

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*

*By Ned Hémard*

### ***Enfilade: From Palaces to Shotguns***

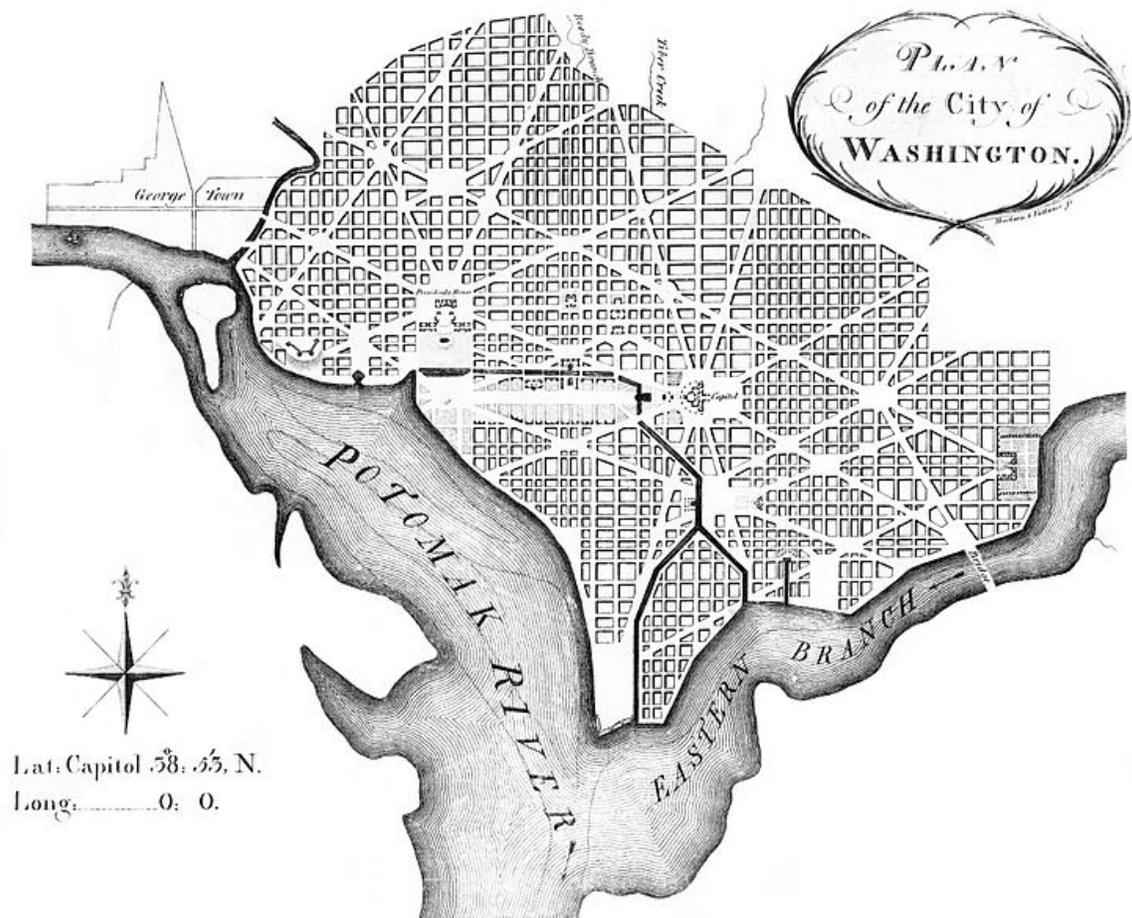
*Enfilade* ('en-fī-lād, -läd) is a word important in the design of military defenses, stately palaces and even humble "Creole Shotguns" in New Orleans. In a military sense, it signifies gunfire directed along the length of a target, such as a column of troops. *Enfilade* (in architecture) is a suite of rooms formally aligned with each of the other rooms. It comes to us from the French verb *enfiler*, meaning to thread (a needle) or to run something through on a string or sling. It can also mean to put on (one's clothes), which is odd because it also has a vulgar definition involving removing one's clothes. *Par exemple*, "*Se fait enfiler*" is a phrase involving maneuvers neither military nor architectural.

Ever have trouble with those traffic circles in Washinton, D. C.? If so, it is thanks to a headstrong and passionate French-born engineer who was chosen to design the nation's new capital city.

Twenty-two-year-old Pierre Charles L'Enfant (1754 – 1825) was deeply motivated by the American colonists in their fight for independence from England. Emboldened by the same democratic spirit, L'Enfant became one of the first French volunteers to enlist in the Continental Army in 1776. A student at the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture in the Louvre in Paris, L'Enfant possessed an artistic sensibility and futuristic vision, marked by his own military experience, that would leave an indelible mark on a fledgling nation - a mark that's grown more important with time.

L'Enfant began his American service as a military engineer with Major General Lafayette. L'Enfant so closely identified with the soon-to-be United States, he adopted the name Peter in place of Pierre. He was wounded at the Siege of Savannah, but recovered and served in George Washington's staff as a Captain of Engineers for the remainder of the war (including the cold winter at Valley Forge). May 2, 1783, he was promoted by brevet to Major of Engineers. After the war, L'Enfant established a highly successful civil engineering firm in New York City.

The new Constitution of the United States, which took effect in 1789, gave Congress authority to establish a ten-mile square of federal territory upon which to build a capital city. In July 1790 an act was passed that gave authority to President Washington to appoint three commissioners to oversee the survey of this federal district and "according to such Plans, as the President shall approve," provide public buildings to accommodate the Federal government. In 1791, President Washington hired Pierre Charles L'Enfant to design the new city on the Potomac River - which L'Enfant actually intended to call Washingtonople. Part of his hub-and-spoke design (radiating out like spokes on a wheel) with broad avenues included several grand traffic circles. L'Enfant also envisioned a 400 foot-wide "grand avenue", which he expected to travel for about one mile along an east-west axis in the center of an area that would later become the National Mall.



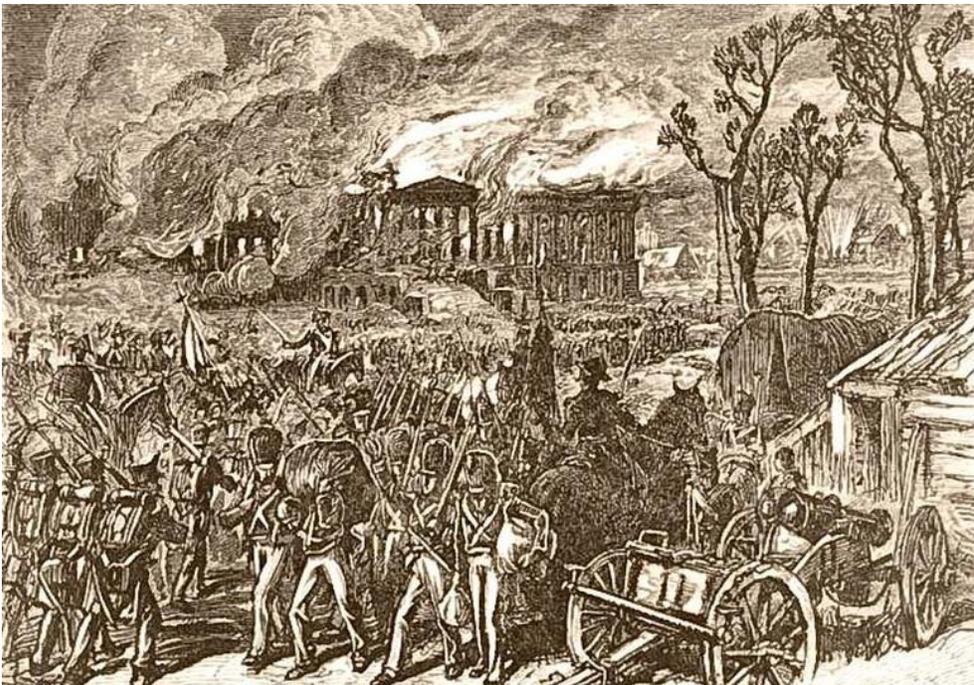
*L'Enfant's Plan of the City of Washington, revised by Andrew Ellicott  
March 1792*

Thomas Jefferson had more modest ideas and hoped the Capital would utilize the traditional gridiron city plan, but L'Enfant (seeing the task as more grandiose) believed "such a plan could only do on a level plain and, where no surrounding object being interesting, it becomes indifferent which way the opening of the streets may be directed."

Jefferson wasn't the only detractor. When Charles Dickens visited the District of Columbia in the 1840s, he called it "the City of Magnificent Intentions", with "spacious avenues, that begin in nothing, and lead nowhere."

Though L'Enfant envisioned the circles to contain monuments and statues, his design was not contemplated just for aesthetic reasons. The circles were also designed to be ideal locations for defensive emplacements so that soldiers armed with cannons could stop approaching invaders. The streets radiating from the circles created optimal artillery sightlines, which meant that the U.S. military could have cannons positioned to protect against an attack in what's known as *enfilade* - where a line of soldiers can be fired upon all lined up in a row instead of many soldiers facing fire straight on. Trajectory adjustment is not as critical when firing in this manner. According to René Chartrand in his book, *French Fortresses in North America 1535–1763: Québec, Montréal, Louisbourg and New Orleans*, he defines *enfilade* fire as "Fire directed from the flank or side of a body of troops, or along the length of a ditch, parapet or wall. Guns in the flank of a bastion can direct enfilade fire along the face of the curtain."

L'Enfant's street design should've helped when the British occupied the Capital and torched the White House during the War of 1812, but the street plan was not fully implemented by then.



*Capture and burning of Washington by the British in 1814*

The burning of the White House and many other public buildings took place on August 24, 1814 (apparently a great date for razing cities).

The Sack of Rome by Alaric and the Visigoths took place on August 24, 410.

L'Enfant never got to finish his city, although others carried out many of his plans. He was reluctantly fired by President Washington, because L'Enfant's temperament (and his steadfast insistence that his design be realized in its entirety) brought him into conflict with the commissioners, who wanted to use their limited budget for the construction of the federal buildings. Worse yet, L'Enfant was not paid at first for his work on his plan for the federal city. He spent years trying to persuade Congress to pay him the tens of thousands of dollars that he claimed he was owed. He eventually was paid a small sum. His dilemma was summarized in 1806 by the architect Benjamin Henry Latrobe (renowned in both the District of Columbia and New Orleans): "Daily through the city stalks the picture of famine, L'Enfant and his dog . . . [he] had the courage to undertake any public work whatever that was offered to him. He has not succeeded in any, but was always honest and is now miserably poor."

The stubborn engineer died in poverty, leaving behind three watches, three compasses, some maps, some books and surveying instruments, whose total value was between forty and fifty dollars.

In architecture, *enfilade* is a linear arrangement of a suite of rooms by formally aligning their interior doors. Predominantly from the Baroque period onwards, this was a common element in grand European palaces and stately homes. The doors entering each room are aligned with the doors of the connecting rooms along a single axis, providing a clear vista (or straight shot in the case of a "Shotgun House") through the entire suite of rooms. The *enfilade* can be used to move large numbers of people along in procession, and is a common arrangement in museums and art galleries for this very reason. *Enfilade* is the reason that *Le Louvre*, once a palace, makes a perfectly splendid museum.

In a Baroque palace, access along an *enfiladed* suite of state rooms was usually restricted by the rank or degree of intimacy of the visitor. In England the culmination of Baroque architecture was embodied in work by Sir Christopher Wren and others, from c. 1660 to c. 1725. The first rooms were more public, and at the end was usually the bedroom (often with its intimate cabinet or boudoir just beyond). Protocol dictated that lower rank visitors would be escorted by servants along the *enfilade* to the farthest room their status allowed. Rituals were involved if the guest was of equal or higher status, where the host himself would travel down the *enfilade* to greet his visitor before taking him back. If a person of much higher rank visited, these rituals extended the *enfilade* to the entrance hall, the gates of the palace, or (today) the airport. Royal palaces often had separate

*enfiladed* state apartments for the King and Queen, and the homes of noblemen (especially when hoping for a visit from the monarch) also feature *enfiladed* suites. Blenheim Palace, Churchill's family manor and seat of the Dukes of Marlborough, is a grand example of this.



*Blenheim Palace, Oxfordshire*

Back in the Crescent City, the “clear vista through the entire suite of rooms” has been more colorfully described as a place where a shotgun can be fired all the way through the dwelling without hitting anything of value along the way. Natives love to call this type of structure a “Creole Shotgun House”, while architects still love to use the word *enfilade*. After all, it’s French and sounds wonderfully pretentious.



*"Single Shotgun" dwelling in Mid-City, New Orleans*

The New Orleans "Shotgun House" is a narrow rectangular domestic residence, usually no more than 12 feet wide, with rooms arranged one behind the other (*enfilade*) with doors at each end of the house. In the photo above, the dwelling is narrow but on a corner lot, allowing it access from the center. The "Shotgun" was the most popular style of house in the South from the end of the Civil War (1861 - 1865) up through the 1920s. In the Crescent City, it was often built of cypress with ornamental brackets supporting the porch overhang ordered from Roberts' Catalogue.

City lots were deep and narrow, construction costs for this modest house design were cheap and the *enfilade* design offered excellent airflow before air-conditioning.

A longstanding theory is that the architectural style can be traced from Africa via Haiti in the 1830s or earlier. After a while, "Shotgun Doubles" were built, as were "Camelbacks" (with a second floor in the rear of the dwelling). Today "Shotguns" are all over the city, comprising over 60% of the building stock in the Bywater alone.

There are even some "Shotguns" in the city's historic *Vieux Carré*. Today, nothing much hints that New Orleans' French Quarter was once surrounded by ramparts and five forts (except for the name Rampart Street). The city's rapid growth following the Louisiana Purchase made these fortifications obsolete. But the original forts once jutted out so as to provide an *enfilade* firing opportunity. An *epaulement* is a

“parapet or work protecting against *enfilade* fire”.

As for Peter L’Enfant, in 1901 and 1902 the McMillan Commission used L’Enfant's plan as the cornerstone of a report that recommended a partial redesign of the capital city. It included the building of monuments, the Capitol grounds, and the Mall - and, *oui*, traffic circles. At the instigation of the French ambassador to the United States, Jean Jules Jusserand, L’Enfant's adopted nation finally recognized his enormous contributions.

In 1909, after lying in state at the Capitol rotunda, L’Enfant's remains were re-interred in Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia, on a hill overlooking the city that he had envisioned. In 1911, he was honored with a special monument placed upon his grave. Engraved thereon is a portion of L’Enfant's own plan, which Andrew Ellicott's revision and the McMillan Commission's plan had encompassed.

From grandiose palaces and plans to modest vernacular architecture, even today one can view “Shotguns” lined up and down the streets of New Orleans all in a row (just like their rooms, *enfilade*).

## **NED HÉMARD**

New Orleans Nostalgia  
“*Enfilade*: From Palaces to Shotguns”  
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