

Pirated Ideas

Wouldn't it be a great idea if someone put together an amusement park attraction with a New Orleans theme? In it they would endeavor to replicate the charm of the French Quarter, the jazz music of the city and even its haunted history. Throw in a band of bad boys with socially unacceptable behavior, and the public will love it! Oh yes, there must be a catchy tune thrown into the mix. A brilliant brainstorm like that should be worth millions!

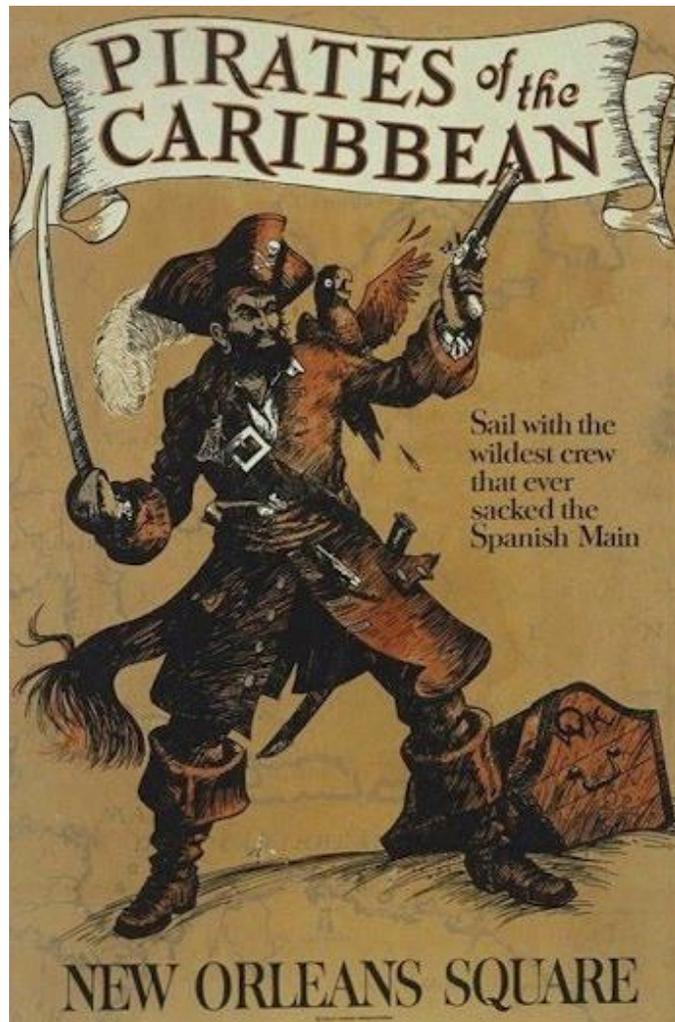
Well, it's already been done ... and it has made billions – with a "B". But it didn't happen in New Orleans.



Original conceptual art for "New Orleans Square" by Herb Ryman

The Vieux Carré, the historic name for the New Orleans French Quarter, means "Old Square" in French. On July 24, 1966, "New Orleans Square" opened to visitors for the first time at Disneyland in Anaheim, California. It is a themed land found only at the original Disneyland and nowhere else, although Japan has a New Orleans themed area within Disney's Tokyo Adventureland.

"New Orleans Square" is home to two of Disney's most popular attractions: the "Haunted Mansion" (Anne Rice would be proud) and the incredibly successful "Pirates of the Caribbean". Having Jean Lafitte and his banditti from Barataria as vivid images of New Orleans' exciting past, it was only natural to have a pirate themed attraction. For a long time "Pirates of the Caribbean" was envisioned as a simple wax museum with famous real-life pirates, but Disney Imagineers decided to liven things up.



"New Orleans Square," home to the "Pirates of the Caribbean"

"Animatronics" was another portmanteau word like "Imagineering", and it would prove to be an important innovation in the success of the project. The Disney Imagineers put to good use the technological achievements utilized in the company's pavilions at the 1964-65 World's Fair to create (instead of static wax figures) a lively and

adventurous journey through a treasure rich island stronghold. The fictional audio-animatronic buccaneers come to life as they plunder, pillage and sack a Caribbean port city. And while they are exhibiting the worst possible criminal tendencies, families find it difficult to leave without humming and singing along to "Yo Ho (A Pirate's Life for Me)".

"Pirates of the Caribbean" was the last theme park attraction designed with direct input from Walt Disney himself. The panoramic boat ride has been such a sensation that it can also be found in Orlando, Tokyo and Paris. Walt also saw to it that then-mayor of New Orleans, Victor H. Schiro, was made mayor of "New Orleans Square" in Disneyland. Mayor Schiro in turn made Walt an honorary citizen of the real New Orleans. This was totally appropriate since Vic had spent his young adulthood in California working as a movie extra. He even worked as an assistant cameraman for Frank Capra (director of great films like "Mr. Smith Goes To Washington" and "It's A Wonderful Life"). Vic summarized his political philosophy with the words "If it's good for New Orleans, I'm for it." And who can forget his "That's the way the cookie bounces."?



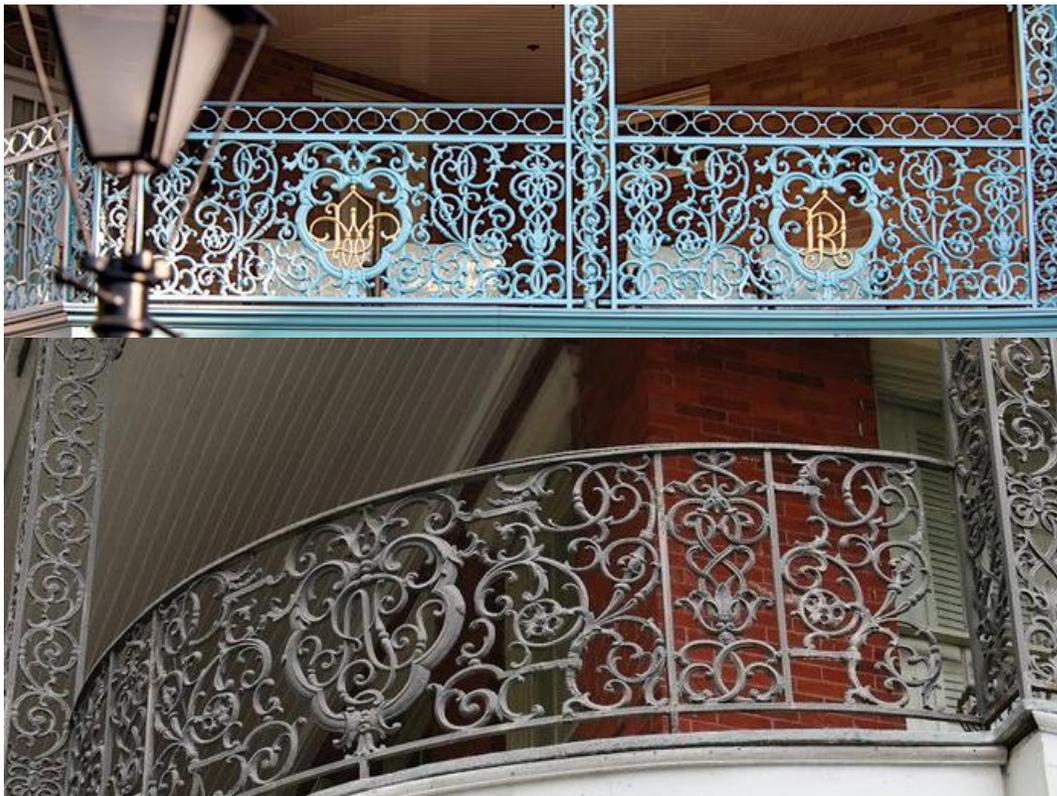
Walt Disney and New Orleans Mayor Victor H. Schiro share a mike

With the talents of Johnny Depp (as Captain Jack Sparrow) and other

talented actors, the three "Pirates of the Caribbean" films ("The Curse of the Black Pearl, "Dead Man's Chest" and "At World's End"), along with the theme park rides, video games, merchandising and spin-off novels, have earned the Walt Disney Company (as of August 2006) over 2.7 billion dollars!

Since writing this article in 2007, Disney has released two more films in the series, "On Stranger Tides" in 2011 (grossing more than \$1 billion for that film alone) and "Dead Men Tell No Tales" in 2017. The franchise has now grossed over \$4.5 billion worldwide, an amazing record.

Meanwhile, back in "New Orleans Square" there is a special "dream suite" originally intended as a private apartment for Walt and Roy Disney and their families. Upon glancing up at the suite's balcony, one can see how the Disney artisans copied New Orleans' own Baroness Pontalba. Instead of the initials "AP" for "Almonester" and "Pontalba," featured within the intricate ironwork are the initials "WD" and "RD" (for Walt Disney and Roy Disney, respectively).



The Disneyland balcony shown above, contrasted with the "AP" ironwork of the Pontalba Apartments below

Back in 2006, another form of piracy was going on. New Orleans mayoral candidate Kimberly Williamson Butler was creating a national stir with her webpage.



It pictured her standing in front of what appeared to the unobservant as the French Quarter. But since when did the Quarter have curved streets? And how did those distinctive Disney trash receptacles get there? The photograph was, of course, "New Orleans Square". Locals, bloggers and the cable news networks caught on quickly ... and so did the Disney legal department. The photo in question had someone digitally placing Ms. Butler in the forefront and airbrushing out the sign for the "Blue Bayou Restaurant". Wouldn't it have been easier to pose on Bourbon or Royal?

"Yo Ho, Yo Ho!" Bet you'll be humming it for the next few days.

NED HÉMARD

New Orleans Nostalgia
"Pirated Ideas"
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