Geographies of New Orleans
by Richard Campanella

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MORPHOLOGY OF A METROPOLIS

Analyses of urban morphology—the shape, form, structure, and growth of a city—often start with a distinction between planned and unplanned towns. Planned towns are premeditated visions executed in a top-down fashion by a centralized authority with the aid of engineers and surveyors, who lay out networks of streets and blocks. In historical times, planned towns represented the imposition of order and rationality in a remote and threatening wilderness. Unplanned towns, on the other hand, derive from the bottom up, forming spontaneously by the aggregation of people at river confluences, road intersections, resource-extraction sites, forts and outposts, and other convenient locales. They expand in irregular star-like patterns, and only when permanency seems assured do they come under governmental authority—and planning.

Most French settlements in North America were planned, but because France’s New World endeavors were more commercial than colonial or imperial in their objectives, carried out by individuals or companies granted trading rights, no standard urban design was consistently executed throughout.

These perspectives of urban growth were made by digitally co-registering eight historical maps, delineating those areas depicted as developed, then overlaying the results along with a 2000 elevation map and comparing the results with satellite-based information for 2000. From its initial 0.3-square-mile footprint at the French Quarter in the 1700s, the deltaic metropolis now spans about 200 square miles across four parishes. Map and GIS processing by author.
the French possessions of Canada, the Great Lakes, the Mississippi Valley, and the Gulf Coast. This contrasts with the Spanish towns and cities established to the southwest, which were developed under a strict and consistent colonial policy toward urban design, "under the careful supervision of the monarch." As a result, towns of New France featured a diversity of city plats reflecting the physical geography of the sites and the capacities of the founders, unified by certain common traits of French design. Quebec, Lousibourgh, Montreal, Detroit, Mobile, New Orleans, St. Louis, and other French frontier communities exhibited centralized grid patterns with centralized churches and public spaces laid out along waterfronts and protected by fortifications. But no two were identical: some were elongated; some were perfectly orthogonal in their arrangement of blocks while others comprised a series of rather haphazard sub-grids; some were behind forts, aside forts, or within forts. "Because of their variety," wrote urbanist John W. Reps, "French colonial towns have something more charm and interest than can be found in the Spanish settlements. Indeed, it is such cities as Quebec and New Orleans where the original French character has not been entirely obliterated, the quality of the urban scene or townscape surpasses virtually anything else of its kind in North America."

New Orleans was the epitome of a planned town, conceived in 1717, invented in 1718 by Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne, sieur de Bienville, and designed and surveyed in 1721-1722 by Le Blond de la Tour and Adrien de Pauger. It represented a series of rather haphazard sub-grids; some were behind forts, aside forts, or within forts. "Because of their variety," wrote urbanist John W. Reps, "French colonial towns have something more charm and interest than can be found in the Spanish settlements. Indeed, it is such cities as Quebec and New Orleans, where the original French character has not been entirely obliterated, the quality of the urban scene or townscape surpasses virtually anything else of its kind in North America."

New Orleans was the epitome of a planned town, conceived in 1717, invented in 1718 by Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne, sieur de Bienville, and designed and surveyed in 1721-1722 by Le Blond de la Tour and Adrien de Pauger. It represented a symmetrical grid pattern with a central place, the institutions of church and state, dramatically perched upon a cusp of the Mississippi River. Surrounding the eleven-by-six-block grid were four forts and three forts (some not actually built until years later) inspired by the French military engineer Sebastien le Pietre de Vauban. Even though a commercial enterprise brought New Orleans to fruition, Bienville and his men instilled in New Orleans a strong sense of special authority and military presence, quite contrary to the laid-back atmosphere for which this city would later gain fame. The remote colonial outpost remained within the strict plan until 1788, after a catastrophic conflagration and growing pressure for more space triggered New Orleans' first expansion beyond its formal confines. Suburban growth started with the layout of the Faubourg St. Mary that year and would continue within the parish for roughly the next two hundred years, and well beyond parish lines. After 1788, the dynamics of New Orleans' urban morphology became a bit more complicated: it expanded in a fashion planned at the macro-subdivision scale, but unplanned at the microscopic, row-wide scale, guided invisibly by the forces of proximity, topography, economics, infrastructure, demography, opportunity, and circumstances. The goal of this chapter is not to recount the stage-by-stage history of this expansion, but rather to identify the unwritten "rules" that explain the why behind the where of New Orleans' expansion and that original sixty-six-block grid known today as the French Quarter.

**"Rules" of Urban Expansion, 1788-circa 1900**

The first condition in the expansion of Faubourg (literally "false town," or inner suburb) was adjacency to an existing urbanized area. Faubourg St. Mary (1788), for example, was laid out immediately upriver from the original city (save for a narrow commons unavailable at the time for development), while the Faubourg Marigny was founded in 1805-1806 immediately below the city. The four new faubourgs—Duplantier, Solet, La Course, and Annunciation—laid out in an imaginative classical form by Barthélemy Lafon in 1806-1810, were located immediately upriver from the Faubourg St. Mary. The first case of faubourgs adjacent faubourgs. The Faubourg Tremé, founded in 1810, was again immediately adjacent to an established urbanized area, at the rear of the original city. Existing development, then, was a strong predictor of the location of future development—until new transportation systems, in the form of canals and railroads, altered spatial relationships. These new transportation origins diminished the need for immediate

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36. See the eight volumes of the Friends of the Cabildo's New Orleans Architecture (Gretna, LA, 1971) series for a detailed account of early city growth.

"Rules" of New Orleans’ Urban Expansion, 1788 to c. 1900

1. Is this land immediately adjacent to the existing urbanized area, readily accessible by transportation lines?
   - Yes
   - No

2. Is it relatively well-drained?
   - Yes
   - No

3. Is it legally suitable for development? That is, is it in the commercial domain or otherwise acquirable?
   - Yes
   - No

4. Site will remain undeveloped until the appropriate drainage technology removes swamp water.

5. Area will develop as a small isolated community until city expands to its doors, thus assuming first condition.

6. Is it a convenient egress / egress to the city, a port or wharf site, a spur for rail extension or a pleasant environment such as a waterfront property?
   - Yes
   - No

7. Area will develop mostly for working- and middle-class residential living, with some commercial / industrial use.
   - Yes
   - No

8. Is the owner ready to sell to a developer, or will the land itself?
   - Yes
   - No

9. Is it a spacious, broad piece of land?
   - Yes
   - No

10. Area will still develop, but less rapidly and dramatically as those expanses of well-drained land.

11. Is it close to the more desirable, economically vibrant part of the city?
   - Yes
   - No

12. Area will develop mostly for middle- and upper-class residential living.

13. Is it far from railroad tracks, canals, dumps, dumps, marshes, industrial complexes, areas of high crime or poverty, or other undesirable phenomena?
   - Less so
   - Somewhat far
   - Quite far

14. Area will develop for commercial and industrial land use, or residential use for working-class and poor families.

15. When the price rises, he will.

16. In an event, government-owned commons usually subjected to economic pressure, it is referred to private lands for development. Towns such as Ville Platte are more strictly regulated by the government, and will probably remain undeveloped.
adjacency (read: minimized walking distance) to the expansion of the city, broadening the rule to accessibility. The tiny agricultural community at Bayou St. John, which dated to 1708, exploited the natural Bayou St. John/Bayou Road portage from the Mississippi River to Lake Pontchartrain, but when the man-made Carondelet Canal increased its accessibility to the bayou in the 1790s, Bayou St. John subdivided into Faubourg St. John (1810). Canals, namely the New Basin and the Carondelet/Bayou St. John, made West End and Spanish Fort into lakefront ports and resorts, and the road following the Metairie/Gentilly Ridge encouraged the development of farmhouses and the Faubourg Marigny. In the 1840s, before New Orleans proper would envelope these areas, Ferries of various forms have long connected African-Americans with the original city, and still do. The Pontchartrain Railroad (1830) made otherwise inaccessible lakefront spots, Milneburg, into a booming tourist and resort, while the New Orleans & Carrollton Rail Road (1835) led directly to the establishment of Faubourg Bienville and Carrollton, and indirectly to many other uptown faubourgs, with these new conveyances, New Orleanians could now be farther from the city, still partake of its advantages and real estate developers were more than eager to accommodate this expanding market. In time, these outlying settlements would be subsumed into the metropolis; some would completely lose their identities, but others would maintain old street networks, names, and some old buildings. Metairie and Carrollton in particular resonated with a lingering sense of being separate cities, as does the Garden District (formerly Lafayette), which grew after the present-day St. Charles Avenue Streetcar Line made it accessible to the city proper. An 1847 description alludes to the conditions of geographical adjacency, topography, spaciousness, and social desirability that guided growth in this area:

Immediately [outside] the corporate limits of New Orleans...Lafayette is most beautifully situated for dwelling-houses. The ground is high and dry; vegetation flourishes here with amazing luxuriance; here are collected many of our wealthy citizens, who have built handsome villas, with gardens and large yards.... Here they have elbow-room—fine green spaces, for the little ones to romp and roll upon—trees, to shade and enliven the scene, and large commodious one story houses, full of windows on all sides, and without those horrible, knee-cracking stairs.

After accessibility, data in New Orleans needed to be, as suggested above, “high and dry” before urban development could occur. This important topographic rule revealed the city to the nature of the Mississippi River and the smaller Esplanades and Metairie/Gentilly ridges from 1700s to the early 1900s. When the municipal drainage system removed runoff and accumulation from the backswamp, it allowed the city to expand toward Lake Pontchartrain, the river’s natural levees crested at about ten feet above sea level at the river’s edge and sloped downward to (and below) sea level, where either cypress swamp, deforested wetlands, or marsh prevailed. So correlated was topography to urban development in nineteenth-century New Orleans than, at quite large, city maps of the era resemble elevation maps. The appellation “Crescent City,” which dates from the 1830s, described not just the shape of the river in New Orleans but the shape of urbanized New Orleans, indicating the historical one-to-one relation between the river’s natural levee and the city’s expansion zone.

If land were conveniently accessible and well-drained, it qualified as a strong candidate for urban expansion. But it also had to be legally acquirable for subdivision. In most cases, attractive land near New Orleans firmed as sugar plantations in the years prior to their subdivision. Pressure to develop increased, plantation owners eventually had to decide between continuing in agriculture with all its unpredictable risks and rewards, or subdividing the land for development, either by hiring a surveyor and overseeing the process personally, or by selling the entire lot to a developer. There were some holdouts—the Stagecoach story of the Foucher tract is one such case—butimation owners were generally recognized when the benefits of subdivision outweighed the costs of cultivation, and acted accordingly. Occasionally, however, government ownership interrupted the inexorable march of prime real estate toward urbanization. The best example was the conflict between the original city and the Faubourg St. Mary, a wedge-shaped expanse bounded by present-day Perdido Street and the eponymous Common Street. Spanish-era fortifications and the need for unobstructed firing lines forced Spanish authorities under Carlos Laveau Trudeau to buy out Faubourg St. Mary (1790) not immediately adjacent to the old city, but across this fortified commons. After Americanisation, with the transfer of the commons in dispute between the city and federal government, pressure mounted to develop this land, especially in light of the deterioration and obsolescence of the colonial forts. By an act of Congress on March 3, 1867, the federal government recognized the city’s claim to the commons, but stipulated that it establish a sixty-foot road on both sides of a canal planned to connect the river with the Carondelet Canal. Starting in 1810, the commons minus the right-of-way was subdivided into lots and appended to the footprint of urbanized New Orleans. The canal was never excavated, for the idea lives on in Canal Street, whose extra-wide neutral ground may be regarded as the last remnant of the old commons. Parts of the area between the Carondelet Canal near Orleans Avenue) to present.

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ent-day Common Street/Tulane Avenue were also held as public commons, and were eventually developed as the faubourgs Hagan and Tremé. Governement agencies, of course, are far more constrained in relinquishing public land to private interests.

If issues of accessibility, drainage, and ownership all favored certain areas for urban expansion, two additional criteria prioritized exactly which could be developed first and more aggressively: the size and spaciousness of the terrain, and its adjacency to the more prosperous, aristocracy-rich, desirable section of town. Neither of these criteria was “binary” in nature; that is, small parcels, disconnected from favored areas did not necessarily preclude development, but rather only delayed or restrained it. Because of the slow meander of the Mississippi in uptown, natural levees there were wider (over a mile from riverfront to back-of-town) than below the French Quarter, where river straighter’s cut and its natural levee spanned barely a half-mile. Topographically, New Orleans was shaped like a sickle, with the wide, curving blade representing the uptown natural levees and the narrow, straight handle defining the downtown.

Developers thus had the freedom to divide the plantation lands to subdivide into faubourgs and than in the lower city. Fortunately, for them, these same areas were also physically adjacent to the economically vibrant and socially favorable parts of New Orleans. This was the American section, where French was spoken, Protestantism was practiced, business and industry predominated, and eyes looked toward the greater cities of the Northeast for cultural affinity and inspiration. Here were the garden suburbs, with homes in architectural styles that were distinctly external. A short streetcar ride took residents to their offices and stores in the Faubourg St. Mary, the city’s economic and professional heart. Downtown, by contrast, looked more to the European past than the American present. This predominantly Catholic and immigrant section spoke French, practiced a religion that differed from the American norm, and referenced the fading colonial worlds of France and Spain for cultural enlightenment. Here were the professional districts, great hotels, theaters, and other amenities (particularly the “Poor Third” District, below Esplanade Avenue), and those of Faubourg St. Marie. The faubourgs carved out a lower-city plantation and finding, were developed with humble cottages, densely arranged and deeply reflective of local designs and amenities. To this day, the riverfront neighborhoods of the Seventeenth, Eighteenth, and Nineteenth wards (Faubourg Marigny, Bywater, Treme, Audubon, and Holy Cross) contain ten to twenty working-class homes for every one religious structure, and of those, very few can be called mansions. For over one hundred years, part estate developers and home-builders had very economic reasons to focus more effort on uptown than downtown, a fact reflected in the expansion of Orleans Parish’s official borders. The parish’s eastern boundary moved constantly and sometimes dramatically; from present-day Iberville Street east-and-a-half miles up to Monticello Street, between 1797 and 1874. The western parish line, on the other hand, has been fixed at Jackson Barracks, three miles below the French Quarter, since 1819—the oldest terrestrial parish line of the city.

One final criterion sorted the destiny of Orleans Parish lands for urban development, and this was proximity to existing conditions. Areas closer to noisy, smelly, unsightly, or the offensive “nuisance” of roads zones, broad tracks, canals, dumps, wharves, industrial premises, red-light districts—tended to develop for lower-class residential uses mixed with industrial and commercial land-use, while areas further from such sites attracted higher-end development for more moneyed tastes. Housing for the city’s poorest residents, usually African-American, was in much lower amenity, high-nuisance “back-of-town.”

Twentieth-Century Rules

Twentieth-century technological and social changes antiquated most of the rules that guided eighteenth- and nineteenth-century growth in New Orleans. The automobile and modern infrastructures and waterways neutralized the need for proximity by making it possible for more moneyed tastes to live near the congested, inner city when peaceful suburbs awaited a short drive away. The municipal drainage system built in the early 1900s opened up a backward for urban development and eliminated the age-old topographical restriction. Development decisions no longer lay in the hands of sugar planters looking to sell their plantations, or professional real estate developers working hand-in-hand with government planning authorities. Economic opportunities in places other than the Central Business District of New Orleans drew development to outer suburbs with names like Metairie and Elmwood, rather than inner suburbs with names like Faubourg Marigny and Treme. Complex social phenomena involving race, class, crime, gentrification, lifestyle, and public education played new and deeply influential roles in determining the why behind the where of urban expansion. Taxation, high costs

living, and exasperation with city life played a crucial role in driving out middle-class residents from the city to new suburban subdivisions. Finally, new physical restrictions, such as hurricane-protection levees and wetlands preservation, coastal erosion, and subsidence, have stilled urban development in many fringes of the two hundred-square-mile Greater New Orleans metropolitan area. Urban development in the twenty-first century is now often driven by the desire of young families to raise their children in safe neighborhoods with decent public schools. Today, St. Tammany Parish and the North Shore of Lake Pontchartrain—"Greater New Orleans" only by very recent definition—are the only rapidly growing areas of the region, and not coincidentally, boast the region’s lowest crime rates and best public schools. New development in Jefferson, St. Bernard, and Plaquemines parishes is less common, and new subdivisions in New Orleans proper now occur only on the Lower Coast of Algiers. The last great wave of urban expansion within the boundaries of Orleans Parish occurred east of the Industrial Canal, along the new I-10 corridor, during the 1960s and 1970s; since then, only small expansions such as the affluent gated community of English Turn in Algiers have arisen.

Ironically, the rising stars of modern-day real estate development in New Orleans are, once again, the historic faubourgs adjacent to the original city. Here, tourism has led investors to renovate historic structures into fashionable bou-
tique hotels, and gentrification draws speculators to restore old houses and “bring back” decaying neighborhoods. Where restoration and gentrification occurs is driven, first and foremost, by a modern variation of the initial “rule” behind development at the turn of the nineteenth century: physical adjacency to already gentrified areas. The pattern of neighborhood revitalization, starting first in the French Quarter and later in the Faubourg Marigny, Lower Garden District, CBD, Bywater, and now Tremé, loosely mirrors the sequence in which these areas were originally developed two centuries ago.

Epilogue: After Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans will likely gain new appreciation for the “rules” that drove the morphology of the metropolis two centuries earlier; primarily flood protection provided by the relatively high natural levee. To an extent, the future morphology of the city may contract from the vast “spread eagle” configuration of recent times, and reconstitute the shape of the “crescent” from historical times.
AN ARCHITECTURAL GEOGRAPHY OF THE FRENCH QUARTER

Preservationists use the French phrase "tout ensemble" to describe both the object of their interest and the objective of their endeavors. The "total impression" (or, literally, "everything together") created by hundreds of adjacent historical structures, more so than any one historic building, is what captures the ambience of the past; preservationists thus strive to save entire streetscapes—enigmatic panoplies of rooftops and dormers, shutters and balconies, lamp posts and hitching posts—while guarding vigilantly against modern intrusions. Tout ensemble has been a guiding principle for the preservation of the French Quarter, resulting in one of the most outstanding historic districts in the nation.

Belying the cluttered heterogeneity of tout ensemble are cryptic trends through historical ages and patterns in geographic space. What appears at first a random mix of structures and structural characteristics is, all yoked under the adjective "historical," actually anything but random. Revealing order in this apparent chaos is well worth the effort: the patterns divulge both national and local history, the architectural styles of distant and indigenous influences, and the complex economics and politics of a city once predicted to become "nothing but a cemetery" and a "ruin." The French Quarter has been saved from an "amorous disaster." Its unique buildings have "endured the centuries with an entirely admirable valor" (as quoted by Florence M. Jumonville) and were deemed to have architectural and historic value, and...should be preserved..." It is the city's unique and priceless Notarial Archives, storing historical documentation. The major source of primary records is the city's unique and priceless Notarial Archives, storing original documents relating to real estate transactions and the historical or architectural importance; and a series of historical maps of the block, including rudimentary lot definitions, from the 1720s and 1730s. Notarial Archive sketches from the nineteenth century, turn-of-the-century Sanborn Fire Insurance maps, parcel maps, color-coded architectural evaluation maps, and others if available.

The remaining 95 percent of the binder presents notarial and graphical data for every lot on the block, even vacant ones. Historical and recent photographs, newspaper clippings, and documents are integrated with the documentary essence of the survey: the chain of title of the lot, the chain of ownership, and the deed. Information on each property is sometimes surprisingly scant, and one is sometimes uncertain whether a particular fact refers to an extant structure or a long-departed one.

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- a map of the Quarter showing the block’s location;
- sketches of the four street elevations (including profiles) surrounding the block;
- three to four pages of summary descriptions of each building, including general type and style, construction date or era, and color-coded assessment of its value, ranging from the lowly brown (mentionable or of no architectural importance) to the regal purple (of national historical or architectural importance);
- a series of historical maps of the block, including rudimentary lot definitions, from the 1720s and 1730s. Notarial Archive sketches from the nineteenth century, turn-of-the-century Sanborn Fire Insurance maps, parcel maps, color-coded architectural evaluation maps, and others if available.

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1 The legal protection of the French Quarter stems from Article XIV, Section 3 of the 1845 Louisiana Constitution, which stated, "The city of New Orleans shall be deemed to have architectural and historic value, and should be preserved..." It was followed by a municipal ordinance (No. 14,538 C.C.S, March 3, 1937), which protected the Quarter’s "quaint and distinctive character" and particularly "those buildings having architectural or historic worth." As quoted by Florence M. Jumonville, A Guide to the Vieux Carré Survey (New Orleans, 1990), 34; and Bernard Lemann, The Vieux Carré—A General Statement (New Orleans, 1966), 5.
Urban Geographies

The Vieux Carré Survey described 1028 St. Philip as follows: “Originally this c. 1839 single, long brick cottage was approximately 3’ lower in height [than] it is today. A massive c. 1880 renovation, which included a roof change and a possible raising in height transformed the early cottage into a late 19th c. single shotgun.” Thus there are two construction dates (1839 and 1880), two styles (arguably Creole and Victorian), and two structure types (cottage and shotgun) manifest in a single building. Note the quarters in the rear, a rarity for shotguns.


Cottages from the colonial and antebellum eras were often razed for postbellum frame and shotgun houses. In other cases, the aged units were simply appended. 1201 Bourbon is a good example: the lower floor was once a circa-1840 Creole corner cottage with Greek Revival details, to which Victorian-style upper floors were added in the late 1880s.


With the goal of mapping out the structural characteristics of the French Quarter, I reviewed the entire Vieux Carré Survey and recorded the address, construction date, architectural style, structure type, original use, and quantity of iron-lace adornment for every extant structure. Conducted during autumn-winter 2001-2002, the process took eighty hours, followed by a roughly equal amount of time to verify and update the data in the streets (much has changed in the Quarter since 1966, despite its protected status), assure consistency and accuracy, and map the addresses to correct geographic locations. Only when all of these steps were completed successfully did the interpretation of temporal and spatial patterns begin.

In conducting a study like this, certain problems arise. The first involves construction dates: by this count, only 72 percent of the Quarter’s structures’ construction dates are known within a margin of two years (for example, 1829-1831); moreover half (53 percent) are known within one year; and only 15 percent are known to the year. Among eighteenth- and nineteenth-century structures, only one out of every eleven may be nailed down to a particular year. This uncertainty is explained in part by the fact that construction, renovation, and remodeling often span long periods of time, and by lack of documentation, particularly for older, humbler abodes, which forces researchers to “age” buildings by their characteristics. The task of mapping and quantifying necessitates that decisions be made about these “fuzzy” data, so the earliest possible construction date, the latest, and the most probable were all recorded. When the survey researchers could do no more than estimate a particular Creole cottage dated from the 1830s, for example, I recorded 1830 for the “earliest” date, 1839 for the “latest,” and 1835 for the “most probable” construction date. It is this last category that appears in the maps and graphs that follow, but readers should be aware that a certain range surrounds most of these dates.

A special problem arose regarding building alteration. About 8 percent of Quarter structures were noted as having undergone radical remodeling, such as floor additions, large-scale extensions, new facades, and reconstruction. Does an 1820s Creole cottage still deserve that classification if it was expanded with a second floor and encrusted with Victorian ornamentation in the 1890s? Or is it now a Victorian storehouse? If a storehouse dating from the 1870s was completely dismantled and reconstructed in the 1980s, is it still honestly recorded as a structure dating from the Spanish colonial era? “How do you pin down a building that grew like Topsy, with newer walls on old foundations, new-dated fronts, and re-oriented rear?” pondered Edith Elliott Long while confronting the same dilemma for her “Along the Banquette” columns in the 1960s Vieux Carré Courier. “The picture is clouded, too, by a mishmash of old legends and oft-told tales.”

“Actually,” I decided in the case of major remodeling, the earlier date would...
Another challenge was even more fundamental: what exactly comprises a single structural entity? Should twin common-wall townhouses on St. Peter Street be considered one structure, or two? Is it reasonable to count both a tiny shotgun house and a block-long three-story hotel as single structural units? What about dependencies and outbuildings? I decided to restrict this quantification to curbside edifices with addresses, plus stand-alone buildings which had addresses and were recorded in the Vieux Carré Survey. I felt that it would be perfectly acceptable to count small and larger structures (for example, a tiny cottage and a large townhouse) each as single structural units, but balked at counting these entities on the same scale as, for example, the block-long Royal Orleans Hotel. I decided that when a single structure spanned many adjacent parcels in the form of a row, it would be depicted as a series of structures (presented cartographically as points) lining the block. This seemed like a reasonable compromise between the relevance of structural unity and the significance of unit size. Thus, the Royal Orleans Hotel is shown on the maps as nine points, because it occupies roughly nine parcels wrapping around Royal, St. Louis, and Chartres streets, and is counted as nine structures in the graphs and tabulations, even though architecturally speaking it is a single edifice. Only a handful of sites were affected by this issue; nevertheless, it should be kept in mind when viewing the maps and analyses of uniting rows and larger units as single structures. All structures in the Quarter today. Indeed, counting buildings in the French Quarter is like counting trees in a forest: one must agree on reasonable and robust criteria of what exactly constitutes a single entity, and enforce them consistently, and even then, ten counters will arrive at different counts. All data presented here is 2,244 as the total.

Architectural style is presented in a more predictable problem—expected because classifying buildings’ architectural styles is notoriously debatable. What is Spanish Colonial to one person is Creole to another, what is Victorian to another is Victorian Italianate to a third. I relied on the judgements of the Vieux Carré Survey researchers for this assessment; if they confidently described a building as a Creole townhouse, with no other stylistic influences, I recorded “Creole” as its primary style and “Italianate” as its secondary style, though some may argue that “Victorian” connotes an era, while “Italianate” is a style in those few cases where the non-architect, had to make a judgement, I relied on venerable sources such as Malcolm Heard’s *French Quarter Manual* (1997), Lloyd Vois’s *New Orleans Houses* (1985), and the Friends of the Cabildo’s *New Orleans Architecture* series for guidance. There is one important exception: all post-World War II construction, which by law must stylistically maintain the *tout ensemble* or block, were recorded as “French Quarter Revival,” despite their primary style. The reasoning: although a 1960s hotel may have been designed faithfully in the Greek Revival style, or a 1970s house as a Creole cottage, the architect probably intended primarily to emulate the ambience of the French Quarter, rather than to extol those particular historical styles. The late Malcolm Heard described this resulting style as “Vieux Carré Revival,” arising from a feeling that new construction should be essentially scenographic and that it should fill in gaps in the French Quarter fabric as inconspicuously as possible.

How many structures, then, are in the French Quarter? Using the above criteria, this tabulation of the Vieux Carré Survey enumerates 2,244 structures in the area bounded by Iberville Street, Rampart Street, Esplanade Avenue, and the Mississippi River. (This count does not include the “100 blocks” between Canal and Iberville, which are technically not in the Vieux Carré but are in the Vieux Carré Survey.) In 1982, researcher Ann Barnes counted 1,843 structures in the French Quarter, including the Canal-Iberville blocks and encircling rows and larger units as single structures.17 Barnes’ figure may be considered a conservative estimate. The Orleans Parish Assessment Roll lists slightly over 2,700 separately owned parcels in the French Quarter regardless of structural status. If one were to include every servants’ quarters, shed, and outbuilding, there are probably close to 3,000 structures in the Quarter. Indeed, counting buildings in the French Quarter is like counting trees in a forest: one must agree on reasonable and robust criteria of what exactly constitutes a single entity, and enforce them consistently, and even then, ten counters will arrive at different counts. All data presented here is 2,244 as the total.

Architectural style is presented in a more predictable problem—expected because classifying buildings’ architectural styles is notoriously debatable. What is Spanish Colonial to one person is Creole to another, what is Victorian to another is Victorian Italianate to a third. I relied on the judgements of the Vieux Carré Survey researchers for this assessment; if they confidently described a building as a Creole townhouse, with no other stylistic influences, I recorded “Creole” as its primary style, with no secondary style. If a shotgun house was described as Victorian Italianate, “Victorian” was entered as its primary style, and “Italianate” as its secondary style, though some may argue that “Victorian” connotes an era, while “Italianate” is a style in those few cases where the non-architect, had to make a judgement, I relied on venerable sources such as Malcolm Heard’s *French Quarter Manual* (1997), Lloyd Vois’s *New Orleans Houses* (1985), and the Friends of the Cabildo’s *New Orleans Architecture* series for guidance. There is one important exception: all post-World War II construction, which by law must stylistically maintain the *tout ensemble* or block, were recorded as “French Quarter Revival,” despite their primary style. The reasoning: although a 1960s hotel may have been designed faithfully in the Greek Revival style, or a 1970s house as a Creole cottage, the architect probably intended primarily to emulate the ambience of the French Quarter, rather than to extol those particular historical styles. The late Malcolm Heard described this resulting style as “Vieux Carré Revival,” arising from a feeling that new construction should be essentially scenographic and that it should fill in gaps in the French Quarter fabric as inconspicuously as possible.


Bourbon Street example of arched openings, typical of pre-1830s Creole style, renovated in 1980s andiedoed openings and a “keyhole” entrance, typical of circa-1830s Greek Revival style. Photograph by author, 2004.

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sible, leaving the limelight for older buildings. Analysis of styles appears in the chapter, "A Draping of Fashions: Patterns of Architectural Style in the French Quarter."

Probably the most straightforward characteristic recorded in this study is one of the least appreciated: structure type, or typology, the functional body and shape of a structure, based on culture, economics, use, need, and geography. Type is distinguished from style, the outward fashion used in the building’s construction and embellishment, deriving mostly from cultural factors. Extending the dichotomy to apparel, type is to style what shirt is to turtleneck, pants to jeans, or shoes to wingtips. Styles vary widely (I counted almost thirty) in the French Quarter, from Spanish Colonial to Spanish Revival, from Creole Greek Revival, but 81 percent of French Quarter structures fall into just four primary types: cottages, shotguns, townhouses, and storehouses. Analysis of typology appears in the chapter, "A Philosophy of Space: Patterns of Structural Type in the French Quarter."

Structural use was deceptively simple: residential, residential/commercial, commercial, or institutional were the main categories, based on an assessment of the structure’s original purpose. A gray zone emerged for structures that may or may not have once housed a business on its ground floor and residences above. When there was a doubt (which was often), the use was recorded as residential/commercial.

The final category was an assessment of the iron-lace balconies or galleries on the structures’ façades. While some architectural purists consider these features (particularly galleries) as gaudy blemishes marring beautiful façades, most people view them as the quintessential signature of the French Quarter, and one of the first mental images evoked when the words “New Orleans” are spoken. Balconies, and especially large galleries, dominate the French Quarter streetscape and truly distinguish it from other American downtowns. Iron ornamentation was ranked on a relative scale, mapped out, and analyzed by the structural type to which they were attached. The analysis appears in the chapter, “Signature of the City: Patterns of Iron-Lace Galleries and Balconies in the French Quarter.”

A word about the mapping of the data: Using Geographic Information Systems (GIS) technology, the addresses for the 2,244 entries were mapped to U.S. Census Bureau digital street files containing beginning and ending house addresses for every block in an associated tabular database. This process, called address-matching or geocoding, is billed as “automatic” but is really semi-automatic because nuances and generalizations in the files usually necessitate that the operator intervene. In this case, the Census Bureau’s cartographic depiction of the streets and the house number on the street needed substantial editing and updating. Once the corrections were made, nearly 100 percent of the entries mapped accurately (the remainder were geocoded manually), but still needed to be adjusted to the correct side of the street. The points on the maps appearing in the next four chapters are sufficiently close to their actual locations for the purposes of this study, but may be one or two doors from absolute locations. Readers searching for information on a particular house should be aware that the use of these maps is not to depict all details of every structure in its exact location, but rather to reveal overriding historical and geographical patterns and trends. Or, rather, to find order in tout ensemble.

Epilogue: Although Hurricane Katrina’s winds caused moderate damage to rooftops and felled a few walls in the French Quarter, the tout ensemble of the district survived intact, largely because the relatively high elevation of the natural levee kept floodwaters at bay by a block or so. The grande dame of the Quarter, the 250-year-old Ursuline Convent, saw its massive chimney collapse into the steep hip roof, but otherwise withstood the storm exceedingly well.

“CURIOUS OLD HOUSES THESE” PATTERNS OF CONSTRUCTION DATE IN THE FRENCH QUARTER

How old is the French Quarter? There are a number of reasonable responses. The underlying terrain is about 5,000 years old; its use by Indians as a river portage is perhaps 5,000 years old, probably much older. Europeans under the command of Bienville first cleared its timber in March-April 1718, the time generally recognized as the foundation of New Orleans. The Quarter’s street network, which survives today almost in its entirety, was laid out in 1722. Perhaps this last date is a fair benchmark for marking time in the French Quarter. But it is not the street grid that imparts the strong sense of historic space to this space; it is the streetscape—"tout ensemble," tightly clustered buildings crowding narrow streets, enveloped by iron lace, gas lamps, crumbling stucco, weathered brick walls, and steep roofs. How old is the French Quarter, the historical built environment (excluding too? 11) This chapter addresses this question by discussing historical and geographical patterns in the construction dates of extant French Quarter buildings, based on the Vieux Carré Survey analysis described in the previous chapter. But before analyzing these trends, it is worthwhile to pose some superlatives among them.

SOME SURVIVING FRENCH COLONIAL ERA STRUCTURE

Only one complete building survives from the first French colonial era: the Old Ursuline Convent at 1112 Chartres Street, donated in 1745 and built in 1749-1753 by Claude Joseph Allard Dubreuil according to designs by Ignace Brouillart. The Ursuline Convent is the oldest documented structure still standing in the Mississippi Valley and deltaic plain, and the most aged in the city by a margin of about thirty years.19 Additionally, a few French colonial era walls remain scattered throughout the Quarter, long since incorporated into later constructions, and plenty of early eighteenth-century building materials (bricks, cypress beams) have been recycled into extant buildings. Remains of the French colonial Corps Garde are “encased in the walls of the Cabildo.”20 Including some researchers no one considers it as another French colonial survivor. The photogenic Lafitte’s Blacksmith Shop at 941 Bourbon Street, designed in 1745 and built in 1749-1753, the convent ranks as the oldest documented structure still standing in the Mississippi Valley and deltaic plain, and the most aged in the city by about thirty years. Photograph by Ronnie Cardwell with author, 2004.

The Old Ursuline Convent (center), the only major structural vestige of New Orleans’ French colonial era. Designed in 1745 and built between 1749 and 1753, the convent and its chapel are the oldest documented structures still standing in the Mississippi Valley and deltaic plain, and the most aged in the city by about thirty years. Photograph by Ronnie Cardwell with author, 2004.

By the end of the French colonial era transcended secretly starting in 1800 (the city of Nueva Orleans, conventionally recognized as Spanish colonial era structures, not French). Then by the end of the French colonial era transcended secretly starting in 1800 (the city of Nueva Orleans, conventionally recognized as Spanish colonial era structures, not French). The fires of 1788 and 1794 destroyed over a thousand of them, often built of materials and by methods considered flimsy by later standards, where demolished or converted into more robust constructions of the Spanish colonial era, or to 1822. The nearly two-and-a-half centuries that have passed since the end of the French regime have diminished the likelihood that fire, storm, demolition, or decay would claim its structural vestiges. A second French colonial era transpired secretly starting in 1800 (the city of Nueva Orleans, conventionally recognized as Spanish colonial era structures, not French). There also exist a handful of French colonial style structures that, while post-dating France’s primary administrative era, new constructions reflect the old French (and West Indian) ways for the city retained its Francophone culture for many years afterward. The most prominent example is the house at 632 Dauphine Street known as Madame John’s Legacy,” built immediately after the 1788 fire, with classic French colonial traits: pavilion-shaped with steep double-pitched roof, center chimneys, and colonnades upholding an airy gallery, raised high on brick piers. The house’s foundation as well as some of its hardware may date as far back as 1730, having survived the 1788 fire. One can visualize French colonial New Orleans by picturing scores of structures like Madame John’s Legacy, of various sizes, setbacks, and orientations, lining the streets.

* A dependency of the convent dating from the same era is counted as a second structure in the graphs.
RARE SPANISH COLONIAL ERA STRUCTURES

Like “French colonial,” the term “Spanish colonial” in New Orleans can imply an architectural style or an historical era. The Spanish colonial style appeared locally in the later years of Spain’s dominion (1762-1803), particularly after the 1794 fire, but persisted for a few years after the departure of the Dons, and for decades hence as an influence in related styles. Only thirty-eight of the 2,244 extant French Quarter structures were built during the Spanish colonial era, and of those, twenty-two exhibit Spanish colonial style. Another three structures were in this style but postdate the era by a few years. Edith Elliott Long, architectural historian and keen French Quarter observer for the circa-1960s Vieux Carré Courrier, wrote:

out of some 3,000 buildings of the Vieux Carré probably only a score, or at the most, structurally descend from [the Spanish Colonial era]. Fires, wind, and hurricanes were known to have leveled others. And the great prosperity and business drive that emerged after the American purchase of the Territory accounted for the destruction of the rest.22

Some secondary sources imply that eighteenth-century buildings abound in the French Quarter, even suggesting that the neighborhood might be more accurately described as the “Spanish Quarter.” While many notable Spanish architectural traits were indeed carried on in subsequent Creole styles, only thirty-eight of the 2,244 extant French Quarter structures built during the Spanish colonial era are, in fact, quite rare in the French Quarter today.23

OLDEST STRUCTURE IN REAR OF QUARTER

The oldest extant structure in the rear of the Quarter is the remarkable Ossorno House. A plantation house by design, origin, and function, it was apparently dismantled from Bayou St. John around 1781 and reassembled at present-day 913 Gov. Nicholls by 1784. Although its original West Indian-style hip roof had been remodeled to a gable by the 1870s, the house is still distinctly rural in its appearance, orientation, and setback. It is an amazing exception to the French Quarter cityscape, like an old Dutch farmhouse in New York City or Spanish mission in Los Angeles. Photograph by author, 2004.

This Chartres streetscape possesses the city’s largest assemblage of Spanish colonial structures. At the corner is the circa-1795 Reynolds House, built as a townhouse with traits of the Caribbean and Latin America. It adjoins 625-627 Chartres, a large wooden. The house is still distinctly rural in its appearance, orientation, and setback. It is an amazing exception to the French Quarter cityscape, like an old Dutch farmhouse in New York City or Spanish mission in modern Los Angeles. While the Ossorno House dates from the Spanish colonial era, it definitely does not represent the Spanish colonial style; rather, it is a French Creole style plantation house that postdates French colonial times. The case of two plantation-style structures in

22 Edith Elliot Long, “Fires of Spanish Period,” Vieux Carré Courrier, October 1, 1965, “Along the Banquette,” column, p. 1. Differences between Long’s count and those presented here attest to the “fuzzy” nature of judging the construction date, style, and frequency of historical structures in a district of thousands. See previous chapter for methodological information.

23 A few French Creole style homes built during the Spanish colonial era still stand in the Bayou St. John-Bayou Road area.

the French Quarter, the other being Madame John’s Legacy, but unlike that much more famous building, the Osorno House once actually stood on a plantation. It boasts an interesting human history having been the home of prominent New Orleanians and in the possession of only three families from 1795 to recent decades. That the Osorno House may have literally come down Bayou Road from the Bayou St. John plantation country and ended up on Gov. Nicholls Street, where Bayou Road entered the city, is also of great significance. One may view it as a structural monument to the historic flow of materials and peoples traveling this route from city to bayou. Edith Elliott Long observed in 1966 that this building had somehow eluded the attention of tourists, artists, and even scholars, who devoted their research to the better-known structures in the heart of the Quarter. That observation remains true today: the Osorno House almost never appears in popular photographic books or walking tours of the Quarter. Even Malcolm Heard’s thorough French Quarter手册 missed it.

### Historical Patterns of Construction Dates

The histogram, Construction Dates of Extant Structures in the French Quarter, by Decade, and the pie chart, Percent of Extant Structures in the French Quarter Built During Historical Eras, show that, structurally speaking, today’s French Quarter is a decidedly nineteenth-century neighborhood. About one of every hundred structures (1.2 percent) dates to the eighteenth century, while about three of four (77 percent) were built between 1800 and 1899 and one of five (21 percent) date from the twentieth century.25 Viewed closer, the histogram shows that 61 percent of the entire present-day Quarter arose between the Battle of New Orleans (1815) and the Civil War (1861), especially between the 1820s and 1850s. The histogram limns four “valleys” (before 1820, 1860-1880, 1930-1960, and after 1980) interspersed among three “peaks” (1820-1860, 1880-1930, and in the 1960s and 1970s) in the construction dates of the French Quarter’s extant structures.

#### First Valley, Before 1820

The relatively few (ninety-six) surviving structures pre-dating 1820 do not, of course, represent low levels of construction prior to that year. On the contrary, the Quarter was entirely developed by 1820, so much so that it had spread into a number of adjacent faubourgs. Rather, this “valley” reflects the toll of time on centuries-old buildings in a busy, semitropical port city. Parcels opened up following the disappearance of the ancient edifices were usually occupied by later “peaks” in construction, which bring up an interesting subject to the maps and graphs in this section: they depict not only the patterns of extant buildings, but also patterns of demolition of previous ones.

#### First Peak, Circa 1820-1861

The rise of sugar as a crop, the arrival of Northern emigrants and foreign immigrants, the development of the steamboat, and the city’s monopoly on Mississippi Valley trade ushered great wealth to New Orleans during this ante-bellum “golden age.” Hundreds of multistory edifices arose to meet the demands, especially in the 1830s, when New Orleans ranked among the wealthiest cities in the nation. Illustrating the prosperity of this era is the fact that, of the 1,294 extant structures built during 1820-1862, over half

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25 Since these figures were computed, the Quarter’s first twenty-first-century structure—a townhouse controversial among some neighbors for its above-average height—was constructed on Ursuline Street. It is not included in these maps and graphs.
(52 percent) were sumptuous townhouses. The French Quarter in these times was an affluent residential neighborhood, as well as a business district (in its upper blocks) and home to a substantial working-class immigrant community, particularly in its lower and rear flanks. These patterns are evident in the data: 21 percent of structures built in this era were storehouses, with commercial use on the ground floor and residences above, and another 20 percent were cottages, where the working class citizens were more likely to dwell. The drop-off in construction in the 1840s and 1850s may be explained by a number of factors: full development of the city’s parcels; increasing popularity of uptown and Esplanade Ridge sites for new construction; repercussions of the Panic of 1837; and increasing trade competition in the form of Northern canal and railroad construction.

**SECOND VALLEY, 1862-1877**

The dearth of structures dating from these fifteen years directly reflects tumultuous historical events, not just subsequent demolitions. The Civil War, the blockade of the port, federal occupation, and Reconstruction interrupted the city’s economic life from New Orleans’ quick surrender in 1862 until 1877. Many local and regional businesses (namely, plantations) folded, investment dollars were limited, and few buildings went up. Only 3 percent of today’s buildings date from this era.

**SECOND PEAK, 1880-1920s**

New Orleans enjoyed a second (though much more modest) “golden age” in the turn-of-the-century era, which coincided with a minor construction boom in the French Quarter. But while a number of impressive Italianate townhouses and storehouses went up in this “second peak,” the new construction consisted mostly of humble wooden abodes for families of modest means. The upper class had by this time departed for uptown or Esplanade Avenue, leaving the French Quarter to the working class, including thousands of indigent immigrants from Sicily and elsewhere in southern Europe, who were accommodated in old mansions subdivided into cheap flats. As a phenomenon seen in many big cities of this era: “Vacated houses were converted into tenements and rooming houses,” observed geographer David Ward regarding national trends, “while vacant lots and rear yards were filled with cheap new structures.” In New Orleans, those “cheap new structures” were shotguns and bungalows. Of the 196 shotguns and eighteen bungalows now standing in the French Quarter, fully 88 percent were built during 1880s to 1920s. And of the 525 total extant building erected during 1880-1920, 313 were shotguns and bungalows. Of the 196 shotguns and eighteen bungalows now standing in the French Quarter, fully 88 percent were built during 1880s to 1920s. And of the 525 total extant building erected during 1880-1920, 313 were shotguns and bungalows.
these four decades, only 8 percent were upscale townhouses for the affluent.

**Third Valley, 1930-1950s**

A number of factors contributed to the decline in construction in these years. Depression and World War II diverted attention and funds away from real estate investment, while in the midst of that era, designation of the French Quarter as a protected historic district (1936-1937) regulated demolition and new construction. Tourism and conventions during this period were at levels low enough not to encourage new hotel construction. Countering these trends were the extensive renovations of the Works Progress Administration and Public Works Administration in the 1930s, especially in the French Market area, and the gerrymandering of the Vieux Carré Commission’s jurisdiction from 1936 to 1946. During that eighteen-year period, certain edges of the Quarter (the Rampart Street frontage, the area riverside of upper North Peters, and the 300 block of Royal) lost their protected status, allowing for a number of demolitions and modern constructions.

**Third Peak, 1950s-1970s**

The late 1950s to the mid-1970s saw the final (to date) boom in French Quarter construction. These new structures tended to be large hotels and affiliated structures such as parking garages, in response to the growth of the tourism economy. Some of these new hotels succeeded in recollecting historic precedents, such as the Royal Orleans on St. Louis Street. Others were flagrantly ersatz.

**Present Day Valley, 1970s to Present**

Since the late 1970s, new construction has tailed off in the French Quarter, a result of prohibition on new Quarter hotels (banned since 1969) and a long, deliberative approval process for new construction. One fine example of new construction according to traditional styles is the St. Louis Street, built in 1999 on what was long an empty lot and now blending into the tout ensemble. Inside, however, is one dramatic difference: aluminum beams have replaced traditional wood, a response to the very serious threat of Formosan termite infestation.27

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The Future

Does another building boom loom in the French Quarter’s foreseeable future? Barrings fires or natural disasters was the only possible site for significant new construction and the “batture blocks” between North Peters and the levee from Iberville to Toulouse. This terrain formed formations decades after the city’s founding, when the Mississippi’s deposited sediment along the bank and augmented the downtown land base. The French Quarter batture was home, from the 1870s to the 1930s, to the city’s Sugar District, consisting of sheds, refineries, warehouses, offices and an ornate exchange.28 This charmless industrial landscape was demolished or burned piecemeal during the 1940s through 1970s, leaving almost nothing but parking lots to-day. Ambitious plans to develop the area for mixed residential and commercial use have come and gone over the years, though a proposed rezoning of the area in 2004 may eventually lead to extensive new hotel construction.29

Geographical Patterns of Construction Dates

While historical patterns of construction dates clearly reflect local and national events, geographical patterns of age in the French Quarter are at least more complex to unravel. There are expansive sections occupied entirely by structures of a single era; rather, the overriding pattern is one of small-scale “clumps” of similarly aged buildings interspersed liberally with structures that may be much older or younger. One often sees rows of townhouses built simultaneously, a line of cottages completed within the same decade, or a series of shotgun houses dating from the 1890s. But nearby or near them may be the Federal-style manse, the massive Commercial style warehouse from the 1910s, or a modern hotel. This pattern of spatial mixing by age itself is old: “There are still, east and there, the old houses, sandwiched in between those of a later generation—quaint, imposing, and picturesque,” stated one observer in 1885. Some French Quarter buildings are rickety, wooden structures, with overhanging porticoes, stated one observer in 1885. Some French Quarter buildings are rickety, wooden structures, with overhanging porticoes, while others are a rare Federal-style mansion, a massive Commercial style warehouse from the 1910s, or a modern hotel. This pattern of spatial mixing by age itself is old: “There are still, east and there, the old houses, sandwiched in between those of a later generation—quaint, imposing, and picturesque,” stated one observer in 1885. Some French Quarter buildings are rickety, wooden structures, with overhanging porticoes, while others are massive stone or brick structures, with great archways, doorways, and paved floors.”30

This spatial complexity is apparent in the first of the two accompanying maps, which shows construction dates categorized by fifteen historical eras for each and every building. This level of detail obscures overriding patterns. A second map, Geographical Patterns of Construction Dates in the French Quarter, solves this problem by aggregating the information into only three eras (antebellum times, between the Civil War and World War I, and to the present) and illustrating it at the street level. That is, all buildings on both sides of each street were summed together by their construction era, which is depicted in pie charts. The size of the pie chart represents the number of buildings on that street. Amid an abundance of exceptions, three overriding “age zones” emerge in this map.

Antebellum Zone — Older extant buildings tend to cluster in the central heart of the Quarter. The preponderance of antebellum structures on Chartres, Royal, and Bourbon streets, within the two blocks of St. Louis Cathedral, is explained by the wealthy residents who once lived here. Well-off families before the Civil War were more likely to erect townhouses, which, because of their sturdiness, elegance and value, had less to fear evading the force of demolition. Some survive into the preservation era (and thereby show up in our data). The rich tended to live here because other areas were less desirable: those blocks near Royal Street were commercial, those toward Esplanade and Rampart tended to be overly plebeian and old-world oriented, and those closer to the river were too noisy, smeared and bustling near the port and market activity.

Numerical data bear out these geographic patterns. The Quarter street which boasts the most average construction date for its structures is, as expected, Royal Street (1850), followed by St. Nicholls (1854) and St. Peter and St. Philip (1855). Three of these four streets penetrate the heart of the Quarter. Those with the second average structural construction date are Bienville (1878), Iberville (1890), and North Rampart (1882), at the edge of which are outside the district’s heart. Pedestrian-level observations also bear this out: walk down Royal Street is an experience of antebellum splendor; a walk down Iberville is a raffish encounter with architectural hodgepodge.

The densest cluster of very old buildings lies in the inner heart of this core, within one block of Royal Street from Conti to Dumaine (especially around the Royal/Peter intersection). Of the ninety-six Quarter structures which pre-date 1820, two-thirds occupy this relatively small area. Incorporated in this highly historic area is the Old block of Chartres (lake side), home to the Quarter’s highest concentration of Spanish colonial era structures. Very old buildings have managed to survive around this stretch of Royal because of its distance from demolition-prone peripheral areas, and because of the magnificence and significance of the buildings themselves. This was also the area irradiated by the fires 1788 and 1794, clearing the parcels for the more sturdy constructions mandated by new Spanish colonial building codes.

Turn-of-the-Century Zone — Turn-of-the-century structures, defined generously here as those built between 1862-1918, are more likely to be found in the Quarter’s lower/lakeside quadrant. This area, which once abutted the poor Third District (across Esplanade) and Tremé and the
swamp (across Rampart), was home to working-class families often residing in cottages, which were often torn down after the Civil War and replaced by inexpensive shotgun houses. Demolition and replacement by shotguns was less likely in high-density commercial areas (toward Canal Street) or in blocks already occupied by spacious townhouses subdivided into apartments.

**Twentieth-Century Zone** — Buildings post-dating World War I are more common in the upper and lakeside section of the French Quarter. The modern tourism industry, responsible for most Quarter construction in recent decades, explains this pattern, as hoteliers were limited by both economic and legal factors to the commercial upper Quarter. The lower Quarter remains more residential. The French Market also registers some twentieth-century construction because of the Public Works Administration renovation work there during the Depression.

How old, then, is the French Quarter? From a structural standpoint, it seems reasonable to date the prototypical French Quarter streetscape to the second quarter of the nineteenth century, with a few streetscapes pre-dating this era and a fair number post-dating it. But, as these maps indicate, exceptions are the rule—and gloriously so. The spatial heterogeneity of the French Quarter makes it a Rosetta Stone of local, regional, and national history. A walk down any given street is a rich and rewarding tour of the past and of the processes of change. Wrote the New Orleans Press on transformations in the French Quarter circa 1885:

> Tile roofs have begun to disappear, the cozy little cottage tenements are fast changing into the newer style of corniced residences.... On all sides, one, who is at all observant, can see how that fickle old fellow, Time, is pushing back the past to make way for the present.... Some of those old Creole houses whose roofs have sparkled and glittered in the spring showers of one hundred years still remain, but they are fast fading away. Curious old houses these.31

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Geographies of New Orleans by Richard Campanella
Please order on amazon.com
“A DRAPING OF FASHIONS: PATTERNS OF ARCHITECTURAL STYLE IN THE FRENCH QUARTER”

“Architectural styles arrived by ship to this port city, rather like fashions in clothing, to be successively draped on the same persisting and evolving [structural] bodies,” wrote the late Malcolm Heard in his 1997 architectural guide French Quarter Manual. While Heard contended that Quarter buildings are more distinguished for their structural typologies (next chapter) than for their architectural style, these fashion statements are nevertheless historically significant and richly catalogued in the French Quarter. This chapter seeks historical and geographical patterns behind the 250 years of styles represented in the Quarter today.

Styles phase in and out gradually, through the adoption of some earlier traits, the modification of others, and the introduction of new ones. Debating this continuous phenomenon into discrete eras is no easier than dispersing its styles themselves. In Bernard Lemann’s The Preservation of Vieux Carré (1968), historic architectural phases in the French Quarter were identified as Colonial Period (1720-1790); Early Federal Period (1803-1825); Antebellum (1825-1860); Paleotechnic (early industrial age architecture, 1850-1900), and Modern. The architectural historians behind the influential Plan and Program for the Preservation of the Vieux Carré (1968) delineated the major stylistic eras as French and Spanish Colonial; Transitional Styles (1803-1875); Greek Revival (1835-1850); Antebellum Period (1850-1862); Later Victorian Period (1862-1900); and Twentieth Century. The late Lloyd Vogt, architect and author of New Orleans Houses: A House-Watcher’s Guide (1985) identifies styles popular throughout New Orleans (not only the French Quarter) by the following periods:

Colonial Period (1718-1832): French Colonial style
- Postcolonial Period (1840-1860): Creole style
- Antebellum Period (1830-1862): Greek Revival
- Victorian Period (1862-1900): Gothic Revival, Italianate, Second Empire, Italian, Bracket, Queen Anne, and Richardson Romanesque styles
- Early Twentieth (1900-1940): Georgian Colonial Revival, Neoclassical Revival, Tudor Revival, Buff and Hadow style, and Spanish Colonial Revival
- Modern Period (1940-Present): International and Suburban Ranch styles

The analysis presented here adds a quantitative perspective to the architectural phases, based on the primary styles of extant French Quarter structures as identified by Vieux Carré Survey researchers. Of the roughly thirty architectural styles represented in the French Quarter today, only four (Creole, Greek Revival, Victorian, and “French Quarter Revival”) adorn 81 percent of the neighborhood’s 2,244 structures.

COlONIAL-ERA STYLES

Most of the colonial era, the vast majority of structures in New Orleans exhibited “French Colonial,” or “French Creole” styles of architecture. The literature of architectural historians, anthropologists, and architectural geographers records inconsistent use of the terms French Colonial and French Creole to describe this eighteenth-century style; some save the term French Colonial for the institutions of state and church, and French Creole or simply Creole for residences and vernacular structures. This being architecture and not biological taxonomy, one should expect a certain level of fluidity in terminology. For purposes of this discussion, we may think of these eighteenth-century Francophone-influenced


* About 500 Quarter structures—about one in every four—exhibit a mix of styles. Both the primary and, if applicable, secondary style of each structure were recorded in this study, but only the primary styles were tabulated in the accompanying graphs and maps. See “The Architectural Geography of the French Quarter” for methodological details.
styles as “first-generation Creole.” While the terminology is debatable, the appearance of these structures is unmistakable. Main house characteristics include a single principal story raised upon piers, large double-pitched, pavilion-like roofs, broad wooden galleries supported by delicate columns and balustrades, exterior staircases, and walls made of brick or mud mixed with moss (bousillage) set within a load-bearing skeleton of timbers. Center chimneys, French doors and shutters, and a lack of hallways and closets characterized interiors. It was a style more suited to rural or semi-rural conditions, and specimens may still be found scattered throughout former colonial Louisiana, in Missouri and Illinois, in the Natchitoches, Opelousas, and Pointe Coupee regions and on the River Road, Bayou St. John, and Bayou Road. That it also prevailed in the French Quarter attests to the early city’s village-like state.

“The connotation of Creole,” wrote anthropologist Jay Dearborn Edwards, “is of someone or something from tropical plantation America—the Caribbean and eastern Brazil, with Southern Louisiana as popularly considered the only Creole region in the United States because of its strong cultural ties to the West Indies” (thought the region extends historically all along the coast, from the Texas to the Carolinas). Vernacular Creole architecture, then, may be described as “an architectural tradition generally descended from a synthesized tropical colonial form.” Four interrelated hypotheses have been offered on the genesis of Louisiana’s Creole architectural heritage:

one commonly held proposition is that Creole architecture was essentially “invented” here as a series of rational adaptations to the environment. Houses built in the Creole tradition, wrote one researcher, are “perfectly adapted to the climate, the topology, the taste, and the times of the people who built them. They are uniquely original [or evolving] out of need... complete and honest expression as the log cabin of the mountainer, the giant bank barn of the Pennsylvania Dutchman, the sod house of the prairie pioneer, and the adobe dwelling of the southwestern.” This environmental-determinism hypothesis is embraced by many for its neat and causative explanations. Heavy rains explain steep roofs. Waterlogged soils caused brick construction. Hot weather leads to breezy galleries. Andoubtless there is some truth to these relationships, but evidence indicates that, in general, cultural antecedents have weighed more heavily than independent invention in the diffusion of architectural traits. Only later are they translated locally according to environmental and practical limitations. Nevertheless, the counterintuitive present of a gallery house in frigid French Canada, or the Spanish house of flat coastal New Orleans. “That full-brick Creole gallery houses...were being built only a dozen or so years after colonization began” also casts doubt on this proposition, for the style was invented here. Unless one learns intricacies of construction techniques from native pioneering settlers in a frontier environment, generally do not experiment with risky new housing designs. They are more likely to modify what their forebears taught them, modifying those traditions to new conditions at face only in subsequent years.

Another hypothesis views Louisiana Creole architecture as a descendent of Canadian houses derived from the Northern region of France, modified in the West Indies and Louisiana to reflect local needs. Edwards summarizes the research of a champion of this hypothesis, Charles Peterson, as viewing the Creole house as “a frontier invention in which a traditional northern houseform was tropicalized to better suit the needs of Canadians in their southward migration.” This proposition suggests that Creole architecture diffused along the Mississippi Valley.

A related hypothesis emphasizes the derivation of Louisiana Creole houses directly from France, particularly Northern, ascribing less importance to the modifications made by Canadians and West Indians as the tradition reached Louisiana, and even less to environmental determinism. One researcher, Jonathan Fricker, identified key Creole architectural features—raised construction, steep hip roofs, galleries, exterior staircases, bousillage—long among centuries—

Vernacular Architecture: A Historical and Social Bibliography (Monticello, IL, 1986), 1-9, and other sources of.


old farmhouses in the countryside of France, he concluded that Creole features derived from "the folk building tradition of medieval France. None was invented on this side of the Atlantic; hence, none originated as a response to the climate either of the West Indies or of the Deep South. Indeed, many other architectural styles found in America, including English, Spanish, Dutch, and French, were once thought to have been invented here as environmental adaptations, and only later were acknowledged as derived largely from European traditions."

A fourth and favored hypothesis sees Creole architecture (particularly its signature gallery) as a reflection from a West Indian cultural milieu, influenced by a wide range of European, African, and indigenous traditions, particularly the Arawak Indian Boughnut. The appearance of galleryed houses throughout the Caribbean—most solely in French colonies but in Spanish and British ones as well, as early as 1685—leads advocates of this hypothesis to de-emphasize the French role in the origin of Creole architecture. While underlying French and French Canadian house types were brought to the New Orleans region by former Canadians, the founders and early settlers also brought with them significant West Indian contributions and modifications, which were locally altered to taste and need by later generations. This hypothesis suggests that Creole architecture emerged up the Mississippi Valley from the Caribbean, rather than down from Canada or directly from France. Edwards viewed this West Indian/Creole influence consequential enough to warrant the inclusion of the Caribbean region as another major cultural hearth for the domestic architecture of eastern North America, along with England, France, Spain, Germany, Holland, and Scandinavian countries.44

English Colonial or French Colonial styles prevailed in New Orleans even after Spain took control in 1769, because the colony remained deeply Francophone in its culture and the new Spanish rulers did not aggressively seek to change this. But population growth and urban development increasingly rendered these structures inadequate, wasteful of space—and dangerous. Of the thousand were destroyed by the great conflagrations of 1738 and 1794, and almost as many others were lost over the years to decay, demolition, storm, and fire. Only one institutional example survives today from the French colonial era (the Old Ursuline Convent, designed 1745, completed 1752) while perhaps the best example of a French Colonial or Creole style residential structure (Madame John's Legacy, built in 1738, after the French conquest) remains at 632 Dumaine Street. The remarkable circa 1800 Ossorno House ('tis Gov. Nicholls, see previous chapter) would have been an equally fine example were it not for the modification of its hip roof to a gable. A paucity of extant structures prevents the graphing of the rise and fall of this style in the

45 Edwards, "A Draping of Fashions": Patterns of Architectural Style in the French Quarter
wrought-iron balconies of a Spanish city. As such structures proliferated, the physical character of the Quarter evolved accordingly—the influence of northern French building traditions, transmitted to some degree through the cold Canadian provinces, waned in favor of the more Mediterranean forms of the Spanish. Derivations of those forms are replete throughout the Quarter: four surviving examples of pure Spanish Colonial Style are not common. Twenty-five edifices—about one of every hundred buildings in the Quarter—exhibit this style, of which twenty-two were built in the Spanish colonial era (after 1789) of the three that postdate the Spanish years, two are quite famous: the Old Absinthe House at 240 Bourbon, built in 1836, and the Girod (Napoleon) House at 601 Chartres, built in 1814, with a wing dating to 1795.

The Spanish Colonial style in its purest form rose in the French Quarter probably during the 1780s, peaked in the 1790s, and fell off steadily in the decade after Americanization. Geographically, these four surviving historical gems are loosely clustered within two blocks of the intersection of Toullous and Royal streets. The lake side of the block of Charles Street possesses the largest concentration of Spanish Colonial structures (both in era and style), and may well be the city’s oldest surviving street scene, despite numerous facade alterations over the past two centuries. The corner of 607 Chartres is the circa-1795 Reynes House, originally a townhouse highly evocative of Spanish architecture in the Caribbean and Latin America, converted to a storhouse in the 1830s—used as Victor’s Grocery from 1896 to 1962, and now. It is attached to 609-615 Chartres, built at the same time, as the corner building and greatly stripped of its details, but still retaining a Spanish appearance. Next is the famous Pontalba Building at 617-619 Chartres, a 1795 townhouse with exemplary Spanish traits: a courtyard and wrought-iron balcony, though its iron arches openings and flat, tiled terrace roof were later modeled in a non-Spanish fashion. (The Good Friday fire of March 21, 1788, began at this site, and the December 8, 1794, fire started just behind it, which explains why the buildings mostly tend to date from 1795.) At 625-627 Chartres is a porte cochère (carriage-way) building with a wrought-iron balcony (reminiscent of San Juan, Puerto Rico, and later modified into a street facade, erected during the later years of Spanish rule. Until 1957 the Spanish streetscape of 600 Chartres clamped with the Orleans-Pontalba Building at the corner of St. Peter, probably designed by Gilbert St. Guillaume and built between 1789 and 1796. But structural decay, including an old, aging infilt of fire, led to its condemnation and controversy in May 1962. Architects Karl and Wilson signed a fine reproduction of this beautiful building in its original 1789 form, which was constructed in 1963 and now houses Le Petit Theatre.

Three other Spanish colonials occupy this same square: bounded by Chartres, St. Peter, Royal, and Toulouse. Continuing downriver on Chartres are the city’s twin jewels of the Spanish Colonial Style: the Cabildo (1799), seat of the Spanish government, and the Presbytère (1791-1813), originally designed as a rectory. Without their mid-nineteenth century Mansard roofs, the Cabildo and Presbytère appear lifted out of an older American zócalo or an Andean Plaza central.

Spain would control New Orleans for less than a decade after its architectural style finally found a local foothold. After Spanish officials departed in 1803 but before Anglo-American culture came to predominate, New Orleanians and themselves with an amalgam of architectural traditions and building skills, some by way of France, some by way of Spain, others by Canada, the West Indies, Asia, Africa, and elsewhere. From this admixture emerged what may be called “second-generation” Creole style.

**Emergence of Creole Style**

While only two or three specimens of eighteenth-century “first-generation Creole” structures survive in the French Quarter, hundreds—740 by my count, about one of every five structures—exhibit architectural styles that are also called Creole. This style was draped on cottages, townhouses, or stores built when between 1800 and 1840, the period when once-prevailing colonial influences waned and once absent American culture waxed. These were structures with an indigenous New Orleans look and design, one which harks back to colonial (particularly Spanish) antecedents, but with local modifications and variations that may be thought of, for the purpose of this discussion, as “second-generation” Creole. What is the ancestral origin of these Creole buildings?

Edwy states that while the pure eighteenth-century Creole tradition survived intact through the Spanish era in both rural and urban areas, it was displaced by new European and Anglo-American influences during the Gulf Coast around the dawn of the nineteenth century. The result was not replacement of Creole traits that would take another century—but a fusion with new ones. Hence, the Creole styles we know in today’s French Quarter bear a resemblance in structure and orientation to the raised, pitched-roof, gallery houses found in the eighteenth century, but usually lack the galleries, have a less-inclined roof, and are only a foot or so raised above the ground. By the 1830s, “Creole architecture had undergone a profound syncretism with Anglo forms. Georgian geometry, with its emphasis on symmetry and axiality, was substituted for the Creole love of asymmetry.

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*In 2003, the Vieux Carré Commission permitted the construction of a large Victorian gingerbread gallery on the facade of the Carondelet plain building. While the gallery per se is perfectly appealing, and a similar one had existed there a century ago, it distracts from what could have been enhanced into the Quarter’s best example of a Spanish colonial streetscape.

and hierarchy." So too did roofs, façades, and room arrangement change from old Creole ways, though enough remained the same to warrant the continued use of the term "Creole architecture"—only here, Creole primarily implies native to New Orleans, and secondarily "descended from a synthesized tropical colonial form." Most of the Creole cottages and Creole townhouses in the French Quarter today (and mapped and graphed as such in these pages) manifest this early nineteenth-century variation of Creole style, rather than the pure eighteenth-century tradition that is rare today both in the French Quarter and throughout former New France. These second-generation Creole structures were modified again in the 1830s and 1840s (transitionals, described later) and were finally replaced, entirely, by the Anglo Americans' favored Greek Revival and Italianate styles. By the 1850s and certainly by the Civil War, the Creole architectural tradition—derived from Medieval France, diffused and altered via Canada and especially the West Indies, and modified for local needs on the plantations of the lower Mississippi Valley and in the streets of New Orleans—was dead. "The truly significant period of New Orleans architecture was brought into jeopardy by the [Louisiana] Purchase and brought to an end by the Civil War," wrote James Marston Fitch in his outstanding article on the rise and fall of the Creole tradition. "The Americanization of the Crescent City has long been completed, at least architecturally; and the whole nation is the poorer for it." We are fortunate indeed, and deeply indebted to pioneer preservationists, to keep within our stewardship the nation's largest concentration of this unique and beautiful tradition.

Emergence of American Styles

The Anglo Americans trickling into New Orleans after the Louisiana Purchase at first conformed to these local architectural traditions, having little choice but to move into existing structures or hire local builders to build what they knew. Some adjusted and modified the structures, as described.


scribed above. But when the trickle grew to a torrent in the years after the Battle of New Orleans (1815), the Americans increasingly brushed aside local architectural traits in favor of their own imported concepts—and their own architects. Had they arrived a generation or so earlier, they might have brought with them the classical styles that were all the rage in the North and Upper South in the 1700s, such as Georgian, Federal, and what is now called Jeffersonian Classicism. But arriving as they did in the early 1800s, Americans imported primarily the latest architectural styles sweeping the Northeast—those of ancient Greece.

The earliest known surviving structure in Louisiana with prominent Greek Revival traits is the Thierry House at 721 Gov. Nicholls Street, designed by Henry Latrobe (the young son of famed architect Benjamin Latrobe, designer of the U.S. Capitol and an emissary of Greek Revival style) and Arsinée Lacarrière Latour. Built in 1814, the Thierry House is notable for its unusual setback distance, shape, and Greek Revival portico. The Doric columns and graceful curves of the porch were hidden for decades until their re-discovery by

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This row of “transitionals”—structures with both Creole and Greek Revival traits—at 335-341 Chartres dates from the 1830s, when political power shifted from Creoles to Anglos. Creole traits include the narrow balconies, jack arches above windows, and narrow passageways between adjoining units; Greek Revival characteristics include the denticulated cornice, squared openings, and massive granite pillars. Photograph by author, 2002.

No clear spatial pattern appears in the map above, where architectural styles are plotted at the building level. But when we look at only Creole and Greek Revival styles aggregated at the street level (right), we see that Greek Revival specimens outnumber Creole examples in the “Americanized” upper blocks, while the reverse is true in the more Francophone lower city. This architectural pattern reflects the ethnic geography of nineteenth-century New Orleans, when Anglo Americans predominated in the upper city and Creoles in the lower area. Maps and analysis by author.
Richard Koch and Samuel Wilson, who restored the house in 1940. Architectural historians trace Greek Revival architecture in the lower Mississippi Valley—a style that would make it famous through its iconic plantation mansions. But this unpretentious little home,53 within a few years, the Greek Revival style spread in the city and region. Plantation houses, townhouses, stores, and cottages formed the first major American architecture contributed to New Orleans, one that may be seen today by the hundreds in the French Quarter and by the thousands throughout the city.54 Georgian, Federal, and Jeffersonian Classicism, on the other hand, are rare in the Quarter and citywide. The Gothic and other Northeastern styles that “missed” the major wave of Anglo settlement in Louisiana. Only eighteen extant structures in the Quarter exhibit Federal, Georgian, or Gothic styles. The Greek Revival style, on the other hand, adorns 614 structures, more than one in every four Quarter buildings. American history, and Louisiana’s place in it, is written into these patterns.

History is also inscribed in the patterns of Creole versus American styles. The graph entitled Popularity of Creole and American Architectural Styles, 1820-188055 shows that Creole styles peaked in the 1830s then fell off precipitously, while Greek Revival peaked a decade later and fell off more gradually. The architectural transition from Creole to Greek Revival corresponds to the 1830s and 1840s shift of cultural and political power in the city from Creole to American elements.56 The trend was noticed by a visitor as early as 1828:

“The houses are rapidly changing from the uncouth Spanish style, to more elegant forms. The new houses are mostly three stories high, with balconies, and a summer-room from which to enjoy the view.”

In this graph, “Creole” includes Creole, French Colonial, and Spanish Colonial Styles, and “American” implies Greek Revival, Federal, Georgian, and American styles, as recorded by the Vieux Carré Survey. Recall that only extant structures are included in this analysis, not all structures that ever existed in the Quarter.


54 Observed James M. Voss, in “An American delighted with the order of the French Quarter: the case of Richard Koch and Samuel Wilson.”55

55 In this graph, “Creole” includes Creole, French Colonial, and Spanish Colonial Styles, and “American” implies Greek Revival, Federal, Georgian, and American styles, as recorded by the Vieux Carré Survey. Recall that only extant structures are included in this analysis, not all structures that ever existed in the Quarter.

The stylistic change transpired not as a drastic, sudden switch but as a gradual, piecemeal transformation. The Vieux Carré Survey refers to those structures (usually townhouses) exhibiting both Creole and Greek Revival attributes as “transitionals.” When we plot separately the average age of Creole, “transitionals,” and Greek Revival structures, we see the historic shift of New Orleans society in even more detail: the transitionals appeared almost exactly when the Creole and American rivalry was at its peak (late 1830s). Afterwards, momentum was permanently toward the Americans, and as it did, the old colonial-inspired Creole styles declined and Greek Revival and other new American styles caught on. These data seem to corroborate architect Malcolm Heard’s observation that “[t]he conflicted process by which Creoles assimilated American influence became architecturally manifest in the large number of Creole townhouses built in the French Quarter during the 1830s.”

The geography of Creoles and Americans is also written in brick. As described in the chapter “Creole New Orleans: The Geography of a Controversial Ethnicity,” Creole culture in the antebellum times was by no means strictly limited to the confines of the French Quarter, nor did Anglo Americans reside exclusively above Canal Street as legend has it. In fact, both ethnic groups (plus many others) could be found throughout the Quarter, with Creoles predominating in the lower area and Anglos in the upper blocks, close to Canal Street. The pattern was observed on numerous occasions by travelers to the city, among them Frederick Law Olmsted, who in 1854 described the cityscape during a cab ride up Decatur Street from the foot of Elysian Fields Avenue to the St. Charles Hotel. In the lower area, Olmsted witnessed “narrow dirty streets, among grimey stuccoed walls; high arched windows and doors, balconies and entresols, and French noises and French smells, French signs, ten to one of English.” In the upper streets, but still within the Quarter, he wrote “now the signs became English, and the new brick buildings American. Upon crossing Canal and heading up St. Charles Avenue, he saw “French, Spanish, and English signs, the latter predominating.” Architectural styles to this day bear out this historical pattern: while Creole (which Olmsted would call “French”) and Greek Revival (“American”) styles may be found virtually on any selected block, the map entitled Geographical Patterns of Greek Revival and Creole Architectural Styles in the French Quarter shows that

...
Greek Revival specimens outnumber Creole examples in the upper "American" blocks, particularly above St. Louis Street, while the reverse is true in the "French" blocks below that street. St. Louis Street is significant because, in 1822, the famous Creole aristocrat Bernard Marigny identified it as a de facto dividing line between American and Creole interests. Broken down to the block-by-block level, the trend is even more dramatic. In the heavily Americanized blocks between Iberville and Bienville streets, which recall Manhattan or Boston more so than the lower Quarter, Greek Revival buildings outnumber Creoles by an eleven-to-one ratio. But from St. Ann to Gov. Nicholls Street, an area that resembles a southern European or Caribbean village, Creole structures outnumber Greek Revivals by more than a two-and-a-half-to-one ratio. This architectural geography, though subtle and not overwhelming numerically, is a direct descendent of the ethnic geographies of nineteenth-century New Orleans, when the city underwent its historic and sometimes painful transition to an American future.

**Trends Through Modern Times**

Architectural styles continue to reflect New Orleans history when we extend the timeline out to 1750 to 2000 (see graph, *Historical Architectural Eras Represented in Today’s French Quarter*). A fly-by from this graph (because they are absent from the streetscape) are most colonial-style buildings, which spanned all of the eighteenth century. We start to see the previously described rise and fall of Creole styles in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, followed by...
the peaking of American styles, namely Greek Revival, in the 1840s. Both Creole and Greek Revival fell almost completely out of fashion during the Civil War and Reconstruction years, when new construction in the French Quarter came to a halt. The turn-of-the-century preference for exotic new styles—Italianate, Victorian, Queen Anne, Edwardian, Neo-Classical, and others—is captured by a modest peak around 1900, which petered out by the Depression and World War II. Finally, the “French Quarter Revival” style mandated by preservation laws to maintain French Quarter scenography, peaked during the hotel construction boom of the 1960s. Prohibition on new hotels and more stringent preservationist oversight led to a drop-off in new construction during the 1980s-2000. The few new buildings that have arisen in those years continue to revive the French Quarter “look.”

A closer look reveals New Orleans’ adoption and abandonment of other Western architectural trends. Note the gradual introduction of the Italianate style just before the Civil War, and its modest popularity (see graph, Rise and Fall of Two Major Postbellum Styles) afterwards. An outgrowth of the “Picturesque” movement and a nineteenth-century fascination with the Renaissance, the Italianate style was introduced to America by way of England in 1839-1841, addressing the increasing American interest in the “aesthetic of luxury” and “artistic values,”61 particularly in the urban South. Fanciful Italianate features such as decorative parapets, segmented arches, quoins, and cornices supported by paired brackets were “applied like an overlay to traditional building types within the city,” effectively replacing the more staid Greek Revival style while maintaining the underlying townhouse/storehouse structural typology. According to art historian Joan G. Caldwell, “the Italianate style was the dominant taste in domestic architecture in New Orleans from 1850 to 1880,” a widespread assessment that agrees perfectly with this numerical analysis of the French Quarter. Caldwell also notes that Italianate fashions in New Orleans “form a small part of a larger picture of Victorian architecture,” which developed from them, as illustrated in the graph. Many of the Victorian structures classified here are more accurately described as “Victorian Italianate,” which boomed primarily in the 1890s. Typologically, most of the ninety-seven Victorian structures dating from this vibrant decade are shotgun houses, joined by thousands others in adjacent neighborhoods in the Seventh, Eighth, and Ninth wards.

The graph Popularity of Later Architectural Style in the French Quarter, by decade, tracks the rise and fall of some less...
common styles represented in extant French Quarter structures. Note the:

• turn-of-the-century preference for European styles such as Renaissance Revival, Queen Anne, Neo-Classical, and Beaux Arts;

• early twentieth century popularity of Edwardian and Spanish Revival (not to be confused with Spanish Colonial) styles;

• surge in Commercial style around 1900, reflecting the conversion of some blocks in the upper Quarter and French Market area from retail and profession to industrial and warehousing;

• post-Victorian emergence of City Beautiful and Craftsman-style bungalows;

• frequency of “functional” structures (sheds, garages, etc.) built in the decades prior to legal protection, when the Quarter was a rundown neighborhood prone to demolition and functional usage;

• rarity of International or Modern styles, which came in vogue after the preservation era and are all but forbidden in the Quarter today.

Many representatives of these late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century styles occur in the lower, lakeside quadrant of the Quarter, for reasons that are related to patterns of structure age (previous chapter) and structure typology (next chapter). This area was historically more residential and less commercial.
affluent than the Quarter’s central heart, and were more likely to host cottages occupied by the working class. Cottages, which did not efficiently utilize parcel space, were more likely to be razed in the postbellum era (unlike large townhouses and storehouses, which were often subdivided into apartments). The demolished cottages were usually replaced by shotgun houses or bungalows, which, with their elongated shapes, made better use of parcel dimensions. Because this transformation occurred at a time when Victorian-Italianate style was fashionable, we see this and other circa-1900 styles predominating through the lower the Quarter. But exceptions are the rule, and, just as one may find eighteenth-century and twenty-one-century buildings practically on the same block in this veritable outdoor museum of architecture, one may also encounter a Spanish Colonial style near a Spanish Revival style, or a building in the style of ancient Greece near a bungalow fashioned like those in California.

Religious institutions in the Quarter exhibit almost as wide a range of styles as commercial and residential edifices. The Old Ursuline Convent is French Colonial, while the St. Louis Cathedral reflects Greek Revival influences. Here, on the North Rampart edge of the district, is a rare example of Gothic style in the Center for Jesus the Lord Church (center), and Spanish Revival style in St. Mark’s Methodist Church at right. Photograph by Ronnie Cardwell with author, 2004.
"A PHILOSOPHY OF SPACE - PATTERNS OF STRUCTURE TYPE IN THE FRENCH QUARTER" 

Structural typology, more so than architectural style, shapes the French Quarter’s built environment and distinguishes it from the urban American norm. Typical terms to type is the underlying form, shape, orientation, and layout of a building. While styles are informed by ever-changing tastes and draped upon structures rather interchangeably, type reflects the needs, wants, and means of its builders and owners, representing "a philosophy of space, a culturally-determined sense of dimension." Values that rank privacy would probably not build townhouses without courtyards, though such that rooms can be accessed directly from outdoors, while gregarious societies may be more inclined to embrace such an arrangement. Individuals with abundant means, and a desire to display it, may opt for a townhouse; those with limited means may have no choice but settle for a cottage or shotgun. Style in these scenarios is not inconsequential, but it is secondary.

Structure types, like styles, sometimes resist easy categorization. The line between type and function for entities such as banks and hotels can be blurry, as is distinguishing between two related types, such as shotguns and certain bungalows. It is also debatable whether a "Creole cottage" is type or style, and whether a Creole cottage is type or overall style. Some are "dressed" in the Greek Revival, Queen Anne, or Italianate styles.64 But the major distinctions are the important ones, reflecting the needs, wants, and means of its builders and owners. Type distinguishes it from the urban American norm.

Not all buildings in the Quarter are Creole cottages. Some are "dressed" in the Greek Revival, Queen Anne, or Italianate styles. Type represents "a philosophy of space, a culturally-determined sense of dimension." Values that rank privacy would probably not build townhouses without courtyards, though such that rooms can be accessed directly from outdoors, while gregarious societies may be more inclined to embrace such an arrangement. Individuals with abundant means, and a desire to display it, may opt for a townhouse; those with limited means may have no choice but settle for a cottage or shotgun. Style in these scenarios is not inconsequential, but it is secondary.

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A townhouse is a multi-story brick structure set in a row, often with shared walls, designed originally for the residential occupancy of its affluent owners. Townhouses in the French Quarter are usually mansions. A structure is outwardly similar, but serves a commercial purpose on the ground floor, and may afford either residential or commercial (including store) use on the upper floors. Both townhouses and storehouses in the Quarter were usually built with three floors, two to three stories. Conversion over the years between townhouses and storehouses, and from mixed-use to solely commercial use, accounts for some gray zones between these two types. But there is no confusing them with cottages and shotguns. Cottages are rectangular or square residential structures, unless they sprang from townhouses on corners, where they often serve retail functions as well. cottages are one-and-a-half stories plus an attic, while storehouses may have steep or flat roofs, balconies or galleries, or arch or square openings; cottages and shotguns may have gable or hip roofs, brick or wooden walls, orange or double-gables.

HISTORICAL TRENDS OF STRUCTURE TYPE

The graph "Historical Trends of Structure Type Represented in Today's French Quarter," shows that cottages, townhouses, and storehouses were all popular during the building boom of the second quarter of the nineteenth century. Townhouses were especially popular, but because these data represent extant buildings, this peak may reflect the greater likelihood that costly and architecturally significant townhouses were more likely to survive to the present day. Shotguns, on the other hand, were extremely scarce in the early 1800s, though not entirely absent. Construction of all types came to near-total halt during the Civil War, and returned at minimal levels during federal occupation.

Once the city got back on its feet in the late 1870s and 1880s, a new built environment arose in the French Quarter. Gone, with few exceptions, was new townhouse construction: the wealthy by this time had departed the no-longer-fashionable old city for uptown and Esplanade Avenue, a trend that had already started before the Civil War. Others had lost their fortunes to the conflict. Storehouses also overtook town-

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64 Not all cottages in the Quarter are Creole cottages. Some are "dressed" in the Greek Revival, Queen Anne, or Italianate styles. There is even one rare Spanish colonial cottage. "Creole style" and era of construction.

65 Based on an analysis of the Vieux Carré Survey. See the chapter, "An Architectural Geography of the French Quarter" for methodological details.
Cottages, townhouses, and storehouses were all popular during antebellum times. After the Civil War, the French Quarter changed. New townhouse construction declined as the wealthy departed for uptown and Esplanade Avenue. Storehouses overtook townhouses, further indicating that what was once a commercial/residential neighborhood with both affluent and working-class populations had transformed to a gritty district for the working-class and poor. Most significantly, shotguns surged in popularity, at the expense of cottages, which had declined steadily after their 1830s peak and never really returned.

Graph and analysis by author.

Most of these houses, which exhibit Greek Revival or Creole styles draped on the cottage typology, date from the 1830s and 1840s. The 500 block of Burgundy provides an idea of rear-Quarter residential streetscapes from the mid-nineteenth century, prior to the boom in shotgun house construction a half-century later. Photograph by author, 2004.

This rare flat-roof Spanish colonial cottage at 707 Dumaine, circa 1799, demonstrates that cultural tradition often trumps environmental consideration in housing: a flat roof works better in arid Spain than in humid New Orleans, yet colonists nevertheless constructed this and other traditions in their new environs, adapting them to local factors only afterwards. Until around 1890, a similar cottage stood to the left of this one; as was often the case, it was razed for a Victorian Italianate shotgun double, visible here. Photograph by author, 2003.
This handsome house at 1023 St. Louis is a shotgun type adorned in the Queen Anne style popular in the turn-of-the-century era, particularly in France. Photograph by author, 2002.


The shotgun house, the most ubiquitous traditional vernacular house type in the South and particularly in New Orleans. Its simplicity, distinctive appearance, conspicuous name, and association with poverty make the shotgun a quintessential component of the Southern landscape, for outsiders revel in discovering, for it seems to fulfill expectations of rough-edged Southern authenticity. Folklore holds that the utterly non-euphemistic name derives from the ability to fire a shotgun through the front door and out the rear without touching a wall. Another story claims that the house’s shape recalls a single-barrel shotgun, a barrel thus resembling a double-barrel shotgun. The name, at least in New Orleans, seems to have been applied retroactively; architect Robert Cangelosi has found the term “shotgun house” used only after 1910, a decade or two after the shotgun’s peak popularity.

Perhaps the most fascinating postbellum shift is the story in popularity of the shotgun house, at the expense of the cottage, which had declined steadily in the Quarter after its 1830s peak and never really came back. What explains this switch? First, some background on theamous shotgun house.

These spectacular Greek Revival-style townhouses at 532-542 North Rampart date from around 1850. Townhouses, originally built as homes for wealthy families, are the most common structure type in the French Quarter, reflecting its mid-19th-century prosperity. When the Quarter declined, they were subdivided into cheap apartments. Today, after decades of gentrification, many old townhouses have been subdivided again, this time as condominiums, though some still retain their antique interiors. These particular units have seen better days. Photograph by author, 2003.

Origins of the Shotgun House

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Knipmeyer traced a lineage from the structural form of pre-European Choctaw huts to indigenous house types to European colonies in the Mississippi River region, particularly in the areas with higher black populations. These shotgun houses “on the west side of the tracks” in Vicksburg, Mississippi, illustrate how this house type is still closely associated with Southern plantation life. Note the “Vicksburg pierced columns,” an architectural trait unique to this river city. Photograph by author, 2003.

Some researchers have hypothesized Haitian, African, and Native American origins of the shotgun house; others suggest it was invented” based on practical constraints, such as narrow land. Shotgun houses are found throughout the lower Mississippi River region, particularly in the areas with higher black populations. These shotgun houses “on the west side of the tracks” in Vicksburg, Mississippi, illustrate how this house type is still closely associated with Southern plantation life. Note the “Vicksburg pierced columns,” an architectural trait unique to this river city. Photograph by author, 2003.

required to convert the Yoruba hut into a morphologically completed shotgun in a short shift of doorways... [The] Haitian shotgun may be considered a product of a continuing process of African architectural modification.”72 Vlach concentrated on tracing Haitian shotguns to their possible African antecedents more so than connecting either to New Orleans, but his general premise is that the exodus of Haitians to New Orleans after the insurrection of 1791-93 brought this vernacular house type to the banks of the lower Mississippi. “Haitian migrants had only to continue the same life that they had known in St. Domingue,” the shotgun house of Port-au-Prince became, quite directly, the shotgun house of New Orleans.”73 The Vieux Carre Survey, which associates construction dates of 1810 to 1833 for the earliest shotgun-like houses, seems to support Vlach’s timeline, since the sudden wave of Haitian refugees arrived in New Orleans in 1840. But this may be a chronological: the researchers may have presupposed that Haitians built these houses at approximated their construction dates accordingly. The circa-1810 shotgun-like house at 819 Burgundy Street—Oldest among the survey—in fact, probably dates to 1840. Other early shotgun-like “long houses” appeared in the residential blocks of the Quarter, according to Notarial Archives documents, in the 1830s, of which six, according to the survey, still exist.74 Despite the apparent absence of very early shotguns, the Haitian/African origin hypothesis for New Orleans shotguns is favored by many scholars. One strand of indirect support comes from the distribution of shotgun houses throughout Louisiana, as mapped by geographer Fred Kniffen in the 1930s. Kniffen showed that this house type was generally found along the waterways and bayous of southeastern Louisiana as well as the Red, Ouachita, and Mississippi Riverine areas in the northern part of the state.75 These areas tended to be, and remain, more Francophone in their culture, higher in their proportions of people of African and Creole ancestry, and older in their historical development. Beyond state boundaries, shotguns are found throughout the riverine areas of the lower Mississippi Valley, spatially correlated with antebellum plantation regions and with areas that, historically and currently, host large black populations.76 If in fact the shotgun diffused from Africa, to Haiti, through New Orleans and up the Mississippi Valley, this is the North American distribution we would expect to see. But there are economic variables at play here as well, and they may trump cultural factors in explaining the spatial distribution of the shotgun.

Some researchers have hypothesized Haitian, African, and Native American origins of the shotgun house; others suggest it was invented” based on practical constraints, such as narrow land. Shotgun houses are found throughout the lower Mississippi River region, particularly in the areas with higher black populations. These shotgun houses “on the west side of the tracks” in Vicksburg, Mississippi, illustrate how this house type is still closely associated with Southern plantation life. Note the “Vicksburg pierced columns,” an architectural trait unique to this river city. Photograph by author, 2003.


72 Vlach, “Sources of the Shotgun House,” 80-155; quote from 154-55.

73 Ibid., 80-155; quote from 189.

74 Some architectural historians question whether any true shotgun house predated 1840. But a simple shotgun-like structure appears in the lower right corner of John L. Boquere de Woezir’s 1853 painting, A View of New Orleans Taken from the Plantation of Marigny, suggesting that this basic form was not unknown to the city in the late colonial era. A view of this painting appears in the chapter on Elysian Fields Avenue.


76 Among cities, Louisville, Kentucky, has been described as second only to New Orleans in its number of shotguns.

73 Ibid., 80-155; quote from 189.

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Independent Invention Based on Practical Constraints — Others speculate that while the shotgun resembles house types of other cultures, its manifestation in New Orleans and the South is related to them only because the ease of construction and conservation of resources (building materials, labor, space) made it equally attractive in many areas. One may reason that, given a mild climate, a builder need not rely on the wisdom of ancestors to design a rudimentary edifice that accommodates a narrow streetside or bayou-side lot while minimizing materials and labor. A shotgun, according to this theory, is a low-cost solution that any rational individual would invent independently, given certain limited resources. (Only a lean-to is simpler, and, alas, there are some very old shotguns in the Quarter with “leaning” roofs.) Advocates of this theory point to the traditionally narrow building parcels on New Orleans blocks and the slender bayou lots following waterways in Louisiana as other causative agents for construction of elongated structures. “The reason there are shotguns,” stated a *Times-Picayune* article, is because “they were a cost-effective way to house a lot of people on limited land in skinny, 30-by-120-foot lots,” like New York City’s “railroad flats” or Philadelphia’s “trinity” houses.77 Lending some apparent support for the invention hypothesis is the activity of Roberts & Company, a New Orleans sash and door fabricator formed in 1856 that developed prefabricated shotgun-like houses in the 1860s and 1870s and even won awards for them at international expositions, where they were billed as *Maison Portative de la Louisiane*. Whether Roberts & Company truly invented the design or simply capitalize[d] on a local traditional form78 is the key question. Others have suggested that shotguns were invented in response to a city real estate tax code which pegged taxation to street frontage rather than total area (though no one seems to be able to identify the exact code). But the invention hypothesis does not explain why the shotgun is not always found wherever narrow lots or frontage-based taxes exist, yet is found when these conditions do not exist, such as along the wide-open roadsides of the Mississippi Delta plantation country or the woodlands of the Felicianas. Nor does it explain why the shotgun failed to catch on until many years after the delineation of narrow lots. Additionally, it could be argued that common-wall row tenements utilize space more effectively than shotguns in urban blocks, yet we rarely see these structures in New Orleans. Could cultural factors outweigh local invention in the development of the shotgun? Jay Dearborn Edwards points out, “anthropologists have long realized that independent invention is rare in human cultural development. People are far better at borrowing the ideas of their neighbors than they are at inventing their own out of whole cloth.”79

78 Vlach, “Sources of the Shotgun House,” 60-63.
79 Jay Dearborn Edwards, “The Origins of Creole Architecture,” Winterthur Portfolio...
Some scholars note the presence of linear house types with interconnecting rooms in eighteenth-century France, raising the possibility of a European link. Others suggest that this vernacular house type may simply represent a modification of the Creole cottage (which also had interconnecting rooms with no hallways) for narrow lots. Empirical evidence shows that, in the Quarter and citywide, shotguns indeed filled the niche left open by the demise of the cottage. Shotgun singles and doubles came to dominate the turn-of-the-century rental-housing stock of New Orleans' working-class and poor neighborhoods, yet they were also erected as owned-occupied homes in middle- and upper-middle-class areas. New Orleans shotguns exhibited numerous locally inspired variations: with hipped, gable, or "apron" roofs; with "camelbacks" to increase living space; with hallways for privacy; with grand Greek Revival and Neo-Classical porticos; with elaborate Victorian gingerbread; and, finally, as "bungalows," arguably the final variation of the shotgun. Their relative numbers by neighborhood reflect when that area was developed: shotguns comprise only 9 percent of French Quarter structures, because the district was entirely developed by the time shotguns came into fashion; Mid-City, on the other hand, developed precisely during the shotgun's turn-of-the-century heyday, and its housing stock is nearly 50 percent shotgun. Though some predate the Civil War by a number of years, and others postdate World War I, most local shotguns were built within a decade of the 1890s, when they were erected to standardized designs and decorated with jigsaw ornamentation sold through such sources as the Roberts & Company catalog. The fanciful gingerbread encrusting the cheerful pastel-colored façade of a typical New Orleans shotgun house masked the fact that the structure and the family life behind it were usually plain, frugal, and cramped.

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82 According to Robert Cangelosi, shotguns comprise 46 percent of the housing stock in Mid-City, while side-hall shotguns make up another 3 percent. As quoted by Judy Walker, "Shotgun Appreciation," Times-Picayune, March 1, 2002, Living section, p. 1.

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When structural types are mapped at the building level (above), and aggregated at the street level (right), three patterns emerge: a zone of cottages and shotguns in the rear and lower Quarter; townhouses clustered in the district's heart; and storehouses prevailing in the upper Quarter. These patterns reflect centuries of history and help drive modern-day commercial and residential use of the French Quarter. Maps and analysis by author.
Shotguns were replaced citywide by the California bungalow in the 1920s and 1930s and, after World War II, by the ranch house, as the “default” house type for new construction in the city. For years, architectural historians rolled their eyes at the run-of-the-mill 1890s Victorian shotgun houses lining streets after streets after streets, and did not protest their demolition, even in the French Quarter, as late as the 1960s. In recent decades, however, many New Orleanians have come to appreciate the sturdy construction and exuberant embellishments of the classic shotgun, and today they are a cherished part of New Orleans culture and a favorite target for historical restoration. The Preservation Resource Center of New Orleans dedicates an entire month (March) to the shotgun, during which tours, restoration workshops, art displays, lectures, and even a “shotgun summit” are held to survey and encourage the many ways in which New Orleanians treasure these oddly sized, oddly named abodes.83 Throughout the rural South, shotguns remain a symbol of poverty and are hardly cherished by those who reside in them. When lined up along barely paved streets on the wrong sides of towns like Donaldsonville, St. Francisville, Natchez, Vicksburg, they form both picturesque vistas of Southern life and poignant reminders of a troubled past.

What, then, explains the rise of shotguns in the postbellum Quarter, at the expense of cottages? One hypothesis is known—freedom for emancipation and postwar economic decline rendered obsolete the servants’ quarters that were traditionally appended to the rear of city structures. We see far fewer of these slanted-roof dependencies built after the war, because slaves had been freed and the luxury of a live-in servant became less affordable. Many antebellum cottages had such quarters or other dependencies (such as kitchens and outhouses) behind them, overlooking a courtyard that occupied the rest of the parcel. With such external quarters no longer necessary, the logical adjustment would be to fill the entire rectangular lot with rentable structural space, rather than squandering it on obsolete dependencies and vacant courtyards.84 Technology by this time allowed kitchens and, later, toilets, to come inside the house, again making less need for courtyard space and greater need for interior space. If this idea of a long, linear house type had already been introduced to New Orleans decades earlier, but remained fairly dormant. Now it offered the perfect solution as a more efficient utilization of limited parcel space: the demolition of a typical cottage availed space for two shotgun singles or one shotgun double. Add to this the cost efficiency of mechanized mass-production that went into turn-of-the-century shotguns, versus the slower, individualized construction of a traditional cottage, and the logic of switching from cottages to shotguns seems compelling. If this hypothesis is correct, then the cottage-shotgun shift in the late nineteenth-century French Quarter may represent a structural response to the
momentous historical and economic transformations occasioned by the Civil War.

**Geographical Patterns of Structural Type**

The spatial distributions for all sixteen structural types are shown at the building level in the accompanying map, and for the four most common at the street level (Geographical Patterns of Four Common Structural Types in the French Quarter). We see that cottages and shotguns both predominate in the lower, lakeside quadrant of the Quarter. Of the 565 cottages (of all styles) and shotguns (including bungalows) in the French Quarter, almost 90 percent occur north of a diagonal line drawn across the Quarter, from the Canal/Rampart intersection to the foot of Esplanade. Shotguns in particular are extremely scarce south of this line. Reasons for this preponderance relate to economics and land use: the lower, lakeside (northern) section of the Quarter was, from the mid-eighteenth to mid-twentieth centuries, the working-class section of the neighborhood, hence the relative scarcity of townhouses and abundance of humbler abodes. Additionally, this was, and remains, the more residential section of the district, thus the preponderance of residential structures over commercial ones (shotguns are all but incompatible with commercial use). That cottages and shotguns both prevail in the same area lends some credence to the hypothesis suggested above. The pattern seems to corroborate the Plan and Program for the Preservation of the Vieux Carré’s observation that shotguns “replaced numerous earlier cottages, mostly in the fringe areas of the Quarter and were crowded onto narrow lots with narrow walkways on either side.”

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As this survey indicates, most pedestrian traffic in the Quarter flows in a dogleg-shaped pattern from upper Bourbon, Royal, Chartres, and Decatur streets, through Jackson Square, to the French Market, and back. The reason is simple: this is where tourist-friendly restaurants, galleries, bars, hotels, and shops predominate. But why here? One reason is the concentration of storehouses in this area (red points), a historical structural type that today best accommodates tourism-related businesses. Townhouses, cottages, and even shotgun houses are also used for commercial purposes, but none are as suited for commercial use as storehouses. The circumstances that led to their construction in this area in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries thus help form the French Quarter experience of millions of tourists in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Pedestrian survey conducted by author on February 3, 2002 (Super Bowl Sunday afternoon) by counting pedestrians for fifteen seconds at every corner (one minute per intersection). Analysis and map by author.
The “townhouse zone” is situated in the central heart of the Quarter, where mansions were built in large numbers in the antebellum era for wealthy families. Both townhouses and storehouses are more likely than other structural types to dominate entire streets, because, as row buildings, they were often constructed in multiple units.

The upper and riverside tiers of the Quarter, labeled “storehouse zone” in the map, have for centuries hosted the lion’s share of commercial activity in the Quarter, and continue to do so today. Most tourists experience the French Quarter by strolling the upper blocks of Bourbon, Royal, Chartres, and Decatur, funneling through Jackson Square, then heading to the French Market and back. Why this dog-legged swath? Because it is where scores of old storehouses have enabled the establishment of businesses, restaurants, and clubs to sell the visitors the “New Orleans experience.” True, many residential townhouses and cottages have been converted to tourist shops, and many businesses simply followed the tourists, rather than vice versa. But, in general, millions of tourists spend most of their time here simply because this is where the structural type needed to serve them is found in the largest concentrations.

A street-level view of the French Quarter bestows many rare and striking sights to the observant pedestrian: buildings older than entire American cities; architectural styles drawn from the world over; ironwork exhibiting the literal hammerblows of eighteenth-century artisans. But the weightiest factor in forming these streetscapes—structural typologies—can be missed at the pedestrian level, as forests are missed for the trees. To appreciate fully the panoply of types assembled here, a lofty perch from a nearby high-rise is recommended. In the complex, angular, jagged, multifaceted, glistening roofscape that unfurls below, cottages intermingle with townhouses, shotguns iterate parallel lines, storehouses intermix with industrial buildings, oversized government institutions loom stoically, and church steeples and cupolas punctuate the skyline. It is a rare sight in modern America.
SIGNATURE OF THE CITY

Patterns of Iron-Lace Galleries and Balconies in the French Quarter

Few images evoke New Orleans in the mental eye of the world like the city’s iron-lace galleries and balconies. Countless iconic references to the city—photographs in generic “American the Beautiful” calendars, destinations ads in airport waiting rooms, casino motifs in the seedier sections of Las Vegas—depict the frilly swirls of iron lace crowding narrow French Quarter streets. Television commercials wield wide-angle shots of iron lace to associate the product with a New Orleans they invariably portray as funky yet authentic. Movies pan down balustrades to set the location and mood of a scene. Tourists’ expectations are fulfilled when they see for themselves that the classic iron-lace streetscapes, complete with ferns spilling from hanging gardens and aloof eccentrics leaning in French doorways, do indeed exist, and in great number.

The frilly designs of iron-lace galleries form internationally recognized iconic imagery for New Orleans in general, and the French Quarter in particular. This specimen adorns the often photographed Labranche House on the corner of Royal and St. Peter. Photograph by author, 2003.

While architectural ironwork is intimately associated with New Orleans in general and the French Quarter in particular, the iconic imagery of the calendar photographs was a late addition to the street scene. Ironwork “wrought” by hand may be traced back to the earliest days of the colony, attributed to both artisans and French and Spanish influences. Wrought iron, containing about 0.04-0.2 percent carbon, formed a “malleable substance which may be shaped by hammering, stretching, or rolling,” producing a strong, durable, relatively flexible finished product with a distinctively austere texture. It was costly in terms of labor and material, and therefore did not dominate the street scene. Elegant but simple wrought-iron balconies, spanning half the width of the banquette (sidewalk) and supported not by columns but cantilevers, were traditional to Spanish colonial-era structures, and may be seen today in the eighteen of the twenty-five such structures that remain. Another two Spanish colonial buildings, the Cabildo (1799) and Presbytère (1791-1813), retain their wrought-iron railings. Even as these surviving specimens were being installed two hundred years ago, the craft was about to be rendered obsolete by the Industrial Age and the economies of mass production.

87 Masson and Schmalz, Cast Iron and the Crescent City, 5.

Cast iron, a technology developed over centuries and-refined in the early 1800s, was first produced by the Leeds Iron Foundry in 1825. Cast iron contained ten to 150 times more carbon than wrought iron, making it brittle, weaker, rougher, and more prone to rust, but also conducive to pouring into lacey, detailed molds. The end result: a fancier (though not necessarily superior) product, available faster and cheaper. Soon, balconies with a mix of wrought- and cast-iron railings were adorning the hundreds of townhouses that arose in the 1830s, a “transitional” decade in New Orleans ironwork as well as in society and in architectural style. Wrote Marcus Christian, “the Victorian taste for the ornate; the increasing demand created by the sugar, cotton, and business wealth; and the advent of the foundry system coupled with the heavy influx of white iron-workers that made cheap ironwork possible accounted for the change from wrought- to cast-iron ornamentation that overtook New Orleans after the 1830s.”

89 Christian, Negro Ironworkers of Louisiana, 31.

Reflecting the increased demand fostered by casting, nationwide iron production...
Multi-story iron galleries, supported with columns and covering the entire banquette, appeared in the wealthier blocks of the French Quarter around 1850. “One who has not seen New Orleans since two years ago,” wrote the Daily Picayune in 1852, “could not fail to be impressed with the extent and importance of the improvements during that time.” Among them was the new penchant for ornamental iron. Unlike balconies, which were designed for little more than a perch and breath of fresh air, these new galleries were spacious, shaded platforms halfway between public and private space, the perfect re-articulation of a porch or veranda—“probably the earliest in the city”—and as equally elegant third-floor balconies with graceful columns and balustrades for railings. Madame John’s Legacy at 632 Dumaine Street is the last surviving example of an original French Creole gallery in the French Quarter. One wonders if the circa-1850 popularity of iron-lace galleries may have been linked to the cultural predilection for semi-private outdoor space among eighteenth-century New Orleanians, which had been forced into the patio (literally) by Spanish building codes and urban densification, only to return years later when technology (iron casting) offered a new and affordable way.

Many sources credit the Baroness Micaela Almonester de Pontalba and her twin rows of elegant apartments and stores (1849-1851) bordering Jackson Square for introducing full-blown iron-lace galleries to the city. Every unit of both the Barthes’ buildings is lined with a full-width canopy and veranda—“probably the earliest in the city”—and a equally impressive third-floor balcony with graceful columns and balustrades, not to mention window grilles and sturdy iron columns. Such a notable resident and such an ambitious, centrally located project may have popularized large iron-lace galleries among wealthy peers. Masson and Schmalz,

New Orleans is the only American city where iron-lace galleries dominate extensive streetscapes and define the character of entire neighborhoods. Why? Perhaps variety had just the right mix of population density, private, cultural heritage, wealth, port accessibility, and appropriate housing stock, plus a “golden age” that coincided with the age of cast-iron ornamentation. This “galleriescape” on Royal Street is among the most spectacular. Photograph by author, 2004.

92 Daily Picayune, July 7, 1852, “City Intelligence” column (article cited by Mason and Schmalz).
93 Cast Iron and the Crescent City, 17.
94 One observer was not particularly impressed with the new feature, stating that the upper Pontalba building was completed by November 1850, presented “a much more striking and massive appearance” before the heavy roofed balconies were erected.” Pontalba Building, Daily Picayune, November 2, 1850.
95 Daily Picayune, July 7, 1852, “City Intelligence” column.
Iron-lace galleries and balconies tended to be concentrated in the Quarter's geographical heart, an area that also hosts the greatest concentration of antebellum townhouses. In its core are the Pontalba Buildings of Jackson Square, where the circa-1850 fashion is said to have originated. Map and analysis by author.
The map shows that ornamental iron may be found at varying levels on almost every block of the French Quarter. But the distribution is not random: it tends to be concentrated in the district’s geographical heart. The densest block layers are near Jackson Square, yet they peter out toward the edges of the Quarter. Among the most magnificent iron-lace streetscapes is Royal from St. Peter to Gov. Nicholls, St. Peter and St. Ann from Royal to Decatur, and the blocks around the Charity Hospital intersection. This pattern seems to correlate spatially to the hypothesis that the Pontalba galleries instigated the fashion, as they are located in the crux of this cluster. But unlike the Pontalba Buildings probably explain the stylistic trend, do they explain the cluster? In other words, did neighbors keep up with the Pontalbas and adopt the fashion because of spatial proximity? There might have been some element of neighborly competition, if not more than in nearby blocks, where mismatched galleries may be seen on adjacent separate buildings. More likely, the pattern simply reflects economic geography: this central area formed the wealthiest residential blocks of the French Quarter, where scores of magnificent residences and townhouses arose during the 1830s through 1850s. If a pattern reiterated in terms of structural age, style, and type, visible in the maps of the previous three chapters, of the 803 ornamental houses counted in the Vieux Carré Survey, for this analysis, 51 percent had substantial or full-blown galleries, while only 11 percent had no iron galleries or balconies at all. Wealthy townhome owners may have been impressed with Pontalba’s bold new fashion statement, saw its aesthetic and utilitarian virtues, and had the financial wherewithal to copy it, and did so either by adding them to existing buildings or including them with new ones. When the Pontalba Buildings were completed in 1851, the Daily Delta lauded “that spirited and attractive lady, Madam Pontalba” and commenting, “seldom were members of our community, tax their fortunes to such a degree as in the place of their nativity, and when such generosity was placed, it is worth noting, it encouraged other wealthy individuals”.

Encouraged were: the appearance of iron-lace galleries on prosperous Esplanade Avenue, in the Garden District, and in the noncontiguous wealthier areas in the 1850s indicate that the trend diffused hierarchically, wherever affluent New Orleanians resided, rather than contagiously outward from a point of origin. The spatial iron concentration in the western, lakeside (northern) quadrant of the Quarter can be explained by the historically higher per capita income of the area, which produced a greater housing stock (cottages and shotgun houses) that was not conducive to such adornment anywhere. The dearth of iron in the upper Quarter is also explained by economic geography: this was the area, economically, of the district, where storehouses and commercial structures outnumbered domestic buildings. Galleries and balconies being primarily for the leisurely use of people and not the storage or sale of merchandise, we would expect to see less of them in commercial areas. The Vieux Carré Survey data support this premise: of the 472 storehouses counted, 53 percent had no iron galleries or balconies at all; 26 percent had simple balconies, and only 7 percent had full, multi-story, ornate iron galleries.

The Vieux Carré Survey data also shed light on when iron galleries thrived, though they fall short of answering the question directly. Since ornamental iron was often added to extant buildings—a trend that continued to this day—the construction date (which is recorded in the survey) is often not the best guide to the gallery date (which is not recorded.) The average construction date of the structures with no or little iron lace was computed in 1855, reflecting the many 19th-century shotgun houses and other late buildings suitable for such adornment. But for all other levels of iron lace, the mean construction date of the host structures were 1853 (“2”), 1855 (“3”), and 1855 (“4”). These figures generally substantiate the historical evidence of a circa-1850s origin to this feature, and concur with Ann M. Masson’s and Lydia H. Schmalz’s survey of prominent ornamental iron-workers and iron-adorned, whose operations often dated from the 1850s.

This leaves us with perhaps the most intriguing question about New Orleans’ iron-lace galleries: why here? Why is New Orleans alone among American cities in its association with this feature? It is certainly not the only city with iron-lace galleries. Other coastal and river cities that experienced nineteenth-century economic booms expressed their wealth through expansive ornamentation, sometimes exacting an exact replica of a New Orleans-style gallery. Examples may be found in Charleston, Savannah, Mobile, Baton Rouge, Natchez, Vicksburg, St. Louis, Natchitoches, and Galveston, to name a few. But New Orleans is the only American city where iron-lace galleries fill streetscapes, dominate extensive vistas, and alter the character of entire neighborhoods. Explaining why is a challenge. The popular hypothesis views galleries as a airy, spacious response to a dense and crowded urban environment in a hot, humid climate. Indeed, galleries are not usually seen in rural towns in frigid climates, but this hypothesis fails to explain why we do not see galleries throughout all crowded cities in warm climates. Cultural factors may be at work as well; perhaps those semitropical or tropical cities imbued with French and Spanish influences are more likely to exhibit the trait. (The semi-public domestic space afforded by galleries is more in line with southern European notions of privacy than with those of northern Anglo-Saxons.) Perhaps the presence of skilled African, Spanish, French, and Creole craftsmen enabled the tradition to take root. Economic factors may be involved: iron may have been cheaper in certain areas—port cities, for example—and the upper class may have had to be sufficiently large and moneyed before a city could develop the cities’ build-


100 Masson and Schmalz, Cast Iron and the Crescent City, 45-50.
Balconies span half the width of the banquette (sidewalk) and are usually supported by cantilevers; earlier examples in the French Quarter incorporate wrought iron and tend to be simple and strong. Galleries cover the entire banquette, are supported by cast-iron columns and lace, and form semi-enclosed, semi-private space. They became popular around 1850, permanently transforming the New Orleans cityscape. In these photographs, balconies appear in the foreground, and galleries in the rear. Photographs by author, 2004.
ing stock would have to harbor a certain structural typology, namely brick townhouses, to host the features. Probably the durability and permanence of the material, in an atmosphere where wood is often quickly destroyed, had something to do with it. Finally, cities would have had to manifest all the relevant variables precisely at the time when cast iron became cheap, available, and in national vogue, to become salient in this regard. Perhaps New Orleans had just the right mix of density, climate, cultural heritage, wealth, port accessibility, and housing stock, plus a “golden age” that coincided with an age of cast-iron ornamentation, to produce these splendid streetscapes. The question warrants further investigation.

That iron-lace galleries have become the iconic signature of New Orleans, then, may derive from a genuinely unique abundance. It may also arise from the worldwide mythologization of New Orleans, to foster a nostalgic and romantic ambience for the sale of products and experiences, for which pictographic references to iron lace offer convenient imagery. There are probably no Milwaukee-style restaurants in Japan or Atlanta-themed casinos in Las Vegas, hence no need to lift attributes from those cities to “brand” the offerings. New Orleans, on the other hand, is used incessantly to infuse allure to commercial products and services, from foods to cars to alcohol to music to gambling, not to mention to sell the city itself. A truly distinguishing aspect of New Orleans’ material culture thus provides an opportune symbol to help consumers connect the city’s mystique with its product at hand. The aesthetic appeal of the swirling patterns of iron lace and its easy adaptation to restaurant décor, menu borders, jambalaya mix cartons, CD labels, television studio sets, theatrical stages, and “A Night in New Orleans” theme parties, cinches the arrangement. Madame Pontalba would marvel at how far her fashion has spread.

ELYSIAN FIELDS AVENUE
BAROMETER OF URBAN GROWTH

A map of greater New Orleans shows a crescent-shaped inner city embedded in a larger spread-eagle-shaped metropolis. Street networks therein vary from crooked grids, radiating lattices to seemingly haphazard subdivisions nestled densely between and beyond the famous Mississippi and the arc of the Lake Pontchartrain shore. Rare are the streets that connect river and lake with a single, straight line; rarer still are north-south-oriented thoroughfares. Only one avenue in all of New Orleans connects the Mississippi River and Lake Pontchartrain with a single, straight north-south line: Elysian Fields Avenue.

The corridor bestowed with that stirring name deserves special attention from those interested in the history, geography, urban development, and architecture of New Orleans, because it tells illustrative stories about the city’s experiences in all four realms. It started at the ramparts of the original city, then penetrated the restrictive swamps lying behind it—the wetlands that New Orleans lay in its entirety until a century ago, when its present trajectories date back to the French colonial era. In the early 1740s, the commons immediately below New Orleans, extending from an angled line between present-day St. Charles Avenue and Esplanade Avenue downriver to Franklin Avenue, came into the possession of the wealthy and influential colonial contractor Claude Joseph Villars. Dubreuil, his builder, required a steady supply of brick plaster, tile, and other construction materials. In time before 1753, he directed his slaves to excavate a canal to power a moulin à planches (sawmill) by diverting water from the river during high stages through a waterwheel about two hundred feet (60 m) long.102 Dubreuil’s canal passed through the center of his wedge-shaped plantation, positioned at a sharp bend in the river such that its velocity and low direction were fully exploited.103 With that project, Dubreuil (builder of the Old Ursuline Convent still standing on Chartres Street) unwittingly established the trajectory for future Elysian Fields Avenue and much of the urbanization aligned to it over the next two centuries. This came to pass because the canal was maintained in the landscape, even as the property was sold to Jacques Delachaise in 1758, purchased by the belated construction of city fortifications in 1760, sold again to Marie Gavriul de Monleon in 1783, to Gilbert Antoine de St. Maxent in 1776, to Launay in 1789, and finally traded to Pierre Philippe de Marigny in 1798 for a plantation in

**ORIGINS OF ELYSIAN FIELDS AVENUE:
DUBREUIL’S CANAL**

Elysian Fields Avenue is a product of the early nineteenth century, but its ancient trajectory dates back to the French colonial era. In the early 1740s, the commons immediately below New Orleans, extending from an angled line between present-day St. Charles Avenue and Esplanade Avenue downriver to Franklin Avenue, came into the possession of the wealthy and influential colonial contractor Claude Joseph Villars. Dubreuil, his builder, required a steady supply of brick plaster, tile, and other construction materials. In time before 1753, he directed his slaves to excavate a canal to power a moulin à planches (sawmill) by diverting water from the river during high stages through a waterwheel about two hundred feet (60 m) long.102 Dubreuil’s canal passed through the center of his wedge-shaped plantation, positioned at a sharp bend in the river such that its velocity and low direction were fully exploited.103 With that project, Dubreuil (builder of the Old Ursuline Convent still standing on Chartres Street) unwittingly established the trajectory for future Elysian Fields Avenue and much of the urbanization aligned to it over the next two centuries. This came to pass because the canal was maintained in the landscape, even as the property was sold to Jacques Delachaise in 1758, purchased by the belated construction of city fortifications in 1760, sold again to Marie Gavriul de Monleon in 1783, to Gilbert Antoine de St. Maxent in 1776, to Launay in 1789, and finally traded to Pierre Philippe de Marigny in 1798 for a plantation in Basin canals and the Mississippi River, it formed a principal ingress and egress to a city practically founded on the notion of expedient passage. It exhibits the full range of Crescent City architectural styles and types, from Creole, Greek Revival, and Victorian to Spanish Revival, California, and Modern; from townhouses, cottages, and shotgun bungalows, ranch houses, and office parks. And it is the Gordian knot of the street network of most of the Seventh and Eighth wards, dictating the orientation of the urban grid and residents and motorists into the twenty-first century.

Expect few mansions and canopies of oaks, no clanging streetcars, and not a single Mardi Gras parade; St. Charles Avenue has the lock on those world famous symbols. Elysian Fields only claim to fame is its cameo in Tennessee Williams’ A Street Named Desire and Walker Percy’s The Moviegoer, and more for its metaphorical implications than as a real place. But as a microcosm and barometer of the centuries of urban growth, Elysian Fields Avenue stands alone.
The elder Marigny died in 1800 and passed the plantation to his fifteen-year-old son, Bernard Xavier Philippe de Marigny de Mandeville. After the Louisiana Purchase, rapid population growth in New Orleans convinced Marigny to subdivide his conveniently located plantation for urban development, for which he hired the French engineer Nicholas de Finiels in 1805. Finiels’ design, according to architectural historian Samuel Wilson, Jr., was “skillfully planned to tie the [strets] of the old city into the new area. The old sawmill canal determined the direction of the new streets, the canal itself becoming the center of the principal street to which was given the name Champs Elisées (Elysian Fields) or Promenade Publique.” Inspired by the grand Parisian avenue of the same name and perhaps by the mythological reference to paradise, Marigny planned for Elysian Fields “a beautiful esplanade, with trees and lawns and shrubbery, and a winding lake on which swan boats were to float gracefully.” Finiels’ design for the Faubourg Marigny, driven by the geometry of the Marigny Canal, was then passed to Barthélemy Lafon to survey and lay out streets, in 1806-1807. The Faubourg Marigny soon developed as a working-class residential suburb of New Orleans, home to a large population of mostly “Europeans of Latin extraction and of Creoles, white and black,” and classic early nineteenth-century New Orleans architecture—the quintessential Creole and immigrant faubourg. Thus Finiels’ plan for the Faubourg Marigny transformed Dubreuil’s circa-1740s sawmill canal into Elysian Fields Avenue and moored its trajectory as a straight line (there was no reason whatsoever to incorporate a bend) from the river to the backswamp. By pure happenstance, it extended perfectly northward and pointed toward a section of the Lake Pontchartrain shore that lay closest to the Mississippi. The advantages of the trajectory did not go unnoticed.

This detail from John Boqueta de Woiseri’s *A View of New Orleans Taken from the Plantation of Marigny* (1803) shows the Marigny Canal and sawmill in the lower city. Two years later, the canal was incorporated into the design of the Faubourg Marigny as the subdivision’s main avenue (Elysian Fields), establishing a trajectory that would influence the layout of much of eastern New Orleans. Notice the shot gun house structure at lower right. Courtesy Library of Congress.
The Pontchartrain Railroad

With the Marigny Canal running through its neutral ground, Elysian Fields Avenue by the 1820s was set in place from the river to a backswamp stream which flowed to the present-day Florida Avenue and connected with Bayou St. John. Beyond that juncture lay the Gentilly Ridge, swampy lowlands, and the wild, uninhabited shore of Lake Pontchartrain. But across the lake and eastward to Biloxi, Mobile, and Pensacola lay lucrative trade opportunities for New Orleans. The city demanded lumber, fire bricks, firewood, game, and other raw materials supplied by the towns on the north shore of the lake, and its citizens needed transportation to the sister cities of the Gulf Coast. These coastal connections had great difficulty in reaching the Crescent City; it was the distant mouth of the Mississippi River, relying instead on the shorter and safer route through the Rigolets, across Lake Pontchartrain, into Bayou St. John, and up the Carondelet Canal to the rear of the old city. Though the circa-1790s manmade navigable waterway was a monopoly of lake and coastal trade, it did not desert it: tolls were high, and the twisting, shallow channel of the connecting bayou slowed vessels to a crawl.

When His Highness Duke Bernhard of Saxe-Weimar-Eisenach arrived at the mouth of Bayou St. John (Spanish Fort) in 1826, his party opted for walk to New Orleans, remarking that as swampy area was "muddy [and] hung full with that terrible moss," rather than pay the exorbitant and unpopular toll fees boat through the bayou and the Carondelet Canal.111 The only other alternative was the Marigny Canal, which was only occasionally navigable and not really designed for that purpose. A lake, though near the city, observed one visitor in 1835, was inaccessible. Vessels laden with their valuable cargo might arrive at the terminus of the lake within sight of the city, but the broad marsh extending between that, and the far-off towers of the desired mart, might as well have been the cloud-capped Jura, for any means of communication it could afford.112 Add to this the growth of the city and the usual challenges of shipping on the Mississippi such as sand bars, cross currents, and decrepit wharves, and a business opportunity emerged: a better transportation connection from the city to the lake.

But what, and who, would span the swamps? The completion of the Erie Canal in New York in 1825 spurred canal excavation nationwide, but news of early railroad successes in England and Scotland, carried by the local press, intrigued New Orleans businessmen more. "Leaders in the upper faubourg [St. Mary] wanted a new, deep, canal to the lake, while residents of the lower faubourg [Marigny] desired a railroad to replace the Carondelet Canal, and of course the terminal point for either canal or railroad would be the faubourg promoting that particular improvement."113 In the summer of 1828, a group of lower-faubourg businessmen met in Hewlett’s Coffee House to discuss the construction of a new river-lake railroad, and appointed a committee for the preliminary engineering and cost estimation.114 Among the attendees was Maurice W. Hoffman, originally from Balti-

114 New Orleans Courier, July 17, 1828, p. 1, and July 31, 1828, p. 3.
more and an enthusiastic protecté of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad. Hoffman trekked across the swamp to the lake, map in hand, scouting the terrain for the proposed route and the challenges that lay ahead. After the men formed the Pontchartrain Railroad Company in August 1829, Hoffman traveled to the Northeast to research the route of the main railroading, even purchasing materials to set up a demonstration in New Orleans.

The breakthrough came in January 1830, when the state granted the men’s request for a charter to form the Pontchartrain Railroad Company, capitalized at $150,000. The charter stipulated that the company could obtain sixty-foot-wide right-of-way for the tracks, the power of eminent domain to attain necessary land, exclusive privileges over the route for twenty-five years, and the right to develop harbor, pier, and warehouses at Lake Pontchartrain. Simultaneously, the executive committee decided that the initial route would be a direct line extending from the foot of Elysian Fields Avenue (a point known as “Pontchartrain Junction”), paralleling the three-and-a-half-mile Marigny Canal, and continuing straight north another one-and-a-half miles to Lake Pontchartrain.115 Reasons were twofold: this route minimized the direct line extending from the foot of Elysian Fields Avenue to the high ground of Gentilly (Gentilly Boulevard), paralleling the Marigny Canal and Dubreuil’s colonial-era canal beforehand, which hitherto was sited to exploit the sharp bend of the Mississippi River. The three-mile-wide right-of-way enabled that the railroad would have plenty of room for growth, and that remained to make permanent the river-to-sea straight north rectitude of the Champs Elysées was the land acquisition and actual construction of the railroad.

The route spanned five plantations. Most owners, sensing the eventual spread of New Orleans into their lands, sold; even eagerly, sold portions of their properties to the company. The Marigny Canal proved to be the most expensive purchase ($25,000), because of its length and criticality to the project. The out-and-out of the Darcantel plantation, situated on the Gentilly Ridge at the present-day intersection of Gentilly Boulevard and Elysian Fields Avenue. The company ended up paying dearly for this land, preferring not to litigate, but made good use of the upland’s soil mixture and its timber for fences. The Darcantel plantation became the most useful as storage and waystation for employees. The Scottish philanthropist Alexander Milne owned or owned at the front end of the route, and, sensing a huge, readily salable, right-of-way and profit-minded, when he subdivided the adjacent area for the future community of Milneburg.

New Orleans’ first lakefront faubourg,116 Clearing of the path commenced on March 10, 1830, and by June 8, the company reported

that the undertaking has progressed with great rapidity;117 that the work of the Route has been opened through the Swamps to the Lake. A considerable extent of ditching has been executed, various Buildings erected; That the whole of the Marigny Canal (present-day Elysian Fields) was dug at Florida Avenue to the high ground of Gentilly (Gentilly Boulevard) has been accomplished as is believed sufficiently firm. That the Road appeared solid and firm; That of the Road until the lower Swamp from the high ground of the Gentilly to the Lake—the distance of which is about 2,500 yards. It has been from the upper end, and 450 at the end of the Lake....117

The large quantities of soil needed for the embankment through the lowlands came from the Gentilly ridge, the lakefront, and from the roads to the canal excavated simultaneously. The company allowed the public to run their carriages upon the roadbed to tamp it down, then raised it higher until it surpassed the high-water mark on nearby trees. In this manner, future Elysian Fields Avenue emerged from the swamps. As the bed was nearing completion in the autumn of 1830, three one-hundred-ton shipments of wrought iron rail arrived from England, while red cedar lumber for ties came from Mexico. Track was laid a pace of about 250 feet per day. Meanwhile, the work progressed slowly on the station and loading dock (Port Pontchartrain) extending into the lake from Milneburg, which Congress had designated as an official port of delivery and departure, on par with the rest of New Orleans.118

The tracks were completed by early spring 1831, and on Saturday, April 23, 1831, the horse-drawn Pontchartrain Railroad made its inaugural run. Six stagecoach-like cars carrying state and local dignitaries, a band, and company stockholders

moved to the most imposing manner, in a sound of music from a large concourse of admiring spectators, who lined both sides of the road, and reached the lake by happy coincidence. The moment the Mobile steamboat arrived for the first time at Port Pontchartrain with the mail. The mail and passengers were immediately forwarded to the city in a car designed for the purpose, and reached 1½ miles of the road in half an hour.119

With that river-to-lake question, the Pontchartrain became the first railroad west of the Appalachians and first in the nation to complete a full system. Seventeen months later, it introduced steam locomotion to the city, “to the great admiration and wonder of a vast concourse of our citizens, who were assembled…to witness this novel and interesting

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115 This suburb and the railroad, Port Pontchartrain were located near the present-day intersection of Leon C. Simon and Elysian Fields Avenue. The neighborhood immediately east of this intersection still bears the name Milneburg today. Ibid., 113-19.
116 Pontchartrain Railroad Company, Minutes, vol. 1, June 8, 1830, Special Collections, Tulane University.
sight.”—it had a significant impact on the economics and geography of the lower city. The new railroad put the old sawmill out of business in 1832, thus rendering obsolete the Marigny Canal, which was then used for drainage and filled in incrementally. It increased nearly ten-fold steamboat traffic on lakes Ponchartrain and Borgne, creating a busy port where there was once only marsh grass and initiating the widespread construction of raised “camps” and cottages along the shoreline.

At its core, the railroad was one of the valued assets of the otherwise poor and isolated Third Municipality (later the “Near” District), helping incorporate it into the city’s critical functions as a transportation hub. If New Orleans’ reach for the lakeshore could be compared to America’s “Manifest Destiny” of expanding to the Pacific, then the Pontchartrain Railroad may be viewed as the local equivalent of the first transcontinental railroad, thirty-eight years before the Canadian Pacific was completed. By the mid-1840s, New Basin Canal was already under construction by 1832—to serve New Orleans for 101 years, the nation’s longest-lived railroad operating under its original charter. The first of passengers arriving in New Orleans in the nineteenth century from lakeside or coastal cities first set foot in Milneburg, then rode the Pontchartrain Railroad down Elysian Fields to the city proper, this route being the fastest and most comfortable ingress from points east. Among those visitors were presidents, dignitaries, illustrious names of the day—and traveling journalists, usually from the Northeast or England, who wrote the nation’s major cities with pen in hand, waxing eloquently about their charms, pontificating about their sins, and leaving behind descriptions of the cities as they encountered. A great many described their trips from Mobile on steamboats to Milneburg, then down Elysian Fields Avenue on the Pontchartrain Railroad to the Faubourg Marigny, where, more often than not, a cabman could transport them to the St. Charles Hotel.

THE ELYSIAN FIELDS LANDSCAPE IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

One of the first visitors to describe the Pontchartrain Railroad and the Elysian Fields landscape was Joseph Holt Ingraham, around 1833 or 1834. “Its advance to New Orleans is invaluable,” he wrote; the line was an avenue of wealth, and which “a great trade is carried on with Mobile and other places along the Florida coast…with safety and rapidity.” He paid six bits passage for the round-trip passage to Milneburg, then boarded the eight-to-ten car train (which, incidentally, had already been segregated by race) at an elongated station at the foot of Elysian Fields. With the clanging of a bell, our fiery leader moved forward, smoking like a race-horse, slowly and steadily at first—“the faster and faster, till we flew along the track with breathless rapidity.” (Locomotives used on the Pontchartrain Railroad would be nicknamed “Smoky Mary” into the 1930s.) Ingraham then took note of the physical landscape, becoming the traditional nineteenth-century view of the natural world as a threatening and foreboding place:

The rail-road, commencing at the levee, runs for two miles through the centre of Mobile street, with fourteen-storied houses on either side. A mile from the levee we left the city and all dwellings behind us. Near the Nez Perce intersection, and were threatened by the endless inhabited marshes, where nothing meets the eye but diverse ranks, luxuriant undergrowth, tall, coarse grass, and never ceasing winding and winding their long, serpentine folds around the trunks of the trees like huge, loathsome water-snakes. By the watch, we passed a mile-stone every three minutes and a half; and in less than nineteen minutes arrived at the first village, quite a village [Milneburg, on Elysian Fields between Port E. Lee and Leon C. Simon avenues]; a hundred half-timbered huts, cafes, dwellings, stores, and baths, all burst at once upon our view; running past them, we gradually lessened our speed, and finally came to a full stop at the pier. The pier [near present-day Second], constructed of piles and firmly planked over, was crowded with sloops and steamers, which were taking in and discharging cargo, giving quite a bustling, business-like air to this infant port. Staggred negroes, and gentlemen amateurs, were fishing in the fast-number far out in the lake. Others were engaged in the intimate amusement of cray-fishing: the right the weather was alive with barbers…

After brushing shoulders with French- and English-speaking locals raising a ruckus at Milneburg’s smoked-filled cafés and billiard halls, Ingraham reboarded and returned to the city. Alas, the return trip did not go so smoothly: somewhere between the Gentilly Ridge and the city, the locomotive struck and completely severed a cow.

In 1839, the Englishman James Silk Buckingham arrived from Mobile to Port Pontchartrain, and boarded the train through “a perfect swamp or morass…a impervious woods and heathets on either side” for the full hour journey to New Orleans. He was more attuned to the cultural landscape than the physical one:

The avenue by which we entered the city was called Les Champs Élysées; and every one that caught our attention reminded us strongly of Paris. The lamps were hung from the centre of ropes passing above the streets, as in France; women were seen walking undercoats, with gay aprons and caps; the names of all the streets and places we passed were French: the car-drivers, porters and hackney-coachmen, spoke chiefly French; the shops, gates, pavements, and passengers moving in the street, seemed so perfectly Parisian, that if a person could have reported here suddenly, without knowing the locality, it would be difficult for him to persuade himself that he was not in some city of France.”
The English geologist Charles Lyell arrived by a Lake Pontchartrain steamer during Mardi Gras 1844 and traveled the Pontchartrain Railroad bound for New Orleans and the St. Charles Hotel. The train

conveyed us in less than an hour to the seat city, passing over swamps in which the tall cypress, hung with Spanish moss, was flourishing, and below immense droves of white pelican bursting into leaf. In many gardens and suburbs, the dead and peach trees in full bloom, the blue-leaved beej, the nachito, and the leaves of a species of oak were very abundant. We saw a tavern called the “Elysian Fields Coffee House” and some others with French inscriptions. There were many houses with port[e]-cochères, and many lamps suspended from ropes attached to tall posts on either side of the road, as in the French capital. We might indeed have fancied that we were approaching Paris, but for the negroes and mulattos, and the large red ladies reminding us that the windows required protection from the sun. But it was a pleasure to hear the French spoken...

During his tour of the South in 1853 and 1854, a disoriented Frederick Law Olmsted, who would later gain worldwide fame in landscape architecture and whose firm would design Audubon Park, encountered a substantially more developed and forested environment along Elysian Fields Avenue.

There were no small buildings near the jetty, erected on piles over the water, with bathing-houses, bowling-alleys and billiard-rooms, with indications of a place of holder, rest and worship; and, on reaching the shore, I found a slumbering village, (Milneburg). [The locomotive backed, screaming hoarsely, down the jetty] and I returned to get my seat.

Off we puffed, past the restaurant...through the little village of white houses...and away into a dense gray cypress forest. For one or two rods [about sixty feet] each side of the track the trees had all been felled and not replaced leaving a dreary strip of swamp, covered with stumps. It continued, for two or three miles, then the ground became dryer [Gentilly Ridge], there was an abrupt termination of the gray wood; the fog was lifting...disclosing a flat country, skirted still, and thinly bounded, in the background, with the swamp-forest. For three or four rods [about sixty feet], each side of the road, as in the French capital. We might indeed have fancied that we were approaching Paris, but for the negroes and mulattos, and the large red ladies reminding us that the windows required protection from the sun. But it was a pleasure to hear the French spoken....

The Antecedent Axis

Once the Pontchartrain Railroad was successfully established, Elysian Fields Avenue’s geometry was preordained. By 1854, the train to Elysian Fields or Chalmette graced the full river-to-lake extent of the artery even though the actual roadbed would not for some time. Charles Zimpel’s Topographical Map of New Orleans and Its Vicinity of that year showed the corridor bisected by the railroad tracks from the levee to the pitchfork-shaped wooden pier over Lake Pontchartrain, with stations at the five major stops of the line: the Faubourg Marigny, the Gentilly Ridge (foreseen as the suburb Darcanel at the time), and at Milneburg. Parallel to the tracks from the levee, the Florida Walk was the Old Canal Marigny, the remnants of Marigny’s old waterway. It is clear from the Zimpel map that Elysian Fields Avenue was not only the single element of urbanization to extend to the lakefront, but also the antecedent axis to which all future adjacent subdivisions would align. Even as early as

129 James S. Zacharie, Orleans Guide (New Orleans, 1885), 99, all directions are Zacharie’s.
130 Charles F. Zimpel, Topographical Map of New Orleans and Its Vicinity, 1834, Southeastern Architectural Archive, Special Collections, Tulane University.
The foot of Elysian Fields Avenue appears in the lower half of this 1920s photograph; the Pontchartrain Railroad station is visible to the right of the smokestack. Oak-lined Esplanade Avenue (left) emanates from the same riverside vertex as Elysian Fields, but differs utterly in its intimate and charming Southeastern Architectural Archive, Special Collections, Howard-Tilton Library, Tulane University.

1834, envisioned faubourgs were tentatively aligned to Elysian Fields—their planners had no choice—thus further implanting the avenue into the future urban geography of the backswamp. Zimpel's map show ghostly outlines of projected streets in the swampland properties of Milne, Hopkins, Lebeau, Hur, Martin, and others, all laid out orthogonally to the antecedent axis.

Structurally, though, urban development proceeded very slowly up Elysian Fields Avenue. “Many persons were led to suppose,” the Daily Orleanian reminded its readers in 1849, “that rows of buildings would extend at either side to the Pontchartrain terminus, and connect the Lake end more immediately with our Municipality.... How have [these expectations] been realized? Any one desirous of informing himself of the fact has only to repair to the railroads and perceive the snail-paced improvement in that quarter. Buildings, on the open and airy road, are ‘few and far between.”131 The problem was the backswamp. It was not until New Orleans' municipal drainage revolution of the 1890s and 1900s that these areas were claimed for residential development, and not until a full century after the Daily Orleanian’s comments that Elysian Fields Avenue’s flanks were fully developed for residential use. Today, all street networks bounded by St. Bernard Avenue, Lake Pontchartrain, People’s/Almonaster/Franklin avenues, and the Mississippi River pay geometric homage to Elysian Fields Avenue.

Elysian Fields Avenue also symbolizes the land-use conflicts that arise when a poor community eager for investment grows into a city of homeowners unwilling to tolerate the nuisances of industry. When the Pontchartrain Railroad received its charter in 1830, the state and local government bent over backwards to accommodate the investment, granting it permanent rights to a wide swath of semi-rural land that, within a few years, became enveloped by residential development. Tensions mounted between residents and the railroad, especially when brisk port business turned lower Elysian Fields into a veritable freight yard of noisy locomotives swapping out rolling stock. The conflict heightened in the 1870s, when the city legally challenged the right of the railroad to the avenue’s neutral ground (which was air-tight in legal terms). When the Supreme Court inevitably ruled in the railroad’s favor in 1874, Mayor Joseph Shakespeare angrily ordered its depot at the foot of Elysian Fields demolished. Lawsuits and complaints against the railroad’s nuisances—countless grade crossings, blockage of streets, smoke and noise, unkempt neutral grounds, even the parking of sleeper cars in the middle of the avenue as “hotels” for visitors—persisted until the line’s last days.

Protesting neighbors played their part in the demise of the Pontchartrain Railroad, but it was direct-line railroads, automobiles, and buses that sealed its fate. In 1930, the Louisville & Nashville Railroad Company, which owned the line since 1880, kept it running solely to maintain the company’s franchise on the route, began divesting of the century-long New Orleans & Northern Railroad...


132 Among the few exceptions are four angular streets south of Gentilly Boulevard, which may trace their origin to the French arpent surveying system.
old line by releasing the city control of the Elysian Fields neutral ground from North Rocheblave to the lake. “Abandonment of the railroad will remove the last barrier in the way of a proposed thoroughfare from the Mississippi river to Lake Pontchartrain via Elysian Fields Avenue,” wrote the Times-Picayune that year. Also in 1930, the Milneburg entertainment district, where generations of New Orleanians came to play and where some of the greatest names in jazz played for New Orleanians, closed to make way for the seawall and lakefront project. On March 15, 1933, after 101 years of service, “Smoky” McQuade made her last run down the Pontchartrain Railroad. Tracks were removed in 1935 from Elysian Fields lakeside of Rocheblave; its neutral ground was landscaped, and its flat area developed with the Gentilly-style cottages popular at the time. Between 1949 and 1950, an 1,100-foot, $1,499,000 overpass was constructed over the Florida Avenue tracks—the back wall edge only sixty to seventy years earlier—making that portion of Elysian Fields more like a highway than a residential boulevard. It was not until 1954, when the final segments of the four to five parallel tracks were removed from North Rocheblave to the river, that the city interests along Elysian Fields Avenue finally went out over the railroad. This was achieved when the city gained control from Florida Avenue to the river, in exchange for the Louisville & Nashville Railroad’s gaining access to a route along Montegut Street, part of the Press Street railroad corridor still in use today. Thus ended Elysian Fields Avenue’s section d’être, and it commenced its modern era. Large-format photographs captured by A.E. Stewart from a low-flying aircraft in 1949 provide a detailed record of Elysian Fields Avenue’s escape at this transitional time in its history. The images show an industrial-looking foot of the avenue emerging from a debris-strewn riverfront, surrounded by the intricate nineteenth-century rooftops. The cityscape that is now described by its historical name, Faubourg Marigny, but at the time was simply the nameless working-class neighborhood below the French Quarter. Three railroad tracks curve from North Peters by the French Market to Elysian Fields, where they furcate into five tracks, some with freight rolling stock remaining uncoupled in the middle of the avenue. Close inspection of the courtyards and backyards evince the modern cityscape that, with the exception of the autos, mobile, and an occasional horse-drawn cart can be spotted—this, in 1949. The streetscape remains lined with tracks and abutted by nineteenth-century structures until North Rocheblave Street, where (near the location of today’s I-10 on-ramp) all tracks veer eastward and disappear from the scene. At this point and particularly three blocks later, at the Florida Avenue Canal, new structures and a few open fields start to predominate. Recently built subdivisions appear sporadically, complete with promotion billboards positioned at key intersections. The suburban area of any American city in the years after World War II. The cityscape takes on a slightly older and busier appearance at the angular Gentilly Boulevard intersection, where the Hebrew Rest Cemetery stands conspicuously. From here northward, Elysian Fields Avenue and its immediate area are entirely drained, excepted from forest, but almost entirely undeveloped. Within a decade and a half,...
half, it would be 100 percent incorporated in urban residential New Orleans.

The last photograph in the 1949 collection barely captures old Milneburg, at the Robert E. Lee and New York Street intersections. Founded in 1831 as part of the arrangements that created the Pontchartrain Railroad and an official port of entry at the lake, Milneburg (known colloquially as “Old Lake End”) was New Orleans’ first significant urban foothold on the Lake Pontchartrain shore, growing quickly with the sudden success of the route. Like many railroad towns, Milneburg structures were clustered around the tracks, which extended out into the lake on a wooden pier. Platforms were constructed at a level such that freight could be transferred between vessel and rolling stock with no hoisting, a railroad innovation at the time. Perpendicular to the tracks was a series of lakeshore “camps,” connected by boardwalks and served by live oaks. Most buildings of Milneburg—the largest and most unique example of Louisiana lake architecture—were raised on high piers and painted white, giving the community a quaint village-like atmosphere. Buildings along the tracks served as restaurants, hotels, and saloons; those on the lake were often bathhouses or fishermen’s abodes. The social center of Milneburg was the Washington Hotel (1831), a stop-over point for travelers in passage. Milneburg as a port boomed until the mid-1850s, when the New Orleans, Mobile and Chattanooga Railroad drew business away from the Lake Pontchartrain shore. Later in the 1800s, it was home to an isolated but diverse population of (in 1880) under 300 people, about two-thirds white and one-third black, hailing from as far as France, Germany, Brazil, and even Greenland, but more likely born locally. Most were fishermen; some were woodcutters, dairymen, laborers, or barkeepers; and a small group of professionals maintained the port facilities. Faced with obsolescence, Milneburg in the late nineteenth century—like New Orleans itself today—reinvented itself as a tourist destination, operating as a lakeside resort in competition with Spanish Fort and West End. Famous names of early jazz played regularly at all venues. The end finally came in the 1930s, when the demise of the Pontchartrain Railroad, the rise of the automobile, and the Lakefront land reclamation project closed the history of the century-old community. Some antebellum buildings survived at the site into the 1940s; the 1949 photograph described above captures a small cluster of weathered buildings, but they are outnumbered by numerous post-World War II cottages and ranch houses, the likes of which predominated here today. The demolition of old Milneburg robbed New Orleans of an important component of its structure history early lakefront architecture.

138 August Perez and M.B. Young, Milneburg, unpublished paper, 1955, School of Architecture, Special Collections Vertical File, Tulane University.
139 1880 U.S. Census, Orleans Parish Population Schedules, Ward 7, Enumeration District 55 and Ward 8, Enumeration District 60. The last pages of these enumeration districts record Milneburg residents.
as the avenue relinquishes neither its clues to the past nor its present-day ambience to those who whiz by in speeding cars. The following observations were made cycling and walking the full length of the avenue repeatedly in 2003.

Recalling the pastoral splendor in the 1803 painting Under My Wings Every Thing Prospers of the riverside foot of Elysian Fields Avenue today is dulled by comparison. Its role as a vertex in the lower-city street system has rendered it a field of concrete and asphalt, surrounded by parking lots and high floodwalls and sprinkled with the glass of shattered beer bottles. But a sense of an interesting past abounds. Dubreuil’s sawmill, a spot where St. Peters now intersects Elysian Fields, where its canal extended directly up the present-day grassy neutral ground of the avenue. To the left is the outline of an early twentieth-century coach from the Gulf, Mobile & Ohio Railroad, possibly a veteran of the Pontchartrain Line. No evidence of the passenger station remains, but some of its industrial neighbors still stand, most notably the early twentieth-century Romanesque brick electrical facility on the 400 block. It is not until the 600-700 blocks that we start to see antebellum architecture, its erstwhile form of imposing Greek Revival storehouses straddling the Royal Street intersection, one adorned with a cast-iron gallery as splendid as any in the Quarter. Across the street is Washington Square, a leafy reminder of the grand aspirations that Bernard Marigny once had for Elysian Fields. The 800 block is one of the few on the avenue that retains its full suite of historic architecture, including one of the most significant structures of the area. The house at 820 Elysian Fields is a survivor of Faubourg Marigny’s earliest days, a circa-1820 brick-between-post cottage with a steep hip roof and the clean, simple lines typical of early nineteenth-century Creole architecture. This patriarch of Elysian Fields has witnessed almost all of the avenue’s history, from the old sawmill to the Parisian landscape witnessed by antebellum travel memoirists; from Smoky Mary and generations of Milneburg day-trippers to the lost tourists of today, hunting for free parking.

Heading up the next few blocks, to what was the rural edge in the 1830s and the “back-of-town” in the 1890s, ancient live oaks shade worn-out Victorian shotgun houses interspersed with an occasional antebellum cottage. Those trees growing in the neutral ground are necessarily much younger, since it was not until 1954 that railroad tracks were removed. At the busy St. Claude intersection, amid modern commercial structures, is a surprise: a Creole storehouse with an elegant balcony and jack arches, painted bright pink (home of “Gene’s Po-Boy”) in a way that could only look good in New Orleans. Storehouses of this era and style are uncommon this close to the former swamp edge.

Reaching the North Roman intersection after eight blocks of mostly late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century back-of-town houses
Elysian Fields Avenue: Barometer of Urban Growth

At the North Roman intersection stands an ancient milestone of the Pontchartrain Railroad, its inscription “1 Mile From the River” now eroded away and covered with gangland graffiti. It is the last vestige of Western America’s first railroad. Photograph by author, 2004.

The overpass at Florida Avenue (called Marigny Avenue until 1924) marks where the Marigny Canal once joined a tributary of Bayou St. John and eventually flowed out to the lake. The street called Florida Walk, now Florida Avenue, parallels it. Still the canal flows here, a descendent of the drainage project that created Elysian Field Avenue. Still it separates sections of New Orleans: civilization and wilderness; history and modernity now. Coasting down the overpass into the former swampland drained in the 1900s, we see the twentieth-century landscape, with the oldest houses on each block dating to the Age of Jazz and the Depression rather than the Age of Jackson and the Civil War. And see these are the exceptions: aerial photographs captured in 1949 show the blocks south as grassy lots; full development came in the following decade. As recently as World War II, this back-of-town section of Elysian Fields (specifically, North Prieur to Florida Avenue) was the only portion of the avenue proper that was significantly or predominantly black in its residential population. Most blocks riverside of this low-lying section were, with some exceptions, white, while those northward toward the lake were either totally white or still vacant. Today, white transplants and some black locals predominate in the Faubourg Marigny end of the avenue, while poorer African Americans generally remain in the former back-of-town by the interstates and Florida Avenue. From Gentilly to the lake resides a large middle-class black population, including many Creole families.

At the North Roman intersection stands an ancient milestone of the Pontchartrain Railroad, its inscription “1 Mile From the River” now eroded away and covered with gangland graffiti. It is the last vestige of Western America’s first railroad. Photograph by author, 2004.
Because the Gentilly Ridge was the only part of lakeside Elysian Fields that rose above the swamps, it hosted houses long before immediately adjacent swamps were developed. Some older structures still stand near the Gentilly Boulevard intersection, such as these shotgun houses. Photograph by author, 2003.

Ahead, a few blocks of circa-1940 cottages in Spanish Revival and California-style designs, the Gentilly Boulevard intersection appears. The terrain below is the Gentilly Ridge, formed as the natural levee of the old Bayou Gentilly, a few thousand years earlier, of the Mississippi River itself. To slight strain from the sub-sea-level lowlands to the three-foot-high ridge is imperceptible to a cyclist, but not to surface water: the Gentilly Ridge was the only dry ground between river and lake and thus hosted an early community and stopped on the Pontchartrain Railroad. It was here that the company bought the Darcantel plantation house and used it as a bunkhouse for its employees. Today the intersection of Elysian Fields and Gentilly Boulevard is a grotesque spectacle of aging strip malls and jumbled billboards, but, peopled by a genuinely local crowd, there is a certain unpretentious authenticity to it, and it is appealing. The blocks immediately lakeside of the Gentilly intersection provide refuge from the sun and commotion; here, the neutral ground supports sumptuous magnolias proximate enough almost to form a canopy. On one side are the Ahavas Sholem, Anshe Sfard, Beth Israel, and Jewish Burial Right cemeteries, all with east-facing below-ground tombs, in the Judaic custom, situated here to exploit the well-drained soils. Among the graveyards is the Seventh Day Adventist “New Life” Church, and across the street is the Brother Martin Catholic High School, with pearl-white statues of the Virgin Mary and Jesus. This microcosm of New Orleans religious culture is juxtaposed against the fact that near this spot, in 1862, was built a small fortification to defend Confederate New Orleans from Union penetration via the Pontchartrain Railroad ingress. No trace of the fortification remains.

For the architectural barometer, the housing stock on the Gentilly Ridge is, expectedly, somewhat older than that of the former swamp blocks, because those few extra inches of elevation allowed for urbanization prior to municipal drainage. Elysian Fields from this point northward exhibits pre-World War II housing—most notably Spanish Revival cottages, some of them quite grand—up to about the Fillmore intersection, after which ranch houses predominate and a suburban motif prevails. Approaching the streets of old Milneburg, which mostly retain their original 1830s names, no evidence of the white-washed hotels and billiard halls remains from the antebellum and Victorian eras. The neighborhoods known as St. Anthony and Milneburg today (which both oc-
Architectural eras manifested along Elysian Fields: late twentieth-century ranch houses at the lake end of the avenue (above)...

...early twentieth-century Spanish Revival and California bungalows near the Gentilly Ridge (above), and nineteenth-century Creole cottages and shotgun houses near the river (below). Photographs by author, 2004.

Epilogue: If Elysian Fields serves as a barometer for two hundred years of urban growth, it was a depth gauge for the floods that followed Hurricane Katrina. The avenue transects the elevational range of the city, from the crest of the riverfront levee to the back-of-town lands to the manmade lakefront. The avenue's uplands fared well during the ordeal, but the low-lying twentieth-century developments were inundated by up to five to six feet (rescue boats traveled the corridor like the railroad once did), and may face partial demolition. Once again, there will be open land along Elysian Fields Avenue—but not for long. The convenience of this spacious ingress and egress will probably attract residents back to its flanks, and Elysian Fields will record yet another chapter in the history of New Orleans' urban growth.
Elysian Fields Avenue serves as a barometer of New Orleans' expansion from the natural levee in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries into the drained swamp in the twentieth century. This map shows the relationship between elevation and architecture on Elysian Fields in its south-to-north run from river to lake. Map and analysis by author based on field observations in 2003.

Elysian Fields Avenue serves as a barometer of New Orleans' expansion from the natural levee in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries into the drained swamp in the twentieth century. This map shows the relationship between elevation and architecture on Elysian Fields in its south-to-north run from river to lake. Map and analysis by author based on field observations in 2003.
Though separated by 150 years and five miles, these historical and modern structures seem to share something beyond an address on Elysian Fields. At upper left is a circa-1820 Creole cottage (oldest on the avenue) near the river, compared to a 1960s ranch house by the lake. At lower left is an 1850s storehouse close to the river, compared to a modern bank near the lake. Photographs by author, 2004.
## Timeline: Emergence of Elysian Fields Avenue

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1718</td>
<td>New Orleans established.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1740s</td>
<td>Dubreuil excavates canal projecting straight north from sharp bend of Mississippi, to power sawmill on plantation immediately below New Orleans.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1798</td>
<td>Plantation and canal come into possession of Marigny family; canal is expanded.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1803</td>
<td>Urban growth after Louisiana Purchase creates demand for new residential development.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1805</td>
<td>Marigny hires Finiels to design Faubourg Marigny; canal corridor becomes Champs Elysées (Elysian Fields); centerpiece of suburb.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1807</td>
<td>Lafon lays out street network of Faubourg Marigny; house construction begins.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1815</td>
<td>Buildings along Elysian Fields from river to present-day Rampart (mile 0.42); undeveloped blocks laid out up to North Prieur (mile 1.0).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1828</td>
<td>Lower-city businessmen refused to build railroad to Pontchartrain; view access to potentially lucrative lake-coastal trade.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1829</td>
<td>New Orleans Railroad Company formed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1830</td>
<td>Steamers take on passengers, goods, produce from New Orleans Canal and Banking Company. New Basin Canal in Faubourg St. Mary, designed to compete with Pontchartrain Railroad and to provide a new route for trade to Lake Pontchartrain, is completed. Elysian Fields Avenue is opened. Like most other subdivisions land and final major urban development along Elysian Fields.</td>
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<td>1832</td>
<td>Wood-bred steam locomotive is introduced to Pontchartrain Railroad. Old sawmill, though Marigny Canal remains.</td>
</tr>
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<td>1834</td>
<td>Blocks placed along Elysian Fields from river to Abundance Street (mile 0.6), though housing construction is limited to riverside blocks.</td>
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<td>1835</td>
<td>From January to June, 552 steamboats, schooners, packets, sloops, barges, and other vessels arrive at Port of New Orleans from Baton Rouge area eastward to Mobile and Florida Gulf Coast. Over 13,000 bales of cotton, lumber, firewood, shingles, fill, merchandise, and thousands of passengers, not to mention exports, make way down Elysian Fields' tracks.</td>
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<td>1850s</td>
<td>New Orleans, Mobile and Chattanooga Railroad connecting New Orleans and Gulf Coast, diminishes importance of Pontchartrain Railroad. Milneburg becomes a resort town from which railroad makes its 1862-1865 runs.</td>
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<td>1855</td>
<td>Lighthouse built off shore at Milneburg.</td>
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<td>1862</td>
<td>Fortification built on Elysian Fields at Gentilly to prevent Union incursion on railroad.</td>
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<td>1863</td>
<td>Developed blocks along Elysian Fields from North Rocheblave to North Miro Street (mile 1.2).</td>
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<td>1870s</td>
<td>City and neighborhood residents begin long legal battle with railroad for control of Elysian Fields neutral ground; lasts until 1930s.</td>
</tr>
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<td>1878</td>
<td>Buildings line Elysian Fields from river to backwamp at Florida Walk (mile 1.62). Gentilly Ridge and Milneburg are also developed by 1878.</td>
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<td>Louisville &amp; Nashville acquires Pontchartrain Railroad; keeps line in operation.</td>
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Urban Geographies
**UPTOWN/DOWNTOWN**

**SHifting PERCEPTIONS, SHIfTING LINES**

All but the smallest or most amorphous American communities perceive a "downtown" within their limits—an inner core from which the community grew, where major arteries intersect, where one finds principal offices and where businesses cluster (or once clustered). "Uptowns" are not as ubiquitous, pervading mostly in larger, older cities, and sharing less tangible but no less real characteristics: spacious residential living, an air of ambiance and sophistication, the mottled shade of mature hardwoods, and a younger urban infrastructure. Cities with universally recognized downtowns and uptowns seem to provide a more distinguished and interesting aura than less varied communities, giving newcomers a sense that a complex sociology and history have unfurled here, that a certain mystery is only to locals persist. (This may explain why some up-nearly mobile cities declare their "Uptown"—capital U—through official channels, whether popular usage will reign it or not.) The monopoly of modern suburbs comes not solely from the homogeneity of the housing stock and predictability of the commercial strips, but also from the lack of perceptive regions within; it's all the same, developed about the same time, in the same style, with no particular characteristics differing one area from the next.

Not so New Orleans. One is hard-pressed to identify another American city with a more profound sense of downtown and uptown. Even Manhattan falls short. These areas are truly regions, a mind in the Crescent City, upvasting up vastly different images and informing many aspects of the city. History, architecture, infrastructure, poverty and wealth, race, region, and ethnicity. Social scenes and gang rivalries. Angry Cricket.**

**Music.**

Roofscapes and streetscapes. Mardi Gras and an unhealthy dose of commotinous exhaust in downtown (particularly the French Quarter) recalls the emanations of Taguigalpa or Quito or Mexico City. Uptown, particularly in the affluent areas, the fragrance of flowering gardenias and sprawling oak trees reflects the fields and forests of the Felicianas. Even the street residents, urban wildlife, reflect the distinction: hard-knock pigeons abound in the ancient streets and buildings of downtown, where squirrels are a rare sight; in leafy uptown, the ratio reverses. Travelling from downtown to uptown in New Orleans is a journey from the old to the new, from the city to the country, from the Caribbean to the American. Everyone has his or her own idea of where downtown becomes uptown, and how a sort of world lies on the other side; these perceptions in turn inform one's perception of the city. Wrote Elsie Martinez and Margaret LeCorgne of their Depression-era childhood memories of the city, "we discovered that while we shared the same unique culture and customs of New Orleans, we often experienced them differently. One of us had an 'uptown' experience and the other had a 'downtown' experience."146

Such strong senses of place pique the curiosity. What is the provenance of the downtown/uptown discourse? Where exactly are downtown and uptown, and how have these men-

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144 Elsie Martinez and Margaret LeCorgne, New Orleans Jazz: A Family Album (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 2004).

145 The French Quarter and all uptown (three prosperousavity-white areas) from his world. Note also how he perceives the nearby Industrial Canal as wider than the inaccessible Mississippi River. A similar "mental map" drawn by an elderly lifelong resident, or a tourist would reveal significant differences in geographical perception. Adapted from hand-drawn map. Special thanks to B.G./CBR Junior SEED Program, 2004.
tal regions changed over time? And what do these perceptions reveal about New Orleans?

**Origin of the Perception**

Two hypotheses explain the origin of this uniquely American perception. According to urbanist Robert M. Fogelson, the term *downtown* originated during the early nineteenth century as an allusion to the southward location of the city's inner core. Northward, there was “up,” and when New York's booming commercial sector pushed residents out of the southern tip by the mid-nineteenth century, new residential areas blossomed northward on the island of “uptown.” The second hypothesis views the term as a reference to the local hydrology. Since most of America's cities abutted rivers, original city centers tended to be downstream, while later developments expanded upstream, in the flow-direction of the river. In time, these references evolved into “downtown” and “uptown.” The hypotheses are not incompatible (as the case of New York), but neither explains why we refer to downtowns and uptowns in many American cities today, regardless of cardinal directions and flow directions. "downtown" and "uptown" terms spread to various American cities in the mid- to late-nineteenth century and conveyed the same meaning for the common phenomenon of a dense, inner commercial core adjoined by a spate of outer residential zones. New Yorkers probably introduced this vocabulary to the Crescent City as they visited other cities on long-term business trips or moved there permanently to small towns, boasting all the outer commercial districts, lending only claim to their downtowns, but larger cities with suburbanization histories often developed perceptions of their own districts as well. Both terms spread to various American cities in the mid- to late-nineteenth century, regardless of their orientation or hydrology.

A series of circumstances allowed downtown/uptown perceptions to take hold in the Crescent City. Not among them were the cardinal directions: New Orleans faced northward, and northward, when the Faubourg Tremé was founded in 1810, but only after two earlier suburbs (Faubourgs Ste. Marie and Marigny, 1788 and 1805) developed to the southwest and northeast of the original city. Most subsequent urban expansions throughout the nineteenth century continued a southward direction, because the natural levees on the Mississippi avoided more well-drained land there than the narrower levees to the east, or the slight slope of the natural levee to the north. To this day, cardinal directions are rarely used in the streets of New Orleans, and they clearly did not inform local perceptions of downtown and uptown.

Flow direction of the Mississippi, on the other hand, spoke explicitly in terms of "down" and "up," and since the southwestern spread of the city equated to an upriver spread, the new semi-rural faubourgs became known as the "upper" portion of the city. Points east of the original city were, for the same hydrological reason, described as "lower." These directional terms were used as abstractions ("up the street," "the street behind") or as adjectives ("upper part of the city," "Upper Banlieue," "Lower Banlieue").

The "street" forms of this perception—"uptown" and "downtown," which carry deeper connotations than the directional labels—seem not to have emerged from this hydrological observation, but rather by introduction from Northerners who settled New Orleans during the high antebellum era. Considering that New York could be used liberally to New Orleans' growing Anglo-American population, and that Manhattan had particularly strong commercial ties to the Crescent City, the terms probably came with New Yorkers as part of their cultural baggage that also contained the English language, Protestantism, and Greek Revival architecture, common law, and other American traits. "Uptown" and "downtown" were, after all, English words in a French-speaking city, indicating that they were not indigenous concepts. The timing seems to corroborate this hypothesis: "downtown," according to Fogelson, emerged in New York in the early nineteenth century, while "uptown" followed around the same time when New Yorkers poured into New Orleans and the city grew drastically in the upriver direction. These years also saw the installation of the streetcar system, which initiated development of a "streetcar suburb's" so populated with many Northerners and now closely associated with the image of uptowns. Before long, the imported uptown/downtown terminology aligned with New Orleans' new spatial self-perception. An example of early usage appeared in an anecdote published in the *Daily Picayune* in 1845:

> Some of our "down-town" negroes, whose vernacular language is the French, have a newfangled way, very often, of translating their ideas into English.

At the risk of reading too much into one example, note the quotations around *downtown* (hyphenated in that nineteenth-century way), perhaps indicating that this was new jargon, heard enough to be used but not enough to be used inconspicuously. Note also the us-and-then viewpoint, "us" being the level-headed English-speakers on the upper side of town (the *Picayune* at this time was on the 300 block

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148 Ibid., 11.

150 The Upper Banlieue, *Picayune* column, April 18, 1845, "City Intelligence" column.
Uptown/Downtown: Shifting Perceptions, Shifting Lines

of Camp Street), and “them” being those strange Frenchmen on the “down-town” side, struggling with a new tongue with amusing results.

The Daily Orleanian, which served the Third Municipality below Esplanade Avenue, provided an example of usage from the downtown perspective. It stated that, in the wake of the 1849 Sauvé Crevasse flood, “people up-town are complaining of the want of tenements.... We would advise such persons, by all means, to come down here, where residences can be had on reasonable terms...compared with the rents demanded and obtained uptown.” Another example appeared in the Daily Picayune in 1850, noting the “large semi-autonomous municipalities, antiquated old terminology and led people to adopt the more stable and evocative terms of uptown and downtown. Use of that lexicon was sufficiently apparent to a tourist in 1869 to warrant mention in a letter to Vanity Fair."

You cannot help observing a change when, after strolling about the business and American quarter, you step over [Canal Street] and promenade in the Canal Quarter. The term “down-town” was adopted the term of “down-town” for the latter, and it now their own residential quarter as “ uptown.” Note also the clear implication that this was an American import. Another example comes from J. Curtis Waldo’s Illustrated Visitors’ Guide to New Orleans (1879), which described the location of a particular market as “considered very far uptown” when first built. But Waldo’s work—an early example of a tourist guidebook, as we known them today—did not consistently use the downtown/uptown dichotomy in regionizing the city for newcomers, something that is standard practice in today’s equivalents. Nor did his antebellum predecessors: the travelogues of John H.B. Latrobe (1834), Joseph Holt Ingraham (1835), H. Didimus (written 1835-1836), James S. Buckingham (1842), Benjamin Moore Norman (1855), and A. Oakey Hall (1851) made no reference to “uptown,” or “downtown,” in describing the city for the reader. One explanation is that these works only passed on the already established terminology used in the city directories of that era. The Historical Sketch Book and Guide to New Orleans and Environs (1885) introduced readers to myriad ways to divvy up the city—by wards, neighborhoods, districts, ethnic patterns, and uses such as “commercial” or “residential.”

153 “City Intelligence,” column, p. 2.
155 The reference was to St. Mary’s Market, on Tchoupitoulas between St. Joseph and present-day Howard Ave, considered to be in the Warehouse District—and downtown. J. Curtis Waldo, Illustrated Visitors’ Guide to New Orleans (New Orleans, 1879), 44.
tre of the city” were used.357 Into the early twenty-first century, documents such as a 1904 streetcar map likely discerned the “American section of the city” from the “French section of the city,” even though these ethnic associations were fading by that time.358 One unusual usage occurred in the title of King Saxon’s 1890 impressionistic painting, *Uptown Street*, which depicts a bucolic landscape in the rapidly developing area near present-day Audubon Park. Another appears in George Washington Cable’s 1880 novel, *The Grandissimes*, in which a reference to “that social variety of New Orleans life now distinguished as Uptown Creoles”159 counters the traditional association of Creoles with downtown.

Judging from the documents they left behind, then, nineteenth-century observers of New Orleans were more likely to regionize the city by:

- municipal districts, wards, faubourgs, or neighborhoods;
- cultural regions (“the Saxons of the Second Municipality...the Saxons of the First Municipality”116);
- flow direction (“upper faubourg,” “lower banlieue”); or
- age (“vieux carré de la ville,” “old square,” “new city”) than by “downtown” and “uptown.” These terms, while definitively popular by the latter half of the nineteenth century, did not carry the deeply connoted perceptions of place that they would assume in the twentieth century. Otherwise, it seems, they would have proliferated in the printed word of the day.

One way to quantify this perception is to count the number of businesses named “Uptown” or “Downtown” in annual directories. Entrepreneurs are usually quite savvy about public perceptions, making business names arguably a barometer of popular lexicon.160 A perusal of the city directories of 1861, 1869, 1877, 1883, 1910, 1911, 1935, 1940, 1947, 1955, 1962, 1969, 1977, 1993, 1994, and 2001 shows that the listed business, organization, or agency started the name with either “Uptown” or “Downtown” until around 1908. There were some early names “Upper” as in “Upper Station of City Police near Lee Circle, as far back as 1861 and probably earlier. But “upper” lacks the connotations of “uptown.” Looking at the span of the twentieth century, we see that the term became somewhat more popular toward the mid-1900s, but it is not until the late 1970s that the terminology really caught on among businesses (see graph).

Additionally, the absence of the regional perceptions of the past comes from news articles and the recollections of elders.

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158 “Down Town Also Wants That New Courthouse,” *Daily Picayune*, January 13, 1903, p. 5; and “Downtown Will Have the New Postoffice,” *Daily Picayune*, January 9, 1903, p. 5. I thank Mark Turner for bringing these articles to my attention.
Every New Orleanian perceives “uptown” and “downtown” differently, in terms of visual imagery, social connotations, and actual locations. One way to map the varying locations is to plot businesses with names incorporating the words “Uptown” or “Downtown.” In this analysis, we see that the traditional view of Canal Street as the uptown/downtown divide holds true until around 1970.


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Unquestionably, the original dividing line between downtown and uptown New Orleans was Canal Street. This perception predates the adoption of the Downtown/Uptown terminology: observers of early nineteenth-century New Orleans routinely described Canal Street as a dividing line between nearly everything that was old and Creole from all that was new and American (even though closer inspections would have revealed a culturally speaking, a blurrier separation). After the emergence of Downtown/Uptown, most descriptive accounts of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries continued to view Canal Street in that partitioning role (witness the 1869 *Vanity Fair* quote above). No less an authority than Charles L. Dufour wrote in 1986:

> Uptown includes the area up-river from Canal Street; Downtown embraces the area down-river from Canal Street. Each of these sections of New Orleans, while sharing many things in common, has a lifestyle of its own—folklore and folkways, customs and traditions which differ in detail, if not in principle. 164

Elsie Martinez and Margaret LeCorgne had no doubts about the dividing line between downtown and uptown in the circa-1940 New Orleans of their youth:

> We don’t think either of us at the time was aware of the “mystique” of Uptown New Orleans or the historical and cultural background of Downtown New Orleans. They were just the areas in which we lived and Canal Street was the dividing line between them. When one of us went to Canal Street she

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Many, perhaps most, New Orleanians retain this perception today, especially those who were born and raised in the city. Looking at the maps of business names, we see that the Canal-Street-as-division view holds true in the data until around 1970. That is, all “Downtown”-named businesses were located below Canal Street, and all “Uptown”-businesses lay above Canal—usually far above. But something occurred by the early 1970s that apparently altered people’s perceptions. By that decade, the blocks immediately above Canal Street—that is, the former Faubourg St. Mary, a.k.a. the American Quarter, a.k.a. uptown—seem to have been annexed into downtown! Why? A number of transformations occurred in this era that may have served to expand their perception of downtown beyond Canal Street. First, in the late 1950s, the Pontchartrain Expressway was built parallel to Howard Avenue to connect with the new Mississippi River bridge to Algiers. This elevated expressway established a stark, conspicuous barrier between the predominantly commercial zone below it and the mostly residential area above it—a barrier that separates two regions more physically disparate than those abutting Canal Street. Second, from 1965 to 1989, New Orleans’ skyline rose from a modest profile of 1920s-era office buildings to a jagged silhouette of modern skyscrapers. The presence of ninety-four high-rises (not to mention the Superdome) sealed the transformation of this area from a historical residential uptown to an indisputable Central Business District of bright sunlight, stark shadows, glass boxes, and concrete canyons, a place that anyone would identify as a modern American downtown. “The skyscraper had [an] important role in the development of a consensus urban core in large American cities,”167 serving “to anchor the central business district,”168 observed urban geographer Larry Ford. Use of “Downtown” and “Uptown” in Business Names, New Orleans, 1861-2004

If business names are any guide, the uptown/downtown terminology in New Orleans has grown increasingly popular in the past century, despite the decline in New Orleans’ population by 25 percent since 1960. Reasons for the recent drop in “downtown”-named businesses are unclear. Graph and analysis by author.

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165 Ibid., xii.
166 Based on Emporis Building Database’s definition of “high rise” as a building at least twelve floors (about 114 feet) high. Most, though not all, of these structures are located in New Orleans’ CBD. See “skyline ranking” system listed New Orleans as nineteenth in the nation, and seventieth in the world, in terms of the visual impact of its skyline—surprisingly high for a relatively small, poor Southern city. Hong Kong and New York, incidentally, ranked first and second, with 7,254 and 5,321 high-rises. Emporis Building Database, “Skyline Rankings,” http://www.emporis.com/en/bu/sk/st/sr, 2004.
Ford, adding that the downtowns of Philadelphia, Cleveland, and New York have also shifted with the rise of new skyscrapers. Thirdly, this era saw the beginning of the three-year decline of Canal Street from a regionally famous uptown shopping district to a raffish main drag of low-end retailers. Most streetcar lines were removed from the thoroughfare in 1964, and old-line department stores, restaurants, and other city institutions folded steadily into the late 1990s that almost none remained by the twenty-first century. The diminution of Canal Street may have erased the sophisticated air of the “Great Wide Walk” in the popular perception, robbing it of its Rubicon role and annexing it to the gritty realities of downtown. Finally, recent decades also saw the introduction of the international jargon Central Business District, the rise of preservation activism, the development of zoning regulations, and the establishment of the Downtown Development District, all of which insinuated the notion of downtown to this city in increasingly formal manners. As a result, the core is today, by the clear and overwhelming evidence of everyday usage, that the former Faubourg Marigny, today’s CBD, is not only downtown but the heart of downtown. Those people incorporating this usage in their speech, if pressed, generally identify the Pontchartrain Expressway as the new downtown/uptown divide. Whereas a century ago, people in the French Quarter would refer to Lafayette Square as “in uptown,” today Quarterites would think of Lafayette Square as “in the CBD,” whereas people in the modern uptown might think of the very same place as “in downtown.”

Yet a surprising number of locals still maintain the traditional view that Canal Street forms the division, pointing to the fact that the streets change names there (Royal becomes St. James, Decatur becomes Magazine, etc.) and that addresses, distances, and directions emanate from Canal Street. A representative of the Times-Picayune, to whom I posed the question, adamantly insisted that Canal Street was the only and only downtown/uptown divide and that he had never heard of any other usage—despite the fact that his newspaper routinely employs the modern usage. A survey of the 114 Times-Picayune pieces about New Orleans (1993-2004) that contained the word downtown in the headline showed that 72 percent either clearly stated or clearly implied that downtown spanned above Canal Street, usually the CBD and Warehouse District. Most of the remaining articles simply did not tie the term to specific sites or areas, an imply a very few cited below-Canal sites exclusively, either consciously or unconsciously, bowing upon the traditional definition. Pursuing the newspaper today, one would be hard pressed to find, for example, a new restaurant at St. Charles and Magazine described as an uptown bistro, or an incident at Faubourg and Girod characterized as a crime in uptown New Orleans. These locales are considered downtown today, even though they are on the uptown side of Canal Street. Other media embrace the new definition: the June 2000 issue of New Orleans Magazine featured a cover story entitled “The Lights Are Brighter Downtown” which celebrated the stylish mystique of downtown and delineated it as exactly the same area—the CBD—that an 1885 tour guide described as “Up-town.” That so many New Orleanians nevertheless cling to the old Canal Street view shows the power of tradition and perception in this city.

Those who disagree with both the Canal Street and the Pontchartrain Expressway perceptions point to a third corridor, Jackson Avenue, as the downtown/uptown divide. One use of this definition is by the Uptown New Orleans Telephone Directory & Internet Guide, which views Jackson as the lower edge of uptown, and defines the CBD as the upper edge of downtown, and entries such as St. Charles, but Washington Avenue from St. Charles to South Claiborne (which is seen as the rear edge). There is no historical precedence for this; Jackson Avenue will never a parish boundary, a district or ward line, nor even a line between Faubourgs. The im-

169 Lexis-Nexis Survey conducted September 1, 2004. Articles that maintained the traditional below-Canal Street usage of “downtown” were often written by Bettina Benoit, columnist for the Downtown Picayune supplement.
expression may derive from the fact that, starting in 1929, St. Charles Avenue below the Jackson intersection was zoned for light-industrial and commercial use, while, above, the avenue along Jackson retained its affluent residential ambiance. Since then, lower St. Charles Avenue suffered numerous demolitions of stately old homes and saw their replacement with modern brick commercial structures. Today, few people live in this stretch, no graceful canopy of oaks shades the street, and the ambiance is of a rather mundane commercial strip, saved only by the streetcar and an occasional surviving historical structure. Above the Jackson Avenue intersection, all this changes: St. Charles exhibits its full uptown glory, with all the accoutrements. That some people see the Jackson line as the downtown/uptown line may reflect this change in land use.

Louisiana Avenue seems the fourth disputed boundary, but this is Uptown with a capital “U,” an official designation rather than perception. The origin of this premise is the National Park Service’s Uptown National Register Historic District, which uses Louisiana Avenue, Tchoupitoulas Street, South Claiborne Avenue, and Broadway as the main boundaries. Visitors’ guidebooks have adopted this interpretation of Uptown for the sake of clarity. Gray zones and fuzziness are the norm in the perception of places, but they are anathema to those who seek to commodify and manage. This Uptown for the sake of clarity. Gray zones and fuzziness are the norm in the perception of places, but they are anathema to those who seek to commodify and manage. This Uptown for the sake of clarity. Gray zones and fuzziness are the norm in the perception of places, but they are anathema to those who seek to commodify and manage. This Uptown for the sake of clarity. 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ton Spur,” again echoing the topographically bounded confines of the historical city.

**Implications of the Perceptions**

Every New Orleanian carries his or her own mental map of downtown and uptown, along with certain implications associated with those regions. Speculations on what those connotations may be:

**History** — The maps indicate that New Orleanians use downtown/uptown, regardless of exact limits, to refer to the older, historical, architecturally significant sections of the city, to the exclusion of the mid-twentieth century subdivisions on the lakeside area and southern sections of the parish. The terms seem to be reserved for those picturesque neighborhoods that made New Orleans famous, where they resist application to places with ranch houses and cul-de-sacs.

**Foliage** — Perhaps the single most dominating characteristic of uptown is the prevalence of mature trees, often forming a veritable forest. This distinction can be traced back to the American preference for spacious, set-back homes with trees. Such a sight in downtown New Orleans is about as common as a squirrel, which is to say, rare but not wholly unheard of. Downtown, for the most part, exhibits a more urban character, where structures and open sky dominate the vistas overhead, and where one is much more likely to see cliff-loving pigeons than tree-dwelling squirrels. Populace perceptions of downtown and uptown in New Orleans may be predicated on this dramatic difference in the cityscape. It may also explain why Central City may not be universally considered “uptown” despite its upper location. It lacks trees and exhibits an inhospitality aesthetic of a downtown neighborhood. But by some hypothesis, oak-lined Esplanade Avenue might be considered “uptown,” which is certainly not.

**External and Indigenous Influences** — Esplanade Avenue offers an interesting test case to help deconstruct how New Orleanians use this terminology. If one understands “uptown” by either of the original Manhattan meanings—a residential area forming northward of the original city—or an affluent residential area, then Esplanade Avenue would qualify as “uptown” on both accords. Its mansions were even built at the same time, and in the same mix of international architectural styles, as those in uptown. Yet no one ever describes Esplanade Avenue as uptown, at least not within the city. This suggests that New Orleans’ adoption of downtown/uptown terminology, though not its provenance, has been adapted to account for river-flow direction, location with respect to Canal Street, and possibly other factors. Like New Orleans itself, uptown and downtown are amalgams of external and indigenous influences.

**Race and Class** — In the modern American parlance, the adjective *inner-city* often serves as a euphemism for poor and black, while “suburban” implies wealthier and white. Downtown/uptown carry somewhat similar connotations, both in New Orleans and nationwide. A study conducted in New York City in the 1960s suggested that uptown/downtown lifestyle differences were primarily rooted in “differences in class, ethnicity, and family status,” not simply distance from the urban core. But that sense in New Orleans is not borne out by statistics. While 2000 census data shows a generalized correlation of majority-white areas with downtown and majority-black areas blocks with downtown, there are so many significant exceptions—many riverside and “black-of-town” portions of uptown are black, while the affluent “uptown” area in the Uptown area is one of the whitest neighborhoods in the city—that usage of downtown/uptown to infer white/black is at most, metaphorical. But metaphors are not trivial: one often hears references to the “bluebloods,” “the downtown Creole community,” “the uptown aristocracy,” and other perceptions that speak volumes about the subtle social and geographical tensions in this city. There is no question that uptown, past and present, is generally wealthier than downtown. Racial distributions are constant as well: uptown is more “clumped” than downtown is more intermingled. Uptown/downtown dichotomies have informed the spatial distribution of a number of ethnic groups in the city’s history—Anglo-Saxons and Creoles, Reform Jews and Orthodox Jews, and African Americans and Creoles of Color.

**Persistence of the Spatial Perception**

Since the city’s first expansion in 1788, New Orleanians have perceived urban space many ways: by faubourgs, municipalities, districts, and wards; by church and school districts; by ethnic associations; by neighborhood and atmosphere; by nodes and nuclei; and by relative position vis-à-vis Canal Street, the lake, or the river. The perceptions vary over time and within sub-divisions of the population. Today, for example, native-born New Orleanians are more likely to reorganize the city by wards, church parishes, and school districts, while transplants tend to favor recently revived historical names, like Faubourg St. John or Faubourg Tremé. What is the Seventh Ward” to a native-born black Creole may be “the Jazz Fest neighborhood” to a white transplant; while the “upper Ninth Ward” to the working class may be “sweater” to artists and bohemians. Many people spatially perceive the city by means of nodes such as favorite restaurants, stores, and nightspots, forming a perceptual map that can be shared within one’s social network, but not necessarily beyond it.


Cityscapes uptown (left) and downtown (right) along the St. Charles Avenue-Royal Street corridor. Today and historically, the two major uptown/downtown divisions are the elevated Pontchartrain Expressway and 171-foot-wide Canal Street, pictured at center below. French Quarter rooftops by Ronnie Cardwell, 2004; all others by author, 2003-2004.
particularly old-timers, are often unfamiliar with the trendy faubourg names, and many recently arrived transplants are at a loss when asked what ward they live in. A century ago often identified themselves by referencing neighborhood landmarks: the “St. Mary’s Market Gang” and “Shot Tower Gang,” for example, were named for prominent features in the Irish Channel area. Gangs today usually spatialize their identity by ward (e.g. “10th Ward Posse”), something regularly seen in graffiti and on commemorative T-shirts sold at gangster funerals. Wards often pop up in rap song titles and lyrics; one rapper in 2005 dubbed himself “Fifth Ward Weebie.” Preservationists and real estate agents, on the other hand, are universally enamored with mellifluous historical monikers, under the theory that most people would rather live in “the Faubourg Bouligny” than in “the Thirteenth Ward.” Many older members of the black community still speak of the “back-of-town” and “front-of-town,” even though the backswamp that gave meaning to those terms has long been drained away.

Overriding all these regions is the uptown/downtown dichotomy, which, since its antebellum inception, has grown all the more popular in the past century. The graph Use of “Downtown” and “Uptown” in Business Names, New Orleans, 1861-2001 shows the increasing usage of this terminology in recent decades, despite the decline in New Orleans’ population by 25 percent in that same period. The relevance of this dichotomy and the chasm they describe seem to grow only more real over time. Geographical homogenization, the norm in the United States, poses no threat to this diversity. However, the perceived dividing lines between these places—Canal Street, Pontchartrain Expressway, Garden or Louisiana avenues—may soon homogenize. In the early 2000s, the Downtown Development District, the city agency tasked to improve conditions in the area between Canal Street and the Pontchartrain Expressway, erected “Welcome to New Orleans-Downtown” signs at strategic points in the shadows of the Pontchartrain Expressway. In the first time, the downtown/uptown perception is now literally demarcated in the streetscape, perhaps eventually muting debate about where the division lies. This geographer hopes not: the rich diversity of adamantly defended perceptions reveals more about this people and this place than a line on a map or a sign on a street.

And what is the meaning of these perceptions of place, with all their history and connotations and controversies? That New Orleans is, indeed, a world unto itself.


“Gus Laurer-Irish Channel,” April 29, 1941, Lyle Saxon interview manuscript, Federal Writers’ Project Folder 81, 1.

The Downtown Development District’s official delineation of downtown uses Canal Street, North Claiborne Avenue, the Pontchartrain Expressway (to South Rampart Street), Howard Avenue (from South Rampart to Lee Circle), the Pontchartrain Expressway again, and Convention Center Boulevard, as its boundaries.
WHAT THE YELLOW PAGES REVEALS ABOUT NEW ORLEANS

In the 1950s, the academic discipline of geography underwent a “quantitative revolution,” a lunge toward the use of numbers, statistical methods, and hypothesis testing, at the expense of traditional descriptive approaches. Out went the pipe-smoking, knapsack-toting field geographer of old, with his hand-drawn maps and informant interviews; in came the number-crunching bean counter, with her abscissa, correlation coefficients, and eigenvectors. With the advent of mainframe computers in the 1960s, a generation of young geographers schooled in quantitative methods delved ravenously into the reams of numerical data produced by an increasingly information-based society, seeking to identify and explain the spatial patterns of the world.

It didn’t work. If patterns emerged from the statistics, it still took traditional descriptive methods to understand and explain them. If patterns did not emerge, all the more so. Neither quantitative nor qualitative methods could claim a monopoly on the truth, and how play important roles in geographical analysis, optimally as complements rather than competitors.

One interesting example of both methods at work is sociologist John Shelton Reed’s classic 1976 study, “The Heart of Dixie: An Essay in Folk Geography,” and its 1988 follow-up, “The Dissolution of Dixie and the Changing Shape of the South,” both appearing in the academic journal Social Forces. Seeking to map the South as a cultural region rather than as a physical or historical one, Reed tracked use of the words “Southerner” and “Dixie” in relation to the word “American” in telephone-directory entries of selected American cities. If the South is “that part of the country where the people think they are Southerners,”180 then use of “Southern” as a measure of organization names is one reasonable measure of where this storied region lies. “Dixie” goes beyond “Southern” as a barometer of regional identity, connoting a sense of traditional affection and reverence for place as well as a certain level of defiance. “American” entries served as the control, on the assumption that this business name would occur consistently in most American cities, fluctuating primarily with population size and economic activity. After mapping Southern-to-American and Dixie-to-American ratios for ninety-

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eight cities nationwide, Reed came to the important conclusion that, essentially, there were few surprises. The definition of ‘the South’ based on the frequency of entries beginning with ‘Southern’ and ‘Dixie’...yields substantially the same results as earlier definitions based on quite different criteria. Alabama, the proverbial Heart of Dixie, proved true to the proverb by this method; Louisiana, with its Protestant north and Catholic south, straddled the edge of Dixie, also confirming perceptions. When Reed repeated the methodology in 1988, however, the findings challenged traditional notions of Southern regional identity: the South as mapped by “Southern” lost ground along its western, northern, and Florida fronts, while “Dixie” lost ground everywhere—especially in Alabama. Many scholars today believe that the South as a cultural region, while still strong, is diminishing in its distinctiveness. Reed’s clever technique produced intriguing quantitative perspectives on the changing notions of Southern regional identity, which he accompanied by descriptive analysis. It also showed that those pulpy yellow tomes that sit in our kitchen cabinets contain troves of seemingly mundane data that, in fact, reveal much about cultural-geographical distinction.

This chapter delves into the Yellow Pages and other sources to address, for New Orleans, a guiding question of geography: how do places differ from each other? The comparisons were made among the thirty-five largest incorporated places (as opposed to Metropolitan Statistical Areas, or MSAs) in the United States according to the 2000 census, rounding up after New Orleans’ rank as the thirty-first largest. Three disclaimers: First, one can only address, not answer, this question through such methodology. Societies are far too complex to expect patterns from the pages of telephone directories to decode them. Nevertheless, they shine new light on old adages, challenge assumptions, and provoke thought. Second, this methodology is biased against activities that are not represented as businesses or organizations with listings in the Yellow Pages. Readers will be alerted to this serious shortcoming as it arises in the pages ahead. Third, to extract the data, I used a technology woefully unavailable to Reed in his research: Internet-based Yellow Pages search mechanisms.

181 Ibid.

Because the thirty-five largest cities were ranked by population within city limits, rather than MSAs, metropolises such as Atlanta and Miami were not included in this study.
In most online Yellow Pages, searching “New Orleans, LA” or “Washington, D.C.” may yield unwanted results from nearby suburbs like Mandeville or Manassas. On the theory that outlying suburban areas may homogenize certain city characteristics and mask inter-city differences, I ensured (for some queries) that only those listings located within incorporated city limits were extracted, by querying with city-specific ZIP codes. Because Superpages.com allows users to search multiple zip codes, and because, in test cases, it yielded a minimum of duplicates and other “data artifacts,” I selected this mechanism for most of the maps that follow. Total population and per capita income for each city were also determined, to neutralize for population and wealth differences. With these data in hand, I searched on the selected phenomena for each of the thirty-five cities, summed the number of responses, eliminated duplicates and erroneous listings, coded the totals in a spreadsheet, neutralized them for population, and inserted maps to interrelate the patterns.

Which leaves the question, what phenomena shall we select? The possibilities are endless and interesting to debate. In judging distinction among places, one may instinctively start with standard socioeconomic measures such as population growth, per capita income, employment, and crime. But these data are readily available through standard sources, and reflect differences rooted primarily in economics, not culture. Columnist Lolis Eric Elie pointed out that New Orleans’ “vernacular culture—jazz, second-line parades and po-boy sandwiches—have risen to prominence among our defining features.” To address the more intriguing, less quantifiable cultural questions, I scrutinized these and other popular images of New Orleans culture—this being the putative “most interesting city in America,” whose name is practically yoked to the word “unique”—and pulled from them key indicators that may be found in the Yellow Pages. The City That Care Forgot? Count the number of bars and nightclubs. A city that lives in the moment, not particularly healthy or literate? Compute the number of health food stores and bookstores. Creole City? Birthplace of Jazz? Home of Mardi Gras? Count the number of businesses using the word “Creole,” “jazz,” and “Mardi Gras,” and see how they compare nationally. A clubby sort of town? Tabulate the number of fraternal organizations, lodges, and krewes. Restaurants, po’ boy joints, music stores, Creole-named businesses: popular imagery and mythology about New Orleans offer a plethora of indicators of cultural difference which may be compared to other

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American cities. The maps below provide no answers, but raise interesting questions.

Bars

On a per capita basis, the Yellow Pages in 2001 listed more bars for New Orleans—55.3 per 100,000 population—than any other city included in this study. A close second was San Francisco, with fifty-two per 100,000; these two cities were home to approximately double the rate of bar listings recorded for Denver, Boston, Portland, Phoenix, and Las Vegas, and over five times the rate of other large cities. This statistic corroborates popular perceptions of New Orleans as a drinking town, a reputation that dates back to at least the early nineteenth century. "More than 2,500 taverns are always filled with drinkers," commented the French geographer Eliseé Reclus during his 1855 voyage to New Orleans, "and fuel the most violent passions with brandy and rum." The city described as "The Cradle of Civilized Drinking,” is home to one of the oldest and most famous bars in the nation, such as Lafitte's Blacksmith Shop, the Old Absinthe House, the Napoleon House, and Pat O'Brien's. The cocktail is said to have been invented here, and the city now hosts a museum dedicated to the mixed drink. A coffee-table book celebrating the city's saloons, Obituary Cocktail, became a local bestseller in the late 1990s. Alcohol by the pint is sold at the most mundane public events, and first-time visitors are often stunned by the casual legality of open containers in the French Quarter. "Booze is part and parcel of just about every event and occasion in town, from debutante balls to jazz funerals to peewee league T-ball games," wrote columnist Chris Rose, with barely an ounce of hyperbole. The impression is not lost on the nation: a recent Internet survey of 500,000 people ranked New Orleans as America's number-one city for bar-hopping, nightlife, and dining out—and dead last, incidentally, in cleanliness.

Four factors are at work behind the pattern in the accompanying map (Bars per 100,000 Population), some cultural, others economic. Port cities as a general rule boast lively night scenes, with plenty of spirits and places to serve them. Historically, sailors at sea for weeks or months demanded such services immediately upon their arrival, and port cities

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What the Yellow Pages Reveals about New Orleans

happily obliged them, often calling off traditional bans on late-night and Sunday sales to accommodate those arriving at odd hours. (The words “Last call!” are rarely heard in New Orleans.) Port cities are also typically more cosmopolitan and liberal than interior cities. So we should not be surprised that New Orleans, San Francisco, and Boston score among the highest bar rates in the accompanying map. A second possible reason explaining New Orleans’ lead in this area is its Latin cultural connection, informed as it has been by the societies of France, Spain, Italy, the Mediterranean, and the Caribbean, where alcohol is viewed as part of the daily bread rather than an escapist’s vice. In Louisiana, one can buy hard liquor between the dairy aisle and the produce section in any supermarket; alcohol is found in K-Marts and Wal-Marts, and daiquiris in go-cups are sold legally at drive-through outlets. Cross into Mississippi and Arkansas, and one must visit special liquor stores for such beverages, usually highly taxed if they are legal at all in that county. Alcohol is simply part of the culture in Louisiana, and especially in New Orleans.

The economic factors behind the map include the fact that many, perhaps most of the Yellow Pages listings are for bars located in the French Quarter and CBD, catering to tourists and conventioneers and their “party town” expectations, rather than locals going out their lives. The perception of New Orleans as “The City That Care Forgot” may have developed over centuries vis-à-vis sailors and visitors letting loose in this remote and exotic port, but with the mechanization of shipping and the advent of other transportation options, those bar hoppers of old are gone, leaving only the reputation of a Sin City. The modern tourism industry enthusiastically exploits this historical reputation, creating an expectation of craziness that perpetuates the reputation, leading to greater expectations. The result: Bourbon Street, go-cups, a bar on every corner, and otherwise decent citizens indulging to such excess that puddles of vomit on the sidewalks have become a fact of life for French Quarter residents.

The per capita bar statistics for other cities in the map, particularly the surprisingly low rates of Chicago and New York and the high rates of Phoenix and Tucson, may be explained by an interplay of the above factors.

Restaurant Listings per 100,000 Population

Although world regards for the quality of its restaurants, New Orleans falls slightly short of its coastally cities in terms of the per-capita number of restaurants. San Francisco had exactly twice the relative number of restaurant listings than New Orleans. Data query was conducted through Superpages.com in February 2001.
New Orleans is a great literary city, inspiration to the likes of George Washington Cable, William Faulkner, and Tennessee Williams, but has never been a particularly literate city. The French colonial era passed in its entirety before the city’s first printing press began operation, and a local newspaper did not arrive until three-quarters of a century (1794) after the city’s founding. Libraries were even scarcer, according to a visitor in 1828:

“That which every town of 2,000 inhabitants is now provided with, a reading-room and circulating library, you would seek in vain in New Orleans. Though the Anglo Americans attempted to establish such an institution, which is indispensable in a great commercial city, it failed through the unwillingness of the creoles to trouble their heads with reading.”

The book scene had changed little by 1846, when Charles Lyell visited:

“The printing even of books of local interest is done by presses 2,000 miles distant.... There is only one newspaper in the [French Quarter], which I was told was a very characteristic of the French race; for, in the [American Sector], although...

189 This was the print shop of Denis Braud, which operated from 1764 to 1770. Douglas C. McMurtrie, *Early Printing in New Orleans 1764-1810* (New Orleans, 1929), 21-22.

190 Charles Sealsfield, *The Americans As They Are; Described in A Tour Through the Valley of the Mississippi* (London, 1828), 186.


No one reads in Louisiana!,” exclaimed one struggling book publisher in 1888. “There is here a prodigious apathy toward everything addressed to the intellect... scarcely sell one book per month.”

Public education has been neither a priority nor a forte from the eighteenth to the twenty-first century, and consistently ranks today as one of the city’s most vexing problems. Traditional literacy-rate studies quantify this phenomenon at the citywide level; in 1998, for example, 39 percent of New Orleans’ adult population were judged to be functionally illiterate. A recent University of Wisconsin study ventured beyond individuals’ reading skills to measure “literate-ness” of major American cities, based on the census, the Yellow Pages, and records of national associations of booksellers, periodicals, and library associations. Out of sixty-four metropolitan areas studied, New Orleans ranked fortieth in an overall list of “America’s most literate cities;
What the Yellow Pages Reveals about New Orleans

it was twenty-fourth and twenty-fifth in terms of booksellers and publications, thirty-first in terms of newspapers, fortieth in terms of education, and sixty-second in terms of libraries. The five “most literate” cities were Minneapolis (first), Seattle, Denver, Atlanta, and San Francisco.

A Yellow Pages survey of bookstore listings per 100,000 population of incorporated cities (excluding suburbs, unlike the University of Wisconsin study) substantiates New Orleans’ historical distinction as a not-particularly-literary city. Major cities of the east and west coasts (map, Bookstores per 100,000 Population) led in this category, with Washington, D.C., Boston, San Francisco, and Seattle having nearly triple the rate of bookstore listings as New Orleans’ 30.1 per 100,000 population. Clearly, there is a socio-economic factor at work here: New Orleans, like El Paso and Detroit in the map, has a low per capita income and a large population of uneducated poor, unlikely to buy and read books. For New Orleans, there may also be an age-old cultural factor at work. The Mediterranean and Caribbean societies that peopled the city in its formative years generally did not (and, arguably, still do not) hold education in the hallowed regard that Anglo societies did in places such as Boston, where a university was founded only sixteen years after the Pilgrims’ arrival. The number of bookstore listings in the Yellow Pages can only tell us so much, but this much is clear: New Orleans’ present-day public-education crisis has deep roots in the history, culture, and economics of the city.

**Ratio of Bars and Nightclubs to Bookstores and Health Food Stores**

Penitence and prayer! fasting and abstinence! in New Orleans! Pooh! the idea is preposterous! Party town? Not particularly literate? Music town? Fattest and least healthy city in America? Multiple indicators may be extracted from the Yellow Pages and computed in ratios to shed more light on the reputations of cities. In the accompanying map, Ratio of Bars and Nightclubs to Bookstores and Health Food Stores, the number of bar listings was added to the number of nightclubs and divided by the sum of bookstore and health-food store listings. Any sort of double-counting between bars and nightclubs is not a concern, since

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all cities would have been held to the same standard.) The results: New Orleans had, by far, the highest ratio between these two phenomena. All cities except New Orleans had more bookstores and health-food stores than bars and nightclubs; Detroit, at 0.84, came closest to a one-to-one ratio. New Orleans nearly doubled the one-to-one mark: the city proper had 1.84 bar and nightclub listings for every bookstore or health food store. Tourism undoubtedly inflates the numerator of this quirky statistic, while the city’s poverty rate helps deflate the denominator, thus producing a high ratio. But cultural factors are probably at play as well.

**Food and Restaurants**

“The joys of the table...are provided not only [in New Orleans’] many fine restaurants and in the clubs,” wrote a contributor to *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* in 1893, “but in a multitude of homes. No city has finer streets.” New Orleans is one of the great eating cities of the world...a city, for the present,” concurred food critic Richard H. Collin seventy-seven years later. It “enjoys the grand traditions of one of the few remaining specialized regional cuisines in the world—the Creole cuisine,” and maintains “a tradition of fine dining unknown to any other American city.” Indeed, the reputation of New Orleans as a food-centric, food-obessed city, home of the nation’s best and most famous restaurants, is a major source of civic pride. Food (as well as music) in south Louisiana play important roles in reflecting or constructing regional identity, with the underlying message being resistance to national homogenization and pride in “otherness.” Not coincidentally, food is also one of the tourism industry’s “trinity” of promoted attributes, along with architecture and music, and restaurateurs and the food industry form powerful lobbies in both the city and state. A query of the Lexis-Nexis archive of newspaper articles shows that far more news pieces have been written about New Orleans cuisine (322 since the 1970s; see map) than any other of the tested U.S. cities, even much larger ones.

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200 Queries of Lexis-Nexis database were performed on the city name plus the word “cuisine” (for example, “New Orleans cuisine;” “Seattle cuisine”) appearing anywhere in the text of the article, in the “Business” category of all major national newspapers, for all available dates, from the 1970s to 2004.
the “Fattest City in America,” and when it recently dropped from first to fifth place in *Men's Fitness* magazine’s annual survey, local wags decried it as a “downright embarrassing, slap in the face.”201 “The whole culture centers around eating and drinking,” observed one recent transplant in an article about gaining weight in New Orleans. “So you say you're new to the area? Noticed the po-boys, cream sauces and pralines around every corner?... Welcome to New Orleans, a tough place to manage your weight.”202 New Orleans may indeed be the only American city with a truly indigenous cuisine, and no one denies its weight problem, but claims about its cultural orientation toward food, and particularly eating out, invite a closer look.

The Yellow Pages shows that, contrary to image, New Orleans proper has only an average number of per capita restaurant listings (272 for every 100,000 population, excluding suburbs) compared to the thirty-five major American cities included in this study. The map entitled *Restaurant Listings per 100,000 Population* shows that major coastal cities of the Northeast and West Coast had significantly more than New Orleans, relative to population, and San Francisco in particular had double the rate. At first, I thought this shortfall might be explained by Orleans Parish’s relative lack of suburban-style arteries such as Veteran’s Boulevard in Jefferson Parish, which is lined with dozens of fast-food restaurants. Such eateries, which would be listed right alongside the most elegant dining establishments in the Yellow Pages, might inflate the number of restaurant listings for other cities. But a query of establishments in the “Restaurants-Fast Food” category failed to confirm this hunch (map, *Fast-Food Restaurant Listings per 100,000 Population*). New Orleans indeed has a less-than-average rate of fast-food listings, and many fewer than certain cities in the heartland, but not sufficiently less to explain the relative paucity of restaurants. These data accurately represent the true situation in New Orleans today, then the impression that restaurants abound citywide is a myth from a bygone era, or a false impression cast by certain high-profile areas—the French Quarter and CBD, or Magazine Street and the Garden District—where restaurants do indeed teem. That said, it must be stated clearly that this Yellow Pages methodology does not take into account restaurant quality, creativity, local ownership, or other angles in New Orleans’ alleged love affair with dining out. It also ignores completely those tiny mom-and-pop eateries operating out

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of corner stores, service stations, booths, and other venues ignores the Yellow Pages.

USDA data on expenditures on restaurant and take-out food (map, Per Capita Expenditures on Food Away from Home, which includes suburban areas) also fly contrary to expectations. The New Orleans metropolitan area spends less ($1,069 per person per year) than the average for the thirty-five major American cities ($1,193 per person per year) on prepared food purchased away from home. It appears that dining out is, quite rationally, more a function of economics than culture: those cities spending the most on restaurants (San Francisco, Seattle, Denver, and San Jose) had four of the five highest per capita incomes of the thirty-five cities studied. The poorest city of the lot, El Paso, spent the least on restaurants, and New Orleans—fourth poorest—spent the third least. Economics seems to trump culture when it comes to eating out.

Economics also seems to trump culture in terms of what is eaten. Is New Orleans “a seafood city?” Perhaps. Its favorite recipes and famous restaurants are not according to the pocketbooks of its citizens. The 1,342,218 residents of the metropolitan area spent $39,137,000 on seafood in 2001, equating to $29.16 per person per year, three dollars less than the thirty-five-city average, a third less than Boston’s $46.49, and only $5.20 more than the desert denizens of El Paso (map, Per Capita Seafood Expenditures). New Orleans a meat-lover’s paradise? Maybe in quantity, but not in expenditures (map, Ratio of Meat to Produce Expenditures). New Orleanians spent more on produce than meat, poultry, and seafood combined, as did most cities with the exception of Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and the reputedly health-conscious cities of the California coast. Such expenditure data does not tell the full story: one may eat large amounts of cheap meat and not “show up” in these USDA statistics. Likewise, coastal areas presumably have less expensive seafood and therefore may consume more for less money. Nevertheless, the relatively low per capita income of the New Orleans area renders its population a bit less extravagant and indulgent in its eating habits than the New Orleans mystique may lead one to believe. There is, however, one sub-category of meats in which the New Orleans market (generously defined to include all the way over to Mobile, Alabama) recently held a national lead: sausages. People along this swath of Gulf Coast purchased over twenty million pounds of dinner sau-

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All USDA expenditure data cited in this section are from the “Urban Demographics and Consumption Profiles” for metropolitan statistical areas in 2001, tabulated by the Agricultural Marketing Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.  
sage one recent year, more than metropolises of much larger sizes.205 One wonders, however, if this statistic would hold up if it were restricted to just Orleans Parish.

Detecting patterns in the styles of restaurant food served nationwide would offer a fascinating commentary on the culinary geography of this nation, and perhaps New Orleans’ role in influencing it. In 2004, a Yellow Pages-based methodology employed by the Deep South Regional Humanities Center at Tulane University found that barbecue restaurants were more likely to be found in interior Southern cities, and that New Orleans ranked dead last among the twenty-six Southern cities tested. (When the results were reported in the popular press, a minor citywide controversy ensued.206) The accompanying map, Popularity of Po’ Boy, Cajun-Creole, and French Restaurants, shows the relative occurrence of these three restaurant categories in thirty-five major American cities, with the total number of all three depicted in the size of the pie chart.207

Po’ boys, the ubiquitous overstuffed French-bread sandwiches, are said to have been created (or at least named) during the 1929 streetcar strike in New Orleans. The Martin Brothers restaurant, run by former streetcar conductors sympathetic to the strikers’ plight, “provided free sandwiches to the carmen during the duration of the strike. Whenever a striker would come by, one of the brothers would announce the arrival of another ‘poor boy,’ hence the sandwich’s name.”208 There are other stories, but all seem to agree that the po’ boy is a bona fide New Orleans invention, both in name and in that which distinguishes it from the hoagie, the sub, and the hero: the special un-tapered French bread, the generous heap of fried seafood or hot meat inside, and the lettuce and tomato “dressing.” Po’ boys are now offered on menus nationwide, at least in name. But po’ boy-named eateries, according to the Yellow Pages, seem to be clustered very close

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207 While the Yellow Pages maintains special categories for “Restaurants-Cajun-Creole” and “Restaurants-French,” allowing for easy tabulation, no such category exists for “po’ boy.” Instead, I queried all businesses with “po’ boy” in their name to tabulate the number of po’ boy joints. The difference of results should be kept in mind when viewing the map.
to the place of their invention, with New Orleans boasting
the largest absolute number (fifteen) and by far the largest per
capita number. The map may also reflect use of the term po’
boy, which is part of the lexicon here but an unfamiliar (and
slightly offensive) term in other parts of the country. Were
this survey to include all po’ boy shops, not just those with
po’ boy in their name, the results for New Orleans might fly
off the map. The Yellow Pages confirms that, whatever the
origin, New Orleans is the undisputed home of the po’ boy
(and, incidentally, its Sicilian cousin, the muffaletta).

“Cajun-Creole” restaurants (the two styles are indi-
cidentally lumped together in the Yellow Pages, despite their
significant differences, which predominate here, but the wide-
spread popularity of Cajun food since the 1980s has diffused
these Louisiana styles nationwide. The commodification of
Cajun-Creole dishes by national chains and by theme res-
aurants with a connection to New Orleans explains much of
the expanded nationwide distribution, though there are
some possible cultural patterns in the accompanying map as
well. Cajun-Creole restaurants do not seem to have reached
the Northeast as they have elsewhere and appear to be more
popular than French restaurants in the interior, while French
restaurants tend to outnumber Cajun-Creole places in the
more sophisticated and prosperous cities of the east and west
coasts. It is surprising that Los Angeles did not have more
Cajun-Creole restaurants, since it is home to a large popula-
tion of both Cajuns and Creoles of Louisiana origin and once
even boasted a “Little New Orleans” neighborhood within its
limits.209 It is interesting that, while New Orleans offers its
fair share of French restaurants, listings for its homegrown
cuisine—po’ boys, Creole, and Cajun dishes borrowed from
its rural neighbors—outnumber those for the foods of its co-
lonial founder by almost a three-to-one ratio. “For a city as
French as New Orleans,” noted Times-Picayune
food critic Brett Anderson in 2004, “there are relatively few French-style
restaurants to choose from.”210 New Orleans listed forty-one
Cajun-Creole restaurants, by far the largest among major
American cities in absolute terms and even more so on a per
capita basis, but its twenty-one French restaurants were sixth
on the list.

Music
Aficionados of the New Orleans music scene agree on
little regarding artists, styles, trends, venues, and making a
living playing music in this market. But most concur on two

209 Mary Gehman, The Free People of Color of New Orleans: An Introduction (New
Orleans, 1994).
210 Brett Anderson, “Foraging After the Fest,” Times-Picayune, April 23, 2004, La-
guise section.
What the Yellow Pages Reveals about New Orleans

points: New Orleans boasts a superlative musical heritage, contributing disproportionately to the world of music starting with religious and martial influences in the 1700s, operatic and compositional work in the 1800s—especially during the civil war—jazz in the 1900s, and rap and hip-hop today. Second, modern New Orleans has failed to capitalize on this legacy, losing its Music City reputation—and the attendant artists, producers, and dollars—to adroit rivals in other cities, namely Austin and Nashville.211 “I don’t know that there’s any city in the world that has more talent, than we have,” said Pulitzer Prize-winning jazz artist and New Orleans native Wynton Marsalis. “But no city in the world has done as sad a job of developing the talent.”212 The best source on today’s local music scene, Offbeat, a free monthly, documents well the controversial efforts to restore New Orleans’ former greatness in this area. The accompanying music-related maps seem to say that New Orleans has not only lost a tremendous opportunity, but, worse, may have also lost its own inherent musicality—this in a city where, it was once said, you could hold up a horn and it would practically play itself.

Total number of listings in the “Music” category of the Yellow Pages is perhaps the bluntest measure of a city’s musicality. It includes any entity with the word music associated with it: musicians, producers, and composers, musical instrument dealers, retailers, teachers, venues, and studios. Since all cities are held to the same standard, any over-counting or dubious inclusions should be neutralized. The per capita results for incorporated cities in 2003 (“Music” Listings per 100,000 Population) show that New Orleans lags behind the large, prosperous coastal cities, as one might expect for a small city in the Deep South. But a comparison to Austin and especially Nashville shows New Orleans to be far behind in a category that it once dominated. New Orleans listed about forty music-related entities for every 100,000 population, as the average for forty-five for the tested cities, and less than a quarter of Nashville’s 177 listings. Clearly, Nashville’s country music industry is reflected in that figure (not to mention the fact that its relatively small population jacks up its presence on the map, beyond the much larger music scenes of New York and Los Angeles). But the contributions to jazz and rhythm-and-blues made by New Orleans, also a small city, do not show up in an equivalent manner. Music

![Map of Music Producers, Consultants, and Services in the United States](image-url)

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Urban Geographies

A better gauge of a city’s musicality, corroborates the pattern. Again, New Orleans fell short (8.5 musical instrument store listings per 100,000 population in 2001) of the thirty-five-city average of 14.8. It trailed the big coastal cities and lagged well behind Nashville’s 32.1 stores per 100,000 population. The explanation of this trend may not be entirely attributable to poverty and lack of education. Much of New Orleans’ population was, relatively speaking, as poor and uneducated one hundred years ago, at the peak of the city’s musicality. Nor does the lack of a major music industry (as evidenced by the map of Music Producers, Consultants, and Services) fully explain this shortfall, as this too did not exist a century ago. It could well be that, while New Orleans still has a large, vibrant, and creative musical community, it is just that—a community of musicians, performing in venues in the French Quarter, Marigny, uptown, Mid-City, and on the festival circuit. The overall musicality of New Orleans’ larger population may have slipped to the levels of any randomly selected city. The same phenomena seems to have affected two other cities famous for their music, Memphis and Detroit, both of which have a minimal number of musical instrument stores relative to their populations.

But this may be an overly pessimistic interpretation. Using the Yellow Pages to shed light on this topic is biased toward commercial manifestations of musicality; only entities with enough wherewithal to warrant listing get counted. Missing are many of the marching bands, aspiring rap artists, Dixieland trios, and neighborhood music makers who fly beneath the radar of the Yellow Pages. Under-funded public school marching bands often reuse their instruments for many years, inferring that fewer instrument stores might be around to sell them new ones. Most musicians in the hip-hop, rap, and “bounce” genre, probably the most nationally influential musical contributions of the city today, come from the African American poor, which is more likely to be undercounted by this methodology. That New Orleans still retains a deep-rooted musicality is evidenced by its “second line” tradition, in which neighbors gather in the street and parade, usually to the oomp of a tuba and the blare of a trumpet, to commemorate an anniversary, a holiday, a slain comrade, or nothing in particular—a tradition that is unique in the nation, and, unlike many other New Orleans traditions, seems to be increasing in popularity.

Whatever the state of the city’s present-day musicality, the mystique of its historical musical achievements is well trumpeted today, as evidenced by the relative popularity of

"Jazz"-Named Businesses per 100,000 Population

This map shows the number of "jazz"-named businesses per 100,000 population in the United States. New Orleans has the highest number of such businesses, with over 30 per 100,000 population. The map also highlights other cities with significant jazz cultures, such as Seattle, Portland, and San Francisco. The map is sourced from data provided by the Yellow Pages, and the analysis was conducted by Richard Campanella. Please visit amazon.com for more information.
businesses using the word “jazz” in their names. In this regard, the New Orleans metropolitan area led major American cities, with nearly triple the rate of “jazz”-named businesses than San Francisco and six times more than New York. New Orleans music is also a popular subject of news articles; a query of the Lexis-Nexis database shows that more news articles have been written about New Orleans music (1,866 from the 1970s to 2004; see map, Number of National Newspaper Articles on Music of Specified Cities) than the music of New York, Los Angeles, and all other tested cities.

FRATERNAL ORGANIZATIONS

Is New Orleans a “club town,” a culture of “clubby clubs,” obsessed with society rituals and debutante parties? That is certainly the image, and during Carnival season, the city is like no other in the sheer pageantry of its krewes, parades, and balls. A Yellow Pages search on fraternal organizations, lodges, and krewes yielded inconclusive but nonetheless interesting information on how New Orleans compares to other cities in this regard (map, Fraternal Organizations per 100,000 Population). The problem is that the Yellow Pages is simply an inadequate source to measure this social phenomenon. The standard Yellow Pages categories of “Fraternal Organizations” and “Lodges,” which include Rotary Clubs and VFWs, do not do justice to New Orleans’ brand of clubs. Comparing the men’s clubs and sororities of Midwestern cities to New Orleans’ illustrious old-line organizations such as Rex, Comus, Le Petit Salon, and the Orléans Club, is to compare McDonald’s to Antoine’s. Besides, “krewes” as a term would rarely appear in the Yellow Pages listings of cities outside Louisiana and the Gulf Coast, and many krewes and private clubs within New Orleans are either secretive or otherwise uninterested in a Yellow Pages listing. New Orleans is genuinely a clubby kind of town? The question warrants further investigation. My sense is that the club scene in New Orleans is a bona fide distinguishing social phenomenon with deep roots in the city’s culture, but is gradually disappearing, as aging members of many old-line clubs are not replenishing their ranks with equally dedicated young people. As for elaborate social rituals, all one has to do is peruse the Social Scene column of the Times-Picayune anytime between Twelfth Night and Lent—or watch the televised “Meeting of
the Courts of Rex and Comus” on Mardi Gras evening—to gauge New Orleans' uniqueness in this regard.

**Maritime Attorneys**

New Orleans has long been home to a large and influential legal community, as a former capital of a colony, territory, and state; as a business center; and today as home to two major law schools (Tulane and Loyola, with LSU in the area), the Louisiana Supreme Court, and the U.S. Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals. Renowned legal minds such as Edward Livingston, Judah Benjamin, and A.P. Tureaud all practiced law in New Orleans. Louisiana’s civil law heritage, instilled by the French and Spanish regimes and producing today one of the most interesting mixed-jurisdiction legal systems in the world, also makes New Orleans a hub for students and practitioners of law. The New Orleans Bar Association claims over 2,500 judges and lawyers in their membership, and the Yellow Pages yields 4,330 attorneys for the city. But in one particular branch of law—maritime law—the New Orleans area had the highest per capita number of listings in any tested city (map, Maritime Attorneys per 100,000 Population). The city is home to the Tulane University Marine Law Center, which describes itself as “the premier institution for the study of maritime law in the United States” and publishes one of only four specialist maritime journals in the United States. New Orleans’ strategically located port and historically complex legal environment are manifest in this statistic.

**Structural Problems**

New Orleans’ soft alluvial soils have long challenged structural engineers. The most visible reflection of this geological reality is the relatively late arrival to New Orleans of modern skyscrapers, most of which were built in the 1970s and 1980s, years after similar buildings arose in other mid-sized American cities. Such projects depended on new piling technology that exploited the hard Pleistocene Epoch clays over a hundred feet below the surface. Less visible, but much more prevalent, is the leveling problems of smaller structures, from old townhouses on the natural levee to new ranch houses.
on drained swamplands. Soil subsidence affects many cities around the world, in coastal areas, deserts, and former lakebeds, where water tables have been lowered. Scientists measure subsidence in increasingly accurate terms using networks of Global Positioning Systems receivers, and it is the data that would determine if New Orleans' subsidence problem is indeed the worst in the nation. The accompanying map, "Shoring" (House Leveling) Listings per 100,000 Population, indicates the severity of the New Orleans metropolitan area's problem in terms of shoring specialists and contractors. It sustained nineteen Yellow Pages listings for shoring specialists, twice the absolute number of those in Phoenix and well ahead of all other cities in per capita terms. (Note the high numbers in other desert cities such as Las Vegas, Tucson, and Albuquerque.) One shoring company, Abry Brothers, has been in business locally since the 1840s, the same decade Antoine's Restaurant was founded; the two operations are now the oldest companies in New Orleans. Sinking houses and fine cuisine apparently make for job security in this city.

A semitropical environment, an immense inventory of old wooden buildings, and a busy shipping port have conspired to make New Orleans the unwilling home of a serious termite infestation problem. Native termites have caused their share of damage, but the accident arrival of invasive Formosan termites from East Asia, via shipping palettes unload ed originally in Houston during World War II, exacerbated the problem. Among the victims of the annual swarms are the city's most treasured attributes: historic landmarks, old houses, even its ancient live oaks. One estimate puts the costs of damage and control in New Orleans at $300,000,000 annually. Curiously, the map of "Pest and Termite Control" Listings per 100,000 Population does not indicate that New Orleans leads the nation in this regard. This may be explained in two ways: New Orleans' pest control specialists are few in number but large in operation. Or it may be that, as bad as the problem is in the city, it is actually a national problem, particularly in the warmer sections of the country. Formosan termites are now found throughout the southern tier of the continental United States, the same area that recorded higher numbers of listings of termite and pest control specialists.

NOMENCLATURE

How has New Orleans culture diffused through the nation? Its contributions to national and world culture exceed those of most American cities its size. It is regularly recognized as one of the truly American contributions to the arts; Mardi Gras celebrations have recently diffused inland to cities with no Carnival traditions (and not necessarily to
the advantage of either Mardi Gras or those cities). And New Orleans cuisine, coupled with recent interpretations of Cajun cooking, may be found in supermarket shelves and restaurant menus from Miami to Fairbanks.\(^{219}\) The influence of New Orleans on American culture awaits a thorough scholarly investigation, but it is safe to say that whatever its findings, the words jazz, Creole, and Mardi Gras will figure prominently in that tome. The Yellow Pages sheds some light on the use of these three code words in business names nationwide (map, "Jazz"-, "Creole"- and "Mardi Gras"-Named Businesses). With the exception of the desert Southwest, all three terms were found nationwide. All three were equally popular in New Orleans, where 104 businesses used them as names in 2003. "Mardi Gras" seemed to be popular in California and the Northeast, while "Creole" was often used in New Houston and sporadically throughout the nation. The absence in Southwestern cities may reflect their larger Hispanic immigrant populations, which may be less familiar with popular New Orleans imagery. The overall results generally correlate well with the findings. Number of "New Orleans"-Named Businesses.

These maps may underreport the true cultural impact of New Orleans upon America. The words jazz, Creole, Mardi Gras, and New Orleans all have widespread cachet and are used nationwide, commercially and otherwise, to signify certain images traceable to the city and state that created them. The same cannot be said for equivalent code words for other regions. As a city advocate recently wrote, “Have you heard of Atlanta cuisine? Houston music?”\(^{220}\) Indeed, few are the restaurants named for Atlanta, Salt Lake City, or Newark. Few are the businesses named "Hoosier," "Knickerbocker," or "Tar Heel," save for those in Indiana, New York, or North Carolina. And few are the clubs named for the music of Denver, Milwaukee, or Houston.

**Conclusions?**

No specific conclusions can be drawn from these maps; they were not designed to test hypotheses about cultural differences, only to address them. But some patterns do emerge, and what the Yellow Pages reveals about New Orleans is this: popular perceptions can be misleading. Many cherished notions of New Orleans’ uniqueness may not hold up to criti-

\(^{219}\) A 1992 study by geographer Cary de Wit found that Texas and Louisiana were among the five American states most connected with specific foods, as indicated by their packaging labels. The other three, California, Vermont, and Oregon, ranked high more for their recent specializations in health and organic foods, than for deeply rooted, culturally based food-place associations. Cary De Wit, "Food Place Associations on American Product Labels," *Geographical Review* 82 (July 1992): 323-30.

Genuine cultural differentiation of New Orleans from the rest of America started diminishing (or, rather, hybridizing) as the ink dried on the Louisiana Purchase in 1803. Ever since, the forces of Americanization have slowly absorbed the colonial orphan into the national fold. The Crescent City today has more in common with the Atlantas and Portlands and Cincinnatis of the nation than many New Orleanians may care to recognize. True, deeply rooted cultural distinction remains; it is abundantly evident in the built environment and during Carnival, All Saints' Day, and Good Friday rituals, but can be subtle and elusive in its inhabitants as they live out their everyday lives. And it is highly prone to mythologization and hype by those who seek to profit from its exhibition or to ennoble themselves by standing next to it. Truth is, New Orleans, for all its unusual circumstances, follows the same general rules that guide all modern cities and societies.

Epilogue: See the final chapter, “Hurricane Katrina and the Geographies of Catastrophe,” for some thoughts on how the Katrina tragedy may affect perceptions about New Orleans. Regarding New Orleans itself, the Yellow Pages may become a fine annual gauge for how the city recovers—which businesses and residents return, where and when, and what this reveals about the future New Orleans.