

Populating the Landscape

*Truly does New-Orleans represent
every other city and nation upon earth.
I know of none where is congregated
so great a variety of the human species,
of every language and colour.*

*Not only natives of the well known
European and Asiatic countries are here...
but occasionally Persians, Turks, Lascars, Maltese,
Indian sailors from South America
and the Islands of the sea, Hottentots, Laplanders,
and, for aught I know to the contrary,
Symnezonians.*

—Joseph Holt Ingraham, 1835

Bienville's Dilemma
A Historical Geography of New Orleans
by Richard Campanella

Please order on [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)

Bienville's Dilemma
A Historical Geography of New Orleans
by Richard Campanella

Please order on [amazon](https://www.amazon.com)



Creolism and Place

The complicated and controversial history of New Orleans' home-grown ethnicity

New Orleans is the only American city that can reasonably claim to have generated its own ethnicity. Creole is a place-based ethnicity, as fundamental to the understanding of New Orleans as Hispanicism is to Latin America. Creole is also a complex, fluid, and controversial identity, whose definition varies on the axes of time, place, context, and perspective.

Most scholars agree that Creole is the anglicization, and *Créole* the gallicization, of *Criollo*, a noun derived from the Spanish verb *criar*, meaning *to create*, *to raise*, or *to breed*. Others cite a compatible Portuguese etymology. The *Academia Real Española* holds that the word was coined by early Spanish colonialists in the West Indies “to refer to persons born of European parents in the islands as well as to locally born blacks.”²⁰¹ Creole would come to describe those of Old World parents born upon New World soils, with no first-hand knowledge of the mother country. The notion of race from the West Indian core as colonialism and slavery spread to the periphery of the Caribbean region. Louisiana represented the northern edge of that cultural region, and to its shores Creole arrived soon after the establishment of French society in the early eighteenth century.

Creole remained a subtle and generally irrelevant identity in eighteenth-century New Orleans, because no outside threat compelled residents to unify around a common heritage. That changed in the early nineteenth century, when Saint-Domingue refugees, European immigrants, and most significantly English-speaking Protestant Anglo-Americans, arrived by the tens of thousands. Those of old colonial stock—described as “ancient Louisianians” by the territory’s first American governor, William C. C. Claiborne—soon found themselves fighting against “modern Louisianians” (incoming Anglo-Americans, including Claiborne) for economic, political, and cultural sway in a city that was once entirely theirs.²⁰² From this native-versus-newcomer struggle (see *Nativity and Ethnicity in New Orleans*) arose a modified variation of Creole, now meaning *native born*. Creoles in this era generally traced their ancestors to colonial times and exhibited the cultures of those Latin societies; they anteceded the era of American domination, forming the local population that newcomers “found” here upon arrival. Creoles of the early nineteenth century might be white, black or racially mixed; they were almost always Catholic and Latin in culture, and usually had significant amounts of French or Spanish blood. But they could also be of German, African, Anglo, Irish, or other origin, so long as they extracted from local society. “All who are born here, come under this designation [of Creole], without reference to the birth place of their parents,” wrote Benjamin Moore Norman in 1845.²⁰³ “‘Creole’ is simply a synonym for ‘native,’ explained Joseph Holt Ingraham in 1835; “To say, ‘He is a Creole of Louisiana’ is

to say 'He is a *native* of Louisiana.'"²⁰⁴

Racial identification within the Creole ethnicity usually derived from context. Advertisements offering "Creole Slaves," including fourteen-year-old "Eugenie, creole... good child's nurse and house servant" and sixteen-year-old "Sally, creole... tolerable cook" implied that these were black Creoles, while an article on Creole voting trends would indicate that they were white Creoles, because blacks were denied suffrage. The *gens de couleur libre* (free people of color—mixed in racial ancestry, Catholic in faith, and primarily French in culture) occupied a special caste between white and black and were often described as Creoles of color or simply Creoles, again depending on context.

Ethnic tensions between Creoles and incoming American emigrants and immigrants, on the rise since the Louisiana Purchase, underscored social, political, and economic life in antebellum New Orleans. As early as 1805, one visitor noted the newcomers' domination of lucrative professions: "Virginians and Kentuckeyans [sic]," he wrote, "reign over the brokerage and commission businesses, [while] the Scotch and Irish [conduct] exportation and importation...." Creoles seemed to be relegated to lesser functions: "the French keep magazines and stores; and the Spaniards do all the small retail of grocers' shops, cabarets, and lowest orders of drinking houses. People of colour and free negroes, also keep inferior shops, and sell goods and fruit...."

The division peaked in the 1820s-30s. On one side was an uneasy alliance between Francophone Creoles, foreign French (that is, immigrants from France and refugees from Saint-Domingue), and Latin immigrants; on the numerical majority, this Catholic group maintained political and cultural control. On the other side were Anglophone Americans of Protestant religions plus their allies, who enjoyed commercial dominance. Each group criticized the other's wielding of power and influence, not to mention their habits and idiosyncrasies. "There is, as everyone knows," wrote the English sociologist-philosopher Harriet Martineau in the 1830s,

a mutual jealousy between the French and American parties in Louisiana.... The division between the American and French factions is visible even in the drawing room. The French complain that the Americans will not speak French; will not meet their neighbors even half way in accommodation of speech. The Americans ridicule the toilet practices of the French ladies, their liberal use of rouge and pearl powder.... Timidly, the French creoles have carried everything their own way, from their superior numbers.²⁰⁷

After years of discord, the Americans in 1836 won legislative consent to divide New Orleans into three semi-autonomous municipalities. Most Creoles and foreign French would be concentrated in the First Municipality (the French Quarter) and Third Municipality (below the Quarter, which also had a high immigrant population), while most Americans would govern themselves in the Second Municipality (above Canal Street, also home to many Irish and German immigrants).

From the perspective of the wealthier Second Municipality, the system fostered economic development and alleviated ethnic tensions. From the viewpoint of the mostly Creole-and-immigrant First and "Poor Third" municipalities, the arrangement

engendered isolation and discord. “Had the Legislature sought, by the most careful efforts,” wrote the Third Municipality’s *Daily Orleanian* in 1849, “to create a war of races, to make distinction between Creole and American, they could not have chosen a better means for these objects, than the present division operates.”²⁰⁸ It was during this era that Canal Street assumed its legendary role as an ethnic Rubicon, strictly separating the allegedly warring factions with its symbolic “neutral ground.” Yet city directories and census data indicate that while Anglos and Creoles did indeed outnumber the other in their respective districts, the ratio was roughly three-to-one in each case. In other words, exceptions abounded.

The municipality system proved inefficient and ended in 1852—but only after the Americans had allied with uptown German and Irish immigrants to guarantee numerical superiority over the Creoles. The reunified city was now under Anglo control; Anglos subsequently began winning city elections. “[T]he ‘American’ candidate for Mayor was elected by over 2,000 majority,” reported the *New York Times* on citywide elections a few years later; “with the exception of two Assistant Aldermen, the entire American Ticket was elected.”²⁰⁹ City Hall moved out of the Creole quarter and into the American sector; the fulcrum of commerce and publishing did the same, speakers of English increased their numbers; and Creole cultural influence gradually waned. “New Orleans has long been known as a ‘very gay city,’” wrote the observant Swedish traveler Fredrika Bremer in the last year of the municipality system,

but has not so good a reputation for its morality, into which French levity is strongly infused. This, however, it is said, decreases in proportion to the Anglo-American people obtain sway in the city. And their influence grows even here rapidly. The French population, on the contrary, does not increase, and their influence is on the decline.²¹⁰

New Orleans society in the mid-nineteenth century moved steadily away from all that was Franco and Creole and toward that which was Anglo and American. In doing so, it gradually abandoned its traditional Caribbean-influenced notion of a racial “gradient” between black and white, an intermediary caste occupied by the free people of color and at least nine different combinations of white and black blood, not to mention Indian. In its place came a strict sense of racial separation, prevalent in the rest of Anglo-America. Ethnic tensions that once revolved around nativity now, in the 1850s, dwelled more and more on race. Some Creoles of color, bearing the brunt of the emerging new racial order, fled to the Mexican ports of Veracruz and Tampico.²¹¹ Wrote Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon in 1837,

Every year the regulations concerning free negroes are more annoying. No sailors or cooks, etc. (i.e. free coloured people) can land from the vessels unless by a pass from the Mayor and security from the Captain. No freed negroes can stay in the state unless born here and no free coloured people can enter, so that the free coloured population can only increase by birth.... It is a most unnatural state of things! I never was in a country where law interfered so wickedly with right.²¹²

A few years later, the nation split into belligerent regional factions. Four years of violence ensued.

In the bitter aftermath of the Civil War, with emancipation and black Reconstruction government restructuring life in New Orleans, new tensions rose between whites and those of African ancestry. While the unquestioned hegemony of whites in antebellum times might have allowed for a certain level of “pan-racial creolism,”²¹³ in which peoples of different racial ancestries openly shared a common nativity-based ethnicity, such feelings dissipated after the South’s crushing defeat. Embittered whites increasingly rejected “the racial openness of Louisiana’s past”²¹⁴ and assumed a newfound antipathy toward blacks of all shades, regardless of ethnicity. White Creoles in particular, deploring suspicion of possessing traces of African blood, vociferously proclaimed the impossibility of a black Creole racial identification, once fluid and complex, increasingly polarized into black or white. The old nativity-based use of the word Creole inconvenienced the emerging postbellum racial order, necessitating a revised definition—one that revolved not around birthplace or local heritage but around a very specific five-word criterion: *pure French or Spanish blood*.

Thus, many New Orleanians who had long identified themselves as Creole, particularly the descendants of the *gens de couleur libres*, were denied their heritage by the most influential voices of the day. Charles Gayarré, the famed white Creole narrative historian, lectured a Tulane University audience in 1885, “It is impossible to comprehend how so many intelligent people should have so completely reversed the meaning of the word *creole*, when any one of the numerous dictionaries within their easy reach could have given them correct information of the subject. . . . It has become high time to demonstrate that the Creoles of Louisiana . . . have not, because of the name they bear, a particle of African blood in their veins. . . .”²¹⁵ *The Creoles of Louisiana* (1884), George Washington Cable answered his question, “What is a Creole?” with “any [Louisiana] native, of French or Spanish descent by either parent, whose fore-alliance with the slave race entitled him to social rank. Later, the term was adopted by—not conceded to—the natives of mixed blood, and is still so used among themselves.”²¹⁶ Notwithstanding that definition, Cable would later cast doubt on the white racial purity of Creoles in his writing, earning him enemies in New Orleans high society and a famous feud with writer Grace King. Other “local color” writers carried the no-black-blood insistence into the twentieth century, while helping construct what historian Joseph Tregle would later describe as a quasi-religious belief in “the mythological Creole—the genteel aristocrat, the charming romantic, the disdainer of physical labor, the *bon vivant*.”

Word of the revised definition never quite made it to the masses, and mixed-race Francophone Catholics who had long thought of themselves as Creoles continued to do so. It was in this era that Rodolphe Lucien Desdunes (1842-1928), born a free person of color, penned *Nos Hommes et Notre Histoire*, the first history of New Orleans Creoles of color. It was written in French, published first in Montreal in 1911, and not fully translated to English and published in Louisiana until 1973.

Geographically, wealthier Creole families began departing the French Quarter around the 1860s. Some moved to the tony new garden suburbs of Esplanade Avenue in the 1850s; others lost their businesses and fortunes to the Civil War and left their man-

sions for humbler abodes in the lower faubourgs. The spacious townhouses they left behind in the French Quarter were often “cribbed” into tenement apartments, which attracted poor Sicilian immigrants to the neighborhood (dubbed “Little Palermo”) in the late 1800s. Some Creoles of color, alarmed by the increasing racial tensions of the day, left Louisiana for Mexico, Haiti, Cuba, and France. By century’s end, concentrations of Creoles in New Orleans shifted from the French Quarter, Tremé, and Marigny, farther into the Fifth, Sixth, Seventh, Eighth, and Ninth wards, between the Mississippi River and the backswamp.

Louisiana’s century-long transformation from the Caribbean-style fluidity of racial identification to the American sensibility of strict distinction culminated with the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* Supreme Court decision, which legalized segregation of whites from those with any amount of black blood. Not coincidentally, the case involved a light-skinned Catholic Creole of color from Faubourg Tremé, Homer Plessy.

Creole would continue to evolve into modern times. Despite the safety of the revisionist definition, many white Creoles in race-conscious Louisiana gradually released themselves from explicit identification as Creole, removing a potential doubt of their whiteness by severing ties with the equally genuine Creoles of black and mixed-race backgrounds. Fewer whites unconditionally self-identifying as “Creole” meant that those who continued to embrace personally the term were more likely to have some African blood. In time, the popular understanding of Creole in the streets of New Orleans came to mean a Franco-African-American—a local person of mixed racial ancestry, usually Catholic, often with a French surname, often well-established in business and society, and always with deep roots in the city’s francophone history, particularly in the downtown wards.

Drainage technology installed around 1900 allowed urbanization to spread out of the historical riverside city and into the lakeside marshes. White Creoles, who by now rarely identified themselves unconditionally as Creoles and melded with whites of Anglo, German, Irish, Italian, and other ancestries, departed for new lakeside developments such as Lakeview and Gentilly in the 1910s-40s, and for Jefferson Parish later in the century. Some black Creoles departed for Los Angeles around World War II, seeking war-related jobs and escaping Jim Crow segregation. Those who remained tended to move from the older waterfront faubourgs inland into the Seventh, Eighth, and upper Ninth wards. Prompting this shift was the nationwide post-war preference for suburban living, the outlawing of racial deed covenants which excluded blacks from new subdivisions, and the structural and social decline of the inner city. Many Creoles, including much of the city’s black middle and upper class, moved again in the 1970s-90s to the even newer suburbs of eastern New Orleans. The central Seventh Ward remains the neighborhood most associated with the modern-day Creole population.

The ranks of Creole thinned yet again during the Civil Rights Movement, which viewed Creolism as a divisive and elitist faction incompatible with the movement’s goals.²¹⁷ That many Creoles of color descended from the *gens de couleur libre*, who often owned slaves and enjoyed a relatively privileged status, surely added to the tension. Forced to “choose sides” in the modern-day racial dichotomy, some Creoles departed for the West Coast; others “passed” for white (*passé blancs*); and most chose

to declare their primary public racial identity as black or African-American. By the 1970s, many black New Orleanians of Creole ancestry, like their white counterparts earlier, abandoned public self-identification as Creole in favor of clear-cut black racial solidarity. They did so for fear of dividing the black community; whites had done so earlier for fear of being considered *part of the black community*.

The election of Ernest “Dutch” Morial—a Creole of color who could easily pass for white—as the city’s first black mayor in 1977 solidified the newfound political unity of the Creole and non-Creole black communities. Recalled his son Marc Morial in 1994, who himself would serve as mayor for the next eight years, “At that time, the black community had historically been divided...between light-skinned blacks and dark-skinned blacks...Catholic blacks and Protestant blacks...up town blacks and downtown blacks. My father’s political genius was that he was able to convince the overwhelming majority of the black community that they had singular common cause.... (Morial’s references to light-skinned downtown Catholic blacks are allusions to black Creoles—Franco-African-Americans, as opposed to the Anglo-American-Americans who tend to be darker-skinned Protestants who live uptown.) “The Creole experience, continued Sybil Morial, Marc’s mother and the matriarch of the Morial family, “is a part of history and we should never deny our history. But in this time, I think attempted designations to try of who is Creole and who is not are totally irrelevant. I am an African-American, not a Creole.... Much that is good come from the Creole experience. But it also produced much that was bad, including artificial differences that were used to prevent black unity.”²¹⁸ Most black New Orleanians shared that sentiment, and Creole faded from publicly expressed ethnic identity, even as the term (as an adjective, usually for food) was bandied about relentlessly by the steadily growing tourism industry. So depleted had grown the ranks of Creole by the late twentieth century that a 1998 anthropological paper on Creolism found it apt to proclaim in its opening sentence: “There is good reason to believe that there are creoles in Louisiana.”²¹⁹

Yet, as researcher Mary Gellman wrote, “to anyone who observes New Orleans social, political, and racial patterns, it is very clear that “Creole” is a term used frequently by blacks among themselves for those who carry on the names, traditions, family businesses and social positions of the free people of color.... Though rarely discussed in the media or other open forums, this intra-racial situation affects the politics, social order, jobs and businesses of the city in many ways.”²²⁰ Code words heard in the African-American community to refer to its Creole subset include “yellow,” “high yellow,” and the old French term *passé-blanc*.

Only recently has a Creole revival movement gained steam, inspired by the success of the Acadian (Cajun) resurgence of the 1970s-80s and by recent popular and scholarly interest in multiculturalism. Creole activists emphatically lay claim to their *own* identity—not European-American, not African-American, not some hyphenated race-based amalgam, but a unique ethnicity with its own names, dates, and legacies. They face ample challenges ahead, from both political activists intent on racial solidarity and cultural activists sympathetic to the cause that they expand the definition of Creole to meaninglessly inclusive extremes.

Defining Creole, meanwhile, remains as contentious as ever. The discourse is

as fascinating to observe as it is to participate in. People with absolutist inclinations tend to view social information—in this case the meaning of a word—as flowing from the top down (witness the forementioned definitions offered by the *Academia Real Española* and Charles Gayarré), and dismiss any later modifications in word usage as mere misunderstanding made by ignorant masses (witness George Washington Cable's explanation). This school usually favors the "New World-offspring-of-Old-World-parents" or the "pure-French-or-Spanish-blood" definitions, and sees the others as recent revisionism driven by politically correct academics. Other people, who have more relativist tendencies, tend to view word meanings as flowing from the bottom up—that is, driven by popular usage—and insist that those who write history simply *cannot* deny the ethnic heritage and identity claimed explicitly by hundreds of thousands of people and their ancestors. This school usually embraces the "native-to-New-Orleans" or the "franco-African-American-Catholic-from-Louisiana" versions and particularly disdains the "pure-French-or-Spanish-blood" criterion as racially motivated revisionism on the left coast from the postbellum age. The Creole controversy is alive and well, intrinsic to Louisiana culture; it reveals as much about present-day society as it does about the past.

For those who *live* Creole rather than debate it, the latest challenge may be the greatest: Hurricane Katrina's floods devastated the Creole-dominant neighborhoods of the Seventh, Eighth, and Ninth wards, scattering their residents nationwide. Two years after the catastrophe, only about half had returned. Time will tell if Creole ethnicity, borne of a sense of importance attached to being *from here*, can survive being elsewhere.

Extraordinary Multiculturalism, Extraordinarily Early

New Orleans as America's first genuinely multicultural metropolis

No city perhaps on the globe, in an equal number of human beings, presents a greater contrast of national manners, language, and complexion, than does New Orleans.

—William Darby, 1816

Q. They say that in New Orleans is to be found a mixture of all the nations?
A. That's true; you see here a mingling of all races. Not a country in America or Europe but has sent us some representatives. New Orleans is a patch-work of peoples.

—M. Mazureau, interviewed by Alexis de Tocqueville, 1832

Americans, English, French, Scotch, Spaniards, Swedes, Germans, Irish, Italians, Russians, Circles, Indians, Negroes, Mexicans, and Brazilians. This mixture of languages, costumes, and manners, rendered the scene one of the most singular that I ever witnessed.... [They] formed altogether such a striking contrast, that it was not a little extraordinary to find them united in one single point. If there is a place [representing] the confusion of tongues at the Tower of Babel, it certainly is New Orleans.

—C. D. Arfwedson, 1834

Jews and Gentiles, the Frenchman, Italian, Spaniard, German, and American, of all conditions and occupations.... What a hubbub! what an assemblage of strange faces, of the representatives of distinct people! What a contrast of beauty and deformity, of vulgarity and good-breeding! What a collection of costumes....!

—H. Dilimus (Edward Henry Drell), 1835, 36

When we state that in no city in the New or in the Old World is there a greater variety of nations represented than in [New Orleans], we are but asserting an established truism. New Orleans is a world in miniature, subdivided into smaller commonwealths, [in which] distinctive traits of national character are to be seen, and the peculiar language of its people to be heard spoken.²²¹

—*Daily Picayune*, 1843

The New Orleans market furnishes, perhaps, the best opportunity for the ethnological student, for there strange motley groups are always to be found. Even the cries are in the quaint voices of a foreign city, and it seems almost impossible to imagine that one is in America.²²²

—Nathaniel H. Bishop, 1879

That nineteenth-century visitors regularly marveled about New Orleans' ethnic diversity offers more than mere anecdotal evidence for the Crescent City's distinction in this regard. Such observers tended to be worldly, erudite, and, by the very nature of their waterborne arrival, usually familiar with other cosmopolitan ports. Their comments may thus reflect fair comparisons to many other great cities worldwide. They align with the assessments of prominent historians.

"From most from the beginning," wrote the late Joseph Logsdon, "South Louisiana had a diverse population of Frenchmen, Germans, Italians, Indians, Africans, and Spaniards. It contained a mixed population well before Chicago, Boston, New York or Cleveland.... [New Orleans' diversity] amazed early travelers, [who] could find comparisons only in such crossroads of the world as Venice and Vienna."²²³ Far more immigrants arrived to the United States through New Orleans—over 550,000 from 1820 to 1860, with 300,000 in the 1850s alone—than any other southern city in the nineteenth century. For most of the late antebellum era, New Orleans ranked as the nation's number-two immigrant port, ahead of Boston and behind only New York.²²⁴ Moreover, New Orleans "was an almost perfect microcosm... of the entire pattern of human movement into the United States prior to 1860."²²⁵

The diversity could be heard as well as seen: visitors often invoked the biblical

Babel in describing the mix of foreign tongues audible in the markets and streets. By one estimate, fully two-thirds of the city's population spoke no English fifteen years after Americanization.²²⁵ "Louisiana was the most compactly multilingual place in the country," wrote English language scholar Richard W. Bailey; "Amerindian and African languages, Caribbean creoles, German, Spanish, French, and English were all routinely spoken by persons permanently resident in New Orleans—and the brisk trading along the levee brought still more languages."²²⁷

Numbers corroborate these assessments of New Orleans' superlative ethnic diversity. The 1850 Census, the first to record birthplace, shows that the city was home to more significantly sized ethnic groups (measured by ancestry, nativity, race, and enslavement status) than any other American city. That is, when we break major American cities' populations into the sub-groups tabulated by the 1850 census, seven groups in New Orleans each comprised at least 5 percent of the city's total population. No other city had more than five such groups.²²⁸

Adding also to the mix were the tens of thousands of American emigrants who, extracted from nearly every state in the union, found themselves within their own country yet in a seemingly foreign culture. The Americans "have all nicknames," reported one 1838 account:

There's the hoosiers of Indiana, the suckers of Illinois, the pukes of Missouri [sic], the buckeyes of Ohio, the red horses of Kentucky, the mudheads of Tennessee, the wolverines of Michigan, the dais of New England and the corn crackers of Virginia. All these, with many others, make up the population, which is motley with black and white shades, 'most of 'em supplied by emigration. It's a great caravansary filled with strangers—disparate [sic] enough to make your hair stand on end, drinkin' all day, gamblin' all night, and fightin' 'll the time.²²⁹

It may well be that New Orleans represented America's first genuinely multicultural metropolis—no small thing for a nation founded on the notion of pluralism and destined for an even more demographically diverse future. At the very least, New Orleans exhibited an extraordinarily high degree of diversity extraordinarily early in the nation's development. A writer around 1880 offered fairly accurate numbers on the city's various racial and ethnic groups, regardless of birthplace. He began with the obligatory visitor's rhapsody:

What life in these streets! What mingling of peoples! Americans and Brazilians; West Indians, Spanish and French, Germans, Creoles, quadroons, mulattoes, Chinese, and Negroes surge past us.... This manifold population includes some 70,000 French and Creoles, 30,000 Germans, 60,000 Negroes and mulattoes, and 10,000 Mexicans, Spanish and Italians. Therefore, the Anglo-Americans do not number more than 80,000 or 90,000.... Each nationality moves in its own circles and mingles little with the others. Each has its [own] daily press....²³⁰

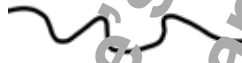
What impact did this diversity have on the city's character? Conventional wisdom today holds that multiculturalism in general invigorates and enriches societies,

and, in the case of New Orleans, underlies nearly all of its distinguishing charms: food, music, architecture, etc. Popular consensus in the nineteenth century was, to say the least, decidedly more exclusionary, if not downright caustic. This correspondence from the *Boston Post* described New Orleans society in 1863:

Instead of a healthy American population, speaking the language of Webster, we have gouging Jews, dark Spaniards, treacherous Sicilians, rat-catching Chinamen, turking Creoles, lazy negroes, and a sprinkling of Yankees... bent on making a fortune.²³¹

Frederick Law Olmsted, who distinguished himself with his incisive 1853-54 traveling study of the slave states before gaining fame as a landscape architect, reflected on New Orleans' multiculturalism with thoughtful ambivalence:

I doubt if there is a city in the world, where the resident population has been so divided by its origin, or where there is such a variety in the tastes, habits, manners, and moral codes of the citizens. Although this injurious civic enterprise...it [nurtures] individual enterprise, taste, genius, and conscience; so that nowhere are the higher qualities of man—his generosity, civility, hospitality, benevolence, and courage—better developed, or the lower qualities, likening him to a beast, less interfered with, by law or the action of public opinion.²³²



Antebellum Ethnic Geographies

Residential settlement patterns from Americanization to the Civil War

People do not distribute themselves randomly across the cityscape. They gravitate toward areas that, first and foremost, offer available housing, and then those that are perceived to maximize their chances of success (in terms of housing, employment, services, amenities, convenience, safety, and existing social networks) while minimizing costs and obstacles (such as price, distance, crime, discrimination, noise, danger, and environmental nuisances). The resultant spatial patterns, which range from intensely clustered to thoroughly dispersed, vary dynamically by group, place, and time. This essay describes New Orleans' ethnic geography during antebellum times, when American emigration and foreign immigration rendered New Orleans arguably the most diverse city in America. The next essay investigates turn-of-the-twentieth-century patterns.

In pre-industrial cities, prosperous members of charter groups usually resided in the inner city, with domestic servants and slaves living in adjacent quarters, and middle- and working-class families residing in a band of adjacent neighborhoods. Indigents, among them immigrants, tended to settle at the city's ragged outskirts or

waterfronts. The pattern is an ancient one—"in many medieval cities in Europe, the city centres were inhabited by the well-to-do, while the outer districts were the areas for the poorer segments of the population"²³³—and it carried over to New World cities. Lack of mechanized conveyances drove the pattern: pedestrian-scale movement made inner-city living a convenient and expensive luxury, which spatially sorted the classes and castes into certain residential-settlement patterns.

In antebellum New Orleans, the charter groups mostly comprised the upper classes of French-Creole (as well as *Français de France*) and Anglo-American society, who tended to live in townhouses in the French Quarter and the Faubourg St. Mary, respectively. Observed Étienne Réclus in 1853: "The oldest district of New Orleans, the one usually called the French Quarter, is still 'the most elegant of the city,' where houses had been 'mostly purchased by American capitalists."²³⁴ We see evidence of this pattern today: the central French Quarter is replete with opulent antebellum townhouses, often ornamented with expensive iron-plate galleries.

Encircling the highly desirable commercial/residential inner core was an annulus of middle- and working-class blocks in the lower and rear fringes of the French Quarter (where to this day, we see a humbler cityscape of cottages and shotgun houses), plus adjacent faubourgs. Further out, along the wharves, canals, backswamp, and upper and lower fringes of the city, lay a periphery of muddy, low-density village-like developments—shantytowns in some places. Here resided thousands of immigrants and other working-class and poor, including many afflicted blacks. During the first great wave of immigration to New Orleans (1820s to 1850s, corresponding to national trends), laborer families mostly from Ireland and Germany arrived by the thousands and settled throughout this semi-rural periphery. They predominated in the riverside inner fringe (upper Faubourg St. Mary and into the adjacent city of Lafayette), the backswamp around the turning basins of the New Basin and Old Basin canals, and the lower faubourgs (the "Poor Third" Municipality).

First-person witnesses to antebellum ethnic geographies abound. Wrote the influential *Commercial Review* editor J. D. De Bow in 1847, "immediately [beyond] the corporate limits of New Orleans, ... Lafayette has been chiefly settled by a laboring population, mostly German and Irish emigrants, who literally fulfil the scriptural command of eating their bread in their sweat of their brow." Further away from the waterfront's nuisances and closer to the convenient new passenger streetcar line on what is now St. Charles Avenue, a more languid urban environment emerged, and with it a different ethnic composition:

But [the laboring population] is not the only class which is pouring into this rapidly advancing city. The rear of Lafayette is most beautifully situated for dwelling-houses. The ground is high and dry, and vegetation flourishes... with amazing luxuriance. Here are collected many of our wealthy citizens, who have built handsome villas, with gardens and large yards....²³⁵

In those "handsome villas" lived, more often than not, Anglo-Americans who grew wealthy pursuing port-city opportunities and erected palatial homes on spacious lots in the American manner. This portion of old Lafayette is today's well-preserved

Garden District; the section by the river now comprises the modern-day Irish Channel, whose functional housing stock enjoyed far less appreciation—and preservation—over the years.

The enigmatic moniker “Irish Channel” first appeared in print in 1893. In that year, seventy-three-year-old Capt. William H. James recollected that in the 1830s, poor Irish immigrants settled primarily along or near the banks of the New Basin Canal at the rear edge of the Faubourg St. Mary; around present-day Gallier Hall in the heart of St. Mary, and

at and above Tchoupitoulas and Canal streets. To this quarter was the given the name, probably as a souvenir of the land of their nativity, of the ‘Irish Channel.’ Here dwelt many engaged in the work of hauling cotton and West Indian produce.²³⁶

Geographically, James is describing Irish settlement in the rear upper, and riverside, fringes of antebellum New Orleans. Thomas K. Whorton witnessed the second of these demographic patterns at an 1854 New Year’s Eve mass at St. Teresa of Avila Church on Camp Street:

Passing by the church of St. Teresa on our way from St. Mary’s market, all Ireland seemed to be streaming from its portals. It is astonishing how large an element [the Irish] form in our residential population... A stranger from Dublin or Londonderry might fancy himself quite at home again in our streets....²³⁷

Irish and Germans shared remarkably similar residential settlement patterns. So German was the area between present-day Howard Avenue and Felicity Street—which includes the aforementioned highly Irish area near St. Teresa’s—in 1843 that the *Daily Picayune* (using “Dutch,” a corruption of *Deutsch*, to mean “the natives of Holland, Prussia, and all the German States”) wrote,

[Y]ou will see nothing but Dutch faces and hear nothing but the Dutch language—every word as rough as a rock of granite... This part of the city is so thoroughly Dutch that the very pigs grunt in that language; you may well imagine yourself to be in the precincts of Amsterdam.²³⁸

Even the heart of the Irish Channel, around Adele Street in Lafayette, teemed with as many Germans as Irish. Wrote H. Didimus (Edward Henry Durell) in 1835-36:

The city of Lafayette is busy behind me—a mere suburb of rusty, wooden houses; on my left I hear a confused Babylonish dialect, sounds harsher than harshness, the patois, or provincialisms, and lingual corruptions of all the Germanic tribes—it is the German quarter....²³⁹

Abraham Oakey Hall made passing reference in the late 1840s to immigrant settlement patterns and their relationship to underlying Creole/Anglo geographies:

One section of New Orleans, the First Municipality, is the old city, left to the tender mercies of the French and Creole population; narrow, dark, and dirty (meaning either their city or the people). One, in the Second Municipality, the new city; with here a little of Boston, there a trifle of New York, and some of Philadelphia.... The third section a species of half village, half city, (uninhabitable but French Faubourg look,) is given over to the tender mercies of the Dutch and Irish, and the usual accompaniments of flaxen-poll'd babies and eleven-tailed pigs.²⁴⁰

As Hall sailed upriver from New Orleans he noticed the changing land use, housing density, and ethnic composition of the city's upper periphery:

We swept by the city. A mile or so of shipping to eye, with here and there some caravanserais [inns for transients]...cotton-yards...and...houses [....] long separation between them. Here was Lafayette [present-day Jackson and Tchoupitoulas], the asylum of anglicised Dutchmen....²⁴¹

While the immigrants of the semi-rural periphery congregated more in certain areas and less in others, rarely did they cluster intensely and exclusively. While they generally avoided the inner city, rarely were they wholly absent from any particular area. Intermixing predominated: the so-called Irish Charney was home to many Germans and other groups, just as Little Saxony near the lower-city riverfront housed as many Irish and Creoles as Saxons. Like the Milk Way galaxy, the patterns formed greater and lesser concentrations overlaid on top of each other, with no intense clusters and no complete absences. Why?

Low-skill employment in this era—dock work, flatboat wharf jobs, warehousing, stockyard and tannery work, rope walking, public works projects, canal excavation, railroad construction—lay scattered throughout the outer fringe, rather than among the offices and shops of the exclusive inner core. Blacks once were assigned these grueling and dangerous hard-labor tasks, but because they yielded higher profit on sugar plantations, a niche opened for poor unskilled immigrants. Between the 1830s and 1840s, white immigrants mostly from Ireland and Germany took most of the unskilled labor, dock worker, drayman, cabinian, domestic, and hotel servant jobs from blacks (both free and enslaved).²⁴² While some of the better working-class jobs existed downtown, the lion's share of hard-labor jobs were on the outskirts. Also there was cheap, low-density, cottage-scale housing, which fortuitously afforded open lots for “truck farming,” a favorite extra-income activity particularly among Germans. Immigrants of the antebellum era thus avoided the inner city for its lack of unskilled-labor employment, its high real estate prices and crowding, and because mechanized transportation (early horse-drawn streetcars) for commuting was limited and costly. Better-off Irish and Germans, who likely arrived earlier (such as the “lace-curtain” Irish establishment of the Julia Street area), worked in downtown-based professions and lived in costly downtown dwellings; they generally blended in with charter groups and rarely rubbed shoulders with their poorer, recently arrived brethren.

People born in France comprised the third-largest immigrant group in antebellum New Orleans, followed by smaller numbers from a wide range of southern Eu-

ropean and Latin lands, such as Spain, regions within modern-day Italy, Cuba, Mexico, Haiti, West Indian islands, and Central and South America. These Catholic peoples of the Latin world usually settled in the working-class neighborhoods on the lower, Creole side of New Orleans, below the central French Quarter. With the exception of some "foreign French," Latin-culture Catholic immigrants were uncommon in predominantly Anglo-culture uptown. Much of the rest of the world, from Scandinavia to China to India to the Philippines, contributed at least some immigrants or transients to antebellum New Orleans society.

The antebellum geography of New Orleans of African ancestry consisted of enslaved blacks intricately intermixed with the white population, while free people of color predominated in the lower half of the city. Anecdotal evidence of these patterns comes from an 1843 article in the *Daily Picayune*:

The Negroes are scattered through the city promiscuously; those of mixed blood, such as Griffes, Quarterons &c., [Creoles of color] showing a preference for the back streets of the First [French Quarter, Faubourg Tremé] and part of the Third Municipality [Faubourg Marigny and adjacent areas].²⁴³

Urban slavery drove this pattern: the enslaved were kept in closely quarters by their enslavers, for reasons of convenience and security (see "*Two Centuries of Paradox*").

The ethnic geography of antebellum New Orleans, then, comprised:

a commercial nucleus around the upper Royal and Chartres intersections with Canal Street;

- a mostly Creole and Francophone culture populace below that commercial nucleus, local in nativity, Latin in culture, Catholic in faith, French in tongue, and white or mixed in race;
- a mostly Anglo-culture populace living above the commercial nucleus, born in the North or the upper South, Protestant (and in lesser part Jewish) in faith, English in tongue, and white in race;
- elite residential living (townhouses) in the inner cores of both the Creole and Anglo sections;
- slaves and domestic servants residing in close proximity to wealthier residents of both the Creole and Anglo sections, often in quarters appended to townhouses;
- a widespread dispersion of Irish and German immigrants throughout the periphery and waterfront of the city, particularly Lafayette and the Third District, with very few living in the inner city;
- smaller numbers of Southern European and Caribbean immigrants, particularly French, Italians, and Haitians, settling in the Creole area for its language, culture, and Catholic environment;
- a poor free black (manumitted slave) population along the backswamp edge.

The antebellum dispersion pattern explains why, to this day, the precise location of the Irish Channel remains a hotly debated subject, and why no one particular neighborhood claims a German sense of historical place. (It is hard to pin down the exact location of a dispersed phenomenon.) The antebellum clustering of the wealthy in the inner city is also evident today: elegant townhouses outnumber humble cottages in the French Quarter, while the reverse is true in the adjacent faubourgs of Marigny and Tremé. Racially, one of the most fascinating spatial patterns of antebellum times was the numerical predominance of free people of color over slaves in the Creole (over city), and the exact reversal of this ratio in the Anglo upper city.²⁴⁴ This trend reflects the Creole adherence to the Caribbean-influenced three-tier (white, free people of color, and enslaved black) racial caste system, versus the Anglos' recognition of a strict white/black dichotomy.

Some of these demographic patterns persist today. The Franco-African-American descendants of the free people of color, for example, generally remain downtown, particularly in the Seventh Ward, while Anglo-African-Americans predominate uptown, mainly in Central City. Immigrant settlement patterns, however, changed markedly as American cities—including New Orleans, came of age in the late nineteenth century.

The Rise and Fall of the Immigrant Belt

Residential settlement patterns around the turn of the twentieth century

The millions of southern and eastern Europeans who arrived to the United States (and the thousands who came to New Orleans) during the second great wave of immigration, 1880s to 1920s, rebounded a rapidly changing urban landscape. Industrialization, the installation of urban streetcar networks, and the rise of centralized, high-rise business districts triggered two important repercussions.

First, in New Orleans, the gentry moved out of the inner city and resettled in “garden suburbs,” particularly along St. Charles Avenue, uptown, Esplanade Avenue, and the City Park area. In some cases, wealthy families departed their opulent townhouses because they lost their fortunes to the Civil War or struggled economically in its aftermath; in other cases, they simply moved away from new urban nuisances and risks, and toward new amenities. Unsightly and smelly breweries, warehouses, and sugar refineries arose in the French Quarter in this era, a block or two from once-elegant mansions. Faubourg St. Mary began to look less like a faubourg and more like a congested downtown. Inner-city living lost its appeal. With convenient new streetcar lines affording rapid access to professional jobs in downtown offices, one no longer had to prioritize for pedestrian access in choosing where to live. Why not move to a spacious

new Victorian home in a leafy suburban park? This exodus, which can be traced to the 1830s-50s but was mostly a postbellum trend, opened up scores of spacious inner-city townhouses as potential apartment housing for working-class folk. As recently as 1939, fully 78 percent of the city's antebellum-era dwelling units were occupied by tenants rather than owners, and most of these units were located in or near the inner city.²⁴⁵

Second, employment opportunities for the unskilled poor moved from the semi-rural periphery, where they existed in the agrarian days before the War, to the urban core, where postbellum modernization created new opportunities. Labor-intensive jobs disappeared from the periphery because those very lands were being developed into the garden suburbs for the relocating upper class, and because much of the needed infrastructure (canals, railroads) was already in place. Whereas an 1830s Irish laborer might have been drawn to the backswamp to dig a canal, or an 1840s German worker to the Lafitte wharves to unload flatboats, a Sicilian, Russian, Polish, or Chinese immigrant in the 1890s gravitated downtown to market housewares, peddle fruit, prepare food, or sell notions. Newly arrived immigrants not only had a reason to settle close to downtown, but an affordable apartment to rent there as well (see map, "Racial and Ethnic Geographies of Early 1900s New Orleans").

Thus, unlike their antebellum predecessors, immigrants of the late nineteenth century eschewed the semi-rural periphery, favoring instead to live in a concentric zone of neighborhoods immediately beyond the inner commercial core. This "immigrant belt" offered enough advantages (proximity to work, convenience, housing) to make life easier for impoverished newcomers, but suffered enough nuisances (crowded conditions, decaying old building, noise, vice, crime) to keep the rent affordable. It offered to poor immigrants a place to work, a nearby and affordable place in which to live and (after an enclave developed) a social support haven including religious and cultural institutions. The immigrant belt ran loosely from the Lower French Quarter and Faubourg Marigny bywater, through the Faubourg Tremé and into the Third Ward back-of-town, around the Dryades Street area, through the Lee Circle area and toward the riverfront to what is now called the Irish Channel. In this amorphous swath, immigrants and their descendents clustered well into the twentieth century, such that their enclaves earned popular monikers ("Little Palermo," "Chinatown") or strong people-place associations, such as "the Orthodox Jews of Dryades Street" or "the Greeks of North Denzinois Street."

Although ethnic groups clustered more densely in the postbellum immigrant belt than in the antebellum semi-rural periphery, ethnic intermixing still predominated. With the exception of certain black back-of-town areas, rare was the block or neighborhood in which only one group could be found. Page after page of census population schedules record Sicilians living next to African-Americans, Irish sharing a double with Greeks, Filipinos living across the street from Mexicans—even in enclaves in which a particular group numerically predominated. Ethnic intermixture is an integral childhood memory of most New Orleanians who came of age prior to the 1960s, and it is striking how often this observation arises in their reminiscences.

The postbellum era also saw the migration of thousands of emancipated slaves into the city from nearby plantations. Victims of disdain, discrimination, and destitu-

tion, their settlement patterns were driven in large part by the geography of environmental hazards and nuisances. Flooding, mosquitoes, swamp miasmas, noisy railroads, smelly wharves and canals, industries, pollution, odd-shaped lots, lack of city services, inconvenience: these and other objectionable circumstances drove down real estate prices and made former prime lands of last resort for those at the bottom rung. The natural and built environment of New Orleans dictated that most nuisances monopolized the two lateral fringes of the metropolitan area: the immediate riverfront and the backswamp edge. Poor African-Americans, the majority of who were culturally Anglo rather than Creole, clustered in these troubled areas, particularly the back-of-town, while others settled within walking distance of their domestic employment jobs in uptown mansions. Creoles, particularly those of color, remained in their historical lower-city location, and migrated backward as drainage technology opened up the backswamps of the Seventh Ward and adjacent areas. Other sections of the new lakefront subdivisions laid out in the early twentieth century explicitly excluded black residency through racist deed covenants. By that time, wealthier whites resided in the convenient, low-nuisance swath sandwiched between the riverfront and the backswamp (particularly along the St. Charles/Magazine corridor), and in the new lakeside neighborhoods, while working-class whites intermingled throughout the front-of-town.

New Orleans prides itself on its uniqueness, sometimes to the point of extolling peculiarities where none exists. In fact, the Crescent City's ethnic distributions mimic those of other American cities, from antebellum times to today. The expression of immigrant enclaves, wrote one social geographer, commonly "take the form of a concentric zone of ethnic neighbourhoods which has spread from an initial cluster to encircle the CBD"²⁴⁶—very much what occurred in New Orleans. In *Cities and Immigrants: A Geography of Change in Nineteenth-Century America*, David Ward stated that researchers are "generally able to agree that most immigrants congregated on the edge of the central business district, which provided the largest and most diverse source of unskilled employment."²⁴⁷ The concentric-ring phenomenon is standard material in urban-geography literature, where it appears diagrammatically as Ernest W. Burgess' classic "Concentric Zone Model," part of the so-called "Chicago School of Urban Sociology," which first viewed cities as social ecosystems in the 1920s. According to Burgess' model, a theoretical city's central business district was surrounded first by a "zone in transition," then a "zone of workingmen's homes," a "residential zone," and finally a "commuters' zone." In that transitional zone could be found "deteriorating... rooming-house districts" and "slums," populated by "immigrant colonies" such as "Little Sicily, Greektown, Chinatown—fascinatingly combining old world heritages and American adaptations." "Near by is the Latin Quarter," Burgess added, "where creative and rebellious spirits resort." In the "zone of workingmen's homes," Burgess predicted Germans, German Jews, and other second-generation immigrants to settle, and in the residential and commuter zones, he foresaw restricted residential districts and bungalow suburbs.

Burgess had Chicago in mind when he devised his Concentric Zone Model, but to a remarkable degree he could have been describing circa-1900 New Orleans. Little Palermo, Chinatown, the Greek area, and the Orthodox Jewish neighborhood all fell within Burgess' transitional zone (which I am calling the "immigrant belt"). Ger-

mans, German Jews, Irish, and other earlier immigrants and their descendants settled in the workingmen's zone (former Lafayette, the Third District, and other areas of the old semi-rural periphery). And Burgess' restricted residential zone and commuter zones describe the leafy garden suburbs (also known as "trolley" or "streetcar suburbs," for the developmental role played by that conveyance) of uptown, Esplanade Avenue, Lakeview, and Gentilly—right down to the bungalow. Even his Latin Quarter model found local representation: "creative and rebellious spirits" have long gravitated to the French Quarter.²⁴⁸

In the closing decades of the twentieth century, the factors that once drew immigrants to that amorphous belt around the CBD diminished or evaporated entirely. They reappeared in different and distant form: in the new subdivisions and strip malls of suburbia. Immigrants in New Orleans today—few in number but enough to form residential patterns—generally settle far away from the inner city, in the extreme western suburban periphery of Kenner (home of "Little Honduras"), or Versailles in extreme eastern Orleans Parish ("Little Saigon"), or to the fringes of the West Bank. Other sites in Metairie and elsewhere in Jefferson Parish. It is in these modern ranch-house/strip mall suburbs that new immigrants find affordable housing, maximized economic opportunities, and minimized obstacles, including a decent environment to raise and educate their children. Once again, New Orleans is not alone in this remarkable trend: it is playing out in most major American metropolises. "In 1990," stated a recent *Esquire Magazine* cover article entitled *The New Suburbanism*, "Immigration meant taking a ferry from Ellis Island to a tenement on the Lower East Side. Today, it often means taking the airport limo to a three-bedroom house in the suburbs."²⁴⁹ A drive along Williams Boulevard in Kenner finds a plethora of Latin and Asian businesses, an ethnic "suburb" that makes downtown New Orleans look homogeneous by comparison. "Suburbs are on their way to becoming the most common place of residence for Hispanic- and Asian-Americans;" also, in the late 1990s, 43 percent of the nation's Hispanics, and 53 percent of Asian-Americans, called suburbia home, and the trend has only strengthened in the decade since.²⁵⁰

That most immigrants in greater New Orleans prior to Katrina lived in relatively comfortable suburban conditions attests to the fact that while this metropolis attracted few people from foreign lands, most who did come were fairly economically stable and arrived into established and nurturing social networks. Pre-Katrina New Orleans simply did not offer a sufficiently robust economy to attract large numbers of poor immigrants; thus its old inner-city immigrant belt vanished and most newcomers opted for suburban lifestyles. An inspection of a 2000 census map of greater New Orleans' ethnic groups (recorded as "ancestry") shows an even dispersion throughout the metropolitan area *beyond* old New Orleans. Immigrants today—Hispanics and Asian Indians in Kenner, the Chinese of West Esplanade Avenue in Metairie, the large Vietnamese community of the Versailles neighborhood, the Filipinos on Lapalco Boulevard on the West Bank²⁵¹—generally reside at the very fringe of the metropolitan area. Ironically, they often live next door to descendants of circa-1900 immigrants; West Esplanade Avenue in particular abuts a number of census tracts in which high concentrations of locals of Italian, Greek, Chinese, and Jewish ancestry may be found.

So utterly reversed is the present-day ethnic geography of New Orleans that formerly lily-white Metairie—Fat City, no less—ranked in 2000 as the most ethnically diverse census tract in the metropolitan area. Even more stunning was the least diverse tract: the Lower Ninth Ward, once practically the Brooklyn of the South.²⁵² The same trend is seen in public schools: most in New Orleans are racially homogeneous (overwhelmingly African-American), whereas those in the once all-white suburbs are now held up as exemplars of successful integration.²⁵³ Equivalents of this statistical irony can be found in almost other modern American metropolises. “So vast is the change taking place in the suburbs of many of our cities that the definition of suburbia needs reworking.”²⁵⁴

Hurricane Katrina added a new twist to the history and geography of immigration to New Orleans. Extensive opportunities in the construction trades attracted thousands of poor migrant workers—overwhelmingly male, predominantly from Mexico, and many undocumented—to the city and region. An extreme shortage in housing in late 2005-06 forced many workers to live in tents in parks and parking lots, or in cars and abandoned houses. Others lived in distant towns and commuted in the beds of pickup trucks. By 2007, as flooded houses returned to the rental market and rents declined somewhat, Katrina immigrants began to settle in a dispersed fashion, including in the flood-affected region. The cityscape reflected their presence: workers queued at rendezvous to await day jobs; signs in Spanish appeared outside home-improvement stores; taco trucks set up at busy intersections; Latin American foods made their way into local cuisine; schools started accommodating Spanish-speaking youngsters; and the *Times-Picayune* began running its want ads (*empleos*) in Spanish.

It remains to be seen what percentage of these workers, who are doing the lion's share of the heavy lifting in the rebuilding of New Orleans, will settle permanently into local society—and write the next chapter of the ethnic geography of New Orleans.

“Two Centuries of Paradox”

The geography of the African-American population

Embedded in the complex geography of New Orleans' African-American community are multitudes of historical and recent influences. Among them, to name a few, are the city's Franco-Afro-Caribbean heritage, urban slavery, Civil War and emancipation, Southern race relations, urban amenities and nuisances and their corresponding land values, and the catastrophe of the Katrina flood. The modern city, as a result, exhibits a spatial distribution of African-Americans that is *de facto* segregated in many ways, yet still more racially integrated than many major American cities.

Premier among the antebellum black settlements was the so-called “back-alley” pattern. Urban slaves often labored as domestics and resided in the distinctive

slant-roof quarters appended behind townhouses and cottages. Other enslaved blacks, many of them skilled craftsmen and artisans, lived in detached quarters on back streets and alleys, close to the abodes of their masters. This settlement pattern imparted an ironic spatial integration into New Orleans' antebellum racial geography, despite the severe and oppressive racial segregation of chattel slavery. Not unique to New Orleans, the intermixed back-alley pattern has been documented in other urban slave centers, such as Charleston, Washington, and Baltimore.²⁵⁵

Slaves accounted for roughly two-thirds of the African-ancestry population of antebellum New Orleans; *gens de couleur libre* (free people of color) comprised most of the rest. Many members of this somewhat privileged mixed-race caste, a product of the city's Franco-Afro-Caribbean heritage, excelled in professions, studied abroad, and gained middle- or upper-class status. Some even owned slaves. Throughout most of the antebellum era, non-free people of color called New Orleans home more than any other Southern city, and occasionally more than any American city, in both relative and absolute terms. Their presence helped distinguish New Orleans and Louisiana society from the national norm. "It is worthy of remark," read an 1856 article in the *New York Times*,

that this class of population, free colored persons, should be so differently regarded in Louisiana from any other of the Southern States.... [They have] acquired a *status* and influence unknown in any other city, even in the Free States.... [O]ne in eleven [in New Orleans] work as] clerks, doctors, druggists, lawyers, merchants, ministers, printers and teachers... It will thus be seen that the free colored population of New-Orleans are acquiring an assimilation to the whites in education and influence, (whether for good or evil, is the problem) superior to that of any other State or city... It is a subject of study for the philosopher, the philanthropist, and the statesman.²⁵⁶

Spatially, this notable population clustered in the lower French Quarter, Bayou Road, the faubourgs Tremé, Marigny, New Marigny, Franklin, and those making up the present-day neighborhood of Bywater. Why here? This was the Francophone, Catholic, locally descended (Creole) side of town, a social environment largely created by free people of color (as well as white Creoles) and more conducive to their interests. The mostly Anglophone Protestant world on the upper side of town was not only culturally foreign terrain, but its white inhabitants were sometimes more hostile to the very notion of a free person of color.

The antebellum geography of black New Orleans, then, consisted of slaves intricately intermixed citywide—"scattered through the city promiscuously," as the *Daily Picayune* put it in 1843—and free people of color predominating in the lower neighborhoods.²⁵⁷ With the minor exception of the back-of-town, where very poor manumitted blacks and others lived in squatter-like huts, there were no expansive, exclusively black neighborhoods in antebellum New Orleans.

New Orleans' black population surged by 110 percent between the censuses of 1860 and 1870, bracketing the trauma of Civil War and emancipation. It rose another 54 percent by the turn of the century.²⁵⁸ Caught up in its own woes, the unwelcom-

ing city nevertheless offered better opportunities to freedmen than the sugar fields. In 1870, black men, who made up one-quarter of the labor force, worked 52 percent of New Orleans' unskilled labor jobs, 57 percent of the servant positions, and 30 to 65 percent of certain skilled positions.²⁵⁹

Where were these emigrants to settle? Unaffordable rents and racially antagonistic neighbors prevented the freedmen from settling in most front-of-town areas. The townhouses in the inner city, recently vacated by wealthy families, had since been subdivided into low-rent apartments, but these dwellings were more likely to be leased to poor immigrants than to poor black emigrants. Nor could the freedmen easily take refuge in the downtown neighborhoods of the former free people of color, who often scorned the freedmen as threats to their once relatively privileged (but now rapidly diminishing) social status.

Excluded and excluded, most freedmen had little choice but to settle in the ragged back-of-town, where urban development petered into amorphous low-density shanty towns and eventually dissipated into deforested swamps. The back-of-town offered low real-estate costs because of the environmental hazards, urban nuisances, inconveniences, and lack of amenities and city services. Together with many local ex-slaves who also found themselves, for the first time, seeking their own shelter, the freedmen joined those blacks already settled at the backswamp margin in the formation of the city's first large-scale, exclusively black neighborhoods. Concurrently, emancipation diminished the "back-alley" intermingling pattern of black tenancy in quarters behind white homes. (Irish and German servants had already replaced many domestic slaves in the 1850s, turning "slave quarters" into "servants' quarters.") The city's back-of-town grew increasingly black in both absolute and relative numbers, while the front-of-town became more white.

Yet complicating patterns persisted from earlier times. Creoles of color continued to choose their neighborhoods on their terms, for reasons of tradition, family, religion, culture, convenience, economics, or real estate, and usually remained on the downtown side of the city. Other black families, whose fathers worked on the docks and wharves, settled near the riverfront for its proximity to the port. Others settled in areas that, unlike the low-lying back-of-town, lay high on the natural levee and free from flood threat—but whose other environmental nuisances nevertheless rendered them less desirable and lower in rent. These areas included blocks near wharves, batture, mills, warehouses, factories, industrial sites, dumps, cemeteries, hospitals, and particularly along canals and railroad tracks. Still others settled in uptown clusters that have been described as "superblock" patterns (see *The White Teapot*).

Thus, even as the city's racial geography gradually disaggregated after the Civil War, it remained far more spatially heterogeneous than those of Northern cities. The German geographer Friedrich Ratzel noticed the pattern in 1874, a decade after emancipation, and offered three hypotheses:

New Orleans has a larger colored population than Charleston or Richmond, but you would not believe it if the statistics did not say so—*so much less is the distance separating these people from the whites.* This is partly because

of the great preponderance of mulattoes (who call themselves “yellow”... as opposed to “black”), partly because of prosperity that prevails in these circles, and partly, though not least of all, *because the French in Louisiana never set themselves off so strictly from their slaves and freed men as the Anglo-Americans did in the other slave states.*²⁶⁰

Two national trends around the turn of the twentieth century further spatially disaggregated New Orleans' heterogeneous racial geography. One commenced—rather climaxed—with *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896, that landmark Supreme Court decision (on a New Orleans-based case) to legalize “separate but equal” statutes represented the culmination of decades of increasing racial tension in the wake of emancipation, as well as a major final act in the century-long process of Americanizing New Orleans' la Franco-Caribbean Creole culture. Legal sanctioned racial segregation would affect real estate sales, deed covenants, access to public schools, jobs, public housing, and nearly every other aspect of life.

The second trend entailed the Progressive Era, which, in New Orleans and elsewhere, brought significant improvements to municipal services—water distribution, sewage, public health, electrification, telephony, transportation, and most importantly for this deltaic city, drainage and flood control. These technologies “neutralized” the lakefront's low elevation and waterlogged terrain as source of environmental risk, and allowed modern amenities to be extended into the former backswamp. Automobiles arrived serendipitously, followed by modern transportation arteries. Developers eagerly built new subdivisions—Lakeview and Gentilly, for example—in the spacious, modern California style, quite the antithesis of the antique housing stock that predominated in the rest of the city. They also installed racist deed covenants explicitly prohibiting sale or rental to black families.

The new subdivisions were a mix. During the 1910s-40s, middle-class white families, formerly residents of the historical front-of-town, “lump logged” over the black back-of-town and settled in the low-lying, whites-only lakeside subdivisions. The intricately intermixed racial geography of old had further dissociated; in the two generations since emancipation, white and black New Orleansians had moved away from each other *en masse*. The trend would only strengthen.

Temendous social transformations forged new racial relationships in mid- to late-twentieth-century New Orleans. Chief among these were *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the ensuing desegregation of public facilities, integration of public schools, and overall increased opportunities in education, employment, and housing for African-Americans. Jim Crow disappeared with less violence and resistance here than other Southern cities; black and white New Orleansians subsequently found themselves working, shopping, and dining together in increasing numbers. Yet *living* together did not necessarily follow the trend; in fact, residential integration diminished. Suburban-style subdivisions in lakefront and eastern New Orleans, in Jefferson, St. Bernard, and St. Tammany parishes, even as far as coastal Mississippi, drew white New Orleansians by the tens of thousands between the censuses of 1960 and 2000. Middle-class African-Americans, for their part, mostly moved lakeward

to the neighborhoods east of City Park and thence into the subdivisions of eastern New Orleans. The greater New Orleans metropolitan area, by century's end, had racially dichotomized into a white west and a black east, with notable exceptions traceable to historical times (see maps, "1939-1960-2000 Metro New Orleans Population"). Greater New Orleans' racial geography by the early 2000s ironically formed more segregated spatial patterns than it did in the early 1800s. "Two centuries of paradox" is how one researcher described the phenomenon.²⁶¹

Perhaps the most pernicious driver of *de facto* racial segregation began via a progressive federal and city government program designed to help the poor. Following the U.S. Housing Act of 1937, the Housing Authority of New Orleans (HANO) cleared a number of old neighborhoods, replete with nineteenth-century architectural gems but considered unsightly slums at the time, to make room for subsidized housing for poor families. Three-story, common wall brick apartments, tastefully designed to reflect local architectural style and scale, were built in geometrical arrangements among grassy walkways and oak trees. In accordance with the Jim Crow laws of the day each complex was racially segregated: two white-only developments were higher in elevation and closer to the front-of-town, while the four black-only projects occupied lower-elevation areas in the back-of-town. The complexes were expanded following the Housing Act of 1949. After desegregation of the projects in the 1960s, whites promptly left the units for affordable-living alternatives in working-class suburbs, and poor blacks took their places. Within a few years tens of thousands of the city's poorest African-Americans became intensely consolidated into a dozen or so projects, all of which were isolated from adjacent neighborhoods and cut off from the street grid. With that concentrated poverty came the full suite of social pathologies, including fatherless households, teen pregnancy, government dependency, drug trading, gang activity, and incessant violent crime. (Whether the projects bred and exacerbated social ills, or merely concentrated them, is a matter of ongoing debate. So bad did matters get by the 1990s that the federal government, which had come to view public housing as warehouses of indigence and cycles of dependency, intervened. The new philosophy, encapsulated in a controversial scheme named Project HOPE ("Homeownership and Opportunity for People Everywhere"), called for the demolition of the most troubled projects and their replacement with mixed-income New Urbanist communities, in which subsidized rental units for the poor abutted market-rate rentals and purchasable homes aimed at modest-income families. The HOPE philosophy rested on two geographical notions: that a physically improved and aestheticized place creates a better society, and that class intermixing restrains delinquency and dependency among the poor. (While both concepts are subject to varying levels of debate among geographers and the public in general, most agreed that the public-housing *status quo* could not continue.) In the early 2000s, amid vocal opposition but with the overwhelming support of the general population, the solidly built structures of the St. Thomas, Desire, Fischer, and other projects were demolished and redeveloped with pastel-colored New Urbanist designs. Opponents read bitter irony into the policy, noting that New Orleans' circa-1940 housing projects, with their modest scales, airy verandahs, and shady courtyards, seemed to embody New Urbanist principles a half-century before the term

was coined. Paralleling Chicago's Cabrini Green and Atlanta's East Lake experiments with mixed-income public housing (which really did replace ugly, dehumanizing high-rises), New Orleans' grand social experiment got under way.

Hurricane Katrina interrupted that experiment in 2005, and rendered the HOPE effort even more polemical amid the postdiluvian housing shortage of 2006-07. When HOPE and HANO proceeded with pre-storm plans to demolish and rebuild the circa-1940s C. J. Pate, St. Bernard, B. W. Cooper, and Lafitte projects, a small number of extremely vocal activists challenged the effort as designed to deny poor displaced African-Americans their right to return to the city. Given the housing shortage and a high homeless population of the time, their case rested upon the bird-in-hand-is-worth-two-in-bush argument: why destroy existing high-quality housing stock when the promise to redevelop it may not be kept, and when basic financing had not yet been secured? Those favoring the demolition pointed to forty years of deteriorating structural and social conditions as sufficient reason to proceed with HOPE. They also noted that many refurbished HANO apartments had failed to attract tenants, indicating that displaced residents were *not* being denied their wish to return. While the public-housing residents in question were overwhelmingly black, both sides in the controversy claimed the full range of the city's racial and class diversity among their supporters; the dispute explicitly did not break down along race and class lines.

Contending that the projects represented failed policies which concentrated poverty, incubated social pathologies, and produced intergenerational dependency, the agencies insisted on proceeding with the HOPE concept (though they did agree to stagger the demolition and reconstruction so that some residents could return as work progressed). All that kept the bulldozers from rolling was the approval of the City Council and mayor. The controversy climaxed on December 20, 2007, when the City Council, amid violent scuffles inside and outside City Hall, unanimously voted to approve the demolitions. Mayor Nagin concurred, and in early 2008, signed off on the demolition permits. By spring of that year, the C. J. Pate, St. Bernard, and B. W. Cooper projects lay in rubble, while Lafitte awaited the same fate. Plans currently entail replacing the "Big Four" complexes' 4,500 units with 2,343 subsidized apartments, 900 market-rate apartments, and another 900 homes for sale.²⁶² Because New Orleans' public-housing population is about 99 percent black, the eventual success or failure of the HOPE vision will deeply influence the city's future racial geographies.

Katrina's flood shattered the centuries-old geographies of African-American New Orleanians. Nearly all of their population of 324,000 dispersed nationwide after the excruciating debacle that started with the hurricane's strike on August 29, 2005, deteriorated immeasurably with the federal levee failures, and ended when the last stranded residents were evacuated in early September. Approximately 221,000 black New Orleanians—more than two-thirds—lived in areas that were deeply and persistently flooded.²⁶³ Those who lived in unflooded areas—particularly home-owners—generally returned by mid-2006 and continued those historical settlement patterns, while those who flooded—particularly renters—continue to face unraveled lives, uncertain futures, and likely displacement after generations of local lineage. By summer 2006, fewer than 20,000 black New Orleanians had returned, equaling the city's

black population in the year 1910. That figure is contested because of the difficulty of measuring population in a society recovering from a major catastrophe. The American Community Survey of 2006 estimated the city's black population at 131,441, still about 60 percent below its pre-Katrina size.²⁶⁴ Whatever the actual figure, New Orleans' African-American population and its total population both increased over the next two years, but at diminishing rates. A comparison of voting records from the 2003 and 2007 gubernatorial elections revealed that black voters in Orleans Parish declined by over 54 percent (84,521 to 38,736), while white voters decreased by 27 percent (46,669 to 33,917). Voter turnout is by no means a perfect indicator of population (for which we will have to wait until the 2010 Census), but it is a fair surrogate. Most studies show that New Orleans will remain a majority African-American, but by a slimmer margin than before the storm. The demographic shift will affect New Orleans' culture, economics, and politics. "The city now has a more racially balanced electorate," said political scientist Ed Chervenak. "The days when local candidates could appeal to Orleans' overwhelmingly black electorate and receive a handful of white votes to win office may be a thing of the past."²⁶⁵

The shift will also affect the city's human geography. Earlier upheavals, such as the Civil War, occasioned the region-wide concentration of African-Americans into New Orleans. Katrina, as of 2008, has had the reverse effect, scattering them throughout the region and nation. Time will determine the permanency of the New Orleans black Diaspora, and what intricate historical settlement patterns—the historical intermingling, the downtown Creole cluster, the old back-of-town, the riverfront concentration, and the ongoing paradox of residential segregation amid social integration—will persist.

The White Teapot

Explaining a peculiar demographic pattern

Map out nearly any socio-economic data about New Orleans—election returns, income, family size, population density—and an odd, teapot-shaped cartographic feature emerges (see map “The ‘White Teapot’”). The plotted statistics correlate to an underlying racial geography: a contiguous swath of historical neighborhoods, stretching from Carrollton to Bywater, comprises only 17 percent of the city's human-occupied footprint, but houses 42 percent of its white population (58,000 out of 136,000 in 2000).²⁶⁶ How did this demographic pattern form?

Explaining the origins of the “white teapot” draws heavily on three realities: (1) urban amenities, geographical hazards, and environmental nuisances are not evenly distributed across the New Orleans cityscape; (2) the white population on average

has always been better educated, more privileged, and significantly wealthier than the black population; and (3) many whites have passively discouraged, actively excluded, or simply fled from black neighbors, particularly in the mid- to late-twentieth century.

When uptown developed in the nineteenth century, hazards and nuisances and other undesirables that people did not want in their backyards predominated at the extreme ends of the natural levee. Toward the rear lay the swampy, flood-prone, mosquito-infested backswamp, while along the immediate riverfront were malodorous wharves, busy railroads, warehouses, and work yards. The middle ground in between—a few blocks either side of the Royal Street/St. Charles Avenue/Prytania Street corridor—lay far enough from the backswamp to buffer its environmental risks, and just as far from the riverfront wharves and railroads to abate their unpleasantness. When investors instigated the New Orleans & Carrollton Rail Road—present-day St. Charles Streetcar Line—through this middle ground in 1833, they both reflected and reinforced the desirability of this middle corridor. Building a costly commuter rail along busy riverfront wharves would not create upscale residential real estate, and locating it along the backswamp edge would make even less sense. By running it down present-day St. Charles Avenue, the engineers created a new urban amenity in an area that already enjoyed environmental advantages. Wealthy families soon started building simple homes along and near St. Charles Avenue, particularly in the Garden District, which formed in the 1830s–50s between St. Charles and Magazine. The proverbial “other side” of St. Charles Avenue (quite literally, “the other side of the tracks”) would have been too close to the swamp, while the “other side” of Magazine came too close to the riverfront wharves. Simpler abodes arose in those areas, and humbler folk occupied them.

In this deltaic Southern metropolis, where urban landscapes were not all homogenous and people were not all treated equally, those with the financial wherewithal—usually whites—gravitated to better drained, lower-nuisance, lower-risk zones, which had higher property values. Those without the means—usually blacks—had to make do with low-rent marginal lands. Poor people, particularly recently emancipated African Americans, settled in large numbers along the backswamp (present-day Central City), where land and housing were cheap. Working-class families of all backgrounds settled along the riverfront, in places such as the Irish Channel. Builders erected housing stock accordingly—substantial homes in the desirable area, simple cottages elsewhere—which, of course, reinforced the pattern, since no affluent family would move into a hovel and no poor family could afford a mansion. Thus, by the latter decades of the nineteenth century, the teapot’s spout—the predominantly wealthy, mostly white, amenity-rich corridor buffered on both sides from undesirables—started to form.

The 1884 World’s Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition initiated a building boom of leafy “streetcar suburbs” around what would become beautiful Audubon Park. Next door to that urban oasis came the graceful campuses of Tulane and Loyola universities (1891–1910), adding further appeal to the neighborhood. It did not hurt, also, that nearby Carrollton occupied a slightly higher and wider swath of the natural levee, giving the area added protection from floods. These factors all drove up

property values. By World War I, well-off whites predominated throughout the greater Carrollton/Universities/Audubon Park area, with some notable exceptions. The “kettle” of the teapot had formed.

Those few exceptions tell a geographical story of their own. Because many blacks worked as domestics for wealthy uptown whites, they (together with working-class whites) often lived in small cottages and shotgun houses developed in the “nucleus” of “superblocks”⁵⁷ outlined by the great mansio-ned avenues such as St. Charles, Louisiana, Napoleon, and Carrollton. Those avenues were developed for upper-class residential living because of their spaciousness, magnificence, “see-and-be-seen” porches, and proximity to streetcar service; smaller streets within the nucleus of the avenue grid were built up with much cheaper housing stock. The grand avenues thus formed a “lattice” of upper-class whites around cores of working-class blacks and whites, who often worked as domestics in those nearby mansions and conveniently walked to their jobs.

Later in the twentieth century, working- and middle-class whites departed for the suburban parishes in greater numbers than did blacks or wealthy whites. Formerly mixed neighborhoods of longshoremen along the river became almost entirely black, as did the uptown “superblock nuclei” and the once-integrated Sixth, Seventh, Eighth, and Ninth wards of downtown. Increasing percentages of African-Americans in areas surrounding the white teapot, and decreasing percentages therein, had the effect of sharpening the spatial delineation of this demographic feature.

Finally, the recent gentrification of historical neighborhoods around Coliseum Square, Faubourg Marigny, and Bywater brought whites into areas that had been mixed or majority-black in prior decades. This extended the teapot’s “spout” nearly all the way to the Industrial Canal. The curious feature, traceable to the late 1800s, thus came into its present-day form by the latter decades of the 1900s.

What impact does the white teapot and the surrounding majority-black areas have on the New Orleans cityscape? Since white New Orleanians earn roughly double the average household income of African-Americans, the teapot spatially correlates with patterns of myriad socio-economic phenomena: politics, property values, single-parent homes, average monthly rent, blighted housing, crime, health and education disparities, and more. It even correlates with nativity, one of the few social characteristics that does *not* correlate well with racial geographies elsewhere in the metropolis (see *Nativity as Ethnicity in New Orleans*).

The teapot’s impact, then, is dramatic. Crossing streets like St. Claude in Bywater (tip of the spout) or St. Charles/Carondelet in the Lower Garden District (trunk of the spout) takes a pedestrian across distinct race and class lines, and into strikingly different cityscapes. Guide books routinely warn tourists exploring the French Quarter not to exit the demographic pattern (though never so bluntly and not in those terms), while many African-Americans feel equally unwelcome and suspect upon entering it. So distinct are the urban characteristics within and beyond the white teapot that the two areas almost seem like sub-cities, separate communities that happen to abut each other, but otherwise do not interact.



Vertical Migration

Residential shifts from higher to lower ground

Nearly all New Orleanians lived above sea level for most of the city's first two centuries. Those higher natural levees abutting the Mississippi River offered sturdier, better-drained urbanization opportunities, not to mention proximity to the lucrative riverfront, compared to the low-lying backswamp. The cypress swamp and saline marshes close to Lake Pontchartrain, low as they were, had not yet been choked off from adjacent water bodies by levees and pumps, and thus remained at or near their original sea-level elevations. Those few people who did live along the lakeshore and marshes still resided at or close to the level of the sea, usually in raised wooden "camps." Into the early 1900s, well over 90 percent of the more than 300,000 people in New Orleans resided above sea level (see map, *Vertical Migration: Population Distribution with respect to Topographic Elevation, 1700s-2000*).

That era saw the augmentation of the artificial levees, the excavation of the outfall canals, and the installation of the Woolser pumps and associated municipal drainage apparatus. Soon, the flood-protected and runoff-drained lowlands transformed from seemingly useless backswamp into developable real estate, even as it subsided. "The entire institutional structure of the city was complete" in the ensuing urbanization of the lowlands, wrote local historian John Magill: "developers promoted expansion, newspapers heralded it, the City Planning Commission encouraged it, the city built streetcars to service it, [and] the banks and insurance companies underwrote the financing."²⁶⁸ New Orleanians, convinced that the topographical and hydrological factors that once constrained them to the natural levee had now been neutralized by technology, migrated enthusiastically off the natural levee and settled into trendy new suburbs with names like Broadmoor, Fontainebleau, Gentilly, and Lakeview. Popping up along the new orthogonal street grids and spacious suburban lots were thousands of California bungalows, Spanish Revival villas, English cottages, Midwestern ranch houses, and other homes of non-native architectural styles. Into those abodes moved thousands of families. Between 1920 and 1930, nearly every census tract lakeside of the Metairie/Gentilly Ridge at least doubled in population. Low-lying Lakeview saw its population increase by about 350 percent, while parts of equally low Gentilly grew by 636 percent. Older neighborhoods on higher ground, meanwhile, lost residents: historic faubourgs Tremé and Marigny dropped by 10 to 15 percent, the French Quarter declined by one-quarter. The high-elevation Lee Circle area lost 43 percent of its residents, while low-elevation Gettown increased by a whopping 1,512 percent.²⁶⁹ Similar figures could be cited for the 1910s and 1930s-50s.

The 1960 census recorded the city's peak population of 627,525, roughly double the number at the beginning of the century. But while over 90 percent lived

above sea level in 1900, only 48 percent remained there in 1960. Fully 321,000 New Orleanians had “vertically migrated” off the high lands near the Mississippi to the low lands near the lake—which had, by this time, subsided by a number of feet below sea level.²⁷⁰

Subsequent years saw tens of thousands of New Orleanians migrate *horizontally* as well. They departed Orleans Parish neighborhoods for social and economic reasons, not for any sense of environmental hazard. In some areas, the demographic exodus occurred dramatically, stoked in large part by the school integration crisis of 1960–61. “I remember Midnight Mass, 1962,” recalled one resident of the Irish Channel: “[t]hey had to close Constance Street to traffic because the crowd was spilling out of [St. Alphonse] Church onto the street. By 1964, it was all gone, so quickly had those parishioners decamped for the suburbs.²⁷¹ Fifteen years later, St. Alphonse closed for lack of a congregation. Similar stories played out citywide. In all, the Crescent City’s population dropped by 23 percent from 1950 to 2000, representing a net loss of 143,000 mostly middle-class whites to adjacent Jefferson, St. Bernard, and St. Tammany parishes or beyond. Testifying to the level of unimagination ascribed to topographic elevation—and implicitly the level of faith in drainage and flood-control technology—most white-flighters unknowingly moved vertically onto lower (or lower-lying) ground even as they sprawled out horizontally.

Suburban exodus coupled with urban sprawl *within* Orleans Parish meant that remaining residents were literally putting more distance among themselves. In 1960, 627,625 New Orleanians lived mostly on 36.8 square miles of occupied neighborhoods (excluding parks, cemeteries, campuses, undeveloped marshes, and other non-residential areas), equating to 17,053 people per square mile. By 2000, only 484,674 lived on 36.7 square miles, a density of 7,266 per square mile.²⁷²

Within the remaining Orleans Parish population, 121,000 New Orleanians—many of them middle-class blacks—internally migrated vertically, from higher historic neighborhoods to low-lying subdivisions, mostly in New Orleans East. Within the span of a century, New Orleans’ above-sea-level population, in relative numbers, declined from over 90 percent in the early 1900s, to 48 percent in 1960, to 38 percent in 2000. In absolute figures, the above-sea-level population remained steady at around 300,000 from the early 1900s to 1960, then dropped to 185,000 by 2000.

Hurricane Katrina’s surge wreaked disproportionately havoc on the same below-sea-level regions to which hundreds of thousands of New Orleanians confidently flocked decades prior. Two years after the catastrophe, the portion of the New Orleans population residing above sea level increased to 50 percent—12 percentage points higher than in 2000 and 2 percentage points more than 1960.²⁷³ By another measure, 55 percent of the city’s 143,825 households receiving mail as of February 2008 (a fair but not perfect indicator of repopulation) lay above sea level.²⁷⁴ Relative numbers thus seem to show that New Orleanians are shifting back to higher elevation.

Absolute numbers, however, tell a different story. Above-sea-level areas, despite their less-damaged status, still lost tens of thousands of residents since the storm. Although that population decline represents a much smaller drop than below-sea-level areas (which diminished by over 100,000), it indicates that New Orleanians after Ka-

trina are *not* flocking to higher ground. The increased percentage now living above sea level mostly reflects the slower repopulation pace of harder-hit low-lying areas, more so than a renewed social value placed on higher ground. Even those wishing to move uphill oftentimes find themselves stymied by insurance stipulations, Road Home restraints, and a tight real estate market, and resign themselves to rebuild in place. If an elevation-related historical tradition regained popularity since the storm, it's raising structures above the grade, not clustering on higher ground.

These figures will change as the recovery progresses. Not until the 2010 and 2020 censuses will we learn with reasonable confidence to what extent New Orleansians stay put, rebuild, or vertically or horizontally migrate again.²⁷⁵

New Orleans' Ethnic Geography in a National Context

Similarities and distinctions compared to other American cities

Wrote geographer Peirce F. Lewis, "it is easy to conclude... that New Orleans' urban growth... obeyed special rules which applied only to it—and nowhere else. It is a tempting conclusion, but untrue."²⁷⁶ Indeed, an important lesson to be drawn from New Orleans' shifting ethnic and racial geographies is that they generally parallel those observed elsewhere. The correlation of African-American and other minority and poor populations with areas of high environmental risk and nuisance areas has been documented far and wide, spawning the environmental justice movement. Likewise, the centrifugal pattern of immigrant settlement in antebellum times, the centrifugal clustering in the turn-of-the-century era, and the centrifugal suburban settlement of recent decades have all been witnessed in other large American cities. Ernest W. Burgess' classic "Concentric Zone Model" (see *The Rise and Fall of the Immigrant Belt*) was among the first (1920) to describe the concentric patterns of class and ethnicity around American cities' central business districts. Burgess' investigation of Chicago's early twentieth-century ethnic geography revealed striking parallels to those of New Orleans in the same era.

Nevertheless, some unusual aspects distinguish New Orleans' experience from the norm. The Crescent City is arguably the oldest genuinely multicultural city in the nation, and may well have witnessed certain ethnic spatial patterns before other cities replicated them on grander scales. Its Franco-Hispanic colonial heritage, deeply influenced by Afro-Caribbean cultures and further rendered by sheer isolation, spawned the enigmatic notion of Creole, a home-grown ethnicity that in time would manifest itself spatially in New Orleans. (How many cities render their own ethnicity?)

Sudden political Americanization, followed by gradual cultural Americanization, would create perhaps the greatest ethnic-geographical chasm in New Orleans

history: the downtown Creoles and the uptown Anglos. This underlying dichotomy informed the residential geographies of numerous other groups: Saint-Domingue refugees, foreign French, and Italians, for example, gravitated to the Creole side, while Jews, Scandinavians, and emancipated African-Americans settled on the Anglo side.

New Orleans was also one of the few places in the United States to harbor a three-tiered racial caste system (white, free people of color, and enslaved black), which further differentiated Creole/Anglo ethnic geographies. The Creole side of town, for example, exhibited a three-to-one ratio of free people of color to slaves in 1860; the Anglo side of town had the exact opposite.²⁷⁷

Physical geography also differentiated New Orleans' experience: the city's deltaic topography constricted urbanization to the narrow natural levee between riverfront wharves and the backswamp, creating a bifurcated environment in which empowered groups gravitated to the more desirable middle ground, and the disenfranchised poor clustered along the troubled margins. These aged patterns—akin in theory, if not in form, to the *cinturones de miséria* (misery belts) surrounding Latin American capitals—remain vividly apparent in modern racial distributions. In some areas today, the interface between black and white neighborhoods (such as Central City and the Garden District) marks the edge of the backswamp at the time of emancipation. Most cities have natural barriers that restrict expansion, but New Orleans' backswamp formed an adjustable constraint: with drainage, it receded and eventually disappeared, leaving behind its imprint in the distributions of humanity. Soils of the former backswamp also subsided substantially, giving New Orleans a dynamic vertical dimension to its residential settlement patterns—a claim few other cities can, or would want, to make.

How does New Orleans' racial geography compare to other American cities? It depends on how one measures integration and segregation. One tool is the "dissimilarity index," which calculates the percent of one group that would have to move to another geographical unit (block, census tract, etc.) to match the distribution of the other group. Perfect integration produces a dissimilarity index of zero, while a completely segregated city would measure 100. Most large American cities have dissimilarity indices in the 60s, 70s, and 80s, meaning that roughly three out of four people of one group would have to relocate in order to intermingle with the other group.²⁷⁸ Compared to the nine largest American cities in which nonwhites outnumber whites, New Orleans' dissimilarity index of 70.6 ranked more integrated than those of Chicago (87.3), Atlanta (83.5), Washington, D.C. (81.5), Philadelphia (80.6), Cleveland (79.4), and Baltimore (75.2). Only Memphis (68.1) and Detroit (63.3) produced lower (more integrated) indices.²⁷⁹ Looking to other American cities, New Orleans ranked more integrated than New York (85.3), Miami (80.2), Boston (75.8), Houston (75.5), and Los Angeles (74.0), not to mention nearby Baton Rouge (75.1) and other prominent cities. But three Southern ports most historically comparable to New Orleans—Mobile (63.3), Pensacola (65.3), and Charleston (63.8)—ranked more integrated than the Crescent City. Perhaps, in these data, we are seeing vestiges of the ancient "back-alley" pattern (see *Two Centuries of Paradox*) persisting in the oldest Southern entrepôts. According to these measures, the popular impression of a relatively high level of racial integration in New Orleans proper (albeit much less than it used to be, and perhaps not

as much now after Hurricane Katrina) seems founded.

The ethnic geographies of New Orleans are notable, too, vis-à-vis the city's cultural source regions. This was a city that looked not to England and northern Europe to people its land and inform its society, as did most elder cities of this nation, but to France and Spain, the Caribbean, Latin America, and Africa. This was a Catholic city in a Protestant nation, a mixed legal jurisdiction in a land of English common law, and a historically racially determined society in a nation traditionally divided strictly between white and black. New Orleans represented the expanding American nation's first major encounter with sophisticated, urban foreigners. From the perspective of *America's* ethnic geography, then, New Orleans indeed plays a starring role.

It has been said that America Americanized New Orleans. But it may also be said that New Orleans Americanized America.