How Long is Basin Street?

Fred Bason

I went to the desk in the United States Embassy, gazed at the pretty young lady for a moment, and took the plunge. Please will you tell me how long Basin Street is? She said: 'I beg your pardon. Will you say that again? 'It's ever so simple,' I said; 'I'm Bason. I know how long I am—five foot five. I've come nearly an hour's journey to find out how long is Basin Street. You know of Basin Street? It's in New Orleans?'

She said: 'I've been here quite a long time and this is the oddest piece of information I've been asked to locate. I will do my best to help you. Will you wait five minutes?'

After a lot more than five minutes she returned. 'We seem to be weak on books about New Orleans—and as for the length of Basin Street we are quite unable to help you. We suggest you write to New Orleans Public Library. We haven't the slightest doubt that they can provide you with the required information to the exact foot.' I departed.

Now you too may wonder why I wanted the answer to this curious question, 'How long is Basin Street?' Let me tell you.

My dad told me, years ago, that in 1900 my grandfather had owned about one-fifth of a notorious street in America and given it all up because he'd turned to religion. I only remember my grandfather as a deeply religious man. He lived at 10 Vowler Street, Walworth. My father hadn't actually told me that the street of which my grandfather had once owned a fifth was Basin Street, but it didn't need Doctor Thorndyke or Mr. Pinkerton to put two and two together and get four. Was it not natural that I should like to know the length of Basin Street and so know just how long one-fifth of it was? After all, with a scrap of luck it could have been my dad's heritage, and he could
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have left to me one-fifth of Basin Street, instead of 14s. 9d., a
loud Victorian tie-pin, two books of how to bet on horses, and a
useless collection of tools for repairing the harness of horses.
(He was a saddler all his life.) These were my dear dad's total
possessions after 73 years of living.

So I wrote to the President of the U.S.A., at The White House:

Dear Mister President,

I am an Honorary Member of The Mark Twain Society of U.S.A. and I
have a certificate to prove it. There are only two other Honorary Members
in England, John Masefield and Winston Churchill—so I am in quite
exclusive company. . . Now I need, Mr. President a little information, and
the American Embassy in London is unable to help me. It is a simple
question: How long is Basin Street (which as you know is in New Orleans)?

I am, Sir, very cordially,
Fred Bason.

Whilst I was waiting for a reply to my letter to the President
(for which I enclosed a new 15 cent stamp) I wrote to a London
Public Library which prides itself on being able to answer any
questions. The Librarian replied:

It appears that this street cannot be much longer than a couple of hundred
yards or so. From the available map we do not find Basin Street marked at
all, but a description tells us that it runs into Beauregard Square and as it
does not show anywhere in the surrounding streets, Basin Street can only
be a short alley. Hoping this satisfies your enquiry.

Well, blow me down! How on earth can a street two hundred
yards in length be a short alley? The whole street would rise up
in arms if they heard that a Public Library called it an Alley.

Then I wrote to Mr. Smith, of Racine, who told me that as
far as he knew Basin Street was 'not a very long street'. How
long is 'long'? Next I wrote to Indianapolis Public Library. The
head of their Social Sciences Division wrote:

Basin Street was one of the streets defining the boundaries of New Orleans
'red light' district in accordance with an ordinance to restrict vice, passed
January 26th, 1897. The area was known as 'Storyville' after Alderman Story
who sponsored the measure. Storyville was officially closed on October 10th,
1917, in response to a request from President Woodrow Wilson for the
curbing of big city vice in wartime. The well-known song 'Basin Street
Blues' was inspired by the colourful life of the quarter. Basin Street is often
spoken of as the street on which Negro jazz originated.

Not a word about the length of the street. Now, had I known
where to locate Louis Armstrong I am sure my question
would have gotten an answer, for he was not only raised in this
street, learned to play the trumpet in this street, but had worked,
played, slept and eaten—and lots of other things in Basin Street! But it is easier to write to the President of America than the
President of the Trumpet. 'Satchmo' Armstrong always seems to be a most amiable Negro, but where to find him? In forty
years I've interviewed some 8,000 celebrities, but I've never
managed to get near Satchmo.

However, Duke University Library in North Carolina came up
with a mine of information. They said my letter had caused a
lot of laughter and they looked forward to helping me again.
They quoted from Eleanor Early's New Orleans Holiday:

There were 38 blocks occupied solely by houses, restaurants, cabarets,
saloons and cribs all devoted to vice and making a nice thing of it. . . There
were nearly 500 white girls and about half as many who were coloured.

They added that Herbert Asbury's The French Quarter: An Informal
History of New Orleans' Underworld contains the following:

In 1899 when New Orleans had a population of about 285,000 [including my
grandfather] Mayor Flower reported that there were in Storyville 230
houses, 30 places of assignation and approximately 2,000 prostitutes.

Miss Early was correct. 750 prostitutes had grown to 2,000—
making, as she said, 'a nice thing of it'. The wages of sin is not
always death. The letter from Duke University Library continued:

For the number of brothels on Basin Street itself you could consult the
directories of the Storyville District. The Blue Book, last of the series of
directories, first issued about 1902, lists all prostitutes in Storyville, white and
black; they were arranged by streets in some issues and alphabetically by
names in others.
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The letter contained the further information that Basin Street is shorter than it used to be—and it 'is a bit hard to tell where the street begins and ends'. So nobody knows.

The infuriating thing is that I once met a very distinguished man who was sure to have known—and I never asked him! In 1938 I appeared on the stage at the Trocadero Cinema, by the Elephant and Castle, in a show called 'In Town Tonight'. My stage act was to come out with a tray full of threepenny bits and defy any member of the audience to name a song or a tune I couldn't play on a piano at once. Since this was the second largest cinema in Europe it was no easy task. I played about eighty tunes correctly and failed only on three occasions. For my staggering performance I got a salary of 30s. per week.

However, on one memorable night the great Negro jazz pianist Art Tatum was encouraged to perform for five or six minutes (maybe just to show me how really to play jazz) during the show, and when his astounding performance was over he and I had a little chat. He said: 'Basin Street was gay, man—there was never any gayer. Hundreds of musicians got their break in the clubs and cabarets of Basin Street. No Basin Street, no Jazz. It's as simple as that. The Blues wasn't born there—but it was improved there. There are many forms of the Blues. The three-line verse is the common one—the repetition of the first line gives a singer time to invent a third line. And the Blues gave the player time to improvise on a basic harmonic structure.'

These were almost Art Tatum's words. I wrote them down at the time. He also talked of a traditional 12-bar structure and a Dominant seventh. I didn't know then, and I don't know now, what is a Subdominant third or a Dominant seventh. But Art Tatum knew exactly what he was talking about and I just listened. Then I created one of the most embarrassing situations of all my life. I held out my book and my pen and asked for his autograph. He put his hand into his waistcoat pocket and brought out a tiny box about two inches long and one inch wide. He opened the box and it was a rubber stamp pad with a tiny rubber stamp facsimile of his autograph.

He was utterly blind! I didn't know.

FRED BASON

What a pity I didn't ask this great blind man how long Basin Street was! He'd have known. It was on the pianos of the brothels and honky-tongs of Storyville that early jazz techniques were being explored by such artists as 'Jelly Roll' Morton, who played the big white piano in Mahogany Hall, Lulu White's house. The brothels afforded wonderful opportunities for Negro musicians, especially for pianists. There was not a brothel of any importance in Storyville that did not have its 'professor' at the piano.

I can't think what my religious grandfather was doing there, though it might have suited his grandson Fred, who, after just two lessons of half an hour each, costing 1s. 6d. a lesson, from a Miss Smith at the age of ten, took to the piano as a duck takes to water. When I was sixteen I played the piano for a week in a Paris nightclub—played jazz; and no one taught me jazz.

It was a book called Frenchmen Desire Good Children, by John Chase, which finally cleared my grandfather's name. It seems that the Orleans Navigation Company cleared and widened the Carondelet canal, improved its turning basin, and dredged out Bayou St. John. A sum of $375,000 was spent on this work. But an ambitious plan to extend the canal from its turning basin, 'to the street which acquired the name of Basin, to the street which acquired the name of Canal, and thence to the river, never came any closer to reality than a legendary legend on maps...'

Thank you, John Chase, for chasing away my fears that my family had anything whatsoever to do with the name 'Basin Street'. Blame it on the Orleans Navigation Company. My grand-dad didn't get there till June 1898.

Altogether I spent over three months and wrote twenty-five letters to America trying to find out how long Basin Street was. Some of my correspondents gave me fascinating information. Basin Street, it seems, is no longer the street of sin; a government housing project stands where the red-light district used to be. Once a railway station stood there, but it was pulled down. All that remains of the original street is St. Louis Cemetery Number One. Jazz has moved out—and spread all over the world.

Yet, as a lady in New York City wrote to tell me, about the year 1900 Basin Street was quite a place. The mansions of sin were lavishly furnished in a violent and barbaric taste. They
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contained heavily carved plush-covered furniture, massive statuary, gaudy tapestries, leopard- and tiger-skin rugs, potted palms, and girls from all nations. Three celebrated madames controlled most of the Basin Street vice: 'Countess' Willie Piazza, Josie Arlington, and Lulu White. Collectively millions of dollars went through their hands—and they all died broke. The Countess had a piano in white that cost $200; at her death it made $1,25 at a public auction. It was badly out of tune. Lulu White's white grand piano realised $2,00. I don't know if Josie had a white piano in her palace, but there is a legend that a red light mysteriously shines from her tombstone on certain nights.

You may be interested to know that the area around Basin Street has produced four world boxing champions: Pete Herman, Tony Canzoneri, Willie Pastrano and Joe Brown. The longest fight in the history of boxing took place here in 1893 between Andy Bowen and Jack Burke. It took seven hours and fourteen minutes.

I could go on for a long time about the curiosities of Basin Street. 'Countess' Piazza was an octaroon and had a large musical box inside the mattress of her huge bed. Josie called her place 'Château Lobrano d'Arlington', and every room had a large mirror built in the ceiling.

But how long was Basin Street? In my room at 152 Westmoreland Road, S.E.17, I have a wonderful map of New Orleans. I've gazed at it for hours. It seems clear that Basin Street begins at the junction where there is the Bolivar Memorial or Monument (how did they come into the Basin story?) and ends somewhere around the cemetery. Perhaps it is now about six-tenths of a mile: in 1879 it might have been as much as one and a half miles.

If my grandfather in 1898 owned one-fifth, then he owned a considerable bit of property—cribs, bars, honky-tonks, or mansions with mirrors built into the ceilings and girls of all nations on the beds. But as the entire district was razed to the ground and re-created in 1940, there isn't anything his grandson can do about it—except, perhaps, to wait for the reply to that letter I wrote to the President of the United States and hope some Foundation will put up enough money to send me (with a tape measure) to complete my history of this famous street.