed to tag along for a boil outing, any reservations

around having crawfish too soon evaporated into cayenne-scented steam.

It's typical for crawfish to turn up in the New Orleans area this time

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**“People just love it. When you don’t have it, they’re so disappointed, so you make the effort,” he said.”** JAMES CLESI, Clesi's Seafood Restaurant & Catering co-owner

## Does anyone remember the zany N.O.-focused '60s talk show?

BY RACHEL MIPRO  
Contributing writer



Night New Orleans People.' When did it air and where did it air? What was the

format of the show?"

Delving into the often inscrutable landscape of old New Orleans media with the help of seasoned TV producers turned up two possibilities: "Late Nite New Orleans" and "New Orleans Nite People."

The question: "I remember hearing about a show called 'Late

"New Orleans Nite People" was a show that elicited strong, although mixed, reactions from the viewing public. Local DJ "Captain Humble," aka Hugh Dillard, created the show in 1968, envisioning a local spin on the classic "Tonight Show" formula.

The show aired on WGNO from 1968-70 and was briefly brought



Dillard

back for a one-hour special in October of 1987. Characters such as Ruthie the Duck Girl, Harry the Singing Mailman and Ding Dong the Singing Bird contributed to mingled feelings about the show, which was often accused of mining for shock value — one guest is said to have bit off a chicken's head on air.

David Cuthbert, longtime New Orleans reporter and former writer for The Times-Picayune, had somewhat unflattering memories of the program.

"If memory serves ... (the show) involved an ever-changing array of people yearning to be thought of as New Orleans 'characters,' whose entertainment

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STAFF PHOTOS BY DAVID GRUNFELD

A delivery of freshly harvested crawfish from Mamou arrives at Seither's Seafood in Harahan.

## CRAWFISH

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of year. Also typical: critique that they're too small and too pricey.

But small and pricey are relative terms. What would be unacceptable in April can prove persuasive in January. From seafood markets to restaurants, I've found hot crawfish ranging from \$9 to \$13 a pound in early January, and size seems to be improving by the week.

My own spring associations notwithstanding, crawfish season really is guided by what the weather does to the harvest, and the demand that people bring to the market. By that measure, crawfish is at the very least in pre-season mode around New Orleans.

### More to come?

So just a few days after Twelfth Night, I found myself crunching along the oyster shell parking lot outside of Seither's Seafood. Shane Granger, proprietor of Shane's Seafood in the crawfish and rice town of Mamou, had just pulled up with a small supply of crawfish sacks bumping along in back. He also brought encouraging news that much more was coming.

Crawfish experts toe a delicate line when it comes to calling the season. Specialists with the LSU AgCenter have been expressing high hopes for a strong harvest this year, while emphasizing that predictions always come with caveats. A forecast can expire with the next cold front. Granger concurs.

"Anything can happen; Mother Nature rules this industry," said Granger.

Still, the fields were giving enough to make early harvests and small deliveries worthwhile.

"People go six months without them, and they want it," Granger observed. "By May, June, everyone's had a lot of crawfish. But right now, it's new again. They want it."

For the small early batch, Seither fired up a pot in his boil room, one that is only small by the standards of professional boil masters. In a few weeks, he'll be using the hot tub-sized boiling rig mounted on a trailer outside. The retail side of supplying sacks to home boilers will surge too, as seasonal traditions crop up again, from Super Bowl boils to Mardi Gras parade parties.

What will be an avalanche of crawfish during spring is still a trickle now. But that trickle is being lapped up by crawfish lovers who have been looking, no matter the price.

### 'Bananas' for mudbugs

In Mid-City, Clesi's Seafood Restaurant & Catering (4323 Bienville St.) has been serving hot crawfish since early December.

"It's a ferocious demand," said co-owner James Clesi. "People have been losing their bananas."

On New Year's Day, a holiday more closely associated with black-eyed peas, hordes turned up to try their luck with mudbugs instead. While minding the boiling pots, Clesi periodically looked



Crawfish is the specialty at Seither's Seafood.

up from the work to see people queuing through the gates to start the new year with crawfish.

Still, getting a steady supply at this time of year is trickier. Larger producers may wait until the supply is really rolling to make it worth staffing up and dispatching their trucks.

And there are new questions around the workforce this season. The industry relies on migrant workers, typically from Mexico, who are hired seasonally on federal visa programs. Processing those visas was reportedly slowed by the federal government shutdown late last year, and immigration sweeps could impact workers' willingness to return.

But crawfish is still flowing. Clesi has been scouring south Louisiana for a sack or two from one producer or another to build up what he calls his "pre-season" supply.

"People just love it. When you don't have it, they're so disappointed, so you make the effort," he said.

### First taste

At Seither's, where the boil was in the final stages, a couple crawfish-inspired dishes came out from the kitchen. There was a thick crawfish queso, with house-made tortilla chips to scoop it up, and a flank of fried redfish over crawfish pasta, with the sauce only slightly less rich than the queso.

Cooked crawfish dishes are available year-round with frozen product. Boiled crawfish has to be fresh to be worthwhile at all, and that was the main act we awaited at Seither's.

Soon enough, out came the plastic serving trays, one pressed over the other. Lifting the lid in a burst of steam was the seafood joint equivalent of opening the first box of king cake. There were oohs and ahhs and camera clicks.

They were tasty, soaked through with flavors of garlic and bay leaf visible between the shells and the spice within.

There was also the time spent snapping tails and peeling shells and talking with friends at the table, a part of the crawfish experience as integral as cayenne. Friday longnecks were easily justified. The pace of a busy week slowed pleasantly.

There will be a time soon when the crawfish will be twice as big and cost half the price. That will be the shank of the season when crawfish will be everywhere. Right now, getting our hands on the first few tails feels like getting back into practice for the full season ahead.

## GEOGRAPHIES

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surveyors established more formal vertical datums, in the hope that other mapping projects would adopt the same standards and the resulting charts could be integrated.

Because such efforts had varying goals and timetables, what resulted was a confusing assortment of horizontal and vertical datums. Among the vertical baselines were the Ellet Datum of 1850, which engineer Charles Ellet established for mapping the Ohio and Mississippi rivers; the Delta Survey Datum of 1858, developed by the rival team of Andrew A. Humphreys and Henry L. Abbot; and the Memphis Datum of 1858, based on an adjustment of the high watermark in that Tennessee city.

In a subsequent attempt at standardization, engineers in 1871 selected the low watermark at Cairo, Illinois, and designated an imaginary plane 300 feet below that level to be the Cairo Datum.

Why Cairo? Because that's where the Ohio River joins the Mississippi, more than doubling its volume as it continues southward to the sea.

Why 300 feet? Because that was the engineers' best estimate of how much the Mississippi River would drop over the next 500 miles until it discharged into the sea.

The Cairo Datum, which was refined in 1876, thus "made room" to include coastal Louisiana on the same elevational ranges that would also accommodate inland hills and prairies. Through the late 1800s, it became the favored vertical datum for mapping projects throughout the Mississippi Valley.

Which brings us to New Orleans.

### A city under water

In 1893, after decades of disappointment, the city finally funded a team of top-notch engineers to design a modern municipal drainage system. Known as the Advisory Board on Drainage, the engineers quickly realized they had no reliable maps of the city's meager topography — critical information if you're going to develop a nearly flat plain.

Under the direction of city engineer Linus Weed Brown, surveying crews set out to measure an interlace of baselines, offsets, profiles and spot elevations, from river to lake and in Algiers. The crews passed the raw field data to a "computer" (mathematician) and a draftsman to plot out one-foot contours on a series of enormous linen panels.

The Brown map, released in 1895, revealed subtle but crucial topographical features such as the natural levee of the Mississippi; the Esplanade, Metairie and Gentilly ridges; and the low-lying backswamp. In accordance with the standards of the day, the mapmakers referenced all elevations to the Cairo Datum, despite that the sea was only a short dis-



NEW ORLEANS SEWERAGE &amp; WATER BOARD

An 1895 Linus Brown contour map uses the Cairo Datum to define elevations around New Orleans.

tance away.

As a result, the contours measured the French Quarter waterfront as being a lofty 37 feet high; the Metairie-Gentilly Ridge as 25 feet high and the lakeshore as around 20 feet high.

A casual reader might interpret these elevations to be above sea level. If only!

In fact, they were above that imaginary plane positioned 300 feet below the low watermark at Cairo, Illinois, in the hope that that plane would roughly match sea level. As it turned out, it missed it by nearly two dozen feet.

Staring in the 1880s, engineers began measuring the actual level of the sea, using tidal gauge stations in places like Biloxi, and extended this new "true" vertical datum inland, to places like Memphis and Cairo — the reverse direction of times past.

What they found was that the old Memphis Datum turned out to be 8.13 feet below the mean level of the sea, and that the Cairo Datum was fully 21.26 feet below that level.

Subtract 21.26 feet from those aforementioned elevations, and you get a more reasonable 16 feet above sea level for the French Quarter waterfront; about 4 feet for the ridge systems; and a foot or so along the Lake Pontchartrain shore.

### Still a data point

Nevertheless, because the entire system rested on Brown's contour map, those Cairo Datum elevations got ingested into countless engineering documents, calculations and contracts — to dig canals and design pumps, and afterwards, to maintain, operate and expand one of the world's most complex urban drainage systems.

And because the Brown map proved so useful to subsequent urbanization upon the now-drained backswamp, the Cairo Datum contours got propagated into countless other projects.

Real estate developers in 1909, for example, cheerfully described their new Gentilly Terrace subdivision as being "twenty-seven feet above the Cairo Datum Line," a figure drawn from 1895 map but erroneously construed to mean "that it is the most elevated residential section in the City of New Orleans."

Only engineers knew to subtract out 21.26 feet to get those figures to sea-level standards, an

adjustment made more complicated by the fact that municipal drainage had triggered soils to subside below the level of the sea.

In fact, a close reading of Brown's map reveals that two spots had already subsided by 1895, due to earlier attempts at swamp drainage. One was in today's Broadmoor/Mid-City area, and the other was in the central Seventh, Eighth and Ninth wards.

Brown's map measured those bowls at about 20 feet above the Cairo Datum, meaning they had dropped to 1 to 2 feet below sea level. To my knowledge, this is the first scientific evidence that New Orleans was subsiding below the mean level of the sea. Today, those same areas are 5 to 6 feet below sea level.

In the early 1900s, new sea-level research called for further adjustments to be made to old datums; for example, the New Cairo Datum of 1910 updated the conversion to be 20.434 feet below the 1870s plane. Mapmakers in the 1930s replaced the old baselines with the National Geodetic Vertical Datum of 1929, which used 26 tide gauges all around the continent.

Decades later, geodesists (scientists who measure the earth) adopted the North American Vertical Datum of 1988 to infer mean sea level, and will soon transition to the GPS-measured North American-Pacific Geopotential Datum of 2022.

But because so much of our regional engineering relies on legacy data, relict datums manage to live on. Writing in 1979, Clifford J. Mugnier, Louisiana's premier expert in geodesy, reported that vertical datums from 1899 and 1911 remained in extensive use, and that the Cairo and Memphis datums still appeared in flood insurance maps.

To this day, certain tasks within the Sewerage & Water Board still require grappling with the 150-year-old Cairo Datum, by either subtracting or adding that adjustment, depending if you're going forward or backward in time.

You can even find a relict datum still in use right here in this newspaper. Turn to the Weather Page, look under River Stages, and find today's river stage. You'll see a preposterously low reading for Memphis, as if the Mississippi were flowing backwards from the higher stages reported for Natchez, Baton Rouge and New Orleans.

Rest assured, this is no hydrological vortex. It's just the old Memphis Datum of 1858, still at work.

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## CURIOS

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value was nil," Cuthbert said.

The show underwent more of a tonal shift when then-station owner Dave Wagenvoord took over as host. Wagenvoord reportedly dedicated more air time to sponsors, such as water bed promoter Red Kagan.

"New Orleans Nite People" was canceled shortly after the station was sold, according to Times-Picayune reporting. From the same scorching Times-Picayune account of the show: "It was deranged. It was disgusting. It was discontinued. ... An hour long edition of 'Stupid Human Tricks' featuring any eccentric or nut case who popped up in the studio audience or walked through the studio doors."

The show has largely disap-

peared from the collective consciousness. Former WGNO producer David Jones, who joined the organization in 1980, said the involved parties had already left the station. Jones later tried to track down a couple of the characters to include in a new weekly series, but the search proved unsuccessful.

"In the '70s they did produce a lot of oddball shows," Jones said via email.

The other show, alternately referred to as "Late Night New Orleans," and "Late Nite New Orleans" was also treated none too gently in the local paper. Current WLAE-TV staff members did not have records of the show, but a Times-Picayune search turned up some information — in the form of another scathing review. The show was announced as a joint project between radio station WTIX and WLAE. DJs Tony Ponseti and Jay Richards headed

the show, set to launch September 1992. The two were meant to host "Late Nite New Orleans" every Tuesday, with new live musical acts broadcasted from the Palm Court Cafe in the French Quarter. But by December, multiple delays and a lack of funding led the Times-Picayune to term the show a "dead issue."

From the December 1992 article on the show: "Once touted as its most ambitious local production ever, 'Late Nite New Orleans' instead has turned out to be one of WLAE's biggest busts."

While the two shows were ultimately short-lived, memories of the programming lives on.

*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.*