

Media contacts:

Lauren Noel, The Historic New Orleans Collection
(504) 556-7655 | laurenn@hnoc.org

Anna Grundmann LeDonne, Gambel Communications
(985) 807-5341 | anna@gambelpr.com

520 and 533 Royal Street | 410 Chartres Street
(504) 523-4662 | wrc@hnoc.org | www.hnoc.org
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New exhibition center to introduce permanent display on the French Quarter

Visitors and residents will have an opportunity to learn more about the historic neighborhood

March 28, 2019 | New Orleans, Louisiana —When The Historic New Orleans Collection throws open the doors to a \$38 million exhibition center in the heart of the French Quarter, it will introduce a new element to the historic district: a permanent place for people to learn about the centuries-old 78-square grid.

Situated on a bend of the Mississippi River, just above sea level, the land on which the French Quarter sits was traversed by Native peoples long before the arrival of Europeans and Africans in the early 18th century. The French Quarter Galleries in THNOC's new exhibition center—housed in the 19th-century Seignouret-Brulatour Building—explore how and why this neighborhood developed, how life has been lived here by various populations in different times and how the legacies that remain shape lives today.

“As the city’s front door, the French Quarter ushers in residents, workers and tourists,” said John H. Lawrence, THNOC’s director of museum programs. “Considering the vast majority of people who live in or visit New Orleans come to the French Quarter at some point, we felt there was an opportunity to tell the history of the place they’re visiting.”

In the French Quarter Galleries, the story of the city’s original footprint is presented thematically, covering arts, music and culture; the neighborhood’s various populations; transportation; communications; the slave trade; commerce and more. More than 300 original artifacts from THNOC’s holdings are complemented by interactive technologies and supplemental texts and illustrations, with staff members stationed throughout to provide more information and answer questions.

The additional galleries allow THNOC to display items that have previously only been accessible in the Williams Research Center, including larger items—like parts of a streetcar and Louisiana furniture—and snippets from the institution’s oral history program Vieux Carré Memoir.

“The galleries were curated by 11 staff members, who collaborated on the different themes constantly,” said Lawrence. “The incredible knowledge of our staff of both the subjects and our holdings produced a rich, multi-faceted look at the history of the French Quarter.”

Visitors will also have the opportunity to experience “The French Quarter by Night,” an immersive film developed by Michelle Benoit and Glen Pitre of Côte Blanche Productions. Projected on all four walls of one gallery, the film fills the space with imagery and sound, taking viewers on an epic 17.5-minute journey over more than 300 years, from nighttime on the primeval land and during early Native American presence, through a night on Bourbon Street in 2017.

“Giving this project both the historical accuracy and the dramatic punch that THNOC wanted took every trick we knew and, frankly, quite a few new ones we had to figure out,” said Pitre. “It’s definitely one of the high points of my 40-year career.”

As part of the introduction to the galleries, new media artist and New Orleanian Xiao Xiao, along with collaborator and fellow alumni from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Don Derek Haddad, developed an ever-changing animated and graphic word cloud providing an at-a-glance overview of topics covered by the display. Sensors are also embedded throughout the gallery, updating the word cloud with the words or objects people engage with the most.

“Having grown up in New Orleans, I was eager for a chance to celebrate my city, and to work with The Collection again” said Xiao. “The word cloud is a playful way to give visitors an overview of what the galleries have to offer. It’s also fun to see what items and displays other visitors are interacting with. It invites visitors on a sort of scavenger hunt, to look for the items relating to the words that they have seen.”

Located at 520 Royal St., and made possible in part through generous donations from the institution’s local, national and international supporters, THNOC’s new exhibition center adds more than 35,000 square feet to its French Quarter footprint and doubles its publicly available spaces. A free public block party will celebrate the opening Sunday, April 7, from 1 to 5 p.m.

Admission to the exhibition center is free, and it will be open to the public Tuesday–Saturday, 9:30 a.m.–4:30 p.m., and Sunday, 10:30 a.m.–4:30 p.m.

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About The Historic New Orleans Collection

Founded in 1966, The Historic New Orleans Collection is a museum, research center and publisher dedicated to the study and preservation of the history and culture of New Orleans and the Gulf South region. For more information, visit www.hnoc.org, call (504) 523-4662, or follow THNOC on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), and [Twitter](#).