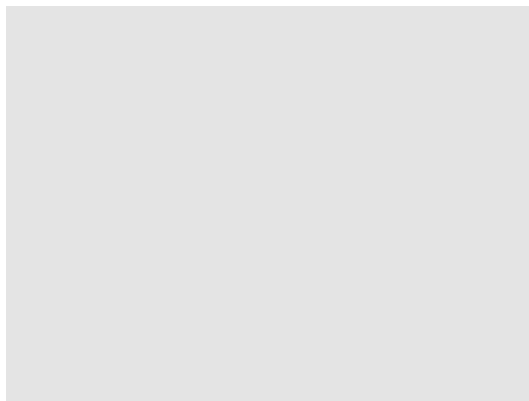


It was early November 1869, and New Orleans was feeling a need for speed. The fuddy-duddies in The Daily Picayune's editorial offices, however, were having none of it.

The newest recreational craze gaining traction in America — roller skating — had just wheeled its way into New Orleans, with the city's first recorded roller rink opening in Mechanics Hall on present-day Roosevelt Way.

Predictably, the city's residents showed up in droves to sample the scene. Meanwhile, the ink-stained wretches in the newsroom bah-humbugged indignantly.



The exposed roof timbers inside the boutique shopping center are a reminder of the building's past.
STAFF PHOTO BY CHRIS GRANGER

“The rink promises to be a nine days' wonder,” read an item in the Picayune of Nov. 2, 1869, the day after the rink's opening, “but whether its attractions would be sufficient to draw people for any length of time from the other numerous places of amusement open in the winter in New Orleans, is doubtful.”

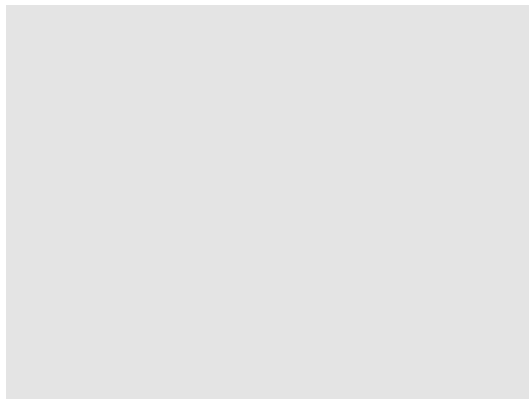
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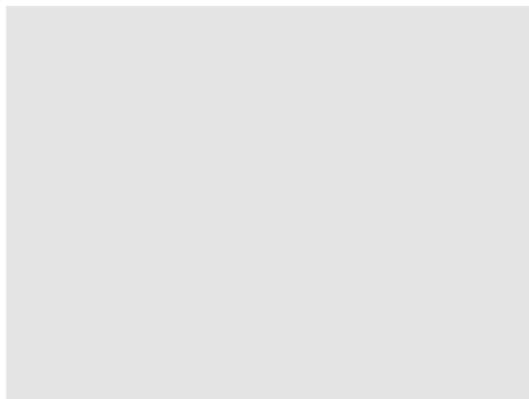
“but whether its attractions would be sufficient to draw people for any length of time from the other numerous places of amusement open in the winter in New Orleans, is doubtful.”

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The long haul

As it turns out, its attractions would be sufficient indeed. Just four months later, in February 1870, the newspaper found itself eating crow: “It has been several months since the skating rink was inaugurated in our city, and still the excitement concerning the novel entertainment keeps up unabated.”

That same month, a second rink had opened at Union Hall, on Magazine and Third streets. Another opened on Carondelet Street in 1873. The next year, temporary rinks opened at Odd Fellows Hall and briefly, in the old St. Louis Hotel.



A historic plaque outside The Rink places the shopping center firmly in the Garden District.
STAFF PHOTO BY CHRIS GRANGER

Then, in November 1884 — not coincidentally on the eve of the World’s Cotton Centennial — the activity was elevated to a new level with the announcement of the opening of a “mammoth” Garden District skating rink at the corner of Prytania and Washington streets.

Built on the site of a marble yard that had long served Lafayette Cemetery No. 1, situated catercorner from it, the Crescent City Skating Rink was designed by architect John F. Braun and managed by Professor Ira W. Daniels of New York — “a gentleman of most pleasing manners and most accommodating spirit,” the Picayune wrote.

Right for the times

Reportedly thrown up quickly to take advantage of Exposition tourism, it was built of wood with a 31-foot ceiling, illuminated by skylights and clad in a board-and-batten exterior. One newspaper story described it as being in “the renaissance style,” but “barn-like” is more accurate.

Admission: 25 cents.

An ad published Jan. 11, 1885, in The Daily Picayune announces the grand opening of the Crescent City Roller Skating Rink, which coincided with the arrival of the 1884 World Cotton Centennial.
THE TIMES-PICAYUNE ARCHIVE

As rustic as its appearance might have been, even the former doubters at The Picayune were excited by the possibilities. “The ornate style of the building, its commodious aspect and vast dimensions, have made it the attraction of the Garden District,” the newspaper wrote. “It is the largest and most complete rink in the United States.”

For skaters, viewers and diners

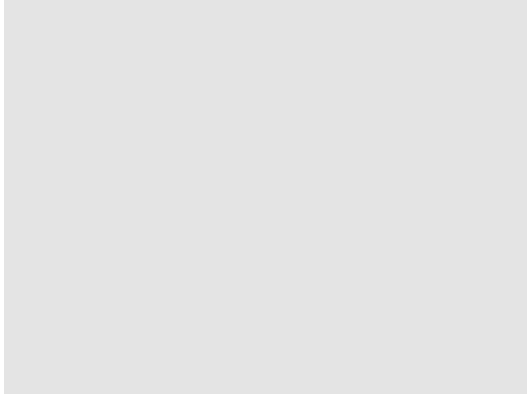
Inside, the octagonal, 70-foot-by-119-foot skating floor, made of kiln-dried maple finished by Cincinnati craftsmen to ensure a smooth ride, could reportedly accommodate 500 skaters at a time.

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Inside, the octagonal, 70-foot-by-119-foot skating floor, made of kiln-dried maple finished by Cincinnati craftsmen to ensure a smooth ride, could reportedly accommodate 500 skaters at a time.

Surrounding it were three tiers of opera chairs with a seating capacity of another 600. Above, on a gallery overlooking the rink, were tables where spectators could dine as they watched the skaters below. In all, advertisements boasted seating for a total of 1,000 people.



The Rink at Washington and Prytania streets in New Orleans is built on the site of an 1884 roller rink. Developers of the shopping center restored the building, working from an 1885 illustration.
STAFF PHOTO BY CHRIS GRANGER

A separate balcony was installed to hold an eight-piece band.

Near the rear was an immense fireplace to warm the cavernous space. On each side of it was a parlor with a skate room attached — one for ladies and one for gentlemen — reserved for those willing and able to pay for private parties.

The novelty of it all drew a steady stream of patrons eager to strap on a set of skates and careen around the rink. Just as popular were the skating exhibitions it frequently hosted.

There was “scientific and acrobatic skating by Profss. Card and Dennis.” There was “bicycle riding” by the Stirk family and “a very pleasing exhibition of fancy skating” by sisters Cora and Gertie Jackson, ages 7 and 12, whose “skillful feats evoked frequent and vigorous applause from the immense audience,” according to the Picayune.

Given the size of the building, political events were also held there on occasion.

Memories on wheels

Clearly, roller skating was in New Orleans to stay. Many locals today still remember wheeling their way through Skate Country, Skateland, Roller Kingdom, Airline Skate Center and others.

Alas, it wasn't destined to stay at Crescent City Skating Rink.

It closed after just two years, with the building being converted into a mortuary for a time. After that, it was home to a livery stable and, later, an array of businesses including a grocery store, a frame shop, a warehouse, a coin-operated laundry, a barber shop and others. Over the years, the building was repeatedly modified or added onto.

By 1978, it was a Texaco service station — and virtually unrecognizable from the days of its former glory.

New respects the old

Then, two real estate agents, George S. Farnsworth Jr. and Martha Ann Samuel, working with architect Barry M. Fox, bought it and hatched a plan to brighten the building's future by embracing its past — and fueled by what was at the time another cultural craze: the shopping mall.

Working from an 1885 illustration of the skating rink published as a newspaper advertisement, they set about restoring the building to its original condition, minus the skating rink but including the exposed roof timbers that serve as a reminder of the building's past.

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As malls go, the 19,000-square-foot building would become a far cozier facility than the sprawling shopping centers more associated with the heyday of the 1980s mall era.

Dubbed simply The Rink, it survives today, a Garden District gem filled with boutique shops, highlighted by the locally beloved Garden District Book Shop.

There's no skating there anymore, of course. But fans of local history will appreciate that the building that once served as a skating palace is still rolling along.

Sources: The Times-Picayune archive

Know of a New Orleans building worth profiling in this column, or just curious about one? Contact Mike Scott at moviegoermike@gmail.com.