

*This 1803 map of New Orleans by French surveyor Joseph Antoine Vinache shows the green commons between the French Quarter and today's Common Street. A canal was planned on the Commons, but it was not built and Canal Street evolved instead. (Courtesy of The Historic New Orleans Collection)*

## CHAPTER ONE

# The Early Days



CANAL STREET WAS born—but not in name—in 1807, and in a sense was an outgrowth of the 1803 Louisiana Purchase. A wide space called the Commune de la Ville, or the City Commons, surrounded the French Quarter and also separated the Quarter from Faubourg St. Mary, the city’s oldest suburb, which was established in 1788 and today is the city’s Central Business District. The Commons was European Crown land where there had been an earth and timber palisade and five forts to protect the city.



*Jacques Tanesse in 1810 subdivided the City Commons, shown here on an 1812 map of New Orleans. The canal was planned where Canal Street eventually would be established. (Courtesy of The Historic New Orleans Collection)*

The five forts were Fort St. Charles, near the Mississippi River and modern Esplanade Avenue, Fort St. John, near Esplanade and North Rampart Street, Fort St. Ferdinand, at Congo Square in front of the modern Morris F. X. Jeff Auditorium, Fort Bourgoyne, near the intersection of Canal Street and North Rampart Street, and Fort St. Louis, near Canal and Tchoupitoulas streets.

With the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, the Crown property went to the United States government. In 1806 the land was given to French nobleman the Marquis de la Fayette, of American Revolutionary War fame. But when New Orleans objected, the United States ceded the land to the city with the stipulation that a navigation canal be constructed along part of the land to connect the Mississippi River and Lake Pontchartrain.

A plan was drawn up by city surveyor Jacques Tanesse, dated April 15, 1809, and titled rather lengthily

MARK TWAIN, FROM *LIFE ON THE MISSISSIPPI* (1883)

*From Chapter 41, “The Metropolis of the South,” on visiting New Orleans in the late 1850s:*

“Canal Street was finer, and more attractive and stirring than formerly, with its drifting crowds of people, its several processions of hurrying street-cars and—toward evening—its broad second-story verandas crowded with gentlemen and ladies clothed according to the latest mode.”





*This view of the Canal Street shopping district on a summer day in 1952 by Charles L. Franck Photographers clearly shows the great expanse of the proposed canal route. (Courtesy of The Historic New Orleans Collection)*

Plan drawn up in execution of the decree of the City Council of New Orleans approved by the mayor the 15 June 1807, relative to the six hundred yards of its Commons, starting from its fortifications on all sides, on which a right of ownership has been recognized to the said city by the United States.

Soon after, all of the fortifications except Fort St. Charles were removed, and in 1810 Tanesse began subdividing the Commons that included Esplanade Avenue and North Rampart Street.

On the upriver side of the Commons Tanesse set aside space for a fifty-foot-wide waterway flanked by two sixty-foot-wide roadways. This was a total width of 170 feet, only one foot less than the width of modern Canal Street. The canal to the lake was not designed as a straight line, but rather extended out from the river levee to what is now Basin Street.

At that point it would turn at a right angle to join the basin of the Carondelet Canal, later called the Old Basin Canal, which had been built in the 1790s. This canal ran along what is now Lafitte Street. It intersected with the tip of Bayou St. John, which ultimately led to Lake Pontchartrain. The Carondelet Canal was not designed to actually intersect with the waters of the Mississippi since that would have produced a serious river flooding problem.

The Orleans Navigation Company was established to finance and construct what was deemed a nationally important transportation route reflecting the monumental importance of the Mississippi River at the time. Lake Pontchartrain and Bayou St. John had formed a major route to the city from the Gulf of Mexico, and a navigation canal between the river and the lake had long been a dream. This dream would have to wait, since the proposed navigation canal on Tanesse's plan was not carried out. There were some canals connecting the river and the lakes such as the

Lake Borgne Canal of the 1840s in St. Bernard Parish. But a large-scale navigation canal did not materialize until 1923 when the Inner Harbor Navigation Canal, better known as the Industrial Canal, was dedicated.

At first Canal Street grew slowly on its path to becoming the heart of commercial New Orleans. In its earliest years after the Commons was subdivided, the street was virtually in the country, with buildings along its route widely scattered except for a concentration near the river at Tchoupitoulas and Levee (Decatur) streets—which was then the Mississippi riverfront.

The character of the modern business portion of Canal Street—between the river and Claiborne Avenue—has gone through several distinct periods of change, change representing not only the growing wealth and importance of the street, but nearly two centuries of architectural fashion.



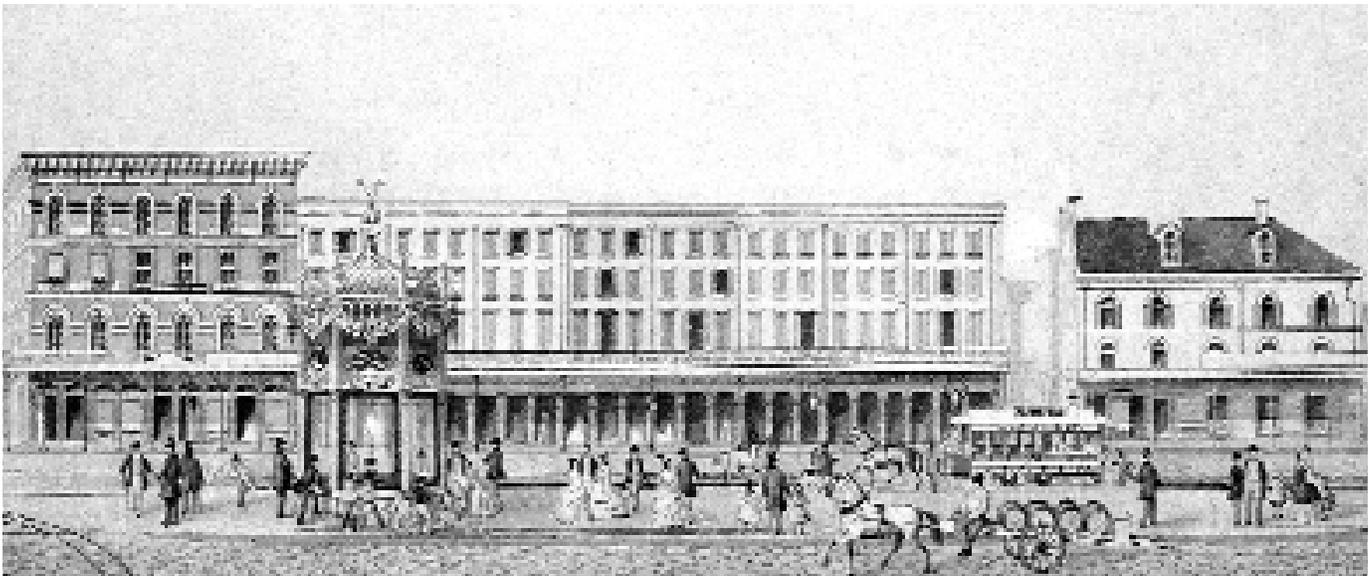
*A late-1850s bird's-eye view of Canal Street by Jay Dearborn Edwards from the top of the United States Custom House. The median was still undeveloped, although by the end of the decade funds from the estate of Judah Touro would pay for the street's beautification. (Courtesy of The Historic New Orleans Collection)*

By the 1840s and 1850s, Canal Street was lined with rows of low-rise three- and four-story buildings. By the 1870s, buildings had more ornamentation, such as elaborate rooflines with spires and cupolas. In the late 1880s, early “skyscrapers” such as the Morris, long known as the Cigali Building, rose to seven stories. After that, progressively taller buildings such as the 1902 Imperial Building (Godchaux’s Clothing Store until the 1980s) and the 1909 Maison Blanche structure would further raise the street’s skyline. With a few exceptions, Canal Street’s panorama would remain relatively unaltered until the decades after the 1960s when real skyscrapers made their appearance at the river end of the street.

Today, several buildings survive from the 1820s and 1830s, and these give us an impression of what the street would have once looked like. The oldest building on the street stretches between Decatur Street and Dorsiere Place. Dating from 1821, it is typical of many buildings at the time, since it served both commercial and residential purposes, although it was remodeled to its present look in 1899 and is now the home of a Wendy’s fast-food restaurant. At the corner of Royal Street are three matching stone buildings built in 1825 by Germain Musson, grandfather of French Impressionist painter Edgar Degas. These are among the earliest large commercial structures on the street.

Directly across Canal Street from the Musson Buildings at the corner of St. Charles Street is one of the remaining structures of what was built as a row of three buildings in 1833. It is typical of small commercial buildings built on Canal Street at the time. For many years it has housed part of Rubenstein Brothers clothing store. This fine store is a complex of fine old commercial buildings whose facades above the ground floors have barely changed since the late nineteenth century.

Beyond Royal Street, Canal became progressively more residential



*Marie Adrien Persac’s 1873 drawing of Canal Street between Decatur and Chartres shows the oldest building on the street at the far right prior to its 1899 restoration. The area at the left is now occupied by the Marriott Hotel. (Courtesy of The Historic New Orleans Collection)*



*The oldest still-standing building on Canal Street, seen here during World War I, is at the corner of Decatur. The building, which dates from the 1820s, was remodeled in 1899 and now houses a Wendy's Restaurant. (Courtesy of The Historic New Orleans Collection)*



*This 1873 Marie Adrien Persac's drawing of Canal Street between Chartres and Royal, with Exchange Place between, shows what is today one of the least-changed blocks on the street. The still-standing buildings owned by Edgar Degas' relatives, the Musson family, are visible at the left at Royal Street. (Courtesy of The Historic New Orleans Collection)*



*One of the few buildings from the 1840s that still stands was built for Newton Mercer, a physician, as his residence. Today it is the home of the Boston Club. (Courtesy of The Historic New Orleans Collection)*

about the 1830s as it witnessed the construction of some of the city's finer townhouses. In the heart of Canal Street is one of its finest mid-nineteenth century townhouses still standing. It is now the home of the Boston Club, a private men's club that has been there since 1884. The club took its name from a card game. The house and side garden remain hardly changed from when they were built in the 1840s for Dr. Newton Mercer.

At one time the block between University Place and South Rampart Street was lined with opulent townhouses. The most notable mansion and garden on the block were built in 1856 for F. W. Tilton at the corner of University Place.

The grand house became the Shakespeare Literary and Theatrical Club by 1873; by 1900, however, the house was no longer standing.

Beginning in the 1840s, additional grandly proportioned townhouses were appearing on Canal Street beyond Rampart Street alongside more modest rows of houses. By the early twentieth century, many of these houses had become tenements, although the buildings still remained recognizable. Today, only a handful of the buildings are standing, and they have become so neglected under the guise of commercial alterations and signage that they are hardly recognizable.

Separating the two roadways of Canal Street and the quaintness of the French Quarter and dynamism of the business district is the median, which is locally called the "neutral ground." Indeed, the term has come to define every median in the area. Initially the term meant a common ground, a dividing line between the French-speaking Creole natives and the newly arrived Americans. By the mid-nineteenth century, Orleanians of all classes and backgrounds gathered on Canal Street to shop, do business, and transfer from one streetcar line to another—thus, this was the "neutral ground" for all New Orleanians.

Outside the business district, as the street developed, street names were given a north and south designation. But downtown Canal Street became the great gathering place and center of activity in New Orleans. With all manner of events occurring on the thoroughfare, it became the equivalent of Times Square in New York or Piccadilly Circus in London.

As large stores proliferated along Canal Street in the 1850s and streetcar lines terminated there, people gravitated more and more to its confines. Because of its great width, it could accommodate larger crowds than most other main streets. Canal Street has been called America's widest main street, and while some towns, including Augusta, Georgia, have disputed this, few big cities have a main street that is as wide as some entire city blocks.

The largest building on early Canal Street was Charity Hospital, which was built in 1815 between Baronne Street and University Place. In 1832 the hospital moved to new quarters on Common, now Tulane Avenue. The state capitol was moved into the former hospital building. In 1815 the building was still considered “in the country,” but by the 1830s the fast-growing city was quickly expanding around it.

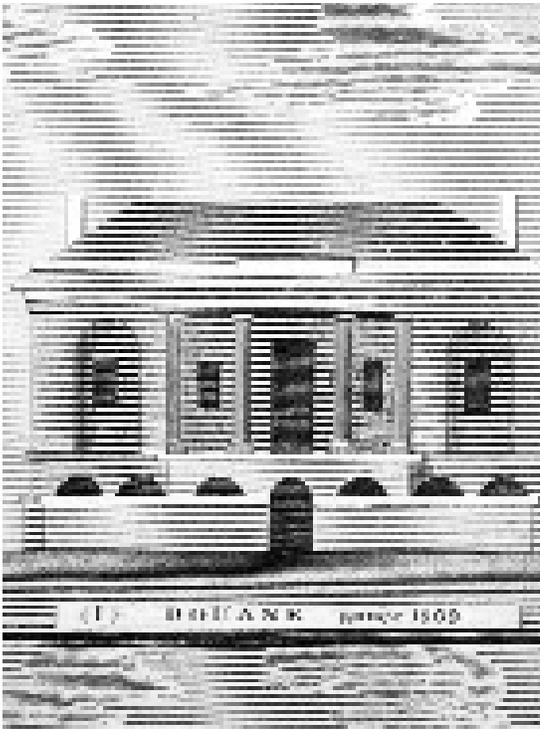
In 1834 traveler Joseph Holt Ingraham wrote of the statehouse:

Its snow-white front, though plain, is very imposing; and the whole structure with its handsome, detached wings, and large green [lawn], thickly covered with shrubbery in front, luxuriant with orange and lemon trees, presents decidedly, one of the finest views to be met with in the city.

Ingraham went on to describe the rest of the Canal Street “with its triple row of young sycamores, extending through out the whole length,” as

one of the most spacious, and destined at no distant period to be one of the first and handsomest streets of the city. Every building in the street is of modern construction, and some blocks of its brick edifices will vie in tasteful elegance with the boasted granite piles of Boston.

The street, though wide, was not long, and Ingraham wrote that “this street, which less than a mile from the river terminates in the swampy commons, every where surrounding New Orleans, except the river side.” Thus, he described Canal Street as disappearing into the swamps somewhere around Claiborne Avenue. Ultimately, the street would extend almost 3½ miles, with its terminus, quite appropriately, in front of a grouping of cemeteries.



*The Custom House as it appeared in the early 1800s. This is one of three Custom House buildings, each larger than its predecessor, that has occupied the site. (Courtesy of The Historic New Orleans Collection)*

The state legislature moved from New Orleans to Donaldsonville, and then to Baton Rouge in the late 1840s, and the elegant capitol Ingraham described—then only about thirty-five years old and surrounded by the fast growing city—was sold and demolished. The block on which it stood was quickly covered with a mixture of residences and commercial establishments, but within a short time, commerce would

come to absorb the entire block. As with the rest of Canal Street's commercial heart, once business took hold the former residential character never returned.

Established in 1805, Christ Episcopal Church is the oldest Protestant congregation in Louisiana, and for about eighty years the church called Canal Street home. The congregation worshiped in several locations, including the Cabildo. In 1816, it moved into an octagonal brick building designed by Henry S. Latrobe, son of the famous English-born architect of the first United States capitol, Benjamin Latrobe, on the river side of Bourbon Street.

By the 1830s the congregation had outgrown its small church, and in 1837 a new one was built on the same site. Designed by James Dakin and James Gallier, Sr. with a row of six Ionic columns and no steeple, it resembled nothing more than a Greek temple. It survived less than ten years, since in 1846 a new Christ Church was built on the lakeside corner of



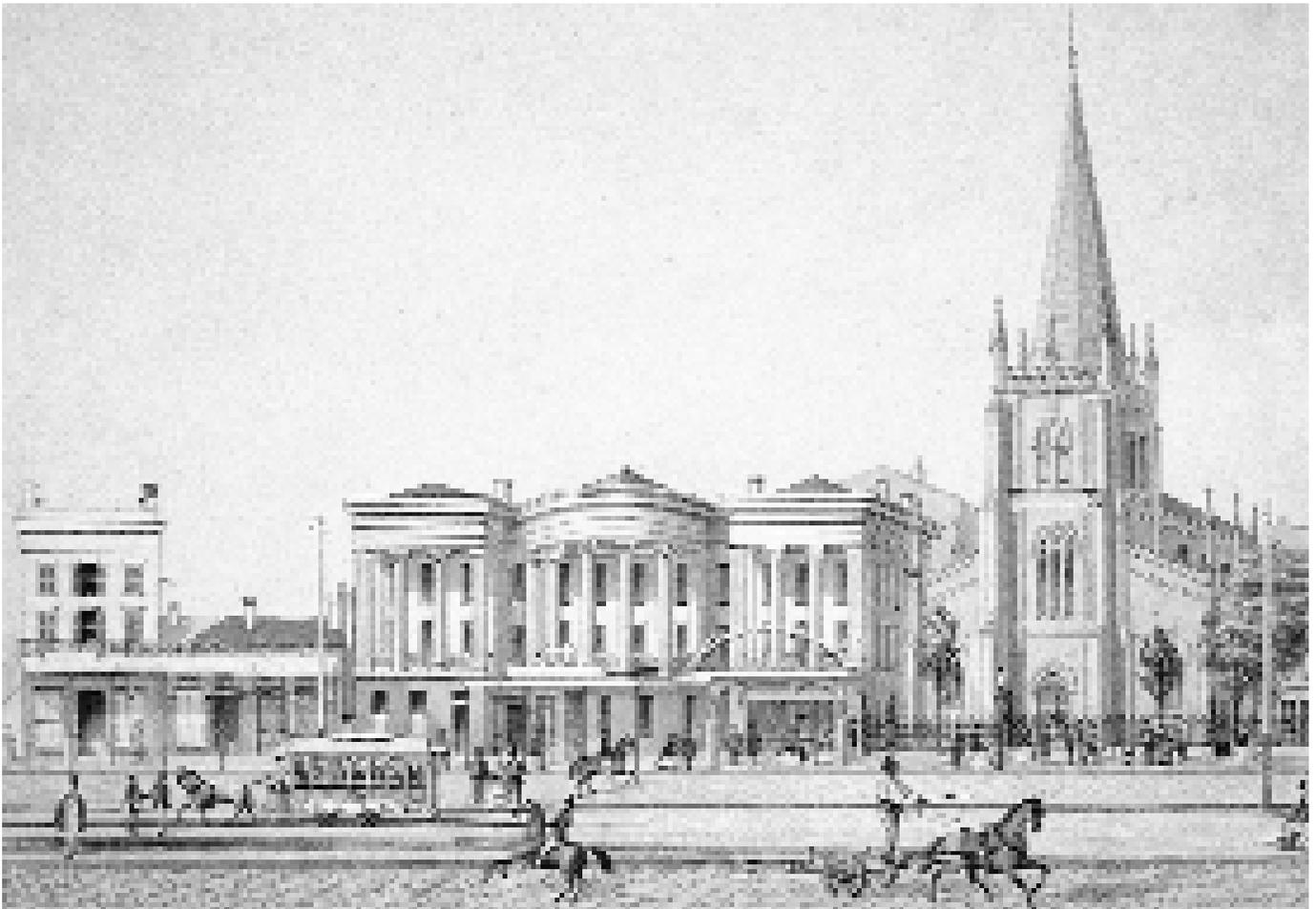
*View of Canal Street looking toward Lake Pontchartrain from Bourbon in the late 1850s, by Jay Dearborn Edwards. The steeple of Christ Episcopal Church is at the right. (Courtesy of The Historic New Orleans Collection)*



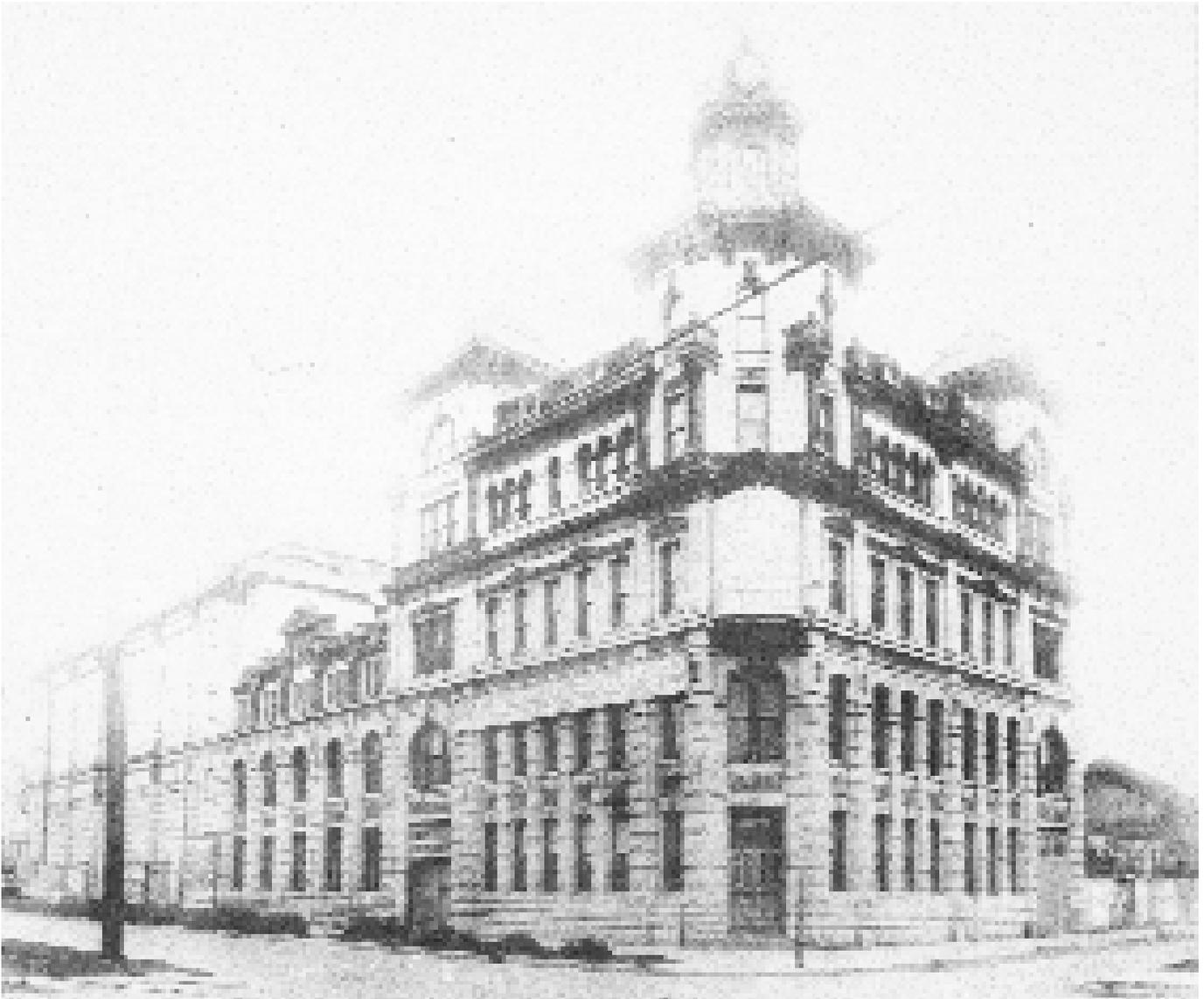
*Canal Street in 1866. (Photo by Theodore Lilienthal; courtesy of the Louisiana State Museum)*

Dauphine Street. It was designed by Thomas K. Wharton and built by James Gallier, Sr. in the Gothic style, which was regarded as more fitting for an Episcopal house of worship. For nearly four decades Christ Church dominated the skyline of Canal Street as the street's tallest structure.

In 1887 the church building—just about forty years old—was demolished after the congregation moved to its current home on St. Charles Avenue at Sixth Street. Its replacement was the ornate Mercier Building, which



*Canal Street between Dauphine and Burgundy in 1873. Shown are Christ Episcopal Church and Union Terrace, to the left of the church. Later, Maison Blanche Department Store occupied most of the block. Today, the Ritz-Carlton Hotel and the Audubon Building fill the block. This is one of twenty detailed block elevations of Canal Street by Marie Adrien Persac. (Courtesy of The Historic New Orleans Collection)*



*During the late nineteenth century, many grandiose buildings appeared on Canal Street. The Crescent Brewery, on the downtown corner of North Claiborne and Canal Street, became a candy factory during Prohibition.*

became the first home of Maison Blanche Department Store in 1897. Commerce had truly come to dominate this portion of Canal Street.

The distinctive golden beehive corner dome of this building would dominate the corner of Canal and Dauphine for only about thirty years—there was no preservation movement then. Around 1908 it was torn down for a new Maison Blanche “skyscraper” store and office building that still stands on the site as the Ritz-Carlton Hotel.