

106 SUCCESS STORY

Riverfront Expressway: French Quarter Threat Demolished by Preservationists New Orleans, Louisiana

“A careful review of the highway proposal and the positions of various interests convinced me that the public benefits from the proposed highway would not be enough to warrant damaging the treasured French Quarter ... The Advisory Council on Historic Preservation opposed the surface-level route. We concurred in that decision.”

— JOHN A. VOLPE

Secretary of Transportation, 1969–1973



THE STORY

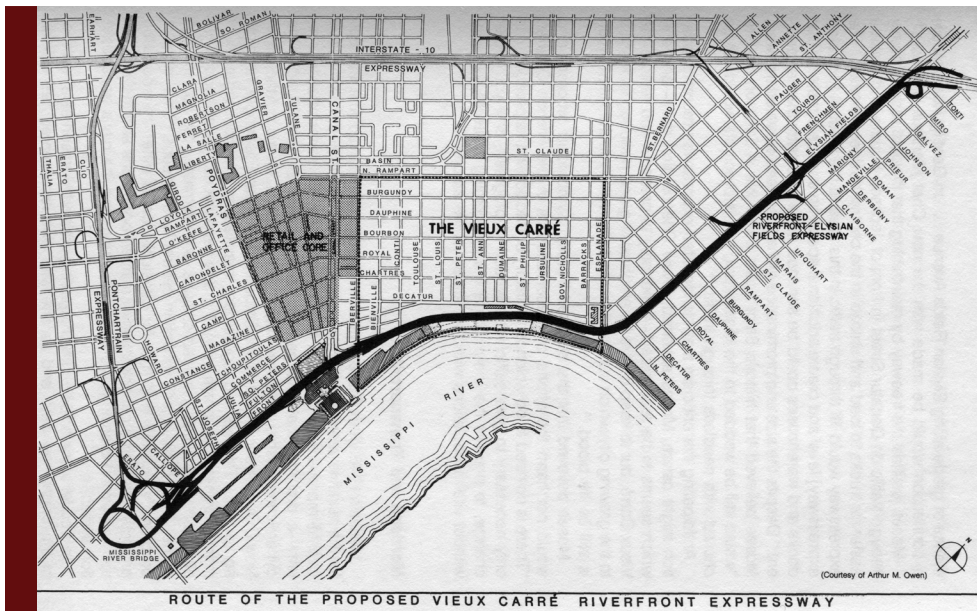
The French Quarter, also known as the Vieux Carré, is the oldest neighborhood in New Orleans, sitting on a crescent in the Mississippi River. When New Orleans was founded in 1718, the city was originally centered here. The neighborhood is a National Historic Landmark (NHL) containing many individual historic buildings and a mix of Spanish, French, Creole, and American architectural styles.

THE PROJECT

Starting in the 1940s, city and state officials sought to improve the core of New Orleans by placing a major expressway along the perimeter of the French Quarter, to separate it from the Mississippi River. City officials and developers claimed it would take traffic off the narrow streets, improve circulation, and spur economic development. Preservationists believed the elevated Riverfront Expressway would unacceptably damage the very nature of the French Quarter. When the debate commenced, the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) of 1966 and its Section 106 process were not in existence, so discussions about preserving this neighborhood did not yet include current Section 106 participants such as the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation (ACHP), State Historic Preservation Officers, Indian tribes, applicants, and interested consulting parties. The concept of an elevated freeway along the riverfront was strongly supported by state and local officials, but a 1965 public meeting revealed the strength of public disapproval and caused local and state governmental leaders to consider a tunnel or ground-level alternative to the raised expressway.

While city officials sought federal funding, opponents met with Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall, who suggested that the French Quarter become an NHL. The New Orleans City Council rejected seeking NHL status. In early 1966, the U.S. Bureau of Public Roads (BPR) approved the elevated freeway as proposed. Before work began, Lowell Bridwell, administrator of the newly-created Federal Highway Administration

Photos: Above, St. Louis Cathedral in the French Quarter; Center: 1910 French Market and the French Market today (all courtesy Wikipedia Commons)



For more about Section 106 and the ACHP go to www.achp.gov

Photo: This map of the proposed route was published in the 1981 book "The Second Battle of New Orleans."

(FHWA) that succeeded BPR, took office. Due to the opposition to the project, Bridwell went to New Orleans to have a public meeting, which resulted in favorable consideration of a ground-level alternative to the raised expressway. Bridwell ultimately approved the ground-level project.

THE 106 PROCESS

On October 15, 1966, the NHPA was signed into law. Section 106 of the NHPA requires each federal agency to identify and assess the effects of the projects it carries out, funds, or permits on historic properties. The NHPA also created the ACHP to oversee that requirement. As a result of the passage of the NHPA, FHWA determined that the Riverfront Expressway project must be submitted to the ACHP before final approval could be given for federal funding. ACHP members issued advisory comments to the head of the sponsoring federal agency. The agency head considered those comments in reaching a final decision on the project.

The appointed members of the ACHP conducted an in-person examination of the project site, had a public meeting, and, functioning as a jury of experts, determined that the highway project would do irreversible damage to a unique and highly significant historic area. In their comments to Secretary of Transportation John Volpe, they strongly recommended that the project not proceed. Following that recommendation, in 1969, Secretary Volpe reversed FHWA's initial approval decision and cancelled funding for the project, ending the prospect of federal funding and effectively killing the Riverfront Expressway.

This was one of the first major cases for the ACHP and Section 106. It began before regulations and the consultation process had been formed and instituted, when the ACHP was shaping the Section 106 process. While the ultimate Section 106 decision, then as now, rested with the federal agency in charge of the project, the newly created ACHP's advice that this project was wholly incompatible with the historic fabric of the French Quarter and should not be built played an important role in the outcome.

THE SUCCESS

This case is an early model for why Section 106 was enacted and why it is essential. Citizens determined to retain this iconic historic neighborhood opposed government officials who wished to site a major highway that would forever alter its character. The Riverfront Expressway was never built, thanks to determined local opposition and the last-minute arrival of tools that preservationists could use to force consideration of how federal funds are spent when historic properties are at risk. The NHPA and its Section 106 process were immediately relevant, helping settle an issue that had dragged on for more than two decades.

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