

The Three Municipalities

From 1836 to 1852, the City of New Orleans was divided into not two, but three distinct municipalities.

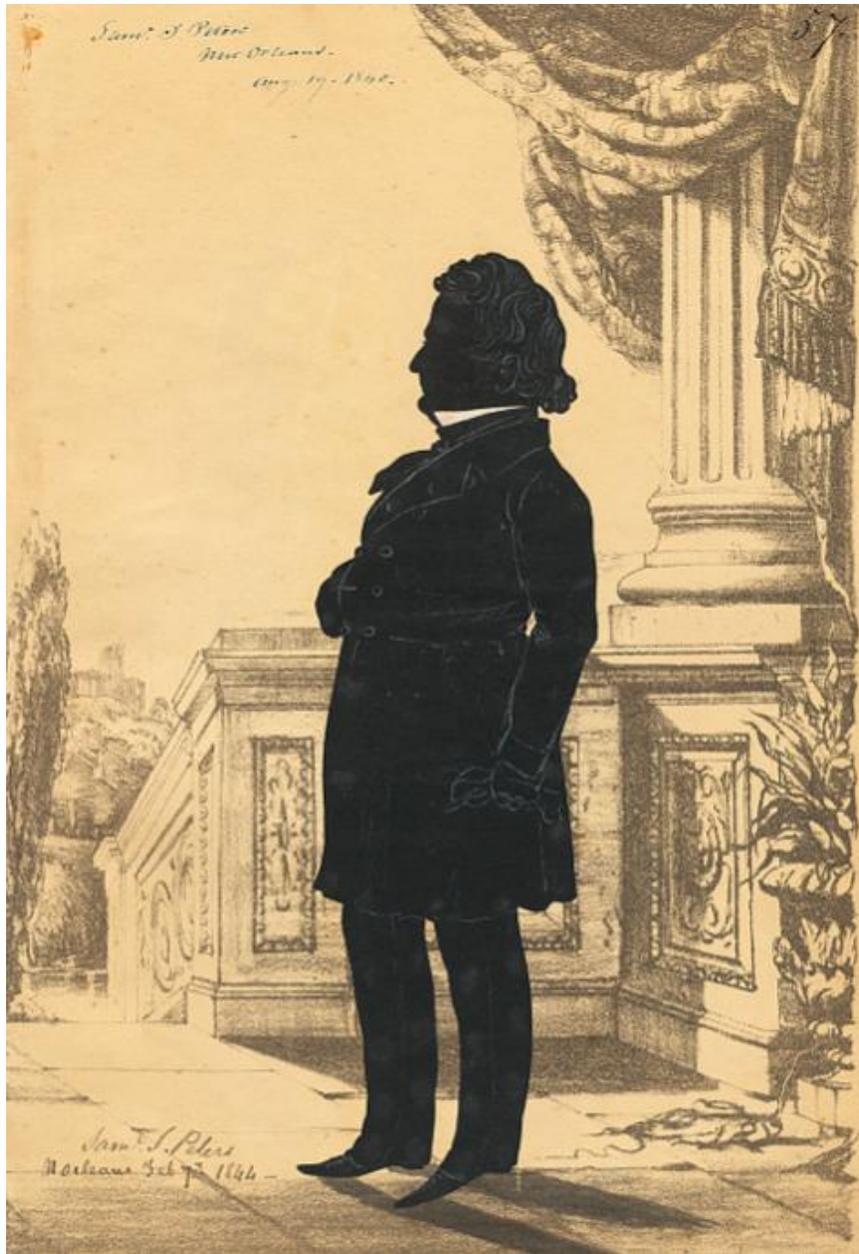
An early sketch of the Faubourg Marigny shows an Indian family roaming freely before the home of Bernard de Marigny in 1821. A huge weeping willow dominates his front yard, and the Native American mother is carrying a papoose upon her back. Anglo-Americans, as well, had been in town for a while, causing somewhat of a cultural clash with the Creole residents who had been there so much longer.



*Section of a study by Felix Achille Beauvoir de Saint Aulaire,
The Faubourg Marigny, 1821*

What is now known as downtown, or the CBD, had not yet been built. It would come to be known as the American Sector, the Faubourg St. Mary (or Sainte Marie) or the Second Municipality. Of the two biggest movers-and-shakers in the development of this American District, one was from Canada and the other from England. Neither would be considered "Kaintocks" or keelboat men, those rowdy Americans that claimed they "was raised on alligators and weaned on Panther's milk! Ya-hoo!"

Samuel Jarvis Peters, who died in 1855, had come to the Crescent City from Canada. Born in 1801, Peters started out in the city as a grocery clerk, became an influential businessman and president of his own grocery company, a city councilman and bank president. He is recognized as the founder of the New Orleans public school system and one of the principal founders of what would be called the Second Municipality.



Silhouette of Samuel Jarvis Peters (1801 – 1855)

Englishman James Caldwell was actor, theatre impresario, *bon vivant*, builder, city planner and entrepreneur, all rolled into one. Some time about 1828, he and Peters had made a proposal to Bernard de Marigny, who owned the huge faubourg downriver from the Vieux Carré, to construct impressive theatres, hotels, docks, gas works and cotton presses on his plantation so that his lands would be the location of a vast and important commercial center. Marigny accepted but, when the day came to sign the deed of transfer, Madame de Marigny was nowhere to be found. Without her signature before the notary, the deal was dead.

NEW ORLEANS CHAMBER OF COMMERCE
JANUARY 6th, 1840

At the annual meeting of the Chamber, held this evening, the following members were duly elected officers for the ensuing year:

Samuel J. Peters, President.
W. L. Hodge, 1st Vice President.
James Dick, 2d do.
Chas. Briggs, Secretary and Treasurer.

And the following members were elected to serve on the Committee of Appeals, for the same term:

Jas. H. Laverie,	P. O. Sorbe,
H. H. Cammack,	S. Thompson,
A. Fick.	W. H. Avery.

CHAS. BRIGGS, Secretary

jys

New Orleans Commercial Bulletin, March 12, 1840

Peters was peeved and furiously responded to the quixotic and eccentric Creole aristocrat. "Sir," he exclaimed, "I shall live, by God, to see the day when rank grass will choke up the gutters of your old faubourg!" Peters stormed off thinking this was some sort of ruse on Marigny's part, but a lawsuit soon filed by Marigny's wife for restitution of her paraphernal rights seems to exonerate Marigny of any bad faith. In any event, Marigny's faubourg soon would be eclipsed by another.

Other reasons persisted for a rivalry between American and Creole factions. The city below Canal Street outvoted the Americans and always elected the mayor and the majority of the council. Consequently, revenues were spent more upon improvements to the Creole section (such as the Carondelet Canal and the Pontchartrain Railroad, "Smoky Mary").

The Faubourg Ste. Marie came back with its own canal. Additionally, the Giquel-Brooks (Creole vs. American) duel and subsequent trial in the mid-1830s caused an angry mob to attack the home of Judge Bermúdez and his wife. After many struggles, the American Sector forced the legislature to withdraw the city charter and provide another, which divided the city into three municipalities. Each were to have its own separate council, Taxing power, recorder and police force, but with a single mayor (an unholy trinity that would exist for sixteen years until 1852 when a new charter would return the city's government to but one municipality).



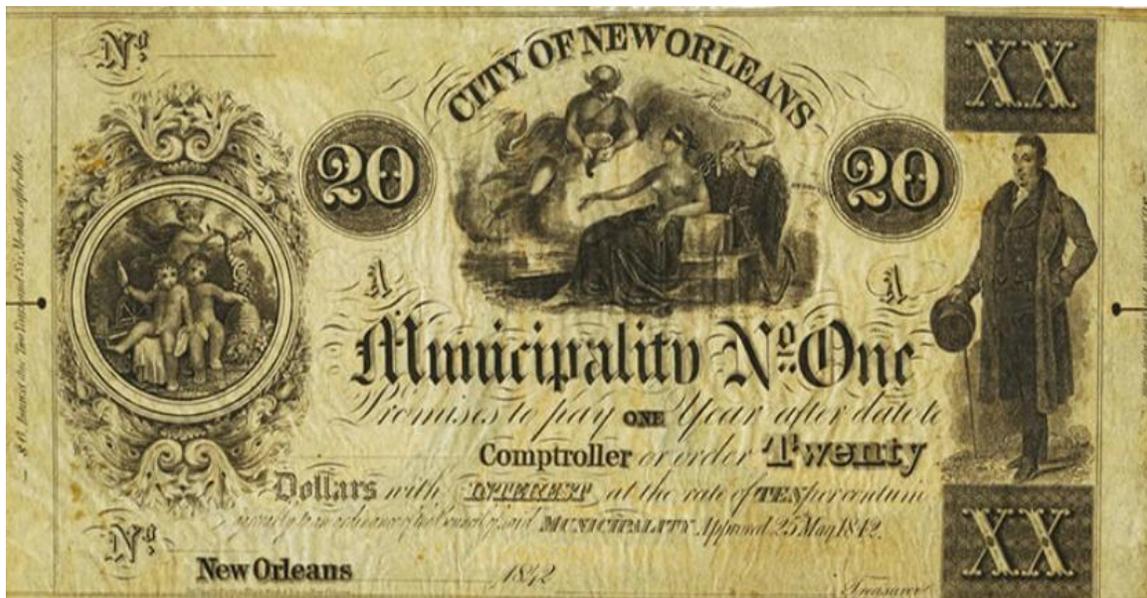
The first St. Charles Hotel, pictured here in 1847, dominated the skyline of the Second Municipality.

The First Municipality was the original French city bounded by Canal Street, the River, Esplanade all the way back to the Lake. At its center

were its *Place d'Armes*, Cathedral, Cabildo and Presbytère. Its domed St. Louis Hotel tried to compete with Caldwell's opulent St. Charles Hotel in the Faubourg Ste. Marie. This six-story colossus on St. Charles was the tallest building in New Orleans; and to rival the Americans' City Hall built by Gallier, Mansard roofs were added to the Cabildo and Presbytère.

The Second Municipality was bounded by Canal Street, the River and Felicite Street (the Jefferson Parish line at that time). There began the City of Lafayette (annexed by the City of New Orleans in 1852 when the three municipalities came together as one). We know it today as the Garden District. Grace King writes that the Faubourg Sainte Marie "left its Creole rival so far behind". She tells of how "truck gardens were shoved into the swamp" and a "wretched waste was converted into Lafayette Square" and how the "the City Hall, First Presbyterian Church, Odd Fellows Hall, were grouped with fine effect around it."

The Third Municipality stretched from the boundary of the First Municipality to the shores of Lake Borgne. It encompassed the Faubourg Marigny and the Bywater, and it did get its cotton press. But Municipality Number Two got most of the action.



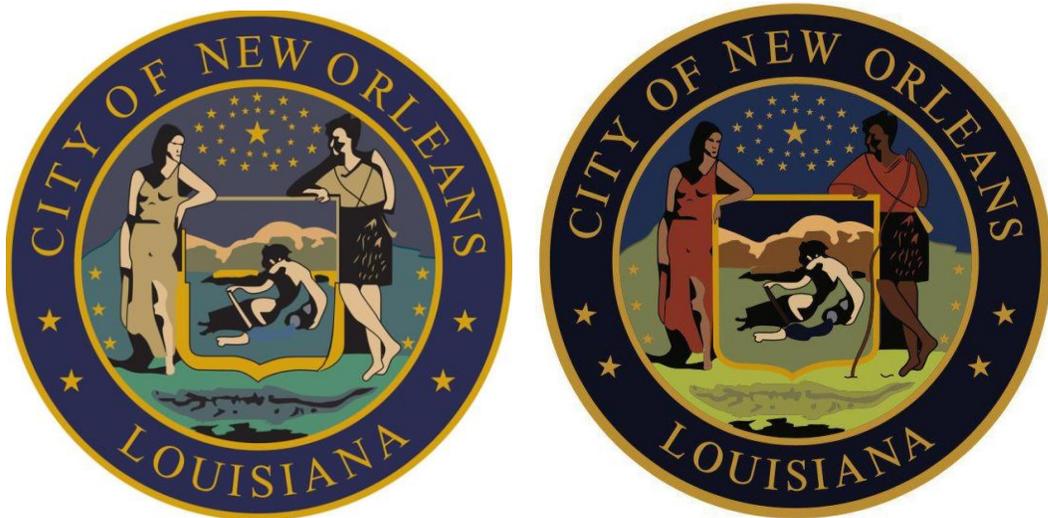
Separate bank notes were issued for each of the three municipalities.

An act of consolidation of the three municipalities was published in the *Picayune* on February 29, 1852, a leap year. Section 25 set out that the Mayor "shall have a seal to be called the seal of the city of New

Orleans, which shall be affixed to all proper official acts of the corporation.”

The City authorized such a seal on June 18, 1852, to symbolize the reunification of the three municipalities. It contains thirty-one stars for the number of states at that time. Twelve stars with a larger one in the center represent the thirteen original states. An additional twelve stars form an outer circle and represent the states admitted to the Union after the original thirteen until June 15, 1836. Louisiana was one of these. There are another six stars (three on each side) for the states admitted from January 26, 1837, until September 9, 1850. In the center of the seal are two Native Americans (a maiden and a brave) leaning against a shield with a white-bearded Neptune representing “Old Man River”. An alligator at the bottom brings to mind the Louisiana swamps and perhaps the food upon which those early “Kaintocks” feasted. The cost for the seal back then, its engraving die and printing was a mere \$16.00.

In September 2018, New Orleans Mayor LaToya Cantrell upgraded the city’s official seal, creating a newer version that darkened the complexions of the two Native American figures depicted in the logo. The mayor commented on Twitter, “We live in a diverse city, and now our seal reflects that.”



The New Orleans City Seal, before and after

For years, New Orleanians have become quite accustomed to observing the 1852 seal (surrounded by the River’s Crescent) on the patches on the sleeves of the New Orleans Police Department. Before the street paving and developing done by Caldwell, Peters and other

visionaries, alligators would've been quite at home in the muddy streets that once crossed the three municipalities of the Crescent City. Today, a better place for alligators is on those sleeve patches or, better yet, in a *sauce piquante*.



On this earlier police patch (shown above), "Old Man River" and the alligator are more easily discernible than in more recently pictured images of the city seal. And in even earlier depictions of the seal, the maiden was topless. Also within the shield, three wigwams can be seen, over which the radiant sun is shining, a reminder of Louisiana's warm climate. This, at least, was the explanation given back in 1968 by Major Henry M. Morris, chief of detectives of the New Orleans Police Department and chairman of the Police Historical Society, after digging into his files.

Today the wigwams in the seal look more like mountains. Now I ask you, where in New Orleans are there mountains?

NED HÉMARD

New Orleans Nostalgia
"The Three Municipalities"
Ned Hémard
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