Lee Circle Before Lee

Long before Lee, the circular park linking the upriver and downriver sections of New Orleans was called the *Place du Tivoli*.

Tivoli is a name that invariably conjures up images of verdant and picturesque gardens, its origin to be found in an historic town in the Lazio region of central Italy, founded centuries before Rome.

According to Cato the Elder, Catillus founded a town in the Sabine hills to the east of Rome named Tibur (the name of which evolved into Tivoli) in honor of one of his three sons, Tiburtus. The town’s name probably shares a common root with the river Tiber. Historical vestiges of settlement in the vicinity date back to the 13th century BC.

*Temple of Vesta, Tivoli, Italy*

Tivoli is home to the *Villa d’Este*, commissioned by the son of Lucrezia Borgia, whose Italian Renaissance gardens are the main reason for
Tivoli’s renown. It was there that this author visited in his youth, sampling his first Campari, and dined that evening at the centuries-old *Ristorante Sibilla*. Napoleon and other notables made this idyllic restaurant a culinary destination, as well. Built in the early 1700s beside the circular Roman Temple of Vesta and the Sanctuary of the Sybil, its *terrazza* garden has a breathtaking view over the deep gorge of the Aniene River, with the sounds of the waterfall in the background. It has been called “the most romantic place in Italy.”

The grandeur of Tivoli’s landscape, with its evocations of ancient glory, also made it a major destination for foreign visitors on their 19th century “Grand Tour.” The Tiburtine Sybil (a kind of oracle) is famous for having announced to the Emperor Augustus the coming of Jesus.

It is no wonder that these gardens and ancient ruins have become part of our collective memory. Long since separated from its Italianate origin, there is now a Tivoli in almost every city and town across the globe: a Tivoli garden here, a Tivoli pond there and Tivoli theatres just about everywhere. Tivoli has become synonymous with a kind of paradise or utopia.

*Fontana della Rometta, Gardens of the Villa d’Este, Tivoli, Italy*

The Tivoli Gardens of Paris are located near the current site of the Saint-Lazare railway station. In 1766, Simon Gabriel Boutin constructed several houses within an eight-hectare park (about 20 acres), featuring English, Dutch and Italian gardens, a bowling green, rare plants and a number of follies. His *Jardin de Tivoli* was named after the gardens in the *Villa d’Este* in Tivoli. And the follies, mainly decorative, included *faux* ruins, rocky promontories and a waterfall.
The famous amusement park in Copenhagen, Denmark, the second-oldest in the world, known as Tivoli Gardens (or simply Tivoli) opened on August 15, 1843, several decades after the Tivoli name first appeared in New Orleans. Georg Carstensen was given a charter by King Christian VIII to design and build a garden to mirror the grandeur of Jardin de Tivoli in Paris, which in turn took its inspiration and name from the Tivoli Gardens in Italy. Carstensen convinced the king that “when the people are amusing themselves, they do not think about politics.” The Danish amusement park and pleasure garden was first called “Tivoli & Vauxhall,” taking its second name from the Vauxhall Gardens in London (one of the most popular public entertainment venues in London from the mid-17th century to the mid-19th century). Believed to have opened just before the Restoration of 1660, Vauxhall Gardens closed in 1859. As for the world’s oldest amusement park still in operation, it is Dyrehavsbakken in Klampenborg, also in Denmark.

Copenhagen’s Tivoli Gardens, from its inception, included a variety of entertaining attractions: buildings of an Oriental or Asian theme, illuminated gardens, a lake, band stands, restaurants and cafés and mechanical rides (including a merry-go-round).

So when did the name “Tivoli” first appear in New Orleans? You might be interested to know that it was mentioned in connection with the celebration of the second inauguration of President Thomas Jefferson. The festivities of March 4, 1805, reported in The Orleans Gazette, included the “firing of salutes from the forts; and in the evening a splendid fete at Tivoli.” The Gazette praised “such a chief to watch over your destinies!!!!” Jefferson’s great achievement, the Louisiana
Purchase, “was obtained without spilling a drop of blood, or wasting an ounce of powder! Glorious acquisition! Happy people!”

1805 inauguration celebrated with "splendid fete at Tivoli"

The “1804” date above is a misprint.

The Tivoli mentioned above probably refers to the inn, or tavern by that name, located along Bayou St. John, and opened “in the most elegant style” by Messrs. Labruyère and Kohn. Samuel Kohn, it may be remembered, was a young Jewish émigré from Bohemia, today’s Czech Republic. He would become a banker and later make a real estate fortune in New Orleans developing the city of Carrollton and the Faubourg Bouligny. An advertisement for TIVOLI was published in both French and English in the New Orleans Telegraphe et le Commercial Advertiser, dated August 23, 1806. The ad also touted additional advantages of Tivoli: the enjoyment of “the air of the country, a prospect of the bayou, and the agreeableness of a charming garden, as a pleasant walk.”

Tivoli would again be used as a place-name in New Orleans in 1807, when Creole architect, engineer and city surveyor Barthélémy Lafon
prepared subdivision plans for the Delord-Sarpy plantation property above Canal Street situated in the Faubourgs Ste. Marie and Annunciation. He envisioned a place for amusements, which he called the *Place du Tivoli*, and proposed a waterway to gracefully encircle his park, much like a well-planned stream in a formal French garden.

*The Naiades, or water nymphs*  
*Triton, who cannot “walk”*

Lafon named his main thoroughfare after the legendary fresh-water nymphs of mythology, the *Naiades*, becoming the *Cours des Nayades*. A continuation of St. Charles Street, Nayades was later renamed St. Charles and became a grand avenue. On the Lake Pontchartrain side of Tivoli Circle was the *Cours des Tritons*, or Tritons’ Walk. But there was only one Triton, son of Poseidon and Amphitrite, represented as a trident-toting merman with the upper torso of a human and the tail of a fish. He blew a twisted conch shell like a trumpet to calm or raise the waves. On the other side of the circle, this street was called Delord for Delord-Sarpy, whose plantation this was. In 1889 Annie Turner Howard, daughter of Louisiana State Lottery organizer Charles Turner Howard, endowed a library on Delord Street, and the name of both Delord and Triton Walk became Howard Avenue.

When John Hancock Life Insurance decided to build on Lee Circle, their second structure outside Boston, the company enlisted Harnett Kane to write a history of Tivoli Circle in 1961. Kane, who the *New York Times* described as “one of the South’s most literate spokesmen,” wrote that the land beneath *Place du Tivoli* was where the Jesuits once grew sugar cane. It was, in turn, a “steaming swamp, a primitive hunting ground, an early plantation, the focus of a transplanted classical culture in the Greek style ... a popular circus spot, a railroad transportation center” and so much more. Its name over time has gone back-and-forth between Circle, Place and even Square, but in the
opinion of New Orleanans it will always be “The Circle.”

Illustration, Place du Tivoli, A History of Lee Circle by Harnett Kane

Kane also wrote that Lafon named the Place du Tivoli for a tivoli, or “children’s merry-go-round,” which he anticipated would be erected in the center. Respected writer Meigs Frost had offered the same explanation in a 1936 Times-Picayune article. Many other local newspaper columnists offered the same merry-go-round origin story in the years between. But this author can find no earlier mention of this, nor can he find any dictionary that defines tivoli as a merry-go-round.

Whirligig or roundabout, yes, but tivoli, no. Most Crescent City natives of a certain age likely call the carousel, which orginated from early jousting traditions in Europe, the “Flying Horses.” The word carousel originated from the Italian garosello and Spanish carosella, meaning a “little battle,” used by crusaders to describe a combat preparation exercise and game played by Arabian and Turkish horsemen in the 12th century.
15th century Turkish drawing depicting early carousel’s use as a way to practice cavalry skills

The likely explanation for Lafon naming his circular park “Tivoli” was probably due to his knowledge of the Jardin de Tivoli in Paris, also a place for amusements, and/or the Tivoli Gardens in Italy. Messrs. Labruyère and Kohn were probably similarly informed of these pleasing gardens across the ocean in Europe when they named their inn on Bayou St. John.

Balloon ascents were popular amusements at the Jardin de Tivoli in Paris. But on July 6, 1819, a great tragedy occurred there and was widely reported in newspapers throughout the United States. A “female aeronaut,” Madame Sophie Blanchard, became the first woman to be killed in an aviation accident when, during an exhibition in the Tivoli Gardens in Paris, fireworks launched by her ignited the hydrogen gas in her balloon. She plummeted 400 feet to her death. “A frightful brilliancy instantly struck terror into all the spectators,” reported the Middlebury Vermont Christian Messenger. Ten years earlier, her husband Jean-Pierre died as a result of injuries sustained when he fell from his balloon after suffering a heart attack. Following his death, Sophie continued to make ascents, more than sixty of them, specializing in night flights. Sadly, that evening at the Jardin de Tivoli was her last.
The New Orleans and Carrollton Railroad (today’s St. Charles Avenue Streetcar Line) was chartered in 1833 and opened for business two years later. It was built to connect the city of New Orleans with surrounding neighborhoods, especially the village of Carrollton, four-and-a-half miles away. The train track cut through Tivoli Circle in an arc and traveled along Triton Walk to Baronne Street, where it turned and continued on Baronne to Poydras.
On one side of Nayades, railroad company officials constructed the Carrollton Railroad Depot at Tivoli Circle. The Place du Tivoli waited anxiously for some long awaited beautification, but it was slow to come. An 1845 city guide mentioned the intended “ornamentation” of the circle, yet twenty years later an article in the Daily Picayune looked forward to the time when some of the circle’s “woe-begoneness will be removed.”

There was a lot of unpopular winnying and wheezing of the steam powered cars, but in 1866 the engines were retired and mule power took over. Electric power was introduced on the Carrollton line on February 1, 1893. Also in 1866, the railroad depot at Tivoli Place was closed and the real estate was subdivided into twenty lots and sold to prospective buyers. The advertisement below mentions the sale held on December 8, 1866, by Messrs, Walton and Deslondes.

In New Orleans during the Civil War, Union forces camped on Tivoli
Circle with their mounts and cannon. By this time, an iron fence had been built around the circle. When the war was over, the well-packed earth provided ample terrain for traveling circuses, such as DeHaven’s Great Circus, Seth B. Howe’s European Circus and (according to a notice in the Picayune dated February 9, 1872) the great Dan Rice and his circus.

Union troops camped at Tivoli Circle in 1864

Dan Rice’s Great Show Returns To New Orleans, 1872

When Robert E. Lee died on October 12, 1870, a group of New Orleanians met a month later to form the Robert E. Lee Monumental Association. The New Orleans City Council donated Tivoli Circle as the site of the proposed Lee memorial. It took fourteen years to raise most of the $40,000 (including $10,000 for the statue) for the Lee Monument. The 7,000 pound, 16½-foot bronze statue by sculptor Alexander Doyle of New York was to be placed upon an imposing white marble pillar. Still $1,000 in debt, the association arranged the sale of 5,000 souvenir medals bearing pictures of the monument. At 50 cents each, that would more than cover the remaining debt.

On February 19, 1884, three days before the dedication, the statue was taken from the ship that delivered it from New York. Over 15,000 people gathered for the event on Washington’s birthday, including
Lee’s daughters, Mildred and Mary Lee. General Francis T. Nicholls delivered an emotional speech which he was too overcome to finish. The ceremonies opened with the Wagnerian grand march, *Rienzi*, followed immediately by a heavy rain. Hardly anyone escaped without getting drenched. Twenty minutes later, the rain subsided, the statue was unveiled and a roar went up through the crowds. Rain-soaked hats were thrown skyward and the crowds saluted the Lee daughters. They, in turn, waved their handkerchiefs in response.

Quite a lot has transpired in the immediate neighborhood after General Lee was first unveiled at Tivoli Circle: a Masonic Temple that was never built, the *Saengerbund*, a well-remembered library, John Hancock Life Insurance Company, K & B corporate headquarters, Pat Taylor of Taylor Energy, the hip Circle Bar and the Hotel Modern with handcrafted cocktails from Bellocq. But this is, after all, a recollection of the years before the Lee Monument.

On December 17, 2015, the New Orleans City Council voted to take down Lee’s statue from Lee Circle, as well as three other monuments from public display. The impetus for this action was a conversation between Mayor Mitch Landrieu and New Orleans jazz great Wynton Marsalis discussing the removal of the Lee statue and renaming of Lee Circle and other city memorials to Confederate slaveholders. After the City Council’s vote, four organizations immediately filed suit in federal court. The City administration agreed there would be no monument removals before a court hearing scheduled for January 14, 2016.
Of the three other monuments, one statue honored Jefferson Davis and another was of General P. G. T. Beauregard, who were both present that day at the unveiling of Lee’s monument. Whatever the fate of Lee and the other monuments, there is a vast history that took place before ... and is yet to come.

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New Orleans Nostalgia
“Lee Circle Before Lee”
Ned Hémard
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