

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

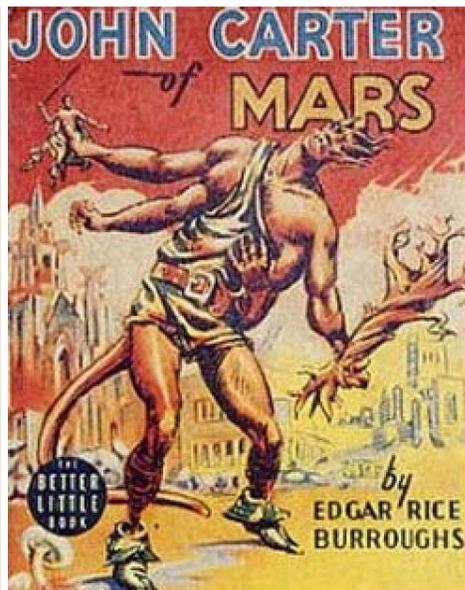
Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Canals That Never Were

Famous Parisian *couturière* of the 1920s and 30s, Elsa Schiaparelli, was the first to use hot pink, animal print designs, shoulder pads and zippers dyed to match the garments. She collaborated with surrealist artists like Dali and Cocteau in the late 30s. Of women she said: "Ninety per cent are afraid of being conspicuous, and what people say. They should dare to be different!" Her main concern was *Chanel*, her fashion competitor, but her great-uncle's main concern was *canali*.

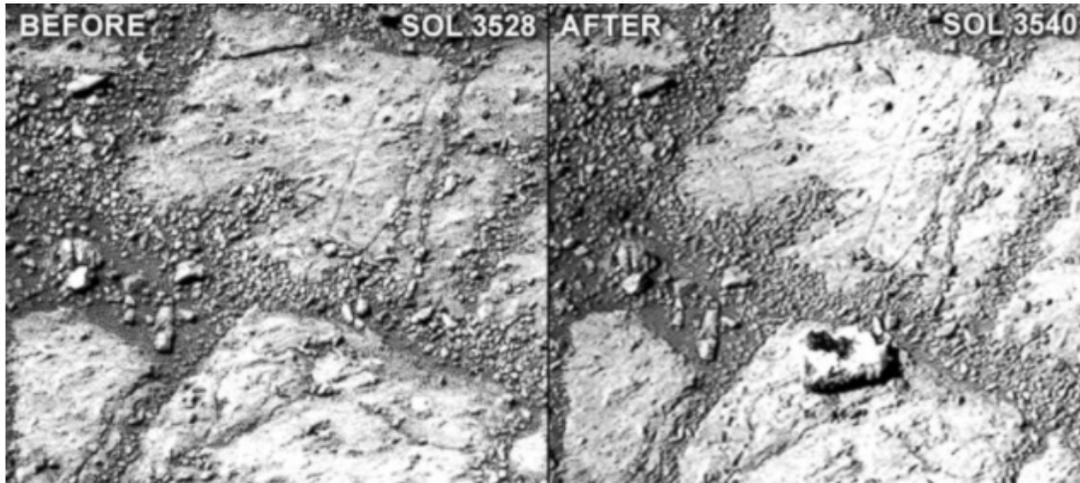
He was astronomer Giovanni Virginio Schiaparelli and in the 1890s he used the Italian word *canali* (meaning channels, or grooves) to describe his observations on Mars. But *canali* was translated for readers on this side of the Atlantic as "canals," which prompted American astronomer Percival Lowell to document what he believed were artificial waterways on Mars (and therefore constructed by an intelligent race). Not until July 14, 1965 – when the Mariner 4 spacecraft provided the first detailed images of the Martian terrain – were Lowell's lingering true believers finally proven wrong.



Astronomer Schiaparelli

John Carter of Mars dust jacket

Just this past week, neuropsychologist and author Rhawn Joseph filed a lawsuit against NASA in an attempt to force the agency to examine a Mars rock he claims is "living". Photographed on January 8 by Mars rover "Opportunity", the rock that seemingly appeared out of nowhere was dubbed the "jelly donut" since it is white on the outside and red at the center. No beignets, however, were sighted.



Mars before and after photos, with "jelly donut"-shaped rock on right. A "sol" is the name for a Martian day.

Mars canal observer Percival Lowell founded the Lowell Observatory in 1894 on an Arizona hill named Mars. Coincidentally, "On The Arizona Hills" was the first chapter of Edgar Rice Burroughs' first book, *A Princess of Mars*, which he began in 1911. In it Confederate Army Captain John Carter finds himself transplanted from Arizona to Mars (called Barsoom in the book), a planet of crumbling cities, decaying civilization, green barbarians, maidens in distress and (of course) canals. Not only famous for Tarzan, Burroughs would write eleven books in his Mars series.

Today we know that, although the *canali* were groovy, they were never really canals. We just mistranslated Italian astronomer Schiaparelli. The Italians also gave us *cannoli* (especially those of Angelo Brocato) and *cannelloni* — so two out of three ain't bad.

The Spanish, however, did deliver when it came to canals. Francisco Luis Hector, Baron de Carondelet, Spanish Governor of Louisiana, was a very capable administrator who oversaw the digging of a canal connecting Bayou St. John with the back door of early New Orleans. The ruling Cabildo named it the Carondelet Canal, but it was later called the Old Basin Canal once the New Basin Canal was dug. Carondelet also dug a ditch from Fort St. Louis, at the Tchoupitoulas Gate, through the city commons back into the swamp. This ditch did

not merit a name from the Cabildo, but today it is the main thoroughfare of the Crescent City. Called Canal Street, it did not acquire its name from this ditch but from a canal that never was.



Postcard scene of Canal Street in the 1950s

In early 1807, March (the month named for Mars), an Act of Congress provided a plan for a canal that would never be. The ambitious plan was for the turning basin of the Carondelet Canal to continue its route along the street (that had appropriately acquired the name of Basin Street) up to the proposed route that (because of this plan) acquired the name of Canal Street, and then hang a left toward the Mighty Mississippi. The right-of-way provided for in the act was to allow sixty feet clear on each side of the proposed fifty-foot wide canal. Throw in an extra foot for *lagniappe* and you have instead the world famous boulevard known as Canal Street with a remarkable width of 171 feet. The Congress of the United States reserved this canal site until 1852 when the Orleans Navigation Company became insolvent. This company had been founded to widen and improve the existing Carondelet Canal (which they did for a sum of \$375,000) and to implement the extension of the canal (which they didn't). Laurent Millaudon was President of the company, but it really didn't do much of anything for about forty years after its initial burst of activity.

The vastly wide Canal Street became the major boulevard of New Orleans and served as a division line between the original French and Spanish colonial-era city (known today as the *Vieux Carré*, or French Quarter) and the newer American Sector (the CBD, or Central Business District). This was precipitated by the Louisiana Purchase in 1803,

which brought a huge influx of these new Americans down the Mississippi River into the Crescent City. Many came from Kentucky and other Midwestern states, creating a culture war between these new "Kaintocks" and the established "Creoles". These backwoodsmen might just well have been Martians to the entrenched Creoles.

The *terre commune* (actually a ten-degree triangular commons between present-day Iberville and Common streets) upon which Canal Street ran was not only a geographic but also a cultural divide between these two factions, and for ever after known as the "neutral ground". As a result, to this day people in New Orleans call all medians of streets in the city "neutral grounds".

Basin Street became celebrated in history (and in song) as the main drag of high-class bordellos and Jazz music.



Scenes of Storyville-era Basin Street, with Anderson's Saloon at left

Once one of the finest residential streets in the city in the early 1800s, Basin Street gradually experienced a movement of prostitutes into the area. Madame Kate Townsend opened the first big brothel at #40 Basin Street in 1866. Others followed. In 1897 a sixteen square block area around Basin Street was created as the red light district known as Storyville (named for Alderman Sidney Story, who wrote the enacting legislation). He believed that consolidating prostitution in one tightly defined area would protect property values in neighborhoods where brothels were popping up unchecked. It was also believed that, confined within set boundaries, the area could be more easily policed and controlled so that vice could be kept in hand. From 1897 until 1917, Storyville was lined with high-end saloons and mansions specializing in prostitution, drinking and musical entertainment. Locals simply called this area "The District".

Almost all the buildings in Storyville were demolished in the 1930s to

make way for the construction of the Iberville housing project. One exception (at 1214 Bienville Street) is the "New Image Supermarket", once home to "Pretty Baby" composer Tony Jackson.

Canal Street, too, has had its own long and interesting history. In 2006, Peggy Scott Laborde and John Magill provided a fascinating in-depth history of all the homes, churches, hotels and businesses that flourished along *Canal Street: New Orleans' Great Wide Way* (Pelican Publishing).



Carondelet



Judah Touro



Lafayette

Early ownership of Canal Street's right-of way was complicated by a series of events involving the American Revolutionary War hero, the Marquis de Lafayette. The United States Congress decided to gift the much-in-debt French hero some land as a reward for his service, and the Marquis' agent suggested the commons of the City of New Orleans. But the New Orleans City Council protested, proclaiming these lands city and not federal property. The 1807 Act of Congress (mentioned above) settled this issue. The Marquis graciously backed off and accepted instead plantation land in Pointe Coupée and property in Mid City that eventually became the Faubourg Hagan in 1841 (situated around Jefferson Davis Parkway).

Two years after the demise of the Orleans Navigation Company, the great Jewish philanthropist Judah Touro died. He bequeathed between two and three hundred thousand dollars for the beautification of Canal Street. The city council gratefully changed the great street's name to Touro Avenue, but quietly changed it back a year later. The people refused to call it anything but Canal Street, and Canal Street it will always be.

Once you get in a groove, you stay in it.

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