

# LIVING WITH HISTORY IN NEW ORLEANS' NEIGHBORHOODS

## Esplanade Ridge



PHOTO: MARY FITZPATRICK



The grand address of the Creole upper class in the 19th century, Esplanade Avenue is a living gallery of 19th and early 20th century residential architecture. The oak-lined boulevard and surrounding neighborhoods, with proximity to both City Park and Bayou St. John and an excellent stock of historic housing, draw outdoor enthusiasts, families and singles. At the same time, the area's association with The New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival, which is held each Spring in the nearby Fairgrounds, makes the Esplanade Ridge Historic District a favorite with artists, musicians, and music lovers. Both the racetrack and the New Orleans Museum of Art are within walking distance, and public transit puts the downtown and uptown universities within easy reach. The shops and restaurants in the 3000 - 3200 blocks of Esplanade Ave. are a community haven to the residents.

In 1822 City Surveyor Joseph Pilie mapped the "Esplanade Prolongment" along the high ground of the ancient Native American portage (where canoes had to be carried overground), but it would be years before the planned European-style boulevard connecting the Vieux Carré to the bayou would become a reality. Lawsuits and contentious landowners impeded its completion until the 1860s, when a trolley began providing regular transportation along its length. Long before the street arrived, however, prominent New Orleanians were building country houses and manor homes along Bayou

PRESERVATION RESOURCE CENTER OF NEW ORLEANS INVITES YOU TO EXPLORE THE LOCAL SIDE OF LIFE IN ESPLANADE RIDGE, WHERE GRAND HOMES OF THE 19th CENTURY CREOLE UPPER CLASS AS WELL AS SMALLER HISTORIC COTTAGES KEEP DRAWING NEW RESIDENTS.



Road and on large parks dotted across the then-rural area that is now the historic district. Some enterprising plantation owners, meanwhile, built developments, or “faubourgs,” of their own between the bayou and the original city (now the Vieux Carré). The alignment of the streets in these separate faubourgs sometimes runs at odd angles to city streets like Esplanade and Ursulines, causing some irregularly shaped blocks.

Demolition of landmark buildings and the construction of an elevated expressway through the area in the late 1960s drew a tough, determined group of residents together to fight for preservation. The Esplanade Ridge Historic District, comprised of the historic Faubourg St. John,

Faubourg Pontchartrain and Tremé neighborhoods, was established through their efforts in 1980. Strong residents’ organizations continue to

police blighted housing and crime and to preserve the residential character of the neighborhood. They also give great parties, like the annual “Voodoo on the Bayou,” to support their community efforts and bring neighbors together. Residents rave about living here, and today it’s difficult for hopeful renovators to find blighted houses in the Faubourg St. John neighborhood.



# TOURS

*We encourage you to use good judgment and common sense in taking these tours.*

## TOUR A

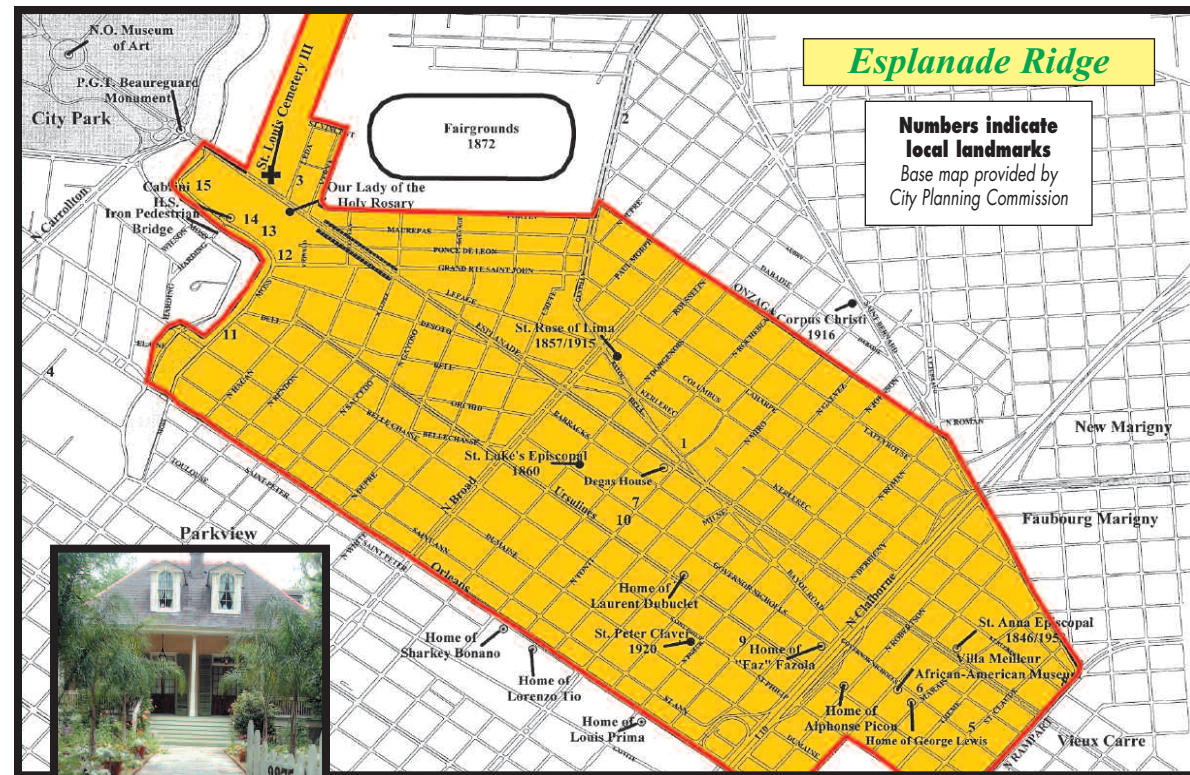
**Bayou St. John (walk)** Bayou St. John was the area’s first highway from French settlements on the Gulf Coast, so early land grants on its banks predate the city of New Orleans by ten years. Start where Esplanade meets

Bayou St. John and follow Moss St. towards the canal. You’ll pass behind Cabrini High School, built as an orphan asylum by Saint Francis Cabrini in 1905, and Our Lady of the Rosary Church, built in 1924, before finding The Pitot House (begun 1799, moved from the present site of Cabrini High School in 1964), now a house museum (W-Sat., 10 a.m.-3 p.m.) and home of the Louisiana Landmarks Society. Other surviving plantation houses nearby include Holy Rosary Rectory (1370 Moss), the so-called “Spanish Custom House” (1784; 1300 Moss), and the restored Louis Blanc House (c. 1800; 924 Moss). Look across the bayou from the Pitot House to spy the spreading Trading Oak, said to have been a trading spot for Native Americans. The bayou itself was cluttered with motley boathouses in the early 20th century, but Congress declared it non-navigable in 1936. Today, this peaceful waterway is frequented by joggers, bikers, picnickers, and strolling families. Walk across the pedestrian bridge in the 1400 block to explore Parkview Historic District.

## TOUR B

**Old Portage (bike/to drive this route you’ll have to do it backwards)** Modern street names make pursuit of the old portage route seem confusing, but it’s easy if you remember that it’s all one road. The original

takeout point for the portage between Bayou St. John and the Mississippi was near the intersection of Moss and Bell streets. Follow Bell away from the bayou to beautiful Ursulines Ave., then veer right after one block on Bell to reach Esplanade (6 blocks), noting the large galleried house with cornstalk-pattern fence at N. White and Bell as you go. A right to commercial Broad St., then a left and almost immediate right brings you to Bell again. Turn right at the second street, Bayou Road. The junction of different streets here was historically Place Bretonne, from which Faubourg St. John’s streets fanned out in Barthelemy Lafon’s 1809 plan. The restaurant at 2285 Bayou Road is a great adaptive reuse of an old corner store/pool hall. The farmhouse next door (2275 Bayou Road, now a B&B) was the second floor of an 1802 “habitation” or country house. Its Greek Revival neighbor, the Benachi Mansion (2257 Bayou Road) was built



in 1858 for powerful Greek cotton broker Nicholas Benachi and preserves the park-like setting that would have been common to Esplanade homes of this period. The portage continues into the Tremé neighborhood.

## TOUR C

**Esplanade Avenue (bike/drive/long walk)** Start at Gayarre Park (Bayou Rd. at Esplanade Ave.), one of several small triangular

parks formed when Esplanade bisected both early land grants aligned with Bayou Road and the fan-like arrangement of streets that Barthelemy Lafon designed for Faubourg St. John in 1809. Follow the odd-numbered side of Esplanade to the c.1873 Dunbar House, 2453 Esplanade, originally one of a pair of Second Empire mansions. Crossing Broad St., note the gardens and delicate Art Nouveau gates outside recently restored 2623 Esplanade. The turreted Queen Anne-style Cresson House (1902), 2809 Esplanade, is a favorite stopping place for tour buses. The shops, cafés and restaurants in the 3000, 3100 and 3200 blocks and along Ponce de Leon are worth exploring. The tiny Whole Foods Store sells more per square foot than any of the company’s emporiums in the U.S. Save time for the Luling Mansion, the most elaborate of archi-

tect James Gallier Jr.’s projects, at 1436 Leda St. (3 blocks past Ponce de Leon, on right of Esplanade). The three-story Italianate mansion (with moat) overlooked Esplanade before it was obscured by residences in the 1920s. In 1871 it became the elegant “Jockey Club” for the newly established Fairgrounds racetrack.

Return to Esplanade Avenue. The front section of St. Louis Cemetery No. 3, established in 1856, is worth a separate trip for its carved stone angels. Head back on the odd-numbered side of Esplanade. Artist Edgar Degas resided from 1872-73 at 2306 Esplanade, where his uncle, brother and sister-in-law were tenants for roughly a decade.





- 1708 First settlement in area established where portage meets Bayou St. John
- 1718 Bienville founds city of Nouvelle Orleans, now Vieux Carré
- 1721 Present-day Esplanade established as lower commons and site for Fort St. Charles
- 1790s Carondelet Canal provides alternate route from Bayou St. John to Vieux Carré
- 1803 Louisiana Purchase
- 1807 U.S. Congress gives New Orleans title to former military commons embracing present-day Esplanade Ave., N. Rampart St. and Canal St. bounding the French Quarter
- 1809 Daniel Clark Plantation subdivided into Faubourg St. John
- 1810 Esplanade between river and Rampart St. plotted for lots
- 1822 Joseph Pilie plan projects "Esplanade Prolongment" as far as Bayou St. John
- 1836 City divides into three municipalities, splitting Esplanade down middle
- 1836 Esplanade Ave. developed from Villere St. through 2000 block
- 1841 Esplanade Ave. reaches a few blocks above Claiborne Ave.
- 1852 Municipalities unite into single government
- 1857 Rodriguez Bayou Road Omnibus establishes regular transportation along Esplanade
- 1861 Rampart-Esplanade Railroad established; becomes Esplanade and Bayou Bridge Streetcar in 1863
- 1867 LeBreton Market formalized as trading place
- 1870 Fairgrounds established
- 1913 Esplanade and Bayou Bridge Streetcar ceases operation
- 1936 Bayou St. John declared "non-navigable"
- 1969 Overhead expressway along N. Claiborne Ave. completed
- 1972 Esplanade Ridge Tremé Civic Association first established; reestablished 1996
- 1980 Esplanade Ridge Historic District established

## Annual Neighborhood Events

- October: Voodoo on the Bayou
- August: Night Out Against Crime

## Neighborhood Organizations

- Esplanade Ridge/Tremé Civic Association
- Faubourg St. John Neighborhood Association
- Greater Tremé Consortium, Inc.



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