



City Councils and City Streets

LOUISIANA STATE MUSEUM

The Cabildo: A History of People and Power in Louisiana – Post-video Activity

Watch the video at: https://youtu.be/3ul_PT0lcho

Primary Source Analysis and Research Prompt

Objective: Students will learn that local government bodies met in the Cabildo, including the Spanish *cabildo* and the New Orleans City Council. Students will also learn that local government is responsible for maintaining city streets, both then and now, and will discover other functions of the New Orleans City Council today.

Louisiana Student Standard for Social Studies: 7.1.1, 7.1.5, 7.10.2, 8.1.1, 8.8.1, 8.8.2, C.1.1, C.2.8, C.5.2

Introduction

The Spanish *cabildo*, or town council, governed in New Orleans from 1769 to 1803. They met in the building we now call the Cabildo from 1799 to 1803. After the Louisiana Purchase, the American New Orleans City Council met in the same building from 1803 to 1852. This council was also called the *Conseil de Ville* by the French-speaking residents.

These government bodies made local laws, managed the police, and oversaw public works and services. They controlled things ranging from public dance halls and taverns to street lighting and levee repairs! The current city council has some of the same responsibilities. Maintaining city streets and sidewalks is one job that has been managed by the *cabildo*, the *Conseil de Ville*, and the New Orleans City Council today.

Primary source analysis

Read these samples of local government documents and letters from three different time periods. They all discuss city streets and sidewalks. Look for similarities and differences!

Cabildo – 1800

This letter dated February 21, 1800, was from acting Civil Governor Don Nicolás María Vidal to the *cabildo*. He asked the *cabildo* to build and fix the sidewalks, bridges, and gutters. The bridges mentioned in this letter helped people walk over gutters when they crossed the street.

Most Illustrious Cabildo,

Since last year, I have been clamouring in various sessions of the cabildo over which I have presided as Civil Governor, for the Honorable Deputies to have sidewalks constructed either through public auction or through a contract, whichever way is more convenient. It is the responsibility of Your Lordships and the Cabildo to see that this is done through the regular administrative channels...

There are several bridges in the City that are always in bad condition, and others that need immediate repairs. Also the ditches they span must be cleaned. Being full of dirt, they impede the course of the waters; and the people of the two extreme ends of town are complaining that the streets can not drain into the ditches. As a result, the water stays in the streets forming puddles and mires, making the streets impassable. Since the water can not drain into the canals, it is useless for the people to dig ditches by their houses. Because of these conditions, I urge Your Lordships to order, without delay, the construction and repairing of bridges and the installation of ducts underneath them for the waters.

Source:

Morazan, Ronald Rafael, "Letters, Petitions, and Decrees of the Cabildo of New Orleans, 1800-1803: Edited and Translated. (Volumes I and II)." (Ph.D. diss., Louisiana State University, 1972), https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_disstheses/2300.

Conseil de Ville – 1832

The following is from the *Conseil de Ville's* record of ordinances and resolutions and refers to the paving of city streets. From the session of April 18, 1832:

RESOLVED, that the Mayor is and remains authorized to pave St. Louis Street with shells from Chartres Street to the cemetery.

Resolved, furthermore, that said work shall be done in preference of all that sort of work ordained by the Council.

RESOLVED, that the Mayor shall notify in the public newspapers that he shall receive bids for 10 days for said work. The earth dug from said street shall be used to fill the streets above Ramparts Street bounded to one side by Carondelet Canal; to the other by the extremity of Canal Street; and that some of this earth shall be used to level the streets of this district.

C. Genois, Recorder

From the session of May 2, 1832:

RESOLVED, that the Mayor is authorized to have Royal Street paved with stones, in preference to any other street.

RESOLVED, furthermore, that from today the Corporation shall use all the stones it can get hold of shall be used to pave the said street, until that work is done.

Source:

"New Orleans (La.) Conseil de Ville. Ordinances and resolutions [translation], 1832." (2003). City Archives, New Orleans Public Library, <http://archives.nolalibrary.org/~nopl/inv/neh/ab311book1.htm>

New Orleans City Council – 2020

This article posted on the New Orleans City Council website on May 21, 2020, refers to a new ordinance requiring the Department of Public Works to use permeable paving surfaces where possible. A "permeable surface" means water can pass through the material.

At today's regular meeting, the Council approved Ordinance 32,933 authored by Councilmember Brossett and co-sponsored by all remaining six members to promote the use of permeable paving and green infrastructure. There has been a noticeable increase in the frequency and severity of heavy rainfall events and flooding throughout the City and everyone, including residents, business owners, and government have a part to play in combating flooding. While previous legislation has looked at what business owners can do, little has been done in terms of City restrictions.

The approval of this ordinance addresses this hesitancy by requiring the Department of Public Works to use permeable paving where practical. Permeable paving allows rainwater to flow through the pavement so that it can be absorbed by the ground underneath. In contrast, traditional paving prohibits rainwater absorption resulting in rainwater being pushed into the City's drainage system, which can be quickly overwhelmed. Permeable paving also lightens the burden on the City's drainage system during heavy rainfalls and curbs stormwater runoff.

Source:

Brosset, Jared C. "Council Supports Stormwater Management and Resiliency Efforts with Approval of Permeable Paving Ordinance by Councilmember Brossett." New Orleans City Council news, May 21, 2020.

<https://council.nola.gov/news/may-2020/council-supports-stormwater-management-and-resilie/>

Answer the following questions based on the documents above.

- How has the construction, maintenance, and repair of city sidewalks and streets changed over time? Think about materials and technology. Why do you think these changes happened?

- The letter to the *cabildo* in 1800 and the article from the New Orleans City Council in 2020 mention similar issues. Describe the issues. Do you notice this issue in your neighborhood?

- Though many things have changed, New Orleans streets are still the responsibility of city government. Do you think a different group or person should maintain streets and sidewalks? Why or why not?

- These documents are examples of primary sources. Primary sources are first-hand accounts of historical events. Do you think these letters and documents are important resources? What do you think we can learn about New Orleans through these documents?

Research prompt – Learn more!

What other issues are the responsibility of the New Orleans City Council today?

- Visit the New Orleans City Council website to learn more: <https://council.nola.gov/home/>
- Visit this site to search the city laws: <https://council.nola.gov/laws/>
Type any search term to find city laws relevant to that issue or topic.
- To learn about another city council initiative related to streets and sidewalks, check out the New Orleans Complete Streets ordinance here: <https://www.nola.gov/dpw/complete-streets/>

Who is your representative?

- If you live in New Orleans, use this map to determine your City Council district: https://council.nola.gov/council/media/Assets/maps/NOLA_Council_Districts.pdf?ext=.pdf
- Then, visit the following page to see who currently represents your district: <https://council.nola.gov/councilmembers/>

Get involved!

- Look at the calendar to see upcoming city council meetings: <https://council.nola.gov/meetings/>. Below the calendar at the link above, you will see “Upcoming meetings and archive.” See which upcoming events have a link to an agenda. Look over an agenda for an upcoming meeting.
- Which issues on this meeting’s agenda interest you and why?

- Would you like to send a message to the New Orleans City Council relevant to this issue? If so, what would you like to say?

- You can submit your comments and ideas about current issues to the New Orleans City Council. Click on the link for the meeting on the calendar and then click “Submit Public Comment.”
- What other issues would you like the city council to address? Has the city council ever addressed this issue? Research their website to make sure. If they have not, how can you bring it to their attention?
