

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

DEC 14 1992

National Register of Historic Places
Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name Congo Square

other names/site number _____

2. Location

street & number Rampart & St. Peter N/A not for publication

city or town New Orleans N/A vicinity

state Louisiana code LA county Orleans code 071 zip code 70116

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant nationally statewide locally. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Gerri Hobdy December 8, 1992
Signature of certifying official/Title Gerri Hobdy, Date
LA SHPO, Dept of Culture, Recreation and Tourism
State of Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official/Title Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the property is:

- entered in the National Register.
 See continuation sheet.
- determined eligible for the National Register
 See continuation sheet.
- determined not eligible for the National Register.
- removed from the National Register.
- other, (explain:)

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

Mag M. Way

1/28/93

Congo Square
Name of Property

Orleans Parish, LA
County and State

5. Classification

Ownership of Property
(Check as many boxes as apply)

- private
- public-local
- public-State
- public-Federal

Category of Property
(Check only one box)

- building(s)
- district
- site
- structure
- object

Number of Resources within Property
(Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
_____	_____	buildings
1	_____	sites
_____	_____	structures
_____	_____	objects
1	0	Total

Name of related multiple property listing
(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

N/A

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

0

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)

LANDSCAPE/plaza

Current Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)

LANDSCAPE/plaza

7. Description

Architectural Classification
(Enter categories from instructions)

N/A

Materials N/A
(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation _____
walls _____

roof _____
other _____

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- A** Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations N/A
(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B** removed from its original location.
- C** a birthplace or grave.
- D** a cemetery.
- E** a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F** a commemorative property.
- G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions)

ETHNIC HERITAGE

Period of Significance

1812-c.1860

Significant Dates

none

Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

N/A

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

N/A

Narrative Statement of Significance

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS): N/A

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # _____
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____

Primary location of additional data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Name of repository:

Congo Square
Name of Property

Orleans Parish, LA
County and State

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property @2.7 acres

UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

1

1	15	7	8	2	9	2	0	3	3	1	7	9	0	0
Zone	Easting				Northing									

3

Zone	Easting				Northing									

See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

11. Form Prepared By

Assisted by Congo Square Foundation

name/title National Register Staff

organization Division of Historic Preservation date November 1992

street & number P. O. Box 44247 telephone 504-342-8160

city or town Baton Rouge state LA zip code 70804

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps

A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.

A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

Representative **black and white photographs** of the property.

Additional items

(Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

Property Owner

(Complete this item at the request of SHPO or FPO.)

name City of New Orleans, Office of the Mayor

street & number 1300 Perdido telephone 504-586-4000

city or town New Orleans state LA zip code 70112

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Projects (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

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**National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**

Congo Square, Orleans Parish, LA
Section number 7 Page 1

Congo Square is a parcel of public land located on Rampart Street just across from the French Quarter. Although its appearance has changed over the years, the square retains its National Register eligibility as an open public area famous for its Sunday slave dances.

Congo Square has been open space since Fort St. Ferdinand was demolished c.1804. It became a square in 1812 when the City Commons area outside the old walled city was subdivided. It appears as "Place Publique" on an 1812 map and was bounded by Rampart, St. Claude, St. Ann and the Carondelet Canal's turning basin. Maps from 1834 and 1841 show St. Peter Street as the southwestern boundary with the turning basin just beyond.

After about 1816 the square became known as Place du Cirque, or Circus Place, because of the circuses that set up there. This name appears both on maps and in official documents. Although never officially designated as such, it was popularly known as Congo Square because of the slave dances that occurred there on Sunday afternoons.

There is some contradiction concerning the square's earliest appearance. Historian Jerah Johnson refers to it as "a starkly bare open field in the middle of an otherwise lushly overgrown city," but on another occasion describes it as "an open, grass-covered field with only a few trees." Paxton's 1822 New Orleans Register and Directory notes that the "Circus public square is planted with trees." The scholarly record indicates that trees were planted in 1820, 1845, 1884-85 and 1893. The present large oak trees date from the 1893 period and were planted when the square was renamed Beauregard Square.

The next stage in Congo Square's development was the construction of the Municipal Auditorium abutting the square in 1929-30. This involved removing St. Claude Street, and thus the square looks as if it is the front yard to the auditorium (see map).

The most recent changes to Congo Square came in the 1970s with the development of Louis Armstrong Park by the city. Essentially adjacent Congo Square was joined to the park. This was accomplished by removing St. Ann Street and extending the park's steel fence (in imitation of old New Orleans wrought iron) around Congo Square. Because of its location in relationship to the park, Congo Square is visually still a distinct entity (see map).

As part of the Armstrong Park work, Congo Square received a fountain specifically designed to represent the slave dances for which the square is most famous (the source of its Register significance). Much of the square was paved

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**National Register of Historic Places
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Congo Square, Orleans Parish, LA

Section number 7 Page 2

with brick in a design of overlapping circles to represent the manner in which the slaves danced (see Part 8). At the center of the paving are subterranean fountain jets arranged in a circular fashion.

Assessment of Integrity

Although Congo Square's appearance has changed since the period of the slave dances, the important point is that it remains a separate and distinct, completely open public commons. It should also be noted that trees in one form or another have been there since at least 1820.

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Congo Square, Orleans Parish, LA
Section number 8 Page 1

Congo Square is locally significant in the area of ethnic heritage because it was the focus of an important aspect of New Orleans' African-American history. Beginning in the early nineteenth century and continuing up to roughly the Civil War, the square was the site of slave dances on Sundays. In the early days, the dances and music were African, but by the 1830s and '40s American culture had made its impact.

It should be noted that African-Americans were a very important group in the history and development of antebellum New Orleans. While there are a great many historic properties associated with them, either as slaves or free people of color, Congo Square is believed to be the only site which is specifically and compellingly associated with the retention of their African heritage. It was also a major focal point of that heritage, being a place where at times hundreds congregated. According to historian Gary A. Donaldson, "Congo Square was the focal point of a subculture of New Orleans black slaves who carried on a lifestyle as close as possible to what they had remembered from their earlier lives in Africa (or what they had been told Africa was like)." He concludes: "The importance of Congo Square cannot be underestimated as an attempt by African slaves to hold on to what they could of their heritage."

The most well-known account of the legendary dances at Congo Square was left us by Benjamin Latrobe, who happened to stumble upon the square one Sunday afternoon in 1819. He was walking up St. Peter Street and heard "a most extraordinary noise," which he thought must have come from "some horse mill, the horses trampling on a wooden floor." He found, however, that it came from a "crowd of 5 or 600 persons assembled in an open space or public square." Blacks "were formed into circular groups in the midst of which was a ring . . . ten feet in diameter." He observed in one ring two women dancing: "They held each a coarse handkerchief, extended by the corners, in their hands" "The music," Latrobe continued, "consisted of two drums and a stringed instrument." He described an old man who played a large cylindrical drum, beating it "with incredible quickness with the edge of his hand and fingers." Together with a second smaller drum, "they made an incredible noise." Latrobe described the stringed instrument as a "most curious instrument . . . which no doubt was imported from Africa." The carving on top of the finger board was "the rude figure of a man in a sitting posture." "The body," he added, "was a calabash. It was played upon by a very little old man, apparently eighty or ninety years old."

Latrobe described another instrument that "consisted of a block cut into something of the form of a cricket bat, with a long and deep mortise down the center" He also observed an instrument in the shape of "a calabash with a round hole in it, the hole studded with brass nails" It was beaten by

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Congo Square, Orleans Parish, LA
Section number 8 Page 2

a woman with two short sticks. "A man sung an uncouth song to the dancing which I suppose was in some African language, for it was not French," wrote Latrobe. He concluded that "the allowed amusements of Sunday, have, it seems, perpetuated here, those of Africa among its inhabitants." The description was accompanied by sketches of some of the instruments.

Latrobe's account is of the square in the heyday of its African heritage. Scholars have noted the strong similarities between the instruments used and native African instruments, and the circles in the dances are believed to represent different tribes. By the 1830s American influence had begun to make itself felt, and as time went on, the activities became less and less specifically African. However, as late as 1845, a reporter witnessed in the square what he called "regular Ethiopian breakdowns." He noted that the happy crowd was equipped with "rude instruments of their own contrivance, the like of which we have never seen before." The last known period account (A. Oakey Hall, The Manhattener in New Orleans, 1851) spoke of "clattering bones, and barrel-headed drumming."

Explanation of Period of Significance

Scholars point to the Sunday dances at Congo Square as beginning in the early nineteenth century, but it is impossible to establish a specific date. It appears that the dancing may have antedated the square's creation in 1812, although perhaps in a larger, less defined area. However, it seemed logical and appropriate to use the 1812 date as the beginning of the period of significance.

The exact ending date for the dances also cannot be determined. As noted above, the last known period account is from 1851. In that year the site became the Place d'Armes where the militia drilled on Sundays. However, the leading Congo Square historian, Jerah Johnson, asserts that the dancing continued up until the eve of the Civil War. Based upon this, a c.1860 date has been chosen for the ending of the period of significance.

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Congo Square, Orleans Parish, LA

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Bibliography

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Donaldson, Gary A. "A Window on Slave Culture: Dances at Congo Square in New Orleans, 1800-1862." Journal of Negro History, LXIX (1984).

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Kmen, Henry A. "The Roots of Jazz and the Dance in Place Congo: A Re-appraisal." Inter-American Musical Research Yearbook, VIII (1972).

Kmen, Henry A. Music in New Orleans: The Formative Years, 1791-1841. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1966.

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Congo Square, Orleans Parish, LA

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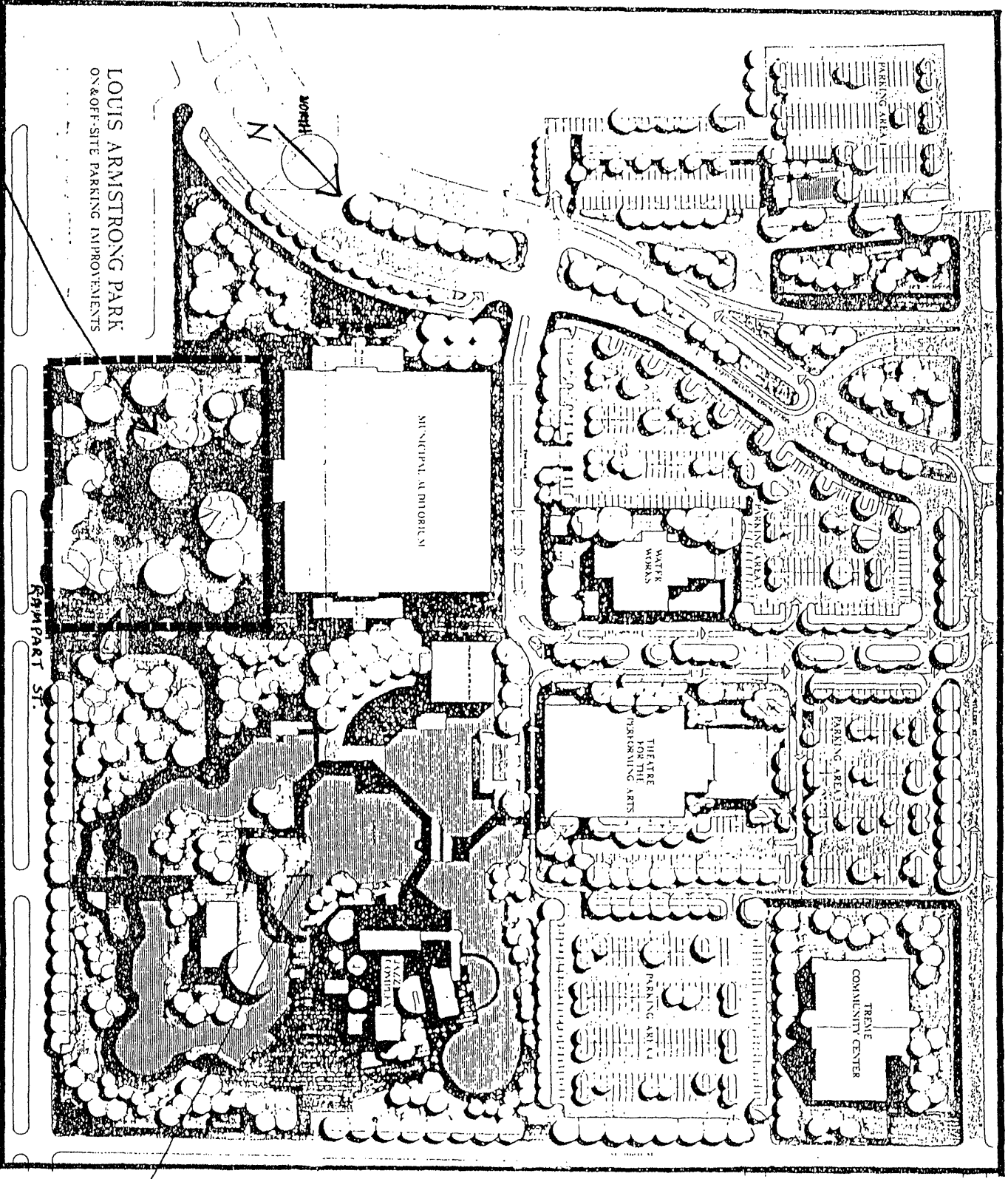
Boundary Description: See enclosed sketch map.

Boundary Justification:

The boundaries shown on the enclosed sketch map were chosen to correspond as accurately as possible to those from the period of significance. Historic maps and the present-day street plan enable one to delineate St. Ann and St. Peter streets (northeastern and southwestern boundaries respectively). The square's rear boundary cuts as close as possible to the front steps of the Municipal Auditorium.

Congo Square
Orleans Parish, LA

Scale
1" = 200'
BOUNDARY



CONGO SQUARE

Armstrong
Park