

## THE NEUTRAL GROUND.

For a long time the locality upon which the large avenue of Canal street is situated, was known under the above designation. This was at the time that the political parties had pretty nearly divided between the upper and lower districts, or municipalities, of New Orleans. But long before this epoch, and as early as the French domination, this vicinity had attracted the especial attention of the inhabitants of the lower portion of the city, on account of its convenient position for the opening of a water communication between the River Mississippi and the upper branches of the Bayou St. John, the outlet to the Lake Pontchartrain. On some topographical maps made in 1727, or under the administration of Gov. Perrier, the first design of such a canal is to be found, running from the margin of the river around the city, and losing itself toward the back lands in the neighborhood of the present Bayou Road. There is even a small basin designated near the levee, now the site of the granite Custom-House, where small vessels, in the shape of pirogues and skiffs, are seen floating, whilst in their vicinity a number of sheds are erected for the building of others no doubt intended for future navigation. However, this plan of connecting the river with the lake by a canal running to the natural water outlet, the Bayou St. John, was never carried out, although even the Jesuit fathers at one time (in 1735) had engaged to undertake this awful enterprise. The fact is, that although the Canal street locality especially invited to this undertaking, the labor forces at that time were inadequate for the carrying through the almost impassable cypress swamps a navigable canal of even the smallest dimensions. Hence the project remained in *statu quo*, and the open space outside the picket fences and the *glacis* of the fortifications was looked upon as common ground for the pasture of cattle and horses.

In 1796, however, when Gov. Carondelet had again placed all the fortifications around the city in a respectable state of repairs, on account of apprehensions of invasions from above, or even from the internal commotions, created by the very lively times of the French revolution, Barthelemy Lafon, an engineer employed under the Spanish Government, obtained from the Governor a commission for erecting upon part of these commons, or open pasture grounds, sundry establishments for the working of a foundry, and other materials necessary for the repairs of the city fortifications and defences. At about the same time, and in the near vicinity of these temporary erections, other mechanics, such as rope or cable makers, solicited and obtained permission with regard for the like temporary erection of sheds and buildings for a rope walk, etc. For these concessions written permits may have been issued under the administration of Gov. Carondelet; but after his departure, and under the successive administration of Gov. Gayoso, Casa-Calvo and Salcedo, the colonial authorities were especially enjoined from granting any royal land concessions in the near vicinity of the city of New Orleans, as may be seen under the stringent land ordinances issued by the Intendant Morales, in 1799, and thereabout. After the transfer of Louisiana, in 1803, to the United States, the locality under review remained for a number of years in a state of quiet or little disturbance. The territorial legislature had incorporated the Orleans Navigation Company in 1805, for the purpose of carrying out the original plan of connecting the Mississippi with Lake Pontchartrain, by extending the Canal Carondelet through Basin and Canal streets to the shores of the Mississippi. That at that time this project might have been accomplished with comparative ease, needs no demonstration, since the Canal Marigny, in the lower part of the city, had been successfully connected with the river. But it seems that the company found it to their interest to leave this improvement aside, and to content themselves with merely widening their already navigable canal. Thereupon various claims sprang up to the ownership, possession or enjoyment of the neutral ground. Barthelemy Lafon, in 1810, and others, claimed these grounds in virtue of royal orders under Spanish Governors; and in 1818, or thereabout, by some compromise no doubt with the then city corporation, these vacant pasture fields were sold to various individuals, after having been laid out in lots and streets to correspond with the old city proper and the upper faubourg or Suburb St. Mary, laid out in 1788 and 1795 by the Graviers. Upon this same locality had been erected the Charity Hospital, which stood in the square part of which is now occupied by Mechanics' Hall, the Academy of Science, State Library, etc. The fortifications were leveled about the year 1808-9, for we find in a paper of 1810 that there a public promenade had been erected along the former *glacis*, extending from the Levee towards Rampart street. At present this Canal Avenue is the most splendid quarter of New Orleans, and in course of time will extend towards the Metairie Ridge with its immense piles of buildings.