

Bethinking of Old Orleans

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REMINISCENCES OF MEDINA'S DOCKS

Prior to the opening of the New York Central Railroad through this area in 1853, canal packets and stage coaches were the only means of public transportation. There being no stage route nearer to Medina than the Ridge Road, the docks were then the center of activity, especially on the arrival of packets from east and west daily. Everybody went to the docks not only to trade but to watch the boats come in with freight and passengers, to hear the news and to visit with neighbors. In those early days after the opening of the canal in 1825, there were no public entertainments like clubs, or a theater, or a library and very few newspapers. But there was a need for some amusements, and so it came that the docks were the place for this.

When a line of packets purposely for carrying passengers was put on the canal, the docks became still more a point of attraction. When the "bowsman" of an incoming packet blew his horn for fresh horses to be ready, it was a signal for people to turn canalward. By the time the boat docked, there was usually a goodly crowd waiting to see who was coming and going.

These boats which were fitted for carrying passengers exclusively had a cabin and some staterooms, with observation seats on the deck. They were towed by three or four horses with the driver riding on the rear horse.

Near the docks were boat stores, markets, saloons and warehouses for handling merchandise received or shipped. There was a canal collector's office where every boat had to report before passing to have their clearance papers examined and pay tolls. This office was open day and night and also served a political prerequisite for whichever party had state control for canal jobs.

Medina's docks were a very busy and sometimes a rough place to be. The boatmen in those days were considered to be a tough lot and were frequently given to fistfights, often times mean brawls and general horseplay. A rowdy bunch indeed. The carting of merchandise from the docks was done mainly by two men who competed for the work. Richard Gordineer and Ora Peasley both operated long wheel wagons without sides to haul the goods for Medinans.

But after the railroad was built the dock scene changed rapidly. The packets were soon withdrawn, and the boats were used mostly for freight. The docks became more and more unprofitable and soon closed as business gradually tended toward the railroad. Eventually all the old business structures on the docks were demolished and their sites became part of Medina's turn basin when it was constructed in 1914. In this 1913 photo looking southwest towards Main Street, we can see a part of the old Erie Canal and to the right of the large building, a stone store which once served the canalers on the docks. The building with X over it is the Journal-Register block from the rear the way it appeared 69 years ago. As it is now, the Medina basin is the widest on the canal measuring 400 feet across. A far cry from the original "ditch" of four feet deep and forty feet wide when the docks played such an important role in Medina's early development.