

PART ONE

Why Was Canal Street Ever Called Canal Street

By Jesse Core

Contributing Writer

Is it true that if you put your ear down flat on the neutral ground of Canal Street you can hear water underneath pouring along into the river?

You may hear what sounds like rushing water — as you can hear the ocean roar in a sea shell, but what is underneath Canal Street is what is underneath nearly any other New Orleans Street — topsoil.

Why, then, call it Canal?

For perfectly illogical New Orleans reasons. It's much shorter and easier than, say, Reserved for Use as a Canal Street or May Become a Canal Street — or Originally Intended to be a Canal Street.

The name of the grand, old street with its evergreen newness was fixed as Canal not only in the official records but the mind of New Orleans by an Act in 1807 of the U.S. Congress. A U.S. statue-at-large of that year recognized the claims of the little insular port city to the commons adjacent to its Colonial environs — "within 600 yards from the fortifications of the same" — with the proviso that the new American municipality shall reserve and convey gratuitously for the public benefit "as much of the said commons as shall be necessary to continue the Canal of Carondelet from the present basis to the Mississippi."

New Orleans was further enjoined not to "dispose of," for the purpose of building thereon, any lot within 60 feet of the space reserved for a canal, which shall forever remain open as a public highway . . ."

The space reserved for a canal became the special business of the Orleans Navigation Company.

The company empowered by Congress to dig a canal on Canal Street "has a curious place in New Orleans' history," writes John Churchill Chase in his history of the city, now in its third edition, entitled *Frenchmen, Desire, Good Children and Other Streets of New Orleans*.

Chartered by the territorial legislature in 1805, its purpose was to make "the Carondelet Canal and Bayou St. John fit for navigation."

The Spanish Governor Carondelet had dug the canal and extended the bayou to the ramparts in rear of the city. "When the United States acquired Louisiana, Carondelet's canal was a neglected ditch of stagnant, useless for either drainage or navigation," writes Chase.

For \$375,000 the Orleans Navigation Co. succeeded in clearing and widening the Canal of Carondelet, improving its turning basis and dredging out Bayou St. John. Thereafter, notes Chase, the company did little else for 40 years but collect tolls on the waterway it had been hired and paid to make navigable and in speculating in real estate.

"The ambitious plans to extend the canal from its turning basin, along the street which acquired the name of Basin, to the street which acquired the name Cabal, and thence to the river, never came any closer to reality than legendary legend on maps of New Orleans for a generation, reading 'proposed route of Canal,'" writes Chase.

The dissolution of the Orleans Navigation Co. in 1852 had a positive effect on the street it had been chartered to canalize, however. Because Congress, which had created the company had also specified that 50 feet of the 171-foot-wide reservation was for a canal, the thoroughfare gained that much — almost the exact width of the neutral ground today.

Is it the widest street in the world as many think?

No, but it might be the widest, central-city business and commercial street in the United States, if not in the world. (The Bay Bridge Toll Plaza which serves San Francisco and Oakland is 23 lanes wide. A street called Monumental Axis in the capital of Brazil is one that is 1½ miles long and six lanes — or 273.4 yards wide, according to the Guinness Book of Records.

According to the New Orleans' Streets Department, headed by Donald Fortney, Canal Street today has a right of way from the first four blocks of the river of 190 feet. At Rampart Street the right of way narrows to 170 feet — one foot less than the 171-foot fixed in 1852 when it was decided not to divide the center of the city with a water navigation way.

Right of way, it was explained, extends from property line to property line. Within that span is a neutral ground of 46 feet and two roadways of 41 feet, totalling 128 feet. The sidewalks of the first four blocks are 31 feet wide — an outstanding pedestrian accommodation.

The middle ground of Canal . . . what's 'neutral' about it when, first, tram tracks filled it in two directions and, today, diesel-burning buses rolling over the same routes?

Part II, Next Week



Hello there! Welcome to Canal Street. This is what Editor Ed Tunstall's fisheye camera lens caught this past weekend as the Marriott, at the right, seems to bend over to greet the new New Orleans Sheraton Hotel, now large "hotel partners" on famous Canal Street. The New Orleans Sheraton will have its official grand opening next month. The Marriott on Canal is the chain's largest.

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Sunday Brunch at the Marriott

How to top off the weekend.

Rise above it all — 41 floors up — and join the Orleanians and visitors in making Sunday a fun day with brunch in the Marriott's rooftop RiverView.

The view is spectacular and so is the buffet: Carved Roast of Beef, Eggs Benedict, other hot entrees, boiled shrimp and raw oysters, omelets cooked to order, delicious salads, cold cuts and

appetizers, plus a stunning array of desserts: French pastries, cakes, pies and mousses. An unforgettable feast.

Champagne and Jazz... they're on us.

Complimentary champagne, a Dixieland band and balloons everywhere will get your Sunday off to a jazzy start. 9:30 a.m. — 3 p.m. Adults \$15.95. Children 12 and under \$7.95. Reservations recommended: 581-1000.

RiverView Restaurant

Atop the **Marriott** Canal at Chartres



Downtown, Downtown, Downtown

The Rediscover Canal Street
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