

Bartholemy Lafon and His Vision for New Orleans

This presentation introduces Bartholemy Lafon, who upon arrival in New Orleans found a provincial frontier outpost that he helped to transform into an important cosmopolitan center with a distinctive architectural tradition. The main focus is given to Coliseum Square in the Lower Garden District, examining how Lafon envisioned the neighborhood and how it appears today.

Born in 1769 at Villepinte in the southwest of France, Bartholemy Lafon came to New Orleans, Louisiana around 1789. Typical for his time, Lafon was a Renaissance man of many talents. He worked at one time or another as an architect, engineer, geographer, surveyor and cartographer. He served on New Orleans' city council (1808-1810) despite accusations of political shenanigans and was an officer and surveyor during the War of 1812. The most productive years in his career fell between 1790 and 1810 when he was living in the city and accruing substantial wealth for the time from his various enterprises. Financially ruined during the War of 1812 and unable to recover his former wealth, Lafon turned to smuggling in the final years before his death and joined the pirate Jean Lafitte in his various escapades. He was buried in New Orleans in St. Louis Cemetery No. 2, also the final resting place for Marie Laveau, the infamous voodoo queen.

Lafon's initial involvement in New Orleans began shortly after a fire in 1794 that damaged a great portion of the city (then confined to the area known today as the French Quarter). At this time, he proposed an urban transformation that included fish and meat markets, a theater and public bathhouse which never saw construction. It is not known how many houses he designed between 1794 and 1810 to replace those lost in the fire, but several are still visible today with little change to their exteriors. In 1805, he surveyed and mapped the Louisiana

Territory with the hope that President Thomas Jefferson would appoint him as the general surveyor for Louisiana. In 1807, he drew plans for the town of Donaldsonville, established in 1806 approximately 60 miles west of New Orleans. In 1808, Lafon surveyed the Rodriguez Plantation in Chalmette, Louisiana which included a mill and canal on site. Later, the Rodriguez Canal would be incorporated into the eastern defensive line for the Battle of New Orleans and is still clearly visible today in the Chalmette Battlefield Park. Between 1810-1815, he dedicated his time to surveying, improving and recommending placement of forts and fortifications to defend against the British. And in 1812, General James Wilkinson engaged him as chief engineer under his command.

Lafon's most lasting achievement in the Crescent City is the neighborhood known as Coliseum Square in the Lower Garden District. The land upon which this neighborhood was established has its own storied past from the time it was acquired in 1719 by Jean Baptiste Le Moyne, then owned by the Jesuits who were expelled from the property in 1763, until Lafon laid out the now historic neighborhood in 1806 and 1807. Influenced by the Renaissance architect Palladio whose work, in turn, relied heavily upon Vitruvius, and upon his contemporaries, like Piranesi, who were publishing engravings and drawings of ancient architecture, Lafon brought to New Orleans the Neo-Classical style sweeping through the great cities of Europe and laid out his neighborhood by harmoniously adapting orthogonal planning to a landscape dictated by the winding course of the Mississippi River. But he did not stop there. His plan included canals, parks and water features to rival Paris. (He followed these same principles when planning the town of Donaldsonville.) But his flirtation with the Classics did not end with Vitruvius. Lafon named many of the streets, water features and public buildings in Coliseum Square after the gods of Classical mythology. A majority of the street names, like those named for the Nine Muses,

are preserved to the present day. His vision for what would eventually be the Lower Garden district became the foundation from which the rest of the expanding city of New Orleans grew. His vision for this one neighborhood helped create the city that we know today.

Illustrations accompanying the presentation include what is left of Lafon's original plans for Coliseum Square and his original survey books preserved in the New Orleans' Office of Notarial Archives and Historic New Orleans Collection, with ancillary materials from legal documents and newspapers in the Special Collections of the University of New Orleans and elsewhere.