



entertainment LIVING

NOLA.COM | SUNDAY, APRIL 5, 2026 1D

'It still gives me butterflies.'

Pigeon Town Steppers make a pastel Easter party

Residents in the 17th Ward "way Uptown" — along with plenty of visitors — greet Easter Sunday with a sense of anticipation. Not for the Easter bunny, but for something far more New Orleans: the Pigeon Town Steppers and their annual second-line parade.

Each year, the Steppers transform their neighborhood streets into a display of style, pride and pageantry.

Around 1 p.m., the door swings open at a familiar spot, and the crowd squeezes together with everyone trying to get the best view.



Tammy C. Barney

► See **EASTER**, page 9D



PHOTO BY MADDIE SPINNER

The Original Pigeon Town Steppers parade with Sudan and Undeafed Divas & Gents & Kids Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs at the Jazz Fest grounds last year.



Tunnel decisions

Projects of 1950s-60s speak to feasibility, viability of metro-area tunnels

BY RICHARD CAMPANELLA
Contributing writer

"Mud, mud, mud," wrote architect Benjamin Latrobe of New Orleans in 1819; "this is a floating city, floating below the surface of the water on a bed of mud."

Soil scientists would not disagree, and actually use terms like "sticky," "muck" and "gumbo" in the federal government's official Orleans Parish soil survey. Nor would geologists disagree with Latrobe in describing our loamy sediments as "the result of the gradual accumulation of the deposition of the river."

► See **TUNNELS**, page 9D



STAFF PHOTOS BY ENAN CHEDIAK

Pandora Gastelum shows off a puppet at the Mudlark Theater in New Orleans on March 11.

'SHINING THROUGH'

New Orleans' Giant Puppet Festival brings eclectic performances to the Marigny

BY RACHEL MIPRO
Contributing writer

The wide red eyes of an albino animal head, fitted onto a lace-covered wire base, greet visitors entering Pandora Gastelum's studio in the Marigny, where puppeteers have started assembling bits and bobs of their crafts ahead of New Orleans' annual Giant Puppet Festival.

Her headquarters, the Mudlark Public Theatre, has been a center for New Orleans puppetry since it was established in 2009. Gastelum further fanned the spark of Crescent City puppetry when she started The New Orleans Giant Puppet Festival.

Now in its 12th year, the festival features local and traveling artists, jam-packed into a five-day lineup. Walk into Allways Lounge and you'll find a psychedelic vampire fantasia, performed by Naughty Little No Good. Beanlandia will



Playdoh Kolo demonstrates a puppet at the Mudlark Theater in New Orleans.

host family-friendly alphabet puppetry by Honey Goodenough. The New Marigny Theater will host Boxcutter Collective's sci-fi musical theater. The list goes on, with

► See **PUPPETS**, page 8D

NEW ORLEANS GIANT PUPPET FESTIVAL

WHEN: April 9-13

WHERE:

The Mudlark Public Theatre, 1200 Port St., and various locations around the Marigny
TICKETS: \$15-\$25, and \$150 for a weekend pass

INFO: neworleansgiantpuppetfest.com

EASTER

Continued from page 1D

The horns begin to blare through the air as the first Stepper bursts on the scene, prancing and waving two large, fluffy feather fans. Cheers rise. Heads turn. Phones go up. The group's "pretty colors" for the year are revealed as he moves to the rhythm.

One by one, more members follow, each receiving their own round of applause.

Then Joseph "Rollin Joe" Henry makes his appearance.

His decorated wheelchair rolls forward, then spins, the front wheels lifting briefly off the ground as the crowd roars. He turns, dips and rolls with the music, commanding the moment as much as any dancer on foot.

"Ain't no feeling like when you come out that door," Henry wrote in a 2020 essay for the Historic New Orleans Collection. "Every-



STAFF FILE PHOTO BY DAVID GRUNFELD

A member of the Original Men Pigeon Town Steppers holds a yellow crocodile during the Easter second line in 2013.

body out there waiting to see you, waiting to see your colors, the pretty colors.

"It still gives me butterflies every year."

The Steppers' outfits are symbols of pride and investment. The members design their own gators — imported from Mori, Italy — with each pair costing about \$1,400. The two-toned shoes match their

gator belts and the bands wrapped around their hats. Their suits are tailor-made too. This year, even the fabric came from Mori.

Henry and his younger brother, Sylvester, were among the 20 founders of the club in 1994, serving as president and vice president. After two years of going "renegade" without permits or a charter, they worked with a member of the Lady Buck Jumpers to make the parade official.

The group chose to parade on Easter because other Sundays were taken. Now 32 years later, Henry is still president and the last surviving founder. Sylvester died in February 2025.

The second-line parade route changes, but always goes through Pigeon Town, Gert Town and Hollygrove. It ends at the Merry-Go-Round Hall, home of the Young & True Friends Benevolent Association, a precursor to the Steppers.

Henry's grandmother, Edna Henry, belonged to the Young & True Friends, founded in 1881.

The 500-member association once was one of the largest in the city. It stopped parading in 1994.

Henry was asked to take over the Young & True Friends charter, but he couldn't at the time. "It would have been nice to keep it going," he said.

Instead, he started the Pigeon Town Steppers Social Aid & Pleasure Club.

They continue the second-line tradition to honor those who came before them, Henry said. "We want to keep fighting to keep it going. Sometimes you can't let it go because of the love for it. I don't ever want to give it up. I want to pass it down to the younger generations."

At age 12, Henry was riding his bike two blocks from his grandmother's house when a stray bullet hit him. He has been in a wheelchair ever since.

"I didn't know about being paralyzed," Henry recalled. "It wasn't easy. I didn't have a lot of things that (disabled people) have

now. I've always been an athletic person. I didn't want to be left out. That has always been my mindset."

Despite this life-changing injury, Henry refused to sit on the sidelines. He set out to do everything his friends did, and he still does today. When he's not spinning himself through the second-line crowd, he takes a push from his friend Jamal Hall.

Instead of competing with other clubs, the Steppers work to improve every year.

"We keep the pastel colors because it is Easter," Henry said. "Our goal is not to disappoint our fans. We put on a show. It's what they want to see."

And this Easter Sunday, as the colors dance and the brass band marches down the street, the fans will experience another spectacular moment.

Tammy C. Barney can be reached at tlcbarney@gmail.com.

TUNNELS

Continued from page 1D

This tenuous terroir likely explains the surprise expressed last month after Elon Musk's The Boring Company selected New Orleans, along with Baltimore and Dallas, for its Tunnel Vision Challenge to explore building a one-mile loop tunnel.

Don't expect any digging soon; it's all pending feasibility studies and route options. Likewise, don't imagine driving down this tunnel. The idea is to move people swiftly on a closed transit system connecting congested areas such as airports, convention centers and downtown hotels.

The Vegas Loop, which the company bored through hard desert earth during 2019-21, is nicknamed "Teslas in a Tube."

As for boring through our "sticky gumbo," yes, it's possible, and no, the high water table is not the main challenge, especially after municipal drainage has substantially lowered that aqueous level. Rather, the challenge has been to prevent the muddy mass — comprising sand, silt and clay particles mixed with water and organic matter — from collapsing into its own cavity.

Modern engineering has solved this problem by shoring up holes right after boring them. Musk's cutter-head device, for example, advances concrete tube segments, like cuff bracelets on an arm, into the cavity immediately after it is hollowed out, preventing collapse.

So while a loop tunnel beneath New Orleans is technically possible, it remains to be seen if such a project is feasible and viable, following an assessment of needs, contingencies, benefits and costs, including long-term operations and maintenance. New Orleans should not be viewed as an experimental laboratory, and this proposal is no mere academic exercise. A history of regional tunneling shines light on the questions of infrastructure possibility, feasibility and viability.

Tunnel at Nine Mile Point?

While speculation about tunneling beneath New Orleans arose periodically throughout the 19th century, the first serious proposal came in 1919, when the Public Belt Railroad Commission created a Bridge and Tunnel Committee to decide whether trains should go over or under the Mississippi River at Nine Mile Point.

Knowing that boring beneath the riverbed would be costly and risky, tunnel advocates instead proposed laying a series of prefabricated concrete ring sec-

tions along a river-bottom trench, which would then be sealed and pumped dry for tracks to be laid.

Shippers supported this idea because it left the navigation channel unimpeded. But railroaders worried as much as civil engineers about its difficulty, even after military officials required that any bridge option would have to be high enough to accommodate large naval vessels.

When the Commission hired famed bridge-builder Ralph Modjeski to design such a span, he promptly quashed the tunnel idea, and in 1925, received a War Department permit for what would become, in 1935, the Huey P. Long Bridge.

All the while, what would become the world's longest canal was being dredged to enable barges to sail between Texas and Florida without venturing into open seas. Known as the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway (GIWW), the channel connected with the Harvey Canal in 1924, extended eastward from the Industrial Canal in 1943, and forked



FILE PHOTO FROM THE TIMES-PICAYUNE ARCHIVES
Grand opening of the Harvey Canal Tunnel in 1957

off on an alternative route through Algiers in 1954. As it extended, the waterway triggered a series of bridge-versus-tunnel debates wherever it intersected with motorist arteries.

The most pressing problem was on the West Bank, where all latitudinal traffic had to funnel onto 4th Street (now Louisiana 18) to get over the Harvey Canal/GIWW, creating what the Jefferson Parish Yearly Review in 1950 called "one

of the worst traffic bottlenecks in the State."

Barge pilots, meanwhile, had a bottleneck of their own. The GIWW got so busy that vessels had to line up for hours awaiting passage beneath the 4th Street drawbridge and through the Harvey Locks.

The Harvey Tunnel

To solve the vehicular bottleneck, transportation planners considered a new bridge or tunnel. The Har-

vey Canal Industrial Club initially supported a bridge, but in 1950 endorsed a tunnel instead, so as not to limit the height of vessels using the canal. Deemed feasible, the tunnel plan won.

Soon, workers began driving steel sheet piling beneath both sides of the Harvey Canal and into the bed itself, creating a subterranean cofferdam. Soil was then excavated from within the walled confine, and water pumped out, allowing for reinforced concrete tubes to be installed into the cavity, section by section. Once completed, an extremely strong roof and floor were built, and the roadbeds finished off.

Described by the Yearly Review as "the second fully automatic underwater tunnel in the world," the new infrastructure comprised "two parallel tubes, each having 2-lane concrete highways," running 1080 feet underground along a full span of "1850 feet...from ground level to ground level."

The Harvey Tunnel opened in September 1957, one year before the comple-

tion of the Greater New Orleans Mississippi River Bridge.

Alas, the Harvey project was not the first tunnel completed in the metro area. That distinction goes to the Belle Chasse Tunnel, which resulted from the resolution to that other bottleneck, of barges at the Harvey lock.

The Belle Chasse Tunnel

In 1948, Congress authorized an alternative channel for the GIWW to be dug along the Jefferson/Plaquemines parish line. Work began in the early 1950s, including the construction of a lock at the Algiers riverfront, a bridge for what is now Gen. DeGaulle Drive, and a combined railroad bridge, auto bridge and auto tunnel to access Belle Chasse.

Unlike the concurrent project in Harvey, the Belle Chasse Tunnel preceded the canal it would go under. This allowed for the easier "cut-and-cover" construction method, whereby a trench is dug on dry land and the

► See **TUNNELS**, page 10D

TUNNELS

Continued from page 9D

concrete tubes are cast and connected thereupon. There was no boring or shoring; rather, the tunnel came together in open air and was later buried for the canal to be opened above.

For this reason, the Belle Chasse Tunnel — “the first underwater tunnel in the state,” according to the Yearly Review — opened by spring 1956, a year ahead of the Harvey Tunnel.

Five years later, workers completed the Houma Tunnel in Terrebonne Parish, also built beneath a new GIWW segment using the cut-and-cover process. To date, the Houma project is the last major vehicular tunnel to open in Louisiana.

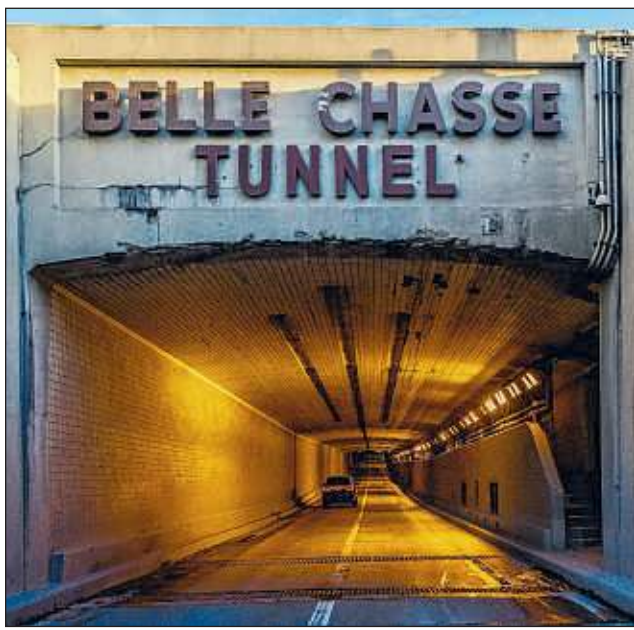
It was not, however, the last to be built in Louisiana. That dubious distinction goes to the Rivergate tunnel, whose strange story began in 1946 when the famed New York city planner Robert Moses came to town to advise on metro-area transportation improvements.

The Rivergate tunnel

Moses’ influential report abounded in compelling ideas and sobering advice. “Never build a tunnel if you can build anything else,” he wrote in regard to the proposed downtown crossing of the Mississippi. “A two-lane tunnel would have less than half the capacity of a four-lane bridge. It would cost more, would take twice as long to build, and cost substantially more to maintain.... (I) can see no justification for a tunnel and therefore without reservation recommend a bridge.”

Twelve years later, the Greater New Orleans Mississippi River Bridge opened, and today no one argues a tunnel would have been better.

But Moses made one infamous recommendation in his 1946 report, one that earns him enmity to this day. Envisioning westbound traffic funneling through



STAFF FILE PHOTO BY CHRIS GRANGER

A car travels through the Belle Chasse tunnel on its last day of operation Dec. 19, 2023.

downtown, he viewed the French Quarter riverfront as the most expedient route to reach the West Bank, being at the time lined with unsightly cargo sheds and underused railroad tracks. He named his proposed viaduct the Waterfront Expressway, hardly considering what impact it might have on the city’s showcase historic neighborhood, including Jackson Square.

After federal funding for the national interstate system became available in the early 1960s, preservationists rose up in fierce opposition for what was now called the Riverfront Expressway — even as most local power-brokers, including City Hall, passionately supported the elevated viaduct.

Preservationists thought they found a new argument against the monstrosity when the Port of New Orleans began work on its International Trade Mart skyscraper (now the Four Seasons Hotel) and the adjacent Rivergate Exhibition Hall, both at the juncture of Canal and Poydras streets.

How can an expressway be built to barricade a trade mart from its exhibition hall?, preservationists asked, hoping the latter two projects would help disrupt

the former.

But the city had an answer ready — and \$1.3 million to back it up. It would preemptively build a concrete box-culvert tunnel — 98 feet wide, 20 feet high and 700 feet long — so that three lanes of high-speed traffic would flow beneath the dual surface projects.

Architects designed the tunnel into the Rivergate basement, and in 1965, workers began digging the trench and piecing together the tunnel segments, resulting in what looked like a gigantic men’s tie box. After it was covered over in 1966, construction began on the Rivergate, which opened in 1968 in time for city’s 250th birthday. The only remaining piece was the long-awaited, much-hated high-speed viaduct.

But in July 1969, the U.S. Department of Transportation issued a stunning decision to cancel the Riverfront Expressway, on grounds that it would indeed irreparably damage the French Quarter. Preservationists rejoiced, while the city, having failed to fully assess viability, got stuck with a perfectly useless 700-foot-long tunnel.

Some suggested turning it into a performance space;

others called for a science museum or entertainment center. One official interviewed in 1987 joked the subterranean chamber could be used for “growing mushrooms or for the world’s biggest wine cellar,” else an “underground swimming hole(,) giant fish tank (or) tunnel of love.”

It ended up as valet parking for Harrah’s (now Caesar’s) Casino, opened in 1999 four years after the controversial demolition of the Rivergate.

A mixed record

Tunnels in greater New Orleans have not been particularly successful. The Harvey Tunnel, largely supplanted in 1984 by the Harvey Canal Bridge, had to be closed temporarily in 2024 for extensive repairs, while the leaky “Belle Chasse Carwash” has been completely replaced by a new bridge.

Both outcomes bring to mind Moses’s admonition, “Never build a tunnel if you can build anything else.”

Soil subsidence throughout New Orleans, meanwhile, has created a counterintuitive problem along our “water tunnels” — that is, those subterranean drainage canals that send stormwater to the pumping stations. Because they rest on sturdy pilings, these concrete culverts sink at a much slower rate than surrounding neighborhoods, resulting in cracked and sloping surfaces.

This explains that slanted neutral ground along 4100-4200 Fontainebleau Drive, and why your car goes airborne on South Claiborne Avenue when you speed across Napoleon. Subsidence around tunnels also partly explains the infamous “Sinkhole de Mayo” incident of May 5, 2016, in which a huge chunk of Canal Street asphalt collapsed immediately outside of the 1966 Rivergate tunnel.

There are other tunnels around town. A pedestrian passageway connects a Poydras parking garage

with the basement of the casino. An abandoned vehicular tunnel lies beneath the old airport, while the new airport has a number of underground service tunnels. And I learned from a retired neonatal nurse that an underground corridor once connected Charity and Tulane hospitals, to get fragile preemies to needed care without exposing them to the elements.

On that note, one might add a corollary to Moses’s adage: Build a tunnel only when you need one.

Richard Campanella, a geographer with the Tulane School of Architecture and Built Environment, is the author of “Draining New Orleans,” “Bienville’s Dilemma,” “Crossroads, Cutoffs, and Confluences,” and other books from LSU Press. He may be reached at <http://richcampanella.com>, rcampane@tulane.edu or [@nolacampanella](https://www.instagram.com/nolacampanella) on X.