

Oak Street: A History

BY Richard Campanella

“TODAY, Oak Street retains the feel of a small-town main street.”

So reads the closing line of the new historical plaque installed by the Oak Street Merchants, Residents and Property Owners organization. It's precisely the thought I had in 1992 when I first saw Oak Street, and it's an impression traceable back to when it first became part of the streetscape of Carrollton.

Centuries prior, this terrain comprised a natural levee redolent of oak, sweetgum, sycamore, and locust trees, elevated enough to evade swampy conditions but low enough for the occasional river deluge. Like other areas along the Mississippi, it was provisionally occupied by the Annochy, Acolapissa, Quinapisa, Mugulasha and other indigenous bands, who referred to this general vicinity as *Chapitoulas*, meaning a sharp river bend, or a fishing hole for *choupic* (choupique, or mudfish).

After the establishment of New Orleans in 1718, French colonials proceeded to grant parcels of land for the production of export commodities. The first concessionaire of the future Carrollton area was city founder Jean Baptiste Le Moyne, sieur de Bienville, who in 1719 granted himself all of present-day Uptown plus much of the West Bank. The audacious move put Bienville at odds with his superiors, and over many years, he was forced to lease out or sell off all tracts.

The parcel underlying present-day Carrollton eventually came into the possession of the LaFrènière clan, whose scion Nicolas by the 1750s launched the beginnings of a plantation, using enslaved labor. An ardent defender of the French regime, Nicolas LaFrènière despaired to learn of King Louis XV's 1762 treaty to transfer Louisiana to Spain, and in 1768 organized an insurrection against the incoming Spanish governor. Its failure led to LaFrènière's arrest and execution, followed by the transfer of his family's property to supporters of the Spanish regime.

The tract thence came into the possession of the Lebreton family, which in 1781 sold it to a Scots-Irish Creole named Barthelemy Daniel de Macarty. Barthelemy's son Jean-Baptiste Macarty went on to form a major commodity plantation that would prosper for decades. According to Robert J. Cangelosi Jr., “the Macartys were one of the first planter families to adopt sugar as their cash crop after it was successfully refined by Etienne de Boré” in his 1795 experiments. By the early 1800s, with Louisiana now under American dominion, the Macarty Plantation spanned 32 arpents, or 1.15 miles, of river frontage and stretched deep into the backswamp.

In 1825, lands around the Macarty Plantation became part of the new Parish of Jefferson, just upriver from New Orleans, whose population had quadrupled since colonial times. Demand for urban housing motivated real estate developers to negotiate with the owners of adjacent plantations — or plantation owners to negotiate with surveyors and

developers—to transform croplands into faubourgs. First to urbanize was the Gravier Plantation back in 1788, followed by the Marigny Plantation in 1805; the Delord-Sarpy (Duplantier), Saulet, Robin, and Livaudais plantations during 1806-1810; the Tremé and Ursuline tracts also in 1810; and from the Panis up to the Bouligny plantations during the 1820s. By then, the public road to the Chapitoulas Coast had become known as Tchoupitoulas Street.

Most of these new faubourgs were either adjacent or proximate to each other, which informed the decision to develop. The Macarty Plantation, on the other hand, was separated from all the downriver action by nearly two miles. Therein lay an advantage: this land could be made into a bucolic country town, isolated from the growing metropolis and yet connected to it, via two exciting new conveyances — a canal and a railroad.

In 1831, the Macarty family sold their land to a group of investors including the New Orleans Canal and Banking Company, which needed the rear flank of the tract for their planned navigation canal to Lake Pontchartrain. Other investors proposed to build a passenger railroad linking their land to downtown, thus steering the trajectory of development in their direction. In 1833, the investors hired German engineer Charles F. Zimpel to design the New Orleans & Carrollton Rail Road while also sketching a street plan for the new subdivision of “Carrollton,” named for Gen. William Carroll, who had his Kentucky militia camp here prior to the Battle of New Orleans.

Zimpel's 1833 plan for Carrollton featured squares that are four times the size of today's blocks and ascribed different names to their streets. Today's South Carrollton Avenue was called Canal Avenue; St. Charles Avenue was First Street; and because of the supersized blocks, present-day Maple Street was Second Street, Freret was Third Street, and today's Oak Street was Fourth Street. Three years later, when the plantation immediately upriver from Carrollton was subdivided as Greenville in 1836, its surveyor ascribed the name “Oak” to the artery corresponding to Zimpel's Fourth Street, perhaps to play on the verdant theme of Greenville, whose other toponyms included “Pine” and “Walnut.”

The New Orleans & Carrollton Rail Road began operation in 1835, while the New Orleans Canal & Banking Company's New Basin Canal, now the I-10 corridor, opened in 1836. Now directly accessible to New Orleans, antebellum Carrollton prospered accordingly, becoming a community of many descriptions. It was at first a hamlet, then an incorporated town, then an incorporated city and parish seat, complete with its own courthouse, school system, fire and police stations, levee and drainage systems, market, churches and cemetery. Thanks to the railroad, Carrollton also became a bedroom community and weekend getaway, offering hotels, gardens, amusements, race tracks — and sixteen

Inauguration of Oak Street plaque, April 16 2026.
Photo by Richard Campanella.



liquor outlets. It was also an intermodal steamboat port, with light industry specializing in lumber milling. By 1861, according to historian Wilton P. Ledet, the City of Carrollton was home to 2,776 people, with German, Anglo-American and French families predominating. Sixty-three white families owned a total of 248 enslaved African Americans, while 99 people of color lived in freedom. Most residents occupied the neighborhoods we now call the Riverbend, Black Pearl, Pigeon (Pension) Town, East Carrollton and Leonidas.

As for Oak Street — that is, Fourth Street — it was perfectly unremarkable at this time, being a quiet residential artery far from the bustling riverfront. Commerce clustered along Levee Street, roughly present-day Leake, because it lay close to the wharves and railroads and tapped into the foot traffic around the Carrollton Market and parish courthouse.

Fourth Street began to transform in the late nineteenth century. One driver was Carrollton's annexation into New Orleans in 1874, the last of three contentious political takeovers dating back to 1852. The new political geography meant residents of Carrollton would be unburdened of their city debt, but they would also relinquish control of their community. In 1891, for example, the Orleans Parish Levee Board decided to realign the river levee fronting Carrollton, eliminating Levee Street and its many stores. In 1893, the former New Orleans & Carrollton Railroad, now the St. Charles Streetcar Line, was electrified, putting Carrollton in easier reach of downtown. In 1894, New Orleans passed an ordinance to rename dozens of streets for the sake of clarity and efficiency.

The 1894 ordinance specifically called for the name of Greenville's four-block-long Oak Street to be extended clear across Carrollton, replacing Zimpel's Fourth Street while eliminating confusion with the other Fourth Street in the Garden District. The problem was that New Orleans also already had an Oak Street, in the Sixth Ward. The ordinance renamed that downtown strip as Orchid Street so that Carrollton's circa-1833 Fourth Street could instead become an extension of Greenville's circa-1836 Oak Street.

Nominally speaking, the 1894 ordinance made Oak Street eighteen blocks in length, measuring 1.12 miles from Broadway to the river levee. Another ordinance later in 1894 adopted the so-called Philadelphia (decimal) system for house-numbering, in which blocks increment by 100 per their distance from Canal Street or the Mississippi River. By 1895, Oak Street had all the names and numbers it has today, and by the early 1900s, its upper half began developing that “main street” character discernible today.

Various reasons explain why commerce agglomerated on Oak Street. For one, retail activity in Carrollton had shifted inland on account of the 1891 destruction of old Levee Street, coupled with the interior expansion of the neighborhood thanks to the 1874 annexation and the 1893 street electrification. This put Oak Street in a more centralized position among local consumers. Oak Street also happened to be the one artery that directly linked the River Road at Southport, itself a bustling little river port, with the heart of Carrollton, without any awkward jogs or turns. That made Oak a key ingress for folks in Jefferson Parish to access Uptown New Orleans.

Importantly, the 8100-8800 blocks of Oak are about 10 feet wider than adjacent streets, enabling them to accommodate a spur line in 1900. Known as the Southport Shuttle, this streetcar line ran from South Carrollton up Willow Street to Gen. Ogden Street to Leake Avenue, then down those eight wider blocks of Oak, making them all the more attractive for commerce. After the termination of the Southport Shuttle in 1929, Oak Street's extra width allowed for two-way automotive traffic plus parking, furthering its appeal for shopkeepers. More shops meant more commerce, because the patron of a restaurant is likely to become a customer at a store or a client at a bank.

Oak Street became the “main street” it is today through spontaneous marketplace dynamics, without any top-down guidance from City Hall. That changed with the establishment of the City Planning Commission in 1923, followed by the first zoning ordinance in 1929. Planners surveyed the cityscape, mapped out existing land uses, and designated certain areas to be commercially or residentially zoned. Because Oak Street had been residential before becoming partly commercial, both land uses, along with their architectural responses, became inscribed into the streetscape.

Oak Street retains this interesting mix of land uses, in the heart of an urban neighborhood that started as a small town and became a separate city. In a city replete with walkable historic commercial corridors, Oak Street stands alone, being at once traditional and contemporary, local yet worldly, ensconced yet accessible, and urbane as well as quaint — a city shopping and dining district with the look and feel of a small-town main street.

streetscapes

Richard Campanella, a geographer with the Tulane School of Architecture and Built Environment. In 2021, the Oak Street Merchants Residents Property Owners commissioned Campanella to research and write a history of Oak Street, from which this article was abridged; he also wrote the text on the historical plaque. Campanella is the author of *Draining New Orleans*, *The West Bank of Greater New Orleans*, *Bienville's Dilemma*, and other books. He may be reached through richcampanella.com, rcampane@tulane.edu, or [@nolacampanella](https://twitter.com/nolacampanella) on X.