ETHNIC GEOGRAPHIES

PART III

Geographies of New Orleans
by Richard Campanella

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AMERICA’S FIRST MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY?

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

—William Darby, 1816

The population is much mixed, consisting of foreign and native French; Americans born in the state, and from every state of the Union; a few Spaniards; and foreigners from almost every nation... there is a great “confusion of tongues,” and on the levee, during a busy day, can be seen groups of every grade of colour and condition: in short it is a world in miniature.

—John Adams Paxton, 1822

Americans, English, Scotch, Frenchmen, Swedes, Germans, Irish, Italians, Spaniards, Creoles, Indians, Negroes, Mexicans, and Brazilians. It is a mixture of languages, costumes, and manners, rendering it a scene one of the most singular that I ever witnessed... they lived altogether in striking contrast, so that it was not a little extraordinary to find them united in one single point. There is a place for everything! The confusion of tongues at the Tower of Babel, it certainly is New Orleans.

—C.D. Arfwedson, 1834

Truly does New Orleans present every other city and nation upon earth. I know of none where is congregated so great a variety of human species of every language and colour. Not only natives that are well known; Spaniards and Scarabrients are met with, but others Persians, Turks, Lascars, and sailors from South America and the Islands of the West Indies... for I sought not for the ordinary cosmopolitans.

—Joseph Holt Ingraham, 1835

Jews and Arabs, the Frenchman, Italian, Spanish, German, and American of all conditions and occupations. What a hub-bub! what an assemblage of strange faces, of all representatives of distinct people! What a contact of beauty and deformity, of vulgarity and good-breeding! What a collection of costumes...!

—Henry Didimus, 1835-1836

An overwhelming nineteenth-century visitor to New Orleans regularly marvelled about the diversity of the local population. This chapter introduces numerical evidence toward answering the above question, then looks behind the question to causation. We begin with some methodological clarifications. Ethnic diversity is judged here not

...as New Orleans, as many observers have passingly commented, the only “foreign” city in the United States... in America’s first melting pot? How does New Orleans’ population diversity compare quantitatively to those of other cities? These questions are of great interest to a geographical inquiry. Early multiculturalism would indicate a widespread attraction of this place to peoples from dispersed lands. What attracted them? What impact did they leave on New Orleans, and vice versa? And why did this attraction eventually fade? An atypical diversity would distinguish New Orleans from other cities of the day; identifying and explaining distinguishing characteristics among peoples is a premier mission of the geographer. Additionally, such a distinction begs investigation about how these various groups lived and interacted over the years, and what this means for a nation practically founded on the principles of the “melting pot” — or better yet, “gumbo.”

MEASURING HISTORICAL DIVERSITY

Is New Orleans indeed America’s first genuinely multicultural society? There exist about as many ways to measure diversity as there are to define it. This chapter lists numerical evidence toward answering the above question, then looks behind the question to causation.
groups spent some time in the position of an ethnic minority. New Orleans is one of the few American cities in which even the primary charter "ethnic" groups, so long as they perceived or perceived such bonds among themselves.

This book, however, considers all groups, regardless of social position, as 'ethnic' groups, so long as they perceive or perceive such bonds among themselves. New Orleans is one of the few American cities in which even the primary charter groups spent some time in the position of an ethnic minority.

all worldview—from the Creoles, whose identity was unified by a deep-rooted sense of colonial-era Louisianan nativity. When the data permitted, both Americans born out-of-state (presumably Anglo) and those born locally (presumably Creole) were considered as ethnically diversifying elements.

A distinction was also made between free people of color and enslaved populations, because their different life experiences and access made it seem reasonable to view each as an ethnic group within the larger black population. The two groups were seen as different classes, with the postbellum Louisiana society, the former allotted certain limited privileges and more likely to be Francophone Creole in culture, the latter at the bottom rung and more likely to have spent time in the out-of-state Anglo world. Because of restrictions on the integration of free people of color to Louisiana in the postbellum era, most residents in New Orleans were native to the state, further differentiating them from their peers in other American cities.16

Whatever the ideal definition of ethnic diversity, we are, of course, limited to the data collected in any day (and surviving to today) if we seek to look at the question quantitatively. It is a matter of doing one's best with the scant data that do exist, rather than giving up because the optimal data do not exist. Spanish colonial-era censuses of New Orleans in 1769, 1778, 1779, 1795, 1799, and an early territorial-era census in 1809, offer only limited statistics comparable to those collected in the first two American censuses of 1790 and 1810. In the 1810 national census, the new American Territory of Orleans received only peripheral attention, and New Orleans proper was less.16 City-sponsored censuses, tax lists, city state records, and other ancillary sources of population information are useless in a comparative study if the data themselves cannot be found for other cities. It is not until the 1820 census, that we find information detailed enough to allow for diversity comparisons of the nation's largest population centers. The 1850 census (and those following it) is a treasure trove because it was the first to record birthplace, a sound indicator of ethnicity. Late twentieth-century censuses were not much further by inquiring about peoples' "ancestries,"


17 The Spanish census of 1778 counted 30,467 people living in New Orleans, 8 percent more than the previous year but less than the 1769 census. Fifty-one percent were white; 31 percent were slaves of pure African blood; 8 percent were free people of mixed blood; and 3 percent were free African of pure blood. Albert J. Robichaux, Jr., Louisiana Census and Militia Lists 1770-1789, vol. 1, German Coast, New Orleans, Below New Orleans and Lafourche (Harvey, 1973), 68; see also Roscoe R. Hill, Descriptive Catalogue of the Documents Relating to the History of the United States in the Papiers Procedentes du Cabinet Depose dans le Tresor de Seville (Washington, DC, 1916), 913.

18 The Territory of Orleans in 1810—roughly present-day Louisiana—contained 77,556 people, of whom 57 percent were slaves, 45 percent were free whites, and 10 percent were "all other free races, except Indians not taxed." These totals were far more than any other American territory at the time—Mississippi, Indiana, Illinois, and Michigan. A census of New Orleans in the same year counted 17,224 New Orleanians, of whom 37 percent were white. Census Bureau, "Aggregate Amount of Each Description of Persons within the United States of America, and the Territories Thereof," 1810, American Documents, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University, and Albert E. Fossier, New Orleans: The Glamour Period, 1800-1840 (New Orleans, 1957), 257.
an even better gauge of ethnicity, and the 2000 census went further still by gathering information on an extremely wide spectrum of racial and ethnic intermixtures.

A Place Apart:
NEW ORLEANS IN 1820S AMERICA

The compendium volume of the 1820 census categorized whites, non-naturalized foreigners, free colored people, and slaves at the county and city level for the nation’s largest communities. Population-wise, Orleans Parish ranked twenty-fifth largest among parishes, while New Orleans was fifth among cities in 1820, a year in which the rural county population was kept separate from that of urbanized New Orleans. From the perspective of sheer size alone, there were certainly larger population centers than New Orleans. But from a diversity perspective, Orleans Parish stands at or very near the top. For example, if diversity is reflected by the number of foreigners and blacks (both free and enslaved) compared to the total population, then Orleans Parish ranks number two in the nation, at 47 percent, behind only the highly enslaved county encompassing the port city of Charleston. If we consider the nonwhite population as the denominator, the pattern persists: Orleans Parish is second only to Charleston County in the outnumbering of non-whites to whites. One may argue, of course, that such measures cannot help but rank Southern counties as extraordinarily diverse, as a statistical offshoot of slavery. Excluding slaves from the calculations, suddenly Orleans Parish becomes arguably the most diverse in the nation. It had by far the highest percent of nonnaturalized foreigners compared to its white population (8 percent, ahead of New York’s 4.8 percent), and the highest percent of foreigners plus free people of color to white population (45 percent, ahead of Baltimore’s 27 percent).

* In the early American years, the term county was used (officially until 1843) to describe what we now call parishes in Louisiana, though for years both terms were used, often rather loosely. Orleans Parish in 1820, not coincident with its present-day boundaries, had included much of today’s Jefferson Parish.

* County-level data from University of Virginia Geospatial and Statistical Data Center; city-level data from Census for 1820. Analysis by author.
When we consider city-level population data, the relative ethnic diversity of the New Orleans area intensifies. Though fifth in the nation in size, the Crescent City was either a close second to Charleston, or first in the nation, ahead of other bastions of plurality as New York and Boston, in the supplemental measures of diversity. According to the best available statistics, New Orleans emerged as one of the most, if not the most, diverse city in 1820 America. Numbers tell only part of the story. Other historical circumstances further add to the case for New Orleans’ superlative multiculturalism. The city’s geographical situation at the nexus of the North American interior with the southern seas availed it to populations largely beyond the influence of the great northeastern ports. In the colonial ports of the Caribbean basin, the complex Creole societies of the sugar islands, and the ports of southern Europe and South America looked first to New Orleans, the New York of Philadelphia, when interacting with North America. New Orleans’ whites, foreigners, free people of color, and slaves “look” the same as those in Washington and Baltimore were listed in a statistical table, but in fact emerged from very different stock. Whites in most American cities were usually English in ancestry, while in New Orleans were usually French. Africans in the upper South were absorbed in mostly Anglo-American culture; those in New Orleans were brought into Latin culture, often by way of French and Spanish colonies in the Caribbean. The very history of New Orleans explains a population mixture that one cannot fail to notice even on the streets of the city,” wrote a Russian visitor a few decades later. “Every one of the nationalities that took part in shaping the destiny of Louisiana’s representatives here, as shown to the present day, Spanish and French are heard along with English. Every American has adopted foreign words into their language.” Politically, New Orleans’ foundation and possession by France, followed by almost forty years of Spanish domination, rendered it fundamentally different from all other major American cities at the dawn of the nineteenth century. It was a French-speaking city in an English-speaking nation. It was a Catholic city in a Protestant nation. It legislated civil law in a land of English common law. It watched the fighting of the Revolutionary War, the signing of the Declaration of Independence, and the ratification of the Constitution from across international borders. New Orleans governed, watched helped, surveyed land, built structures, recorded deeds, celebrated holidays, and entombed the dead differently. And in interlopers among whites, in slaves, and interlopers who more often than not, shared one culture characteristically a French culture prevailed for many years in America, as evidenced by this interview with prominent New Orleans lawyer M. Mazureau conducted by Alexis Borisovich Lakier in 1832:

Q. They say that in New Orleans is to be found a mixture of all the nations?
A. That’s true; here we have a mingling of all races. Not a country in America, or Europe but has sent us some representatives. New Orleans is a workshop of peoples.
Q. But in the midst of this confusion what race dominates and gives direction to all the rest?
A. The French race, up to now. It’s they who set the tone and shape years.

Intensifying this cultural distinction with New Orleans’ geographical isolation, separated by a thousand and waterborne miles from the South’s number-two port, Charleston, and twelve or more distance from the heart of Anglo-America, New Orleans in the early 1800s represented not only the nation’s western frontier, but also a different experience in its westward expansion: a century-old sophisticated foreign society under very different circumstances, distinctly Americanized. These factors make New Orleans’ hypermulticulturalism that much more extraordinary.11

**Ethnic Gumbo**

**New Orleans in 1850s America**

By the midpoints of the nineteenth century, New Orleans had tripled its 1830 population, remaining fifth among cities in the growing nation and enjoying the height of its wealth and prestige and its ability to attract newcomers—a sound gauge of a city’s greatness—peak years of the 1850s. In fact, for most of the years between 1837 and 1860, the remote and isolated Crescent City attracted more immigrants than any other city in the South, and may in the nation save New York. In 1851, a city record of 52,011 immigrants arrived to New Orleans, almost the same number as recorded for Boston, Philadelphia, and Baltimore combined.22 Many of them, of course, arrived and promptly departed for other destinations up the Mississippi Valley; others remained and settled locally. Exactly how many can be determined not through immigration data but census data. An analysis of the 1850 census—that tabulated state or country of birth for the first time—provided additional evidence that New Orleans was at the very forefront of the American experimentalism of pluralism. Some observations about the 1850 census follow.

**Ethnic Gumbo** — New Orleans in 1850 was home to more significantly sized ethnic groups (measured by ancestry, nativity, or language) than any other city. The best available statistics give New Orleans as having more than ten different ethnic groups: African, American, Argentine, Austrian, Belgian, British, Canadian, Creole, English, and French. Among the best accounts of antebellum New Orleans’ ethnic chessboard are found in the works of historian Joseph G. Tregle, Jr. Especially recommended is “The Ethnic Imperative” chapter in his *Louisiana in the Age of Jackson: A Clash of Cultures and Personalities* (Baton Rouge, 1999). A Russian visitor to America’s First Multicultural Society, 1979), 232.

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18 The Treasury Department, Bureau of Statistics, *Statistics of the United States—Compendium of the Seventh Census* (Washington, DC, 1854), 395-99. Note: this source combines New Orleans, Lafayette, and Algiers for population figures on whites, slaves, and free people of color, totaling 133,650. But figures involving place of birth appear to have been held to different standards, representing only New Orleans proper, while population in 1850 was 119,460 (91,431 whites; 18,068 black slaves; and 9,961 free people of color). I adjusted the data in the accompanying table such that only New Orleans proper is depicted.
New Orleans in 1850 was home to more significantly sized ethnic groups (measured by ancestry, nativity, race, and enslavement status) than any other American city. Nearly three out of every four residents were born elsewhere. New Orleans in 1850 claimed the highest numbers of French- and Spanish-born residents, and probably Italian-born as well. Foreigners and African Americans comprised a greater percent of the total population (64 percent) more than any of the other eight largest cities in the nation. Map and analysis by author.

A Town of Out-Of-Towners — New Orleans had the lowest percentage of locally born people (26 percent, born in the city or state) of these six American cities with populations over 100,000. Nearly three out of every four New Orleanians in 1850 were born elsewhere and came from every corner of the globe. Four smaller cities near the western frontier—St. Louis, Chicago, Milwaukee, and Memphis—had lower rates of nativity.

Vestiges of Colonial Ties — Nearly a half-century after the departure of the colonial regimes, New Orleans in 1850 still claimed the highest numbers of French- and Spanish-born residents (7,522 and 1,150, respectively) of any city in the nation—and by a wide margin, in both absolute and per capita terms. It also had the second-most Italian-born residents, showing Catholic southern Europeans' preference for New Orleans above most other American cities.

A Majority of Minorities — Foreigners and African Americans comprised a greater percent of the total population (64 percent), and of the white population (84 percent) in New Orleans than any of the other eight largest cities in the nation. However, the number of smaller cities—Charleston, Milwaukee, Savannah, among them—ranked higher in these measures of diversity.

* The subgroups were aggregated as (1) locally born; (2) born elsewhere in United States; (3) born in England, Wales, or Scotland; (4) born in Ireland; (5) born in Germany, Prussia, or Austria; (6) born in France; (7) born in Spain; (8) born in Italy; (9) free people of color; and (10) enslaved blacks. De Bow, Statistical View of the United States, 395-99.

* Other tabulations of the same data indicate that New Orleans had the most Italians of any American city in 1850, in both absolute and relative terms. See the chapter on Little Palermo for details.
Foreigners — New Orleans ranked second in the nation (53 percent) in percent of foreign-born²⁶ to the number of whites, behind only Milwaukee (64 percent), a younger city settled by a large German-born population.

Foreigners and Free People of Color — We also consider foreign-born plus free people of color as a percentage of total white population. New Orleans is again number two in the nation, at 64 percent, just behind mostly immigrant Milwaukee (65 percent).

Explaining the Diversity

Though the specific causes subject to debate, both first-person testimonies and statistics show that New Orleans was among the most ethically diverse major cities in nineteenth-century America. What beg the question, why? What was it about New Orleans that attracted so many from so far and wide, so early? A series of interrelated factors—geographical, economic, sociological, and historical—explain the phenomenon.

Accessibility — A strategically located river/sea port is, by definition, relatively cheap and easy to reach by waterborne transportation, especially when that river is the likes of the Mississippi, and a river/sea communicates not just with the Gulf and East coast, but societies in the Caribbean basin, Europe, and Asia. Water bodies, not land, connected New Orleans with the outside world, in an era when humans depended almost entirely on waterborne transportation for commerce and long-distance travel. Immigration routes followed commercial routes, which followed waterways. Fares were sometimes cheap, and ships from certain major world ports departed regularly and sailed directly to New Orleans. Accordingly, a wide diversity of people in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries gained easier access to distant New Orleanians than to more populous ports or landlocked communities. Being a major node in the world shipping system also instilled an international character in New Orleans, which augmented its diversity. Merchant mariners, sailors, servicemen, multinational businessmen, consuls, and a network of support industries created a community of long-term visitors in New Orleans, many of whom married or took up residence there because they arrived destitute or because they did not have the desire, knowledge, or skills to become agricultural pioneers in the interior valley.²⁸ Thus, originally drawn by the hinterland, they instead became New Orleanians. Historian A.A. Conway observed that New Orleans, like most large ports serving vast hinterlands, served as a filter on the flow of immigrants, and not necessarily to its benefit. The city often "was left with a residue of poorer, less desirable immigrants who lacked either the resources or the inclination to strike out for the West, [thus] it became a transitory point for the best elements of the immigrant flow" into the hinterland.²⁹

Force — Tens of thousands came in bondage, directly from Africa or via the Caribbean, other Southern ports, and plantations throughout the lower Mississippi Valley. Slaves did not form one homogenous community unified by race—a fact not appreciated by many slaveholders—but rather a multitude of ethnic groups carried from their life experiences and from those of their ancestors. Force was also the factor behind the flight of some early colonial settlers, whose deportation to the Louisiana colony was the only alternative to imprisonment.

Prosperity and Opportunity — In the decades after the Louisiana Purchase, New Orleans ascended to become one of the wealthiest cities in America, attracting the privileged and ambitious as well as the job-seeking impoverished and destitute. Crescent City was the talk of the nation in the early-1800s, a cosmopolitan port at the gateway of the Mississippi Valley. Suddenly thrown open to American commerce, precisely when the serendipitous advancements in ginning and granulation allowed lucrative cotton and sugar production to replace fading colonial-era crops such as tobacco and indigo. "New Orleans has been rated as the third city of the Union," wrote one proud partisan in 1838, "but she is in reality the third only in population and second in a commercial point of view. Her imports are now exceeded only by New York and Boston; while her exports nearly triple any port in the United States except New York, which she exceeds by one third."³⁰ New Orleans in the early 1800s promised an opportunity to strike it rich and to make it big; it offered both the excitement of a frontier town and the sophistication of an older city. By the mid-1800s, however, New Orleans’s relative lack of industrialization forced many “desirable” immigrants to proceed to interior destinations while the poor

²⁶ Note that the “foreign” statistic in 1820 meant non-naturalized foreigners, while in 1850 it implied foreign-born—compatible, but not identical.
²⁸ Ibid., vii.
and destitute remained: the city could employ unskilled dock workers and canal diggers in much larger numbers than it could support middle-class professionals or skilled workers. Perceptions of economic opportunity for unskilled workers also attracted thousands of freedmen in the years after emancipation, diversifying the local urban black population with rural blacks of both Creole and African ancestry.

**Marketing, Employment, and Recruitment**

Marketing—often deceptive—encouraged some groups to immigrate to French colonial Louisiana, which was in the early years, a land-development scheme predicated on its ability to appeal to the land. Some immigrants were attracted by specific job offers from private enterprises, a seductive proposition for those suffering hopeless conditions in their mother countries. This was the case for the thousands of Irish who immigrated in the 1840s for the grueling and dangerous work of digging the New Basin Canal. Similarly, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, people recruited out of desperate conditions by the marketing efforts of the labor-starved Louisiana sugar industry, absorbed by the state of Louisiana. Sugar planters had earlier recruited small numbers of Chinese out of Cuba, California, and the Far East, to replace emancipated slaves. Acadians exiled from French Canada by the English near New Orleans for its cultural similarity to their home country. This was the case for the thousands of Irish who immigrated in the 1840s for the grueling and dangerous work of digging the New Basin Canal. Similarly, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, people recruited out of desperate conditions by the marketing efforts of the labor-starved Louisiana sugar industry, absorbed by the state of Louisiana. Sugar planters had earlier recruited small numbers of Chinese out of Cuba, California, and the Far East, to replace emancipated slaves. Acadians exiled from French Canada by the English near New Orleans for its cultural similarity to their home country.

**“Cotton Port”** — Market—often deceptive—encouraged some groups to immigrate to French colonial Louisiana, which was in the early years, a land-development scheme predicated on its ability to appeal to the land. Some immigrants were attracted by specific job offers from private enterprises, a seductive proposition for those suffering hopeless conditions in their mother countries. This was the case for the thousands of Irish who immigrated in the 1840s for the grueling and dangerous work of digging the New Basin Canal. Similarly, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, people recruited out of desperate conditions by the marketing efforts of the labor-starved Louisiana sugar industry, absorbed by the state of Louisiana. Sugar planters had earlier recruited small numbers of Chinese out of Cuba, California, and the Far East, to replace emancipated slaves. Acadians exiled from French Canada by the English near New Orleans for its cultural similarity to their home country.

**Familiarity** — Certain groups established their home in or near New Orleans for its cultural similarity to their homeland. Acadians exiled from French Canada by the English near New Orleans for its cultural similarity to their home country. This was the case for the thousands of Irish who immigrated in the 1840s for the grueling and dangerous work of digging the New Basin Canal. Similarly, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, people recruited out of desperate conditions by the marketing efforts of the labor-starved Louisiana sugar industry, absorbed by the state of Louisiana. Sugar planters had earlier recruited small numbers of Chinese out of Cuba, California, and the Far East, to replace emancipated slaves. Acadians exiled from French Canada by the English near New Orleans for its cultural similarity to their home country.

**Commercial Ties** — Old economic ties, often the byproduct of direct shipping lines, underlie the city’s worldwide connection to certain world ports. A steady stream of cotton exports to Liverpool made for plenty of room for poor Irish immigrants to New Orleans on cheap fares, serving as ballast in the otherwise-empty holds of ships. Commercial shipping for the tropical-fruit industry connected New Orleans with Palermo in the early nineteenth century, and with La Ceiba, Honduras in the twentieth century. The old Palermo connection made New Orleans the home to the nation’s largest concentration of Sicilians. The old Central American connection, in which New Orleans-based banana companies (one run by a Sicilian immigrant, the other by a Russian

— Fredrick Marcel Spletstoser noted that no government agency regulated immigration at the port of New Orleans at the antebellum era, and no quarantine was practiced until 1855. Immigrants with diseases, disabilities, criminal records, debts, and other issues who would have been turned away from New York, were freely access to the United States through New Orleans.

**Chain Immigration** — An established community of compatriots settled in a distant land offers a compelling reason for more to come; the same group infuses its brethren of opportunities, warns them of threats, and calls them a haven, a refuge, and a sense of security. The size of an established group may vary from a few dozen to several hundred. In the event, it may turn a critical mass, recognized, established, immigration of dramatic numbers of wives, children, relatives, and friends make the move. While the original immigrants might have selected New Orleans for reasons X, Y, and Z, the next wave might choose New Orleans for only one reason: they are in the first wave. This phenomenon of chain immigration is evidenced among Latin American immigrants to various American cities, in which people of certain towns and cities in Latin America, for example, develop a network of connections in those cities.

**Ethnic Geographies**

— Perhaps the best local example of environmental similarity as an immigrant draw is the latter waves of Vietnamese immigrants, who came to the New Orleans area in the 1980s-1990s in part for fishing opportunities and semitropical climate. But they might not have arrived there if there had been no Vietnamese community established. That initial community of Catholic Vietnamese refugees connected with the city on cultural grounds: they were specifically invited here in 1975 by the Catholic Church.

migrant) controlled extensive tracts of land and wielded great political power, has made New Orleans today a third largest Honduran population center in the world. 36

Isolation — At the dawn of the American era, New Orleans formed the nation’s most isolated major urban outpost. The city’s remoteness, its separation from its immediate mainland by swamp, marsh, forest, and water, and its position about as far down the Mississippi River as geography would allow, made it the premier place to settle or stop over in traveling to the southwestern frontier. New Orleans’ wealth, its biggest, wealthiest, and most vivacious city naturally attracts the lion’s share of that region’s immigration and emigration. But when the city is isolated from neighboring cities and surrounded by inhospitable terrain, the attraction of newcomers amounts to monopolization.

Tolerance — New Orleans’ president atmosphere of tolerance is a product of its diversification and, to some degree, a cause of it. Black free men emigrated to the city after emancipation mainly for economic opportunity, but also to seek refuge in the more liberal attitude toward race and racial subjects perceived in the Crescent City, relative to the interior South. This city attribute of tolerance also explains the historically large and currently growing gay population in the city.

“Creole Factor” — Connotations of Creole—nativism to the New Orleans region, and the blending of ethnic and racial heritages—ad a perplexity to New Orleans’ ethnic diversity, but help define it from that of other cities. In early and mid-nineteenth-century usage, Creole implied those native to New Orleans and the delta region, whether white or black or mixed, traced their lines back to colonial times and thus were more likely to practice Catholicism, speak French or Spanish, and exhibit local, tinged, Old World cultural traits. The most profound ethnic dichotomy of antebellum New Orleans formed between these Creoles and the recently arrived, English-speaking, Protestant Anglo emigrants from the upper South and northeastern states. The early nineteenth-century understanding of Creole has since been supplanted by modern usage (see next chapter for details), in which the word loosely refers to those New Orleanians who emerged from the free people of color or other mixed-race vectors with some Francophone heritage. That the concept still survives today as a differentiating element of the black community illustrates yet another angle of New Orleans’ unique brand of multiculturalism. Another connotation of Creole comes in its process form—creolization—meaning, according to one observer, “the blending of different ethnic groups in forming an individual or group identity.” 37 To the extent that this means a racial blending, New Orleans society has traditionally recognized gradations between black and white unions, further diversifying the local ethnic and racial landscape. To the extent that creolization means that who gets married and intermarries in the steamy gumbo of a New Orleans neighborhood eventually assumes a new, local identity, born of different origins, but unified by a sense of place—well, then, there is no greater testimony to New Orleans’ true diversity.

DIVERSITY IN DECLINE — New Orleans’ ethnic diversity—the early eighteenth-century augmented later in the century, as peoples from southern and northern Europe and elsewhere arrived to the Americas greater than those of most other Southern ports. But its national primacy in multiculturalism began to dwindle around the time of the Civil War, toppled by transformations both internal and external, gradual and sudden. It was foretold when the American flag first rose above Place d’Armes on December 20, 1803. New Orleans’ underlying French Creole culture would assimilate, hybridize, and eventually give way to, the dominant way of life of the thousands of incoming migrants, backed by the larger American culture and government. “The moment the cession was made, crowds of neophytes—Yankees, what is worse, Kentuckians, spread all over Louisiana, attracted by the hope of gain; the latter treating the inhabitants as little better than a purchased property,” recounted visitor Charles Sealsfield twenty-five years after the Louisiana Purchase. He continued, “In full of prejudice toward the descendants of a nation which they knew little more than the proverb, ‘French dog,’ many Americans [by] knowing or condescending to learn their language, preceded towards these people as if they were, as well as the inhabitants, could be seized without ceremony.” 38

“There is little doubt,” wrote Richard Champion Rawlins in 1840 when the cultural transformation of New Orleans was well underway, “that before long the French will be almost unknown in the city as a distinct community...owing to the large influx of Americans into the city, whilst the local still increase at all a numbers.” 39

For most of the decades between Americanization and the Civil War, Creoles and Americans wrestled each other in politics, business, society, religion, and lifestyle, an omnipresent tension that underscored much of life in the antebellum city. But in no way could Creole culture have survived the onslaught. It was severed from its colonial-era taproot, outnumbered and overwhelmed by an ambitious people born of a vivacious new nation. Creoles had lost most of their political power by the time of the 1852 reunification of the mun-
After the Civil War, economic opportunities in the industrialized North and advancements in transportation made Northeastern cities far more attractive than New Orleans to European immigrants. Additionally, Southern cities traditionally regarded immigrants with suspicion, and did not embrace them or encourage their arrival. With each passing year in the late nineteenth century, weaker and weaker was the case for New Orleans as America’s most multicultural city. This 1980 map shows relative ethnic and cultural diversity in the nation’s twenty-one largest cities, using the same measure employed in the previous maps from 1820 and 1850. San Francisco ranked first in diversity (fifteen groups over 5 percent), while New Orleans-ranked fifteenth (ten groups), having fallen dramatically from first-place rank in 1850. Map and analysis by author.

Political turmoil dropped the number of arrivals in New Orleans thirteen-fold between 1860 and 1861. The ensuing Civil War terminated most immigration and migration to the South, and to New Orleans in particular, which had surrendered early (May 1862) and subsequently suffered a massive disruption of shipping traffic and regional agricultural production. Immigration to the Crescent City would pick up again after the war, but the numbers of arrivals would never again reach the levels of the 1840s and 1850s. The ranks of immigrants arriving in antebellum New Orleans, large as they were, might have been greater had the South in general realized their value and encouraged their settlement. Instead, according to historian A.A. Conway, Southern cities regarded immigrants with suspicion as potential abolitionists, even as immigration swelled Northern cities and allowed them to industrialize.

The same year that the shipbound Creole culture of New Orleans began to disappear, the great Irish and German settlements of the central Mississippi Valley received a new wave of immigration. Advertisements for midwestern seaports made Northern cities more economically accessible than distant New Orleans, while Eastern railroads penetrated the Appalachians and reached St. Louis by 1857, making the central Mississippi Valley accessible by rapid overland transportation rather than the long, shipwreck-prone voyage through yellow-fever-plagued New Orleans. Worst-ever “yellow jack” epidemics killed over 8,000 New Orleanians in 1853 alone (about one in twelve citizens), including a disproportionately high number of Irish and German immigrants. That immigration from both Ireland and the Germanic states nevertheless reached their highest levels in the early 1850s attests to advantages still perceived by those setting sail for New Orleans.

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up in later decades, but never would it approach antebellum levels. The damaged economy and reputation of the South after the conflict directed most incoming immigrants to the industrialized, victorious North. Concurrently, the Mississippi River further relinquished its monopoly in accessing the Mississippi Valley. Whereas in the antebellum past one had to pass through New Orleans to penetrate the North American interior and extract its resources, Easterners in the postbellum age could now take railroads, canals, waterways, and roads across the Appalachians to reach the western frontier. Thus, as Creole culture waned, as war took its toll on the local economy, as new immigrants opted for Northern cities, as railroads competed with the Mississippi River, and as the nation outgrew its dependence on waterborne transportation, both New Orleans' economic strength and its ethnic diversity steadily diminished. We see this in the accompanying Alien Passengers graphs, which the Crescent City rises above all American cities except New York starting in 1837, peaking in the 1850s, then plunging during the Civil War. New Orleans only weakly bounced back a decade later, when even Portland, Maine, attracted more immigrants.

With each passing year in the late nineteenth century, weaker and weaker grows the case for New Orleans as America's most multicultural city. New York, long the nation's leader in absolute numbers of immigrants, attained that distinction by the close of the century. By the late 1900s, San Francisco ranked arguably as the most diverse city in the nation, according to one analysis of the 1980 census data (see map, *By the Late Twentieth Century, A Different New Orleans in a Different America,* while New Orleans sank to the eighteenth. Today, cities such as Sacramento and suburbs of Atlanta or Washington, D.C., surpass New Orleans in most measures of diversity, while the Corettoy neighborhood of Brooklyn ranked in 2000 as America's most diverse census tract. In terms of percent foreign-born, New Orleans ranks sixty-seventh in the nation, with only 3.4 percent of its population born outside the U.S., barely ahead of Louisville and Toledo, and far behind Miami's leading 51 percent. One-hundred-fifty years earlier, New Orleans had number two in the nation, with 53 percent foreign-born.

New Orleans' historically superlative ethnic diversity is, like many of its distinguishing characteristics, now a thing of the past. Yet it lives on in the ethos of the city, the built environment, the food and music, in the bloodlines and group memories of its citizens—and in a few faint words and phrases surviving from the “great confusion of tongues” once common in America's original genuinely multicultural metropolis.

Epilogue: In the ten days following Hurricane Katrina, Orleans Parish's original population of 462,000 declined to antebellum levels of about 100,000, then to pre-Civil War levels of a few thousand. Around 70,000 had returned by late autumn, and around 250,000 are predicted to return permanently, in racial and ethnic mixes that can only be speculated about at this early stage. One possibility is that much of the black underclass will resettle elsewhere, leaving behind a smaller, whiter, more gentrified New Orleans. Another is that the city might see an influx of Latino workers to fill new jobs in the construction and tourism sectors. Whatever transpires, one thing is certain: New Orleans society is again making history, as the first modern American metropolis to depopulate entirely, reconstitute, and then reconstruct.


CREOLES NEW ORLEANS
THE GEOGRAPHY OF A
CONTROVERSIAL ETHNICITY

One should wade warily into the waters of the Creole, that
famously controversial word which means so much to Louisi-
ana history, yet defies so steadfastly consensus on its mean-
ing. Many a researcher, endeavoring to clarify matters, has
only muddied those waters, while others have intentionally
manipulated the ethereal concept to promote one-sided views
or hidden agendas. Identifying Creoles in historical records
is that much more difficult, given the vagaries of definition
and fluidity of identity. This section is devoted to mapping the patterns of their
residential distribution over time with the intent of promoting one-sided views
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There are four types of inhabitants: Europeans, Africans, Negroes, and half bloods, born of Europeans and savages native to the country. Those born of French fathers and French, or European, mothers are called Creoles. They are generally very brave, tall, and well built and have natural inclination toward the arts and sciences.19

Usage reflects the old colonial Caribbean use of the word, inferring ancestry and birthplace, rather than ethnic-
and cultural. Creole remained a stable and generally irrelevant concept in eighteenth-century New Orleans, because outside force compelled the residents to unify around their common heritage. People generally do not view themselves as “natives” if everyone is native. Those outside forces arrived en masse at the turn of the nineteenth century, when waves of refugees arrived from Saint-Domingue, followed by waves of English-speaking Protestant Americans, followed again by thousands of European immigrants. Within a few decades, those outside colonial forces found themselves in a complex, fragmented society, fighting for economic, political, and cultural superiority in a city that was once entirely theirs. It was out of this ethnically turbulent milieu of native versus newcomer that the antebellum New Orleans (and Loui-
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siana) notion of Creole arose. It was during this era that Creole society figured most prominently as a self-identified group seen as indigenous.
The best scholarly characterization of Creole for the antebellum age, based on usage of the term I have encountered in numerous newspapers and literature of the era, is that of the eminent University of New Orleans historian, Joseph G. Tregle, Jr. In 1952, while working toward his Ph.D. at the University of Pennsylvania, Tregle published a seven-page article entitled “Early New Orleans Society: A Reappraisal” in the venerable Journal of Southern History. To the great pleasure of some old-line New Orleanians, the paper found many traditional impressions of nineteenth-century Creole society—born of earlier notions that were turned on their heads after Americanization—to be little more than cherished myths: that Creoles comprised those only of pure French or Spanish lineage; that Creoles could have no African blood; that Creoles were haughty aristocrats who defined the “crass” Americans and foreigners to live on the other side of Canal Street. Over the next four decades, Tregle accumulated a wealth of primary-source evidence, examples of usage of the word Creole or Creole in public and private documents of the day—demonstrating that in antebellum Louisiana, Creole simply meant native-born. The word may be encountered in a multitude of contexts, as a noun or adjective, capitalized or not, but the common denominator of almost all usage was a sense of nativity and indigenousness to southern Louisiana and the neighboring Francophone societies of the Gulf Coast. Creoles generally traced their ancestors to colonial times and exhibited the cultures of those Latin societies. They preceded the era of American domination, and formed the local population whom the Americans “found” here upon their arrival. A Creole of the early nineteenth century might be white, black, or racially mixed; he was not at all Catholic and “catholique” in culture, and usually bore significant amounts of French or Spanish blood. But he could also be of German, Anglo-American, Anglo-Irish, or origin, so long as he was extracted from local society. “All who are born here, command this designation [Creole], without reference to the birth place of their parents,” wrote Benjamin Moore Norman in 1845. Joseph Holt Ingraham in 1835 clarified that “Creole’ is simply a synonym for ‘native’. . . . To say ‘He is a Creole of Louisiana’ is to say ‘He is a native of Louisiana’. An ignominious Creole correspondent to the Louisiana Courier in 1831, protesting the continued use of the old-born or European-parents definition, pointed out that Creole is a term by which “we have been distinguished from those who have emigrated into the state.... It is also used by family such as have been born in the country, whether white, yellow, or black; whether the children of French, Spanish, English, Dutch, or any other nation.” In the Creole ethnicity usually derived from context. Antebellum slave advertisements offering “Creole Slaves,” including fourteen-year-old “female, creole...good child’s nurse and house servant” and fifteen-year-old “Sally, creole...tolerable cook” implied that these were black Creoles, while an article on Creole voodoo patterns would indicate that these were white Creoles, since blacks were denied sufficient “the gens de couleur libre [Creole people of color—mixed racial ancestry, Catholic in faith, and proudly French in culture] occupied a special racial caste between white and black, and were often described as Creoles of Color, or simply Creoles, again depending on context. “Mrs. V.,” wrote the English visitor Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon in 1857, “when she elected to be a Creole, a native of Louisiana.” Because the choice of color has had such a right to live here unless born here,” she continued, this woman “had all the bother of proving herself a Creole.” Creole ethnicity is further clarified by understanding who would not have possessed this identity in the antebellum era. A slave brought down from the upper South who would not be Creole, but a French-speaking, French-descended man of pure African blood residing in Louisiana since childhood would be. A German or Irish immigrant of the 1830s-1850s could not be Creole (he would be a “foreigner”), but a 12-year-old Allemands setter, or a member of the colonial era Irish Macarty family or Scottish Pollocks, would have. A Parisian-born Frenchman residing in the city and a French-blooded Saint-Domingue refugee who arrived in the city in the 1800s would not technically be Creole (both would be foreign French), although either might have allied with Creoles for political and cultural reasons. The post-Haitian Purchase Anglo-Saxon American emigrants were culturally non-Creole, but the Louisiana-bornCreole children might, in certain contexts, blur the line. A Louisiana-bred native, be his parentage what it may, is a Creole. They are “irreversible terms,” explains the 1854 City Directory in an interesting digression on Creoles. Although the writer notes that “the word Creole in New Orleans is often misapplied, so as to imply more or less of negro blood,” the writer also allowed that “Creole” in its usual acceptation meant a native person, [but] it applied to all races, as Creole negroes.” The Ber, a bilingual Louisiana way of speaking primarily the city’s French-speaking population, compared Creole in

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* An 1835 slave ad took care to distinguish between three “American negro” men (Jim, Moses, and Bob) and “a creole mulatto man, ‘creole negro boy,’” “creole negro woman,” and “creole mulatto boy” (Manuel, Nounou, Caroline, and Alfred). Charles, the one man born elsewhere, was described as “negro man, a creole of St. Domingo.” Such distinctions were common in the slave trade throughout southern Louisiana. New Orleans Bee, May 1, 1835, p. 1, col. 3.
1839 to equivalent concepts elsewhere: “A Greekian is a Creole of Kentucky and a Yankee a Creole of New England... and an Irishman of Ireland... A Creole is native of the state or country where he or she may have been born.”

**Creole Through Time**

By the latter half of the nineteenth century, the relevance of Louisiana nativity and color, or ethnic heritage, as unifying ethnic bond began to fade. Thousands of post-Purchase Anglos had by this time settled into New Orleans society for generations, and were, genetically speaking, “purified.” Thousands more immigrants of Irish, German, and other nationalities had also by now earned their claim to nativity, and intermarriage among all groups abounded. A Creole political power had waned, and the English language predominated in newspapers and the realm of commerce. The aged dichotomy of old-line, French-speaking, Creoles versus Anglo-American stock versus recently arrived, English-speaking, Protestant, Northeasterner Creole lost much of its street meaning. The new dichotomy revolved around race, rather than nativity, and was evident in the increasing racial tensions immediately prior to the Civil War. Women, Barbara Leigh Smith Boden, wrote in 1857:

“Every year the restrictions concerning free negroes were more annoying. No porter, no cooks, etc. (of free colour) can land from the vessels unless by a pass from the Mayor...”

After the Civil War and emancipation, in the midst of federal reconstruction and black Reconstruction government, whites increasingly rejected “the race consciousness of Louisianans.” And longed for the days before the war. Racial identification, once fluid and complex, increasingly polarized into black or white. Many Creoles of Color, bearing the brunt of the new order, had disappeared for the Mexican ports of Veracruz and Tampico as early as the 1850s, and more so in the 1880s and 1890s, when segregation was legalized. In the postbellum era, white Creole historians and writers of the “local color” school began to recast the Creole into a more racially exclusive and socially aristocratic type. They acknowledged only in the most dismissive terms other historical uses, and insisted that popular usage should bear little affect upon “true” meaning. Two theories may explain this postbellum revisionism. Perhaps the historians and writers of this era sought to revive the eighteenth-century notion of Creole, which they saw as the original and therefore true meaning of the word, as reflected by Boswell’s circa-1751 usage. Or perhaps these observers sought to aggrandize and mythologize their own Creole heritage, a tradition, given the era’s racial atmosphere, required the admission of all African blood from Creole identity. The unquestioned hegemony of whites prior to the Civil War now allowed for a certain level of “pan-racial creolization” in which peoples of different racial ancestors openly shared a common ethnicity. But with the fall of the Confederacy and the rise of black political power during Reconstruction, whites in general assumed a newfound antipathy toward blacks of all shades, regardless of ethnicity, and white Creoles in particular, fretful of being confused with “black monocots,” proclaimed the impossibility of a black Creole. The term was that a large segment of the New Orleans population, which had long identified itself as Creole, particularly its descendants of the gens de couleur libre, had denied the heritage by the most influential voices of the day. Charles Gayarré, the famed Creole historian, wrote extensively on the subject, lectured at Tulane University; and in 1882, “It is impossible to comprehend how so many intelligent people could have so completely reversed the meaning of the word Creole, when any one of the numerous dictionaries within their easy reach could have given them correct information of the subject...” It had become his lifetime to demonstrate that the Creoles of Louisiana... “have no particle of the name they describe as a particle of African blood in their veins...”

In The Creoles of Louisiana (1884), George Washington Cable answered his question, “What is a Creole?” with, “any [Louisiana] native, of French or Spanish descent by either parent, whose non-attachment to the slave race entitled him to social rank. Later, the term was adopted by—not conceded to—the natives of mixed blood, and is still so used among themselves.”

Notwithstanding that definition, Cable would later cast doubt on the white racial purity of Creole. In his writings, earning his enemies in New Orleans society and a famous feud with writer Grace King, “local color” writers such as Cable carried the no-black-blood insistence into the twentieth century, while promulgating that Tregle would later describe as a quasi-religious belief in the mythological Creole—the genteel aristocrat, the charming romantic, the disdainer of physical labor, the bon vivant. But word of the revised definition never quite made it to the masses, and mixed-race Francophone Catholics who had long thought of themselves as Creoles...
Creole continued to do so. It was in this era, Rodolphe Lucien Desdunes (1849-1928), born a free person of color, penned the first history of New Orleans Creoles of Color, *Homes et Notre Histoire*. It was written in French, published first in Montreal in 1911, and not fully translated to English and published in Louisiana until 1974.

Creole would continue to be a term in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Despite the utility of the colonialist definition, whites in race-conscious Louisiana gradually began to release themselves from explicit Creole identification. *French or French Creole*, fine, white Creole seemed a problem. But self-identification simply as Creole left a more question unanswered. The strict racial segregation of early twentieth-century Louisiana led whites of genuine Creole ancestry to distance themselves from the stigmatic term, retaining all potential doubt of their whiteness by severing ties with the equally genuine Creoles of dark and mixed-raced backdrops. In time, the popular understanding of Creole at the streets of New Orleans evolved to mean a local variant of mixed racial ancestry usually Catholic, often with a French surname, often well-established in business and society, and always with deep roots in the city's history. The Creoles of Creole were thinned out again during the civil rights movement, when the non-Creole black community, which was numerically superior but economically subordinate to the Creole black community, viewed the Creole identification as a divisive and elitist faction incompatible with the movement's goals. The Creoles of Color descended from the free people of color, who often owned slaves, usually added to the tension. Forced to choose sides in the modern-day racial dichotomy, some Creoles departed for the West Coast (1940s); others passed for white (passé blanc) and most chose to declare their identity as black or African American. By the 1970s, the new black Creole of New Orleans Creole ancestry, like their white counterparts earlier, abandoned public self-identification in favor of clear-cut racial solidarity. They did so for fear of dividing the black community; whites had done earlier for fear of being considered part of the black community. The election of Ernest "Dutch" Morial—a Creole of Color who could easily pass for white—as the city's first black mayor in 1977 solidified the new, reorganized Creole and non-Creole black communities. Recalling an address at the 2003 Creole Studies Conference in New Orleans in October 2003, self-identifying Creoles specifically stressed their claim to their own identity, not European American, not African American, not a race-based label, but a unique ethnicity with its own history and heritage. Latter-day Creoles face challenges ahead, from both political activists intent on racial solidarity and cultural activists sympathetic to the cause that they expand Creole to meaninglessly inclusive extremes. Thus Creole will remain controversial into the twenty-first century.

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MAPPING A CONTROVERSIAL ETHNICITY

The Creole ethnicity challenges efforts to map residential patterns through time. Nowhere in antebellum New Orleans from 1810 to 2000, does the term Creole appear regularly. Nowhere in city records are Creoles tabulated comprehensively and consistently, let alone with addresses. Using the best data, we have to look for clues, indicators, and surrogates for Creole identity, sometimes colliding in two or more simultaneously. Some ideas:

- **Free People of Color** — *Gens de couleur libre* were tabulated consistently along with free and enslaved black slaves, dating back to colonial-era censuses and into the American era until 1860. Most free people of color were Creoles, but not all. Indeed, not even most—Creoles in antebellum New Orleans were free people of color (there were also free Creoles enslaved black Creoles, and manumitted black Creoles). Mapping the locations of the free colored population at the street level or aggregated by ward would yield on the Creole geographic question.

- **Surname Interpretation** — Surnames listed in directories or censuses, along with street addresses, can be filtered in a Gallic- or Hispanic-sounding (Lafré, de Boulangry, Bouligny) versus Anglo-sounding (Smith, Brown, Thompson) with the implication that the former group was probably Creole at the latter American. Certain letter sequences—-eau, -aud, -ier—can be used to distinguish probable French family names from those of Anglo and other ancestries. The problem with this approach is that many refugees from Saint-Domingue (who may have been known as Créoles on their old island but not here, at least not at first) and recent immigrants from France (the "foreign French") may be accidentally categorized as New Orleans Creoles. Anglo, German, and Irish surnames, such as the ubiquitous Macarty, run deep into the colonial era and are by all means Creole, but may land on the Anglo side of a surname interpretation. Additionally, some people Englishized their names, others gallicized or hispanicized their names; and still others are just plain difficult to categorize. Nevertheless, the simplicity of this method and so much mapable data to the historical geographer, that it advantages outweighs its disadvantages.

- **“Classic Names” Sampling Technique** — Historians and genealogists have compiled lists of classic or prominent Creole family names of New Orleans. Assuming their criteria for Creole were sound and their selection accurate—in other words, assume such lists form statistically representative sampling—one can search directories for those names, map out their residential addresses, and reveal their geography. The problem lies in the word "prominent." Are such lists truly representative of the Creole population, or were the compilers drawn to the most democratic and famous names? The three dozen Creole surnames included in Germain’s *Creole Families of New Orleans* (1921) compose a veritable Who’s Who of New Orleans history: Marigny, Pontalba, De Boré, de Boulangry, Grima, Pitot, Forbin. One gets the sense that those other Creoles on the wrong side of track may not have made it onto the lists. More useful lists appear in Mary Gehman’s 1994 monograph *The Free People of Color of New Orleans: An Introduction*, including common names of free and color, and surnames of free people of color before and after Americanization, including those of Saint-Domingue refugees.70 Provided representative names can be found, this sampling technique can be useful, time-saving, and free of the pitfalls of the surname-interpretation method, and may even help distinguish among Louisiana Creoles, Saint-Domingue refugees, and foreign French.

- **Race plus Religion** — In the early nineteenth century, adherence to Catholicism and Protestantism offered solid evidence of Creole versus non-Creole ethnicity. But with the arrival of Irish, German, and Sicilian Catholic immigrants from the 1850s to the 1910s, “the distinction between Catholics and Protestants was no longer quite equivalent to the distinction between Creoles and non-Creoles. One could [no longer] infer that a person was Creole from the mere fact that he was Catholic, though it could be difficult for him to become Creole without somehow affiliating himself with the Catholic church.”71

Funding with Catholic New Orleanians is woefully inadequate as a technique to identify Creole ethnicity today, because so many are of non-Creole Irish, German, or Germanic ancestry. Gehman, *The Free People of Color of New Orleans*, 132-34.


identity; essentially, anyone could be Creole, as Creole identity is part-and-parcel of the larger American story. In response, up stop the problem of identifying Creoles (capital C) in the audience, who reminded the doctor of the problem, Creole was their unique personal heritage and ethnicity—a history with names and faces and traditions, not an intellectual abstraction to be shared by everyone in the hope of excluding no one. Not everyone was Creole.
man ancestry. Finding black Catholic New Orleanians, however, is a compelling technique. Most modern-day New Orleanians who are Catholic in faith and black in race usually trace their roots deep into the city's colonial-era history, have some French or Spanish blood, and may well bear a French surname—all major traits of Creole ethnicity. Modern-day black New Orleanians who are Protestant, on the other hand, more likely arrived to the city from the interior South after emancipation, are purer in their African blood, possess an Anglo surname, and do not claim Creole ethnicity or ancestry. New Orleans is one of the major centers of black Catholicism in America today, and it is no coincidence that the nation's only historically black Catholic institution of higher learning, Xavier University of Louisiana, calls New Orleans home. But how to identify black Catholics? The U.S. Census does not inquire about religion, so one must obtain data on religious affiliation from other sources, namely the Catholic diocese, which tracks this information at the church-parish level. This technique is not without problems. Many people reside in suburban neighborhoods but, for reasons of tradition, worship at the inner-city churches of their childhood, which may be miles away. Many black Catholics may simply not claim any Creole heritage, regardless of whether they could; others may have adopted the faith through a Sicilian or Irish ancestor; others still may have converted. This technique also misses black Creoles who, for whatever reason, may be Protestant or have abandoned their Catholicism, and, as previously discussed, completely misses all white Creoles. Nevertheless, because the popular understanding of Creole New Orleans today implies African Americans of a certain heritage, the black Catholic technique appears to be a sound one.

- Other Techniques

Creoles may also be identified through affiliation with such groups as the Creole Association of Louisiana and Anthéne Louisianais of the late nineteenth-century white Creole community, or the

Mapping Creole distributions is challenging because no standardized historical data source captures this enigmatic ethnicity consistently and comprehensively. Instead, “indicators” of Creole identity must be used. An 1808 property map of the French Quarter was interpreted for Francophone-sounding surnames (probable Creoles, shown in red) versus likely Anglo names, in blue. We see here, less than five years after the Louisiana Purchase, the beginning of one of historic New Orleans' overriding ethnic-geographical patterns: the preponderance of Anglo culture in upper city (to the left) and Creole culture in lower areas (to the right). This pattern remains evident in the streetscape—architecturally, ethnically, racially, culturally—to this day. Map and analysis by author based on Plan de la Ville de la Nouvelle Orléans.
WHERE WAS CREOLE NEW ORLEANS?

Prior to 1788, when the city was confined to the present-day French Quarter, the answer to this question was simple: all of New Orleans was Creole. The development of Faubourg St. Marie (that year to relieve population pressure and open up new land after the 1788 fire), followed by an in-pouring of American emigrants particularly after 1803, started to rearrange the cultural landscape of the new American city. Geographical patterns of Creole ethnicity emerging from the moment a mere century and a half after the founding of New Orleans. In this map, we can see the emergence of ethnic patterns because it was a transitional decade in the Americanization of New Orleans. Ethnic tensions in the preceding decades had split the city into two factions. On one side was an uneasy alliance between French-speaking Catholic Creoles and foreign French (that is, immigrants from France and refugee from Saint-Domingue), who, by means of their superior numbers, maintained political and cultural control. On the other side were English-speaking Protestant Americans and their allies, who enjoyed commercial dominance. Both groups were in competition with, and critical of, the other, depending on economic and cultural influence. After years of discord (which sometimes came “perilously close to armed violence”), the Americans in 1836 resolved this problem by winning legislative consent to divide New Orleans into three autonomous municipalities. Most Creoles and foreign French would be concentrated in the First Municipality (the French Quarter) and Third Municipality (below the Quarter), while most Anglo-Americans would govern themselves in the Second Municipality (above Canal Street, also home to many Irish and German immigrants). The municipality system pitted sections of the city and their respective ethnic groups in fierce competition against each other. From the perspective of the wealthier Second Municipality, the system supported economic development and alleviated ethnic tensions. From the viewpoint of the mostly Creole-an immigrant First and “Poor Third” municipalities, the arrangement isolated them and intensified ethnic discord. “Had the Legislature sought, by the most careful efforts,” wrote a Third Municipality’s Daily Orleanian in 1849, “to create a war of races, to make distinction between Creole and American, they could not have chosen a better means for these objects, than the present division oper-
Where did Creoles and Anglos live in antebellum New Orleans? To find probable Creole households and businesses, surnames in the 1842 City Directory containing the distinctive French letter sequences of -ais, -aud, -ier, -ign, -aux, -çois, and others were extracted and mapped (top). For probable Anglo residences, the most frequent Anglo-American surnames (Smith, Brown, Moore, Thomas, Davis, Jones, and others) were identified and plotted (bottom). True to popular perception, Creoles generally lived below Canal Street, outnumbering Anglos by a highly three-to-one ratio, whereas Anglos outnumbered Creoles by a similar ratio above Canal Street. But contrary to legend, Canal Street did not decisively divide the two populations. Map and analysis by author; see text for details.
Creole New Orleans: The Geography of a Controversial Ethnicity

Mapping Creole (and American) New Orleanians in the 1840s, then, sheds some light on the residential patterns underlying these politics. That year 1841 is particularly opportune because, in that year, a map entitled Plan of New Orleans with Perspectives and Geometric Views of the Principal Buildings of the City was drawn and published by the architect/civil engineer/surveyor, L. Hirt. This document is important because it may be the only comprehensive reference for the erratic and confusing pre-1852 house-numbering system. Beginnings and ending house numbers for most blocks between present-day Howard Avenue and Franklin Avenue from Rampart to the river are set in tiny type in the corner of each block. These numbers were coded into a computer-based Geographic Information System to enable semi-automated mapping at the house-number level. Next came the question of how to identify Creoles and Americans, recognizing the aforementioned methodological problems. I decided to employ the "semantic interpretation" technique to identify Creoles, and "classic names" method to identify Americans, using the 1842 City Directory as the data source. To extract the probable Creole names, all those directory entries (out of over 16,000) that contained the distinctive French letter sequence of -ais, -aud, -ier, -ign, -ier, -ois, -ois, -eu, or -ue) or that started with St. or that ended with -ville, were found and flagged. Examples include Daumarais, Arnaud, Boissière, Marigny, Lanaux, François, Beauregard, Dubreuil, Boudreaux, St. Amand, and Jugeville. Since Creoles may also have had Spanish surnames, entries for Garcia, Gonzales, and all those ending with the letter z that were probably Spanish (such as Alvarez, Fernandez, and Lopez), but excluding names such as Fitz and Allulz) were added to the sampling. The number of Creole samples was limited to about one thousand (1,181 to be exact); 1,051 French surnames and 130 Spanish surnames on the presumption that this would be sufficient to depict overall spatial patterns.

Next came the Americans. Because the ratio of Creoles to Americans in the Creole sample was roughly two-to-one (with a sample size of around 600 (631 to be exact) was reached. These most-common names were Smith, Brown, Moore, Thompson, Davis, Jones, Clark, Lewis, Taylor, White, Jackson, Williams, Harriet, Wilson, Henderson, Thomas, Wood, and Johnson. Seven percent of the samples were lost because of either re-entered or nonexistent or otherwise inappropriate addresses, leaving 1,682 probable Creole and American households. These samples, together with their residential and/or business addresses, were then mapped to the 1841 house-numbering system, a process that was only partially automated. One of the total sample of 1,682 names 41 percent (those with neat, clean addresses such as "164 Camp St.", or "86 St. Louis St.") mapped out automatically. But the remaining 59 percent with messy addresses (for "Bayou Road S. Carais & Ave") had to be manually moved to their proper locations. All together over thirty-five hours of work, 96 percent of the 1,682 names mapped out to within a half-block of their actual historical locations. The resultant pattern of maps, Creole and Anglo New Orleanians in 1842, depict the following patterns:

- It comes as no surprise that Creoles in 1842 were concentrated primarily in the old city's today's French Quarter, spilling significantly into the Faubourg Tremé and up the Bayou Road (First Municipality). Fewer Creoles lived in the Second and Third Municipalities (faubourgs St. Mary and Marigny). The whole patterns reflect well the observations made by A. Oakey Hall in the late 1840s.

One section of New Orleans, the First Municipality, is the old city, left to the tender mercies of the French and Creole population; a town dark, and dirty [meaning either the city or the people]. One in the Second Municipality, the new city, with lots of Boston, there a touch of New York, and a little Philadelphia; the third section a species of half village, half city, [unmistakable in its breed]. A Faubourg book is given over to the tender mercies of the Dutch and Irish, and the usual accompaniments of flaxen-pollopped boys and flaxen-tailed pigs.

- It is far from this map that neither perfect integration nor perfect segregation prevailed between these two ethnic groups. This semi-integrated, somewhat clustered pattern of geographical distribution persisted in New Orleans among almost all groups, with the exception of non-Creole blacks) for most of New Orleans’ history. This is evident in many of the ethnic distribution maps in this book.

- True to popular perception, Creoles generally lived below Canal Street, outnumbering Anglos by roughly a 3.2-to-1 ratio, whereas Anglos outnumbered Creoles by a similar 2.8-to-1 ratio above Canal Street. But contrary to legend, Canal Street did not decisively divide the unique surnames) that year. Typical Anglo-American names; the top ten were Smith (fifty-five-three entries), Clark, Martin, Moore, Thompson, Davis, Jones, Mitchell, Clark, and Lewis (three entries). Only after the two hundredth or so most common surname do French-sounding names come to predominate. This means, of course, that there were relatively few variations of Anglo surnames, repeated many times, numerous separate families, but thousands of variations of French names, most of which had only one or two family entries.

* Daily Orleansian, February 19, 1849, p. 2, col. 3.
* The Historic New Orleans Collection, accession number 1952.4.


Almost all of the thirty most common names in New Orleans (out of over 7,500
two groups. Twenty-four percent of the households and businesses below Canal Street, in the reputed Creole section, in fact had Anglo-American names, and a comparable 25 percent of the entities above Canal Street (in the so-called American Sector) had French and Spanish surnames. The upper streets of the French Quarter were particularly Americanized.1

This map is corroborated by the observations of Joseph Holt Ingraham, who, walking up Chartres Street from the cathedral in 1838, wrote:

After passing Rue Toulouche, the streets begin to assume a new character; the buildings were loftier and more modern—the signs over the doors were English signs, and the characteristic arrangements of a northern dry goods store were perceived... We had now attained the upper part of Chartres-street, which was occupied almost exclusively by retail and wholesale dry goods dealers; jewelers, booksellers, &c., from the northern states, and I was almost realize that I was taking an evening promenade in Cornhill [England], so great was the resemblance.8

Ingraham later rounded Canal Street to Levee Street (now Decatur) and proceeded downriver: "The stores on our left were all open, and nearly every one of them, for the first two squares, was kept by Americans; that is to say, Anglo Americans as distinguished from the Louisianians French..." Only when he reached the market, about five blocks down, did "French stores [begin] to predominate, till one could hardly imagine himself, aided by the sound of the French language, French faces and French goods on all sides, to be traversing a street in Havre or Marseilles."9

As Canal Street, as the boundary between the First and Second Municipalities (1836-1852), had indeed serve as the political "dividing line between the American and French interests,"10 but it did not effectively separate the demographic distributions of the two groups. Comparing the 1842 map to the previous 1808 map illustrates the extent to which American influence infiltrated the former French and Spanish colony during the first half of the nineteenth century. By 1842 the municipality era ended in 1852, the economic, political and cultural fulcrum would shift from the old Creole downtown to the new American uptown.

- This map may give the impression that the old city in the 1840s comprised only Creoles and some Americans, and few others. Nothing could be further from the truth. The 1850 census indicates that fully 54 percent of the free population of the French Quarter was foreign born; another 14 percent was born in America outside Louisiana and 32 percent were Louisiana-born. Of those 32 percent, however, less than one-third were white Louisiana-born offspring of Louisiana-born fathers. Most probably Creoles by the traditional definition. "Now, then, can we square these data with the [notion] of the lower city as something approaching an exclusively creole domain?" pondered Joseph Tregle who studied the 1850 data. Tregle hypothesized that Creole and the general populace, in forming their impression of the old city, added to the small sum of traditionally defined Creoles those other parts of the community which seemed to unite with them into a kind of ethnical solidarity, the foreign born French and Mediterranean stock plus their children and the 2,070 free persons of color, [who were] equally entitled to the name creole.11 Such a "fusing" would raise the Creole population of the old city to 75 percent in 1850, and that of Creole slaves were included. The patterns shown in the map do not reflect these complexities, only the spatial patterns of those with probable French and Anglo surnames.

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8 See Holt on Creoles and Americans, and Canal Street in Campaign—Time and Place in New Orleans, 1:93-94.
9 Ingraham, The South-West by a Yankee, 1:93-94.
**Geographical Shifts in the Creole Population, from the Civil War to the Civil Rights Movement**

Wealthier Creole families began departing the French Quarter around the time of the Civil War. Some moved to the tony new garden suburbs of Esplanade Avenue in the 1850s; others lost their businesses and returned to the suburbs of the 1860s and left their mansions for humbler abodes in the lower faubourgs. A small group of free Creoles of color, alarmed by the increasing racial tension of the day, left Louisiana in the 1850s for port cities in Mexico, where their descendents live today. More Creoles of Color departed for Mexico as well as Haiti, Cuba, and France in the 1880s-1890s. By century’s end, concentrations of Creoles in New Orleans shifted from the French Quarter, Tremé, and Marigny farmlands into the Sixth, Seventh, Ninth, and Ninth wards, beyond the Mississippi River and the backswamp, where some had been settled for almost a century. Poor Sicilian immigrants replaced the Creole population in the Quarters during the latter nineteenth and early twentieth century, making it into a high-density “Little Palermo.” With the introduction of drainage technology at the turn of the century, the swamps were drained out and the backswamp edge crept farther and farther toward Lake Pontchartrain, until the entire river-to-lake swathe of the seventh, Eighth, and Ninth wards was developed. By the 1950s, for residential living, White Creoles, who by now generally no longer identified themselves as Creoles, departed along with other whites to the new suburban developments of Lakeside New Orleans in the early decades of the 1900s, and for Jefferson Parish and other neighboring suburbs later in the century. Meanwhile, black Creoles left the city in droves starting in the late 1930s, taking the Sunset Limited from New Orleans for Los Angeles that made New Orleans style French bread. Although many of the estimated 5,000 California Creoles have since moved again to other areas in Los Angeles, Jefferson Boulevard between Arlington Avenue and Crenshaw Boulevard today is lined with Creole diners, food restaurants, and businesses with French names. Smaller pockets of New Orleans Creoles formed in other large western and northern urban areas.

Those black Creoles who remained in their ancestral city tended to move out of the old faubourgs and into certain new lakeside suburbs (most prominently Pontchartrain Park) of the Seventh, Eighth, and Ninth wards. Prompting this move was the nationwide preference for suburban living in new northern urban areas. The assaults on the old Creole faubourgs were the destruction of the well-loved forested North Claiborne Avenue neutral ground for Interstate 10 in 1966, and the leveling of ten blocks of Faubourg Marigny for the urban renewal project that became the Mahalia Jackson Theater for the Performing Arts and Louis Armstrong Park by 1980. Many Creoles would...
move again to the even newer suburbs of eastern New Orleans, home today to much of the city's black middle class. (See map, *Creole New Orleans, 1800-2000*.) Thus, during a span of two centuries, Creole New Orleans and its Creole population migrated out of its original French Quarter hearth, into the lower faubourgs, then lakeward up the Elysian Fields and Franklin Avenue corridors (early to mid-1900s), and eastward out Gentilly Boulevard to the subdivisions beyond the Industrial Canal (late 1900s). The Seventh Ward in particular, since the late nineteenth century, became the geo-political entity most associated with the Creole population, both in fact and in the public lexicon. Many of the most influential leaders of the New Orleans black community, such as A.P. Tureaud and other civil rights pioneers, were Seventh Ward Creoles. The area has been called the “Mother of Mayors,” with mayors Ernest Kent Morial, Sidney Barthelemy, and Marc Morial all tracing roots to this storied ward.

**Catholicism as a Clue to Creole New Orleans**

As the Creole population shifted, so did Creole streetscapes and landmarks. Popular perceptions of the “main street” of black Creole New Orleans shifted from North Claiborne Avenue northward to St. Bernard Avenue and North Broad Street. Epicenters of Creole Catholicism also moved with the population. Creoles in antebellum times worshipped primarily at St. Louis Cathedral in the French Quarter and St. Augustine in the Faubourg Tremé, both located in the heart of that era's Creole population clusters. After the beginning of segregation of churches in 1895, “certain churches became associated with [the] colored Creole community,” premier among them Corpus Christi Church (1916) on St. Bernard Avenue, located in the Seventh Ward lakeside of the old Creole area. Holy Redeemer, a new parish, was carved from Corpus Christi Parish, and St. Peter Claver and Epiphany were founded in adjacent areas in the Sixth and Seventh

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80 Domínguez, White by Definition, 223.
wards. These four churches “became nearly synonymous with Creole in the black community. By implication, membership in these churches was thought to signal Creole identity.”

(Other predominantly black Catholic churches, such as St. David’s, St. Philip’s, and Blessed Sacrament, are not necessarily located in traditionally recognized Creole areas, illustrating that such concentrations are by no means exclusive.)

As the Creole population moved out through Gentilly and toward the lake, it spawned new predominantly black Catholic parishes: St. Paul’s, which grew out of Corpus Christi’s Leo the Great; St. Raphael and St. Gabriel’s, serving parishioners in Gentilly Woods and Pontchartrain Park, and Immaculate Heart of Mary and others in the suburbs east of the Industrial Canal. The map shows those Orleans Parish churches in 2001 with at least 10 percent African American membership, with the implication that most black Catholics in New Orleans have at least some current or past claim to Creole identity.

True to perception, the central Seventh Ward—“the fountainhead of New Orleans’ Creole culture”—stands out dramatically in this technique as a main Creole area, though not the only one. One journalist described this exact area as the “mother lode” of New Orleans’ Creole heritage. Black and heavily Catholic, this is the neighborhood, she said, “that provided the city with its skilled plasterers, masons, carpenters and other craftsmen.”

A woman who grew up in this same area (specifically North Robertson at Columbus) in the 1880s described it as “the nest of the Creole district and so near the fine, rich, Creole aristocracy of [Esplanade] Avenue,” and wrote of the Creole dialects, customs, and characters of the neighborhood.

Using black Catholicism as an indicator of Creolism nationwide, we see that, at least in these 1984 Catholic diocese data, the Gulf Coast was indeed “the Creole coast.” Recent immigration from the Caribbean to Miami and New York may have altered these patterns.

The same Catholic-based technique mapped at the national level (map, Gulf Coast Concentration of African-American Catholics) shows that, in 1984, the old French colonial Gulf Coast region remained the premier hearth of Creolism in North America. Immigration from the Caribbean to Miami and New York may have altered these patterns lately.

Occupation as a Clue

Skilled building trades have long been associated with the black Creole community of New Orleans, from colonial

Bruce Nolan, “Memories Sear Women’s Family,” Times-Picayune, June 17, 2004, B1-2. The specific area referenced in the above quote was the 1900 block of Duels Street, which is located precisely in the high-Creole section of the central Seventh Ward as indicated by the map.

Not your typical Southern city: black Catholic landscapes in and near the Seventh Ward. Street photos by author; rooftop photos of St. Peter Claver and St. Augustine by Ronnie Cardwell, 2003.
and antebellum times to today. Wrote the Daily Picayune in 1859,

"Our free colored population form a distinctive class from those elsewhere in the United States... Some of our best mechanics and artisans are to be found among the free colored men. They form the great majority of our regular, settled mechanics, bricklayers, builders, carpenters, tailors, shoemakers, and merchants. As a general rule, the free colored people of Louisiana, and especially of New Orleans—the 'Creoles colored people,' as they style themselves—are sober, industrious and moral class."

Ironwork, lathing, plastering, painting, and tile setting are among the other professional crafts that Creoles have handed down for generations, dating back some centuries to French, Caribbean, and African schooling and traditions. These lines of work availed to the men of color to whom the doors of many other professions were closed. This level of independence, steady work, opportunities for creativity, and a sense of accomplishment are clues to the geography of Creole New Orleans. Their labor have permanently enriched the physical culture of New Orleans, and much of the city's spectacular architecture stands today as a monument to their efforts. Tracking the residential patterns of these tight-knit, tradition-bound artisans provides clues to the geography of Creole New Orleans. "This 7th ward here was full of trade people," recollected the late Mardi Gras Indian Chief Allison "Tootie" Montana, himself a skilled lather with deep Seventh Ward roots. "You could build a house, really didn't have to spend no money at all. You knew plasterers, You knew lathers. You knew carpenters. You knew plumbers," he said. The U.S. Census, which collects data on occupation, estimated numbers for non-white "craftsmen, foremen, and kindred workers" at the census-track level for the first time in 1940. The map Black Craftsmen in New Orleans, 1940, verifies a cluster of African American craftsmen living in Seventh Ward and adjacent areas known for high Creole populations, but also shows many black craftsmen living in non-Creole areas, particularly the former back-of-town section now known as Central City.

**LINGUISTICS AS CLUE**

Mapping the patterns of French speech offers additional evidence to the geography of Creole New Orleans. Historically, the ability to speak French and its local variations served as a reliable indicator of Creole identity, more so than religion or ancestry. To a keen ear, it might even serve to distinguish Creoles from foreign French immigrants, Acadians, and Saint-Domingue refugees, for it mentions the castes and classes among them. Though most of that language diversity is gone today, linguists still classify three French-related languages spoken in modern Louisiana: Cajun French, Louisiana Creole, and Colonial French. Of these, Cajun French is the largest number of speakers today, most of them rural Acadians residing throughout Louisiana's so-called Frenchophone triangle. Louisiana Creole (français nèg'), considered a separate language influenced by French and African tongues as much as a variation of French, is spoken by an estimated 20,000–30,000 (c. 1998) mostly African-Louisianians clustered around New Roads in Pointe Coupee Parish, along Bayou Teche near Lafayette, in the German Coast above New Orleans, and reportedly south of Lake Charles. Colonial French, the old French of educated Creoles, is the rarest of these Louisiana French. Additionally, standard French, the type taught in schools, is heard in Louisiana, sometimes among elders of the upper class. Though linguistic boundaries separate these tongues in Louisiana; rather, a continuum exists, such that a black Creole in St. Martinville may drift in and out of Cajun French, English, and Louisiana Creole in the course of conversation. It is not clear how the French variations once heard in the streets of New Orleans fit into such a continuum, because most recent scholarly research in...
Louisiana linguistics has focused on rural areas in modern times, not urban areas in either historical or modern times. It is probable that old New Orleans French ranged from a rural African-influenced \textit{français nèg’} to Colonial French to a Parisian French imported directly from France. There is some debate as to whether Louisiana Creole was spoken by native New Orleanians, or imported to the city by emigrants from nearby rural areas, where it has always been more prevalent. For our purposes here, the French spoken by New Orleans Creoles may be generically referred to as French Creole. How to map these folks?

U.S. censuses have since 1890 collected data on language spoken at the household or individual level, but certain nuances about the data frustrate their use to map detailed geographical distributions. Finding French-speaking households in the old population schedules suffers from the problem of lumping French-speaking Creoles together with non-Creole French speakers. Separating out those with Louisiana birth-

Mapping linguistic patterns offers additional evidence for the geography of Creole New Orleans. Remarkably, 41,719 residents of Orleans Parish claimed French as their “mother tongue” (the language spoken in one’s childhood home) in the 1970 census. They are mapped here in red dots, and plotted numerically, upon green shading representing the size of the African American population per census tract. Points in majority-black tracts likely represent black Creoles/Creoles of Color (labeled “A,” in the Seventh Ward). Points in majority white tracts may be white Creoles or descendents of French immigrants (labeled “B”), or they may be Acadians recently settled in the city. Note the large number of points in mostly white tracts on the West Bank, particularly Westwego (labeled “C”), which practically abuts the Acadian region. Map and analysis by author.
place, or with Louisiana-born parents, may find it impossible to disentangle this information, but any approach involving the original hand-written population schedules is extremely time-consuming and requires a team of assistant enumerators. Long volumes offer aggregations at coarser spatial scales (such as census tracts), but in most census languages, information is among the pieces of information aggregated as "French" or "Creole" as languages often fall in the "other" category of the censuses and thus suffer from undercounting. In other cases, the phrasing of the question affects the reliability of responses and thwarts the comparability on decade to decade. Finally, the complex continuum of French variations spoken in Louisiana before modern times obscures the direct association of certain speech patterns with conventional language categories and thence with specific ethnic groups.

Queries regarding mother tongue, which the Census Bureau defined as the language spoken in one's childhood home, offer particularly interesting results. While "mother tongue" may be a straightforward notion in homogeneous societies, confusion may arise in multicultural communities.

What is the mother tongue of a multilingual household? A New Orleans respondent may say, "the mother tongue" quite simply (appearing in the censuses of 1910-1940 and 1960-1970) the way one grew up without childhood memories dating back to the 1850s to the 1950s, when English, French, Italian, Spanish, and other languages could be heard on city streets. Queries about one's mother tongue vary also distinctly in these people to respond sentimentally, either to affirm or deny a particular heritage. Renewed ethnic pride may explain why the 298,420 white Louisianians who claimed French as their mother tongue in 1940 grew mysteriously to 487,626 in 1970, despite the insidious decline of traditional Cajun culture during the previous years.104

Mother-tongue data for New Orleans in 1970 divulges fascinating patterns. Fully 41,719 American-born residents of Orleans Parish—one of every fourteen—claimed French as their mother tongue that year. This figure is almost double the combined total of those claiming Italian, Spanish, German, Polish, Russian, Yiddish, and Yiddish as their mother tongues.105 At first glance, this statistic seems incredible: French ceased being a New Orleans lingua franca during the Civil War, and studies disappeared from the streets of New Orleans throughout the course of the twentieth century. French and Creole were spoken mostly by elders in parlors and churches by the end of that century, and rarely as a first language.106 Creole is still there, but there are more French speakers in this major American city, 167 years after its colonial era? If respondents heeded well the Census Bureau's definition of "mother tongue," these points may not necessarily represent French speakers, but rather people who grew up in households in which, many years ago, some variation of French was spoken at some level. Speakers in majority-black tracts are more likely to represent black Creoles and Creoles of Color (labeled "A") in the map New Orleans Area Residents Identifying French as Their "Mother Tongue," 1970); speakers in majority-white tracts may be white Creoles or descendents of French immigrants (labeled "B")—or may be Cajuns recently settled in the city. Many of the Cajuns emigrated to New Orleans during and after World War II, when mechanization and agricultural mechanization pushed Cajun people nationwide to the nearest major cities. Notably, particularly the number of points in mostly white tracts on the West Bank, particularly Westwego (labeled "C"), which practically abuts the Acadian region. While greater New Orleans is not what it was 150 years ago, there are more Cajuns here than one might expect (though less than tourism promoters would have you believe). The local phone books list plenty of classic Cajun names such as Boudreaux, Dardar, Landry, and Thibodeaux.107 An alternative explanation is that some people responded emotionally to the term mother tongue; claiming French to affirm their Frenchophone heritage is, finally, it is quite possible that many of these points represent bona fide speakers of some variation of Louisiana French. According to Gilbert A. Martin, prior to World War II, it was uncommon to hear the Creole language spoken daily on the streets of New Orleans.108 Indeed, all of the older siblings of Mayor Ernest "Dutch" Morial, a Seventh Ward Creole born in 1922, spoke some French.109 Whatever the explanation, one geographical element in clear: a cluster of speakers appears in the majority-black tracts that make up the old Creole neighborhoods of the Seventh Ward, a pattern of Creole ethnic distribution corroborated on the other maps of this chapter.

**CREOLE CITYSCAPES**

Creole cityscapes—that is, elements in the built environment that reflect past or present Creole ethnicity—assume three forms in twenty-first-century New Orleans. The first manifests itself in the hundreds of structures exhibiting Creole architectural styles, most of them built before the mid-nineteenth century. To stroll through the Lower Quarter, Faubourgs Tremé and Marigny, and Bywater is to observe streetscapes like few others surviving in modern America. But, despite the architecture, few Creoles still reside here.110

Creole speakers are rare in New Orleans today. Personal communication, Thomas A. Kliger, December 5, 2003.

105 Domínguez, White by Design: 2,300 Years of Cultural Continuity (Castro Valley, CA, 1992), 35.


107 In 1808, the majority of parcel owners of the French Quarter had Francoophone surnames. Eighty percent were Anglo. Two centuries later, this figure had reversed: only 19 percent of the French Quarter's parcel owners in 2002 had Francoophone surnames. Survey by author, Orleans Parish Assessment Roll, District 2.
Ethnic Geographies

North Claiborne Avenue was once popularly perceived as the “main street” of black Creole New Orleans, lined with locally owned businesses and shaded by over two hundred live oaks. Most of the shaded neutral ground was destroyed in 1966 for the construction of I-10. Today, many people identify St. Bernard Avenue (and sometimes North Broad) as the “main streets” of the black Creole community, though North Claiborne is not forgotten. Murals on the interstate pillars commemorate local civil rights leaders and black history, and the live oaks are poignant reminders of the lakefront past (upper right). This is one of the great cultural experiences in modern New Orleans, missed by nearly all the thousands of tourists in town for the festivities. St. Bernard Avenue penetrates the heart of the Seventh Ward (right), also goes unnoticed by millions of Creole-curious tourists who visit New Orleans annually. Photographs by author, 2003-2004.

subdivisions of eastern New Orleans. You’ll find tourists here, but tour busses crawl through the streets at the pace of the guide’s amplified narrative; no brochure racks clutter the foyers of public buildings. These Creole cityscapes, structurally speaking, are unspectacular, lined with twentieth-century ranch houses and modern commercial edifices that could be found anywhere. But a closer inspection exposes clues to modern Creole identity—the French surnames, the black Catholicism, the foods, the word “Creole” used in business names—which culturally set this neighborhood apart from the rest of New Orleans just as Creoles have set New Orleans apart from the rest of the nation. Clues of Creolism may also be found through a culinary geography—an enticing research project awaiting some intrepid investigator—in which the availability of distinguishing Creole cooking ingredients (such as rabbit) in local grocery stores, or the styles of gumbo prepared in mom-and-pop restaurants, is mapped citywide.108 Whatever the technique, one major geographical

2003.

107 Jonn Ethan Hankins and Steven Maklansky, eds. Raised to the Trade: Creole Building Arts of New Orleans (New Orleans, 2002).

108 The Seventh Ward style of gumbo, according to legendary Creole chef Leah Chase, is “a somewhat Creole gumbo—a gumbo-brown brew with crab, shrimp, crawfish, ham, smoked sausage, and [sometimes] veal stew meat.” “The Creole gumbo here doesn’t change in the Creole community, and when I say Creole I mean Creoles of color. If you talk to people in the 7th Ward they will tell you that the way I (cook gumbo) is the way they do it. Why certain ingredients? ‘You put it in there because that’s what your mammy told you to do.’” Brett Anderson, “Bowl of Wonder,” Lagniappe.

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“Foodscapes” throughout the Seventh and Eighth wards, directly or indirectly informed by Creole culture. “Creole” as an adjective for certain foods or cooking styles accounts for most of the modern-day usage of the word. Photographs by author, 2003-2004.
pattern seen for almost two hundred years remains in twenty-first-century New Orleans: the non-Creole black community predominates above Canal Street, in Central City and uptown, whereas the black Creole/Creole of Color community lives primarily in the downtown half of the city, below Canal Street and east of City Park. This 20th-century derivative of the old downtown-Creole/uptown-Anglo pattern, first seen around the time of the Louisiana Purchase, prevailed two Creole women interviewed in the 1970s about this ancient pattern.

Canal Street was the dividing line. People who lived north of Canal Street called themselves Creoles, they were somewhat of a different type of Negro. South of Canal Street, uptown, there seemed to be a different class of Negroes...You just didn't mix with those people. You just didn't cross that boundary.109

One learns little of the geography of Creole New Orleans from a survey of the word Creole in the cityscape today. While French Quarter restaurants and merchants recklessly exploit the enchanting term to authenticate their offerings, the genuine Creole community and its businesses endure in relative obscurity in Seventh Ward neighborhoods, unbeknownst to and unvisited by the millions of Creole-curious tourists exploring the Creole City annually. Only during Jazz Fest, a visitor satire en masse to the Seventh Ward, yet most festivalgoers, though deeply appreciative of local culture, are ignorant to the fact that they are in the modern-day heart of Creole New Orleans. As it can be heard above the noise of genuine Creole restaurants in the Seventh Ward, a popular, seductive Creole restaurant and political community owned by Stan "Pampy" Barré, practically had to shout its bona fides in a print ad posted in the visitor-oriented Where magazine. Its copy read, in part, "Pampy's Creole Kitchen...authentic Creole cuisine...native Creole cuisine...original Creole cuisine...dine in a casual ATMOSPHERE with a true Creole family...WHERE IT ALL STARTED...DEEP in the heart of the 7th Ward."110 The word Creole appeared eighty-nine times in that seventy-two-page magazine; fully 60 percent of the usage was by commercial establishments located in the French Quarter, one of the least ethnically Creole neighborhoods in modern New Orleans. Eighty-three percent of the uses were as a culinary adjective, describing a food, cooking style, or restaurant theme. Another 12 percent described elements of the built environment, such as a style, a building, architectural, historical neighborhood, or structure name. 5 percent—four uses—meant a particular people. (These percentages would probably be in reverse in a 19th-century usage were similarly tracked.) And of those four uses of Creole to describe people, only one implied a group currently living in modern New Orleans—the aforementioned "true Creole family" of Pampy's Creole Kitchen.111

Epilogue: The modern-day Creole community settled in the very parts of the Seventh, Eighth, and Ninth wards that flooded terribly after Hurricane Katrina. The catastrophe will likely further scatter the ethnic group, across the city, region, or nation, perhaps to the point of eliminating any sort of recognizable Creole neighborhood. This loss, if it comes to pass, will represent one of Katrina's deepest wounds to the cultural heritage of New Orleans.

But even at this early stage, there are signs of resiliency. One famous Creole chef, Austin Leslie, died while evacuated to Atlanta, his life was celebrated with a jazz funeral held on a beautiful October Sunday afternoon in New Orleans. The procession started at his former workplace—Pampy's Creole Kitchen—and wound its way through the heart of the Creole Seventh Ward. It was the city's first jazz funeral after Hurricane Katrina.


WHERE WAS THE IRISH CHANNEL?

While numerous historical accounts delve into the story of Irish New Orleans, few track the elements of place established by the tens of thousands of Irish immigrants who settled in the Crescent City. This aspect begs further investigation because ethnic interaction in this city of active diversities is inherently fascinating, and because a place most associated with New Orleans’ Irish is among the most obvious ethnic enclaves in the city: the Irish Channel. The period sobriquet “Irish Channel” helped save the Irish from the memory of this district, for though the Irish have gone elsewhere, what modern city planner would be foolish enough to change such an enigmatic name?

The name is but one of the mysterious aspects of the Irish Channel. The substance, essence, center, boundaries, even the extent to which the neighborhood was genuinely Irish, also persist in gray-zones and scattered secondary information in the historical literature of New Orleans. Some say the Irish Channel encompassed a vast Riverside swath about downtown, while others insist the Irish Channel was bounded by the grown, urban activists of today who increasingly live in and defend districts they had help to build. Others claim it centered around certain community loci or corridors within this swath, such as churches, markets, or streets. Still others point to ethnically heterogeneous census populations scheduled and dismiss the entire notion as just another local myth. Modern-day technocrats cite government reports and declare resolutely that the Irish Channel officially lies between such-and-such street and this-and-that avenue, regardless of either historical data or popular perceptions, while ever-liberal urban activists view the district as a state of mind—wherever residents say it is. The goal here is not to recapitulate the history of the Irish Channel; nor is it to trace the spatial patterns developed by ethnically heterogeneous census populations scheduled and dismissed by others. Rather, the goal here is to shed light on one specific question: Where was the Irish Channel?

The term “Irish Channel” seems to have emerged in the later decades of the nineteenth century. A perusal of numerous Irish-related newspapers, a review of a survey of the Irish Channel, an article about continued violence in the St. Thomas Street area, for example, contains numerous Irish names but made no reference to the area as the Irish Channel. In an 1883 article about the 1879 yellow fever epidemic, George Cable, the Washington Cable made reference to the “blocks, streets, and courts in the filthy Irish quarter of St. Thomas and Tchoupitoulas streets,” but despite George’s probity, “local color,” failed to use the colorful term. A comprehensive assisted search for the words “Irish Channel” in nearly one million pages of national periodicals and books published between 1815 and 1860 returned only references to the geographical feature of that name in Ireland. A review of the bibliographies of Irish New Orleans works also turned up no evidence. In 1893, however, the Times-Democrat published the recollections of a seventy-three-year-old gentleman who not only used the term “Irish Channel,” but implied that it had been in the popular vernacular for a while. That “Irish Channel” emerged as a neighborhood name sometime after the Civil War was the assessment of Father Earl F. Niehaus, author of The Irish in New Orleans 1800-1860, the 1965 publication that remains the most explicit work on this topic. Though its origin is a mystery, the resonating name stuck, and ever since, residents, observers, writers, and historians have all weighed in on describing its location. “Where is the Irish Channel?” pondered the States-Item in a 1980 special report on the historic neighborhood. “The question is as hard to pin down as a leprechaun, not only because there is general disagreement on the subject, but also because the Channel seems to often have a foot on the map.” Few researchers dwell on the issue of definition, but all make some effort to define it geographically. Many unrelentingly quote each other; some describe the neighborhood as perceived rather than as was; and just as all seem to have quixotically, with the notion of a mysterious old enclave nestled so deeply in New Orleans that its very location is a secret of the past.

Geographers are intrigued by peoples’ varied perceptions of place and space, all the more so when the perceptions are heartfelt, adamantly defended, and difficult to verify. One suspects that most people of both people and places are tuned to these sundry perceptions and take them seriously, with less than acquiescing to the supremacy of only one and dismissing all others. In published sources since the mid-1800s, one encounters a variety of “theories” regarding geographical perceptions of the Irish Channel. The discussion below sorts these various interpretations into the “Adele Street Theory,” the “In-and-Around-Adele-Street Theory,” the “Tchoupitoulas Street Theory,” the “Riverside Swamp Theory,” the “Bounding-the-Street Theory,” the “Myth Theory,” and the “State-of-Mind Theory.” To these I add my own cartographic analysis using the words of Irish names and passages from a century ago. Where was the Irish Channel? Only the judge.

THE ADELE STREET THEORY

“I do know where the Irish Channel is... The one and only Irish Channel of New Orleans was Adele Street,” declared sixty-eight-year-old lifelong resident Richard A. Braufriff in a 1937 Times-Picayune recollection. For this old-timer,
Two-block-long Adele Street, defended adamantly by some neighborhood elders as the Irish Channel, extended perpendicularly from Tchoupitoulas Street near the river wharves of antebellum Lafayette. It was mapped in the late 1870s for the 1883 Robinson Atlas (left). Adele's historical structures were cleared for the St. Thomas public housing project in the late 1930s, which in turn was demolished in the early 2000s for the mixed-income housing plan named River Garden. The photo pair at upper right shows former Adele in 2002, after the demolition of St. Thomas, and two years later, after a controversial Wal-Mart was built squarely on Adele's old site. In the River Garden development behind Wal-Mart, planners created a new Adele Street (bottom right), a few hundred feet from what many call the original Irish Channel. Photographs by author, 2002-2005; map courtesy New Orleans Notarial Archives.

The Irish Channel was not an areal feature one lived "in" but a linear entity one lived "on." Adele Street stretched for only two blocks, from Tchoupitoulas to St. Thomas streets, and hosted about forty-four buildings (thirty-three houses and the rest commercial, institutional, and industrial structures) which forty families occupied and many more patronized. Quick to dismiss "the flashy writers and glib commentators" who suggested otherwise, Braniff authoritatively described his Irish Channel right down to the ratio of double to single cottages, its characters and characteristics, and exact street measurements to the hundredth decimal place. For this gentleman, the Irish Channel not only existed but had very specific and well-defined boundaries. More significantly, he recollected that the two hundred or so people who lived on Adele Street were "principally Irish and German, with the Irish slightly outnumbering the Germans," and for a while, there was even a Negro church there (though no blacks lived there). Clearly, in this testimony, the label Irish Channel did not imply a purely Irish neighborhood segregated from other ethnicities. The only thing Braniff could not peg down was the original of the name, though he did delight in shooting down some popular theories.117

117 Richard A. Braniff, "'Irish Channel' Days Recalled by 'Native Son,'" Times-Picayune, January 25, 1937, p. 11.

The dismissed theories included (1) a barroom light reminded a seaman of a beacon marking a channel of coastal Ireland, and (2) the many Irish patrons lining outside a competitor's store prompted an unpopular English grocer to dub the assemblage a "channel."

118 The dismissed theories included (1) a barroom light reminded a seaman of a beacon marking a channel of coastal Ireland, and (2) the many Irish patrons lining outside a competitor's store prompted an unpopular English grocer to dub the assemblage a "channel."
Where Was the Irish Channel?

A kindred spirit, Gus Laurer, dismissed three expansive Channel theories in a 1941 interview with Lyle Saxon, later published in the 1945 classic Gambit (LaSalle). “People got all mixed up when they talk about the Irish Channel,” said Laurer. “It doesn’t cover the streets they think it does. The Irish Channel links two bodies of water, don’t it? ‘Well, the Irish Channel is right there—Adele Street—and Tchoupitoulas and St. Thomas Streets. That is the real channel, and I remember when there was nothin’ but Irishmen on it.’”

Channel-born Arthur J. O’Keefe, who served as mayor of New Orleans in the late 1930s, felt the same way:

“The real Irish Channel is little Adele Street, you know how it started? It was really the back yards of the houses facing on St. Andrew and Josephine. There was some work on the river, the Irish that were there, started shacks for their cousins, brothers, all their relations, and the Irish immigrants kept coming in.... Well, there wasn’t enough houses for them, so they built them in the back—cottages—if you notice they’re all small along Adele Street—although no time the streets were full with the Irish.”

Interviews conducted by the Federal Writers’ Project in 1941 iterate the case for Adele Street. “I never lived in the real Irish Channel, that’s Adele St.,” recalled eighty-one-year-old George Leitz, whose German-born parents raised him in the area. “We called it ‘Goats’ Alley,’” for all the milk-bearing goats raised there.

“I’ve lived right in this neighborhood for sixty years,” declared Charles Cole. “The Irish Channel is Adele St.—it’s only two blocks long between St. Thomas and Tchoupitoulas and I remember when only the Irish and the Scotch lived there. There was the McShanes, O’Connors, McAllisters, Egan, Greys—all those are all good names, ain’t they?” Cole explained that the Channel got its name long before he was born, when the captain of a docking ship saw rain-flooded Adele Street and said, “By God, it looks like the Irish Channel.”

Neighbor George Morrell recounted a similar yarn: “Irish immigrants, he used to frequent an Adele Street saloon named ‘The Ocean Home,” owned by Mike Noud. “One Irishman looked at Adele street when it was flooded from the rain and said: ‘If this is the ‘Ocean Home,’ that must be the Irish Channel.”

Mrs. Powell, a fifty-four-year-old bar owner, readily acknowledged that her neighborhood at Orange and Tchoupitoulas “was never called the Channel, of course... Adele St. was the real Irish Channel.” “Adele St. was really the Irish Channel,” agreed John P. Bayer, born in 1866. “Adele St. was for the Irish—a hard-working lot. They had to be. Longshoremen, Screwmen—and Cotton.”

In the 1960s, the well-known tax assessor and neighbor advocate Richard F. Burke added cautious support to the Adele Street theory. The lifelong Channel resident explained that the only ingress and egress to the area in this area was an opening across from the street, where many laborers, sailors, and new arrivals funneled into the neighborhood directly through this street. A few years later, Bartholomew La Rocca, an elderly Italian resident interviewed for a social-work documentary, concurred with the Adele Street definition of the Irish Channel:

“Tell me, what is the Irish Channel? Only a few blocks, it started from Saint Thomas to Tchoupitoulas on Adele Street. Outside of that the other places weren’t known as the Irish Channel, they might have everybody called it that, but it wasn’t known as the Irish Channel.”

**The In-and-Around-Adele-Street Theory**

This theory also recognizes the centrality of Adele Street, but places it southeast of downtown and bounds it with “fuzzy” edges rather than definitive ones. A Times-Picayune article from

Charles Cole (White) 475 Josephine St., May 1, 1941, ibid., 2.
George Morrell (White) 2919 Audubon St., June 26, 1941, ibid., 2.
MRS. Powell (White) 1524 Tchoupitoulas St., June 24, 1941, ibid., 2.
Mrs. Powell (White) 2312 Tchoupitoulas St., June 24, 1941, ibid., 2.

Public markets played a role in driving Irish residential patterns. Bracketing the main residential distribution of Irish were St. Mary’s Market at the downtown end and the Lafoura Market farther uptown. Both are gone now, but their imprint remains in the cityscape. Shown here is St. Mary’s Market, dating to 1822 and photographed around the turn of the century (left), and its former site today (right), between North and South Diamond streets off Tchoupitoulas. Southeastern Architectural Archive, Special Collections, Howard-Tilton Library, Tulane University Library; 2003 photographs by author.
1938, reporting the impending destruction of the area for what would later be known as the St. Thomas public housing project, employed this view by describing Irish Channel as not a linear feature but an areal one—a “channel” with “forks.” St. Andrew and Josephine and other streets, being two blocks from the Mississippi to “Thomas Street.”

The article also made clear that the influence of the Irish Channel did not insinuate a purely Irish population: “Hardly the Irish, but some French and Germans, getting their livelihood from the adjacent docks, built the ‘channel.’” The reporter’s informant, sixty-five-year-old Edward T., himself, was more French and German than Irish, yet readily applied the famous appellation to his neighborhood and once lived in what he described as the “heart” of the Irish Channel. But Gras also “heard the term, ‘Irish Channel’ applied to other sections, even to a long strip of streets parallel, rather than vertical to, the river.

The writers of a popular history of the Garden District adhered to the around-Adele Street theory when they described the “Irish Channel section of Lafayette as [the] streets closest to the upper limit of New Orleans and nearest to the river, Felicity, St. Marys, Adele, and Nuns.” The writers of the 1938 New Orleans City Guide pushed the focus a bit too far, viewing the riverfront sections immediately above and below Irish Avenue as the Irish Channel.

The writer of a historical journal article centered the Channel around the division intersection of Constance and Gravier streets—a full half mile from others’ interpretations—but then added that many Irish overflowed into the city of Lafayette, thus forming an Irish section that would include the general Adele street area. (Adele Street is laid out in 1813, pertained to Orleans Parish from 1818 to 1833, and to the Jefferson Parish city of Lafayette from 1833 to 1852. Adele was three blocks above Felicity Street, which formed the parish line from 1812 to 1818 and Falicity from 1833 to 1852.)

The same credence for this theory comes from historian John Leslie Kolp’s statistical analysis of the 1850 census for Lafayette. Kolp found that, while Germans outnumbered Irish two-to-one among Lafayette’s 14,190 residents, Irish immigrants and their children made up a greater percentage (34.2 percent) of the city’s First Ward than did the other four wards. The First Ward was bordered by Felicity, the river, on Avenue, and Chippewa—in other words, in and around Adele Street. But to use this statistic is to mislead the Irish Channel: it must be noted that the First Ward had an even higher percent of Germans (36 percent), not to mention 11.8 percent American, 7.4 percent French, 5.2 percent Creole (Louisiana born), and 6.5 percent from elsewhere.

**The Tchoupitoulas Street Theory**

In her 1954 thesis, “A History of the Irish Channel 1840-1860,” Sylvia J. Pinner acknowledged disagreement about the Channel’s location, but described the Adele Street theory as a “legend,” instead viewing the principal Irish street perpendicular to Adele—Tchoupitoulas Street—as a more significant feature. “Whatever the boundaries were, there is no dispute that Tchoupitoulas road was the main avenue of the Irish Channel.” This theory held that Tchoupitoulas, the old Spanish Camino Real and original “River Road” connecting New Orleans with the upper plantations, united a series of important neighborhood landmarks with a convenient access route leading into the city, while forming an interface between the residential area and the river. “Sa-loons, so-called coffee houses, ‘segar stores’ poyster bars, and boarding houses” lined Tchoupitoulas through the Channel, anchored by Thomas Simmons’s Louisiana Hotel, a favorite rendezvous of the preponderantly Irish Third Ward Democracy Club, and the adjacent St. Mary’s Market, described as “the Irish French Market.”

The St. Mary’s Market would later anchor its western end. Additionally, Tchoupitoulas Street was flanked by bustling riverside warehouses, and warehouses (many of them on the new “batture streets” of New Levee and Front Levee) where many Irish and Germans labored. “When our steamer was made fast to the levee,” wrote the Maine traveler John A. Abbott upon arriving to New Orleans in 1857, “the wide, extended dock was thronged with laborers, nearly all Germans or Irish.” Another traveler in 1858 described Tchoupitoulas Street as busy, picturesque, swarming levee, with its negroes and Irishmen. Among these levee-side operations were the Orleans, Mississippi, and Baxter cotton presses, seven cotton picking wharves, and a major cattle landing at the foot of Story Street, where shipments of Texas herds were received for the nearby slaughterhouses. The aptly named Bull’s Head tavern was located next to the cattle landing on Tchoupitoulas, catering to flatboatmen and local Irish laborers. (Lafayette was a major port for flatboats descending the river.) According to one first-person account, a tiny
Most Irish Channel “theories” locate the elusive district somewhere within this upper-riverside swath, from Canal Street (top) to Louisiana Avenue. These images capture the vast changes wrought here over eighty-two years. Note in particular the neighborhood around Adele Street, shown in its original state in the 1922 photograph; after the late-1930s construction of the St. Thomas housing project in the 1952 photograph; and after St. Thomas’ demolition, in the 2004 satellite image, taken while the Wal-Mart was under construction. GIS processing by author; images from Port of New Orleans, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and DigitalGlobe.
settlement grew around the intersection of Tchoupitoulas and St. Mary (two blocks from Adele and one block outside the Orleans Parish line) because it was at Mrs. Bell’s Head that flatboats were broken up for fuel and building material. By another account, Tchoupitoulas near Adele “became the principal business thoroughfare during the 1870s and was lined with establishments of all sorts: barrooms, oyster saloons, furniture stores, barber shops, lottery shops, sailors’ establishments, pharmacies and wholesale houses and shoe, dress, cigar, candy and confectionery shops.”

That Tchoupitoulas dominated social and economic life in the ragged riverside edge of antebellum New Orleans is probable; whether it formed the main corridor of the Irish Channel is another question. How many Irish lived and worked along Tchoupitoulas Street in antebellum times is difficult to verify, due to the lack of mapable street addresses in census schedules of the day, but possible to estimate through other sources. Using the 1859 City Directory, I surveyed a selection of classic Irish surnames, recorded their addresses, and converted them to the modern street-numbering system. Of the 830 samples (which comprised both residential households as well as businesses) counted citywide, twenty-six entries (3.1 percent) were located along Tchoupitoulas Street, from Gravier to Felicity (its upper terminus at the time). Census data tells us that there were about 20,000 Irish-born people in New Orleans in 1860, plus many American-born people of Irish descent. Assuming that the sampling accurately represented the total Irish population, then perhaps seven or eight hundred Irish-born individuals had recorded addresses along the seventeen blocks of Tchoupitoulas Street prior to the Civil War. Factoring in their offspring might increase this figure to over a thousand, and adding those workers who toiled near Tchoupitoulas but did not reside there, or were too far down the economic ladder to have been recorded by the city directory, would significantly increase the total. One sampled name had an address on Adele Street, which, by the same reasoning, would equate to about thirty Irish-born individuals plus unrecorded persons. Adele Street

Modern streetscapes corresponding to famous Irish Channel “theories”: Tchoupitoulas near Canal (upper left); Magazine near the bridges (upper right); in the officially designated Irish Channel neighborhood (below left), and at Parasol’s (below right), premier rendezvous for St. Patrick’s Day revelers and often considered quintessential Irish Channel. Photographs by author, 2003.
The locations of English-speaking Catholic churches both drove and followed the geography of Irish New Orleans. Seen here, clockwise from upper left, are the churches of St. Alphonsus (with St. Mary in the background), St. Peter and Paul, St. Patrick, St. John the Baptist, and St. Theresa. Photographs by author, 2003-2004.

was only two blocks long, so these data do not necessarily diminish the Adele Street theory.142

The Riverside Swath Theory

Some observers, among them historians who have assessed the dispersed nature of Irish settlement patterns in census data, take the “Irish Channel” sobriquet to mean a generalized swath of neighborhoods located above the old city, below and within the former city of Lafayette, and proximate to a river. This theory commits to no particular streets or clusters within this area as being the Irish Channel, makes no assumption of a majority-Irish ethnic composition within it, and may or may not cite specific streets bounding it. One example is Robert C. Reinders, who, in End of an Era: New Orleans, 1850-1860, described the Channel as “between Camp Street and the river in the First and Fourth Districts—that is, Canal Street to Toledano Street, another way of saying all riverside neighborhoods between the old city and the plantations. (Reinders also notes that many Irish moved into the Third District, below the French Quarter.)143

By not going out on a limb, this theory is probably the most unassailable, and may very well be the one that survives the most thorough tests of both historical and anecdotal information. It may also have at least one first-person supporter from 1893—significant, because evidence of actual usage of the term Irish Channel in the nineteenth century is scant. That year, seventy-three-year-old Capt. William H. James recollected that in the 1830s (before the main waves of famine refugees), poor Irish immigrants settled primarily in three locales. One was along or near the banks of the New Basin Canal at the rear edge of the Faubourg St. Mary; another was

142 Gardner’s New Orleans Directory for the Year 1859.

near present-day Gallier Hall in the heart of St. Mary, and the third was “at and above Tchoupitoulas and Canal streets. To this quarter was the given the name, probably a souvenir of the land of their nativity, of the ‘Irish Channel.’ Here were many engaged in the work of hauling cotton and western produce.”142 One can take this to mean the blocks immediately at the Tchoupitoulas/Canal intersection, but more likely it means starting from that intersection and heading upriver along Tchoupitoulas and the Mississippi, given the nature of the riverfront work. A States-Item article many years later alluded to the looseness of the channel’s river-perpendicular boundaries: “Most people agree that the French and Magazine Street form two of its boundaries, [but] running down the other set of boundaries it involves considerable acrimony. The Downtown line has been set anywhere from Canal Street to Jackson Avenue, but a brown line has been pinpointed anywhere from Louisiana Avenue to Louisiana Avenue.”145

In other words, a generalized riverside swath.

In application—that is, in planning and zoning—the convenient riverside swath theory usually succumbs to official, well-defined boundaries. Preservationism reached the Irish Channel in the early 1970s, after the Riverfront Pressway controversy of the 1960s galvanized local activists and the 1971 publication of the Friends of the Cabildo New Orleans Architecture: The Lower Garden District produced New Orleanians of the treasures in their own backyard. The Irish Channel Committee on Historical Landmarks and Neighborhood Preservation set its very first goal, in 1971, as the establishment of official boundaries around the neighborhood of the original Irish Channel running from Canal Street to Louisiana Avenue, and from St. Charles Avenue to the river.”146 Commenced chairman Sam J. Allen cited a riverside swath theory, however, these boundaries have changed quite a bit since the first Irish settlers came. “Along after preservation officials and city planners got out their maps and grease pens.

The Bounding-Box Theory

Ambiguity is anathema to those who seek to plan and manage, and for good reason. It is hard to run a city or business or anything without clear rules and set limits. In urban planning, this means that the planners must demarcate into official neighborhoods and districts with undisputed boundaries. “What for decades was called the ‘French quarter,’ the ‘French section,’ or ‘the old city’ became the French Quarter, bound traditionally by Iberville, Rampart, Esplanade, and the river, once it gained under legal protection in 1937. What everyone knew loosely as “downtown,” became delimited with street-side signage once the Downtown Development District got to work in the early 2000s. The “bounding-box theory” reached the Irish Channel at least by the 1930s, when the WPA New Orleans City Guide, in a section devoted to motor car tours of the city, identified St. Joseph Street, the river, Louisiana Avenue, and Constance Street as the neighborhood’s edges.147 In setting the lower boundary of St. Joseph Street, in what we now call the Central Business District/Warehouse District and far below most other Irish Channel perceptions, the WPA seemed to be prescribing to the “riverside swath theory,” erecting hard edges only for the convenience of tourists. This would be among the last Channel perceptions to extend to downtown, because by the time the WPA guide was published (1938), a large section of riverside New Orleans was destined for a U.S. Housing Authority public housing project later known as the St. Thomas. In place of over a dozen blocks of crowded mid-nineteenth-century cypress, there appeared identical brownstone government apartment buildings arranged in distinctive geometric patterns amid barren market yards. The St. Thomas Housing Project would alter peoples’ perceptions of where the Irish Channel was located, cutting the broad riverside expanse into square and exclusive, even Adele Street.

By the time seven-year-old Channel resident John P. Bayer was interviewed by Lyle Saxon in 1941, the new spatial perception had taken root: “the Channel was really the Irish Channel,” he recalled, “but of course all of this is known as the Channel now from Felicity to Washington and from the river to Magazine.”148 Neighbors Richard Braniff would be nothing of the newfangled bounding-box theory: 

“A lot has been said and written about the Channel lately, because people don’t know where the Channel is. The original Irish Channel is two blocks, starting at Tchoupitoulas and coming to a dead end at St. Thomas. Some people think the Channel runs from Felicity to Louisiana Ave. and from Magazine back to the river, but they’re wrong.”149

Also altering Channel perceptions was the re-identification of the area below St. Thomas as the “Lower Garden District.” The growing preservationist movement adopted this designation coined by architectural historian Samuel Wilson, Jr. (1962) for the “Nine Musicians” area around Coliseum Square, thus extricating it from what many people had once identified as the Irish Channel. Formation of New Orleans Architecture: The Lower Garden District in 1971 further established the new term in the lexicon. In the decades that followed, bounding-box theories invariably identified areas above the vicinity of Jackson Avenue as the Irish Channel, consistently excluding both the St. Thomas area and the Lower Garden District, regardless of their historical association with the Irish. Some versions of the bounding-box theory:

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142 Dimitry, “Recollections of an Old Citizen” (emphasis added).
145 Federal Writers’ Project of the Works Progress Administration, 332.
146 “John P. Bayer (White) 1229 St. Andrew St.,” August 22, 1941, Lyle Saxon interview manuscript, Federal Writers’ Project, Folder 81, 3 (emphasis added).
147 “Richard Braniff (White) 943 Washington Ave.” May 5, 1941, ibid., 1 (emphasis added).
148 “John P. Bayer (White) 1229 St. Andrew St.” August 22, 1941, Lyle Saxon interview manuscript, Federal Writers’ Project, Folder 81, 3 (emphasis added).
• When the director of a proposed documentary film about the neighborhood interviewed an advocate of the “Adele Street theory,” he noted, “This person who insists on such a restricted definition, the Channel is dead.” Saint Thomas housing project (which physically supplanted it).195 Rather than ending the project, the director simply relocated his Irish Channel to the area bounded by Felicity Street, the river, Tchoupitoulas, and Magazine streets. His rationale was that this area roughly coincided with the old city of Lafayette, where many Irish as well as German immigrants once lived. Here we see the historically “fuzzy” Irish Channel region to clear the boundaries, tipping the hat to history but prioritizing for modern convenience.

• Bureaucratic neighborhood delineation in New Orleans, when generations-old perceptions of place were translated to maps, commenced in 1973 and 1974 with the architectural firm Curtis and Davis’ influential *New Orleans Historic Areas and Neighborhood Preservation Study*. The study identified sixty-two official city neighborhoods, based on a fusion of historical perceptions, natural geographical barriers at land or water, and social and economic patterns, and pre-existing census tract boundaries. The study at first defined the Irish Channel as bounded by Josephine, the Mississippi River, Louisiana Avenue, and Magazine streets, but the city later adjusted these to First, Tchoupitoulas, Toledano, and Magazine streets. This definition remains today as the city’s official interpretation of the Irish Channel.151 The relatively small patch excludes a significant portion of the former city of Lafayette, including Jackson, Sophie, Adele, and other Channel streets. Nevertheless, First Street offered a convenient edge for this governmental version of the Irish Channel because it also defines the tenth and eleventh wards; Toledano Street is doubly suitable because it separates the eleventh and twelfth wards as well as the fourth and sixth Municipal Districts. This bounding-box interpretation of the Irish Channel is one of the smallest and farthest upriver.

• In 1974, local citizens founded the Neighborhood Improvement Association of the Irish Channel (later the Irish Channel Neighborhood Association), which proved to be a key player in the formalization of Irish Channel perceptions. The name of the association was chosen, explained the group’s historian, Ken Owen, because it is historically the Irish Channel (it isn’t), but because the people who lived between the streets of Jackson and Washington Avenues, Tchoupitoulas and Magazine referred to the area as the Irish Channel.” The association expanded this new box upriver to Delachaise Street in 1975, in response to concerns that the planned second Mississippi River bridge might be built down Louisiana Avenue. "These boundaries, established by the Association, have since come to officially mark the neighborhood called the Irish Channel.”153 This honest explanation makes no pretense about the historical accuracy of its bounding box.

• In 1976, after two years of persuasion by neighborhood advocate Christine Moerdyk, the National Park Service designated the neighborhood as an Irish Channel Area Architectural District for its National Register of Historic Places. Though mostly a honorary designation with limited federal benefits (rather than a legal prohibition on demolition), the official designation did much to institutionalize the concept of Irish Channel in citizens’ minds. The Irish Channel National Historic District used Jackson Avenue, Tchoupitoulas Street, Delachaise Street, and Magazine Street as its borders, an area described since that time as possibly “the largest, relatively untouched mid-late nineteenth century neighborhood in the United States. Imagine that the wharves riverside and streetcar tracks projects below Jackson Avenue were excluded from this and most other bounding-box theories, not because they lacked an Irish past but because they no longer harbored architecture worth saving.”

• When, in 2002, the Irish Channel became New Orleans’ fourteenth local Historic District—a designation with far more preservationist clout than the federal equivalent—they adopted those National Historic District boundaries in place since 1976. (There was one minor exception: lots fronting Jackson Avenue in the Magazine Street to Chippewa were excluded from the local Irish Channel Historic District—the first time any channel delineation gave way to the sub-block level.) Thus, by the close of the twentieth century, the amorphous geography of the nineteenth-century Irish Channel had settled in bureaucratic, black-and-white lines intersecting on maps at ninety-degree angles.

The Myth Theory

“Travel accounts and popular surveys have created the impression that the Irish in New Orleans either isolated themselves or were segregated,” Father Earl F. Niehaus wrote in *The Irish in New Orleans 1800-1860*. After the term Irish Channel emerged in the years after the Civil War, he contin-
uded, “this picturesque, though mysterious, phrase caught on and a myth was born.”

Citing census data to the contrary, Father Niehaus dismissed the notion of Irish residential segregation, and with it the existence of the Irish Channel as a specific place. Indeed, late nineteenth-century population schedules from the decennial census list indisputably show scores of Irish-born households integrated with hundreds of families of German, French, Sicilian, Anglo, African, and multitude of other ancestries. Rare anywhere in the city were expansive sections of exclusively Irish people, or that matter any one ethnic group. Instead, the typical social geography of historic New Orleans embodied a door-to-door heterogeneity of ethnicities (and, to a lesser extent, races) with an occasional predominance of one group in certain areas. As the only book-length scholarly history of New Orleans’ Irish, Father Niehaus’ work has become deeply influential in the local historical community. His assessment of the Irish Channel as a myth has been adopted by many New Orleans history cognoscenti, some of whom saw the opportunity to scoff at the charming delusions of local “Y’ats.” But are these historians too quick to dismiss the Irish Channel? Must a neighborhood comprise exclusively one group to be recognized as an ethnic enclave, one worthy of a name like Irish Channel? We have seen that many Irish Channel interpretations, including those held by old residents of the neighborhood, made no pretension of exclusive Irish ethnic makeup, instead readily acknowledging that the Channel was multiethnic and integrated. Yet, to many it was still the Irish Channel—a proper noun in the lore of folk rather than the documents of officials, but a proper noun nonetheless.

**The State-of-Mind Theory**

Local history buffs, aware of the rift between popular notions of the Irish Channel and scholarly doubts of its existence, found benign refuge in a theory of their own: the Irish Channel as a state of mind. This theory celebrates the area’s historical architecture, and affirms the nostalgia felt by old residents and their descendants, yet does not deny the hard statistical data refuting Irish predomination. It also does not preclude the use of bounding boxes defining its edges, because many state-of-mind proponents are also preservationists and community activists, who see planning commissions and zoning regulations as pillars of civilization. Note how the *Irish Channel 1980 Home Tour* brochure grapples with the varied and conflicting perceptions of its place:

> In all probability, the area of the old Faubourg Lafayette was the original “Irish Channel” as of reference to the area around Coliseum Square, which was called the “Irish Lace District.” Part of Faubourg Lafayette has been redeveloped by the Coliseum Square Association and is called the Lower Irish District, and the rest has recently been renamed under the St. Thomas Association. Nevertheless, it was the residents of this area who named it. The [Neighborhood Improvement Association of the Irish Channel] defined its boundaries. The Irish Channel is a state of mind: proud, protective and full of the spirit of living.”

The state-of-mind theory takes a geographical conceptualization of the Irish Channel to a postmodern extreme, casting aside problems of location and boundaries, historical data, and even existence, in favor of an intrinsic specialness of place. The Irish Channel, in other words, you feel it.

Perceptions of the Irish Channel reveal how city dwellers alter their comprehension of space and delineation of regions through time. Imagine the charming old curmudgeon who declared in 1937, “The one and only Irish Channel of New Orleans was Adele Street”—might react to modern-day bureaucracy with its planning documents, or to preservationists’ expedient expansion of the Channel up to Delachaise Street, or to its perception as a state of mind. How might these varied perceptions of the Irish Channel compare to historical data?

**A Look at the Historical Data**

Mapping mid-nineteenth-century Irish New Orleans poses a number of challenges. Simply recording references to Irish areas in contemporary press is not suffice—too generalized and spotty. Nor can the statistics compendia of the decennial census help, because birthplace information (collected starting 1850) was not aggregated at the ward level until 1890, and not at the census tract level until 1940, by which time old Irish residential patterns were largely dispersed.

Lacking these sources, one must go back to the original handwritten population schedules to identify and map Irish-born residents, one by one among the thousands of households lining the hundreds of blocks of antebellum New Orleans. That all house numbers and many street names have since been changed (or are in the least of the problems; there’s also

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Irish in nineteenth-century New Orleans resided in dispersed patterns, with most settling along the river and back-of-town rather than the inner city (French Quarter). The economic geography of the antebellum city explains the pattern. The 1842, 1859, and 1901 maps above are based on samplings of common Irish surnames listed in city directories; the 1940 map shows only those born in Ireland, at the census tract level. Map and analysis by author.

Geographies of New Orleans
by Richard Campanella
Please order on amazon.com
deciphering the elegant cursive, decoding the arcane abbreviations, and discerning the faint (sometimes completely faded) lettering against a background of scratched, yellowed microfilm. It's a big job. But an insurmountable challenge, still, with the fact that census enumerators in 1850, 1860, and 1870 recorded neither the house number nor street name for the households they visited. In the column labeled “Dwelling house—numbered in the order of visitation” in the population schedules, enumerators simply wrote the incremental number of the abode “in order of visitation,” rather than the more logical house number or street name. What inspired the enumerators to neglect such a critical piece of information is the secret of some long-departed (and done too soon) project manager. Surely an enumerator kept track of the areas they covered but their tracking system beyond the perimeters of each enumeration district is lost to history. Other data sources such as voting records, marriage licenses, and obituaries are too spotty and erratic, especially for recent immigrants for a sort of city-wide mapping project, which requires even and comprehensive coverage. Deprived of the best data source one must seek surrogates. I decided to extract a representative sample of “classic” Irish surnames and their addresses in the annual city directories, translate the old address system to the current one, and map out a pattern. The city directories have no match for censuses for this type of research, but for this investigation, their content, legibility, and accessibility made them the best choice. The Irish would need a map of New Orleans' total Irish population, but a reasonable representation of its distribution based on a systematic sampling. To find the most common and unmistakable Irish names, the alphabetization of old records of the historic St. Patrick's Cemetery #1, a good place as any to find the vestiges of old Irish New Orleans, were consulted. Familiar names such as Callaghan, Connan, Cullen, Farrell, and McFlynn, Kelly, Murphy, and those starting with Fitz-, Flan-, and O', such as Fitzpatrick, McDonald, and O'Brien, predominated among the hundreds of entombed. This list was narrowed down to Fitzgerald, Fitzpatrick, Fitzsimmons, Flanagan, Kelly, and all surnames starting with Mc-, O'-. The assumptions that such surnames are (1) most likely residents of Irish ancestry, (2) least likely confused with the surnames of other ethnic groups, and (3) fairly representative of the larger local Irish community's residential patterns, led for the sample names to then be located in the Galbraith's New Orleans Directory for the Year 1859. Why 1859? Because that year allowed enough time after the early-1850s wave of Irish immigration to New Orleans for the new residents to “settle in,” while avoiding the turmoil of the approaching war years (there were no city directories published in New Orleans for the mid-1850s to 1861. Of the 831 entries for the selected surnames listed in the 1859 directory, about 54 percent were paired not with house numbers but nearest street intersections, such as “Melpomene n. Dryades,” meaning on Melpomene Street (now Martin Luther King Boulevard) near its intersection with Dryades Street (now Oretha Castle Haley Boulevard). Once chosen street names were accounted for, these entries mapped with a high level of confidence. The remaining 45 percent were listed by the unintuitive old house numbering system, for which the invaluable New Orleans Alphabetical and Numerical Index of Changes in Street Names and Numbers, 1832–1938, as well as the Robinson Atlas of 1883, was consulted to translate to the modern (late 1894) system. Most of these points plotted with reasonable accuracy. One percent of the samples lived outside Orleans Parish at the time, one in Algiers, and another five in the former Jefferson Parish developments of Jefferson City and Kirkville (now Carrolton, now all in uptown New Orleans), and a very small number were ignored because their addresses were clearly erroneous. Have exercised this methodology. Why 1859? Because much of the Irish Channel (as it is named today) developed into a high-density cityscape in the last two decades of the 1800s. A total of 2,208 names and addresses were recalculated from 1901, almost triple the 778 from 1859. Although these data took much longer to pre-prepare, most mapped out easily because their addresses suited the modern system. Nevertheless, 15 percent had to be dropped manually because of street name changes, demolished neighborhoods, and long-disappeared features.

Having exercised this methodology, I then went back in time to 1842 and repeated the process, again using the same methodology. City directories were not published with annual regularity prior to the 1850s, so the 1842 directory is one of the few publications soon after the first significant waves of poor Irish immigration. Only 54 samples were extracted for this year, compared to 83 in 1859 and 238 in 1901. Of these, 150 entries had incorrect addresses (such as “Philippa b. Hevia & Girod Sts.”), which were mapped manually after consulting to changed street names. The other 204 were not a problem, because the pre-1852 New Orleans house numbering system is sparsely documented. These points were mapped as best as possible using a number of sources, including A. Hirt's 1841 Plan of New Orleans with Respect to Geographical and Numerical Index of Changes in Street Names and Numbers, 1852–1883, as well as the Robinson Atlas of 1883.
Where Was the Irish Channel?

Observations: Irish New Orleans, 1842–1940

1842 — According to Niehaus, Irish in New Orleans prior to the 1830s generally lived in the present-day French Quarter, and expanded upriver across Canal Street into Faubourg St. Mary over the next two decades.158 This figure includes some non-Irish immigrants departing from Great Britain, but does not distinguish between those Irish who remained in New Orleans and those who proceeded upriver. Conway, “New Orleans as a Port of Immigration, 1820–1860,” Appendix 22, 500. Niehaus, The Irish in New Orleans, 30.

The peak wave of Irish immigration to the city (almost 75,000 came during 1849-1853159), we see a marked expansion of the Irish community in all directions. Restricted only by the topographic patterns of the natural levee and backswamp, this expansion was not evenly distributed. The greatest spread followed the Magazines-Tchoupitoulas corridor from the old Faubourg St. Mary/Lafayette Square clusters toward the semi-rural upriver edge, forming a generalized riverside swath. This again corroborates Niehaus’ observations that, in general, Irish residential preferences drifted from “the so-called Irish Channel from near Canal Street to the Second Municipality (its original location), to the riverfront streets of the City of Lafayette. There the Irish immigrants remained in the majority throughout the antebellum period.”160 Thomas K. Wharton witnessed this demographic at the 1844 New Year’s Eve mass at St. Teresa of Avila Church, “the geographical heart of this swath:

Passing by the church of St. Teresa on our way from St. Martin’s market, all Ireland seemed to be streaming from its portals to the church...There the Irish immigrants remained in the majority throughout the antebellum period.”160 Thomas K. Wharton, “New Orleans as a Port of Immigration, 1820–1860,” Appendix 22, 500. Niehaus, The Irish in New Orleans, 30.

...opposite of what “inner city” connotes today—with elegant neighborhoods tended to be populated in their residential living—the scarcity elsewhere in the old city correlate to the preeminence of American culture in the upper streets (sign and spoken word in English, northeastern architectural styles, etc.) and the mostly French-speaking Creole culture encountered below roughly St. Louis Street. In antebellum times, these inner-city neighborhoods tended to be home to their residential living—opposite of what “inner city” connotes today—with decent townhouses interspersed with commercial/residential storefronts, many of the city standing today. The rising residential and working class through the 1842s probably the working-class establishment segments of the community, particularly in the vicinity of Girod Street, and Julia streets. It was on Girod Street in 1843, one observer noted, “you on every side hear ‘illigant [restat] Irish,’ in the mother tongue, and you ungraceful a brogue as if you stood on the shores of the Shannon or at the lakes of Killarney....”160 We see some Irish in the neighborhoods upriver from the Faubourg St. Mary and along Tchoupitoulas, the beginnings of a poor Irish enclave tending to the unskilled labor needs of the riverfront and the urban periphery. Most waves of famine Irish had yet to arrive at this time; when they did, this riverfront area, and to a lesser extent the riverfront below the old city, became their main destinations. One thing is clear in this map: the Irish Channel, however defined, did not yet exist in 1859.

1859 — A few years after the peak wave of Irish immigration to the city (almost 75,000 came during 1849-1853159), we see a marked expansion of the Irish community in all directions. Restricted only by the topographic patterns of the natural levee and backswamp, this expansion was not evenly distributed. The greatest spread followed the Magazines-Tchoupitoulas corridor from the old Faubourg St. Mary/Lafayette Square clusters toward the semi-rural upriver edge, forming a generalized riverside swath. This again corroborates Niehaus’ observations that, in general, Irish residential preferences drifted from “the so-called Irish Channel from near Canal Street to the Second Municipality (its original location), to the riverfront streets of the City of Lafayette. There the Irish immigrants remained in the majority throughout the antebellum period.”160 Thomas K. Wharton witnessed this demographic at the 1844 New Year’s Eve mass at St. Teresa of Avila Church, “the geographical heart of this swath:

Julia Street played a prominent role in the early nineteenth-century Irish community. Wealthier, established members, who founded St. Patrick’s Church (upper left) on nearby Camp Street, lived on Julia. Julia, while poorer Irish immigrants lived near the turning basin of the New Basin Canal, once located in the area at the bottom right of this photograph. Irish laborers dug this canal between 1832 and 1838, with great loss of life. Photograph by author, 2003.

158 Niehaus, The Irish in New Orleans, 28.
or Londonderry might fancy himself quite at home again in our streets...\textsuperscript{162}

Behind this trend is the demand for dock workers in the uptown and Lafayette flatboat wharves, and the greater availability of cheaper land and lower-density housing, the predominance of English as the first language, and the Irish immigrant population already residing there. The older Faubourg St. Mary Irish community was significantly more porous (indeed, some of these data points represent Irish businessmen at their office locations) than the new riverfront communities.

We also see lesser clusters along the back-of-town, from the Dryades Street area to the turning basin of the New Basin Canal. English visitor Sarah Leigh Smith Bodichon might have witnessed one of these enclaves near this canal in 1858, perhaps around Battle Row, where she was shown “a street called Battle Row” because the Irish are always fighting and murdering one another there... In the Workhouse (which is a prison for small offences as well as a refuge for destitutes) I saw again Irish Irish, most of them in a drink.”\textsuperscript{163} Many also resided in the predominantly Creole faubourgs of Tremé and Marigny. The great majority of the immigrants—Irish and German—land in this municipality,\textsuperscript{164} noted the \textit{Daily Orleanian} of 1849, referring to the Third Municipality’s Faubourg Marigny levee. Upon landing, many Irish remained in “the Poor Third” because it offered the unskilled riverfront jobs and low-density cheap housing they needed, and because this was the area to which they were first exposed. English-speaking Catholic churches arose amid most of these clusters to serve the Irish families within, thus drawing more Irish.

Note also the marked dearth of Irish in the central and lower French Quarter in the 1859 map. This inner city offered few unskilled labor opportunities for poor immigrants, and the high housing stock to share them, a predominant language that the Irish did not understand, and a Latin culture that was alien to them. It seems as no surprise that few Irish called the French Quarter home in this era. Noticeably, the Irish avoidance of areas now called the Garden District—the affluent American-style suburb that developed since the 1830s between Magazine Street and St. Charles, the former city of Lafayette. Irish seemed to avoid both ends of the Irish Channel, the affluent American-style suburb that developed since the 1830s between Magazine Street and St. Charles in the “Poor Third,” because it offered the unskilled riverfront jobs and low-density cheap housing they needed, and because this was the area to which they were first exposed. English-speaking Catholic churches arose amid most of these clusters to serve the Irish families within, thus drawing more Irish.

By the Civil War, then, Irish were found in greater numbers along the river above the inner city, but also below and behind it. A 1849 article alluded to this peripheral dispersal pattern as it announced the establishment of an Irish migrant society in the Third Municipality—Faubourg Tchoupitoulas.

\textsuperscript{165} \textit{Daily Orleanian}, November 27, 1849, p. 2, col. 1.
Where Was the Irish Channel?

Where, then, was the Irish Channel?

My instinct is to conclude that the Irish Channel indeed existed, at Adele Street. We have first-person testimony to that effect, not just passing observers but from life-long residents. These witnesses clearly recalled the term as applied as a proper noun to a specific place, regardless of its exact nature and role in residential patterns. Who are we to refute them? No one questioned the legitimacy of the term "French Quarter," even though that quarter was never purely French. Nor are cartographers erasing the name "Irish Bayou" from maps of that eastern New Orleans Parish waterway, the nest of Irish residents along its banks. These and many other place names—indeed most-originated as vernacular terms which evolved into proper nouns, regardless of the literal accuracy. Documented historians should exercise caution before dismissing generations of folk knowledge.

But we also have ample evidence that the residential geography of the Irish in New Orleans did not constitute a discrete, intensely clustered, exclusively Irish neighborhood, thus to perceive the Irish Channel itself as flat-out erroneous. Clusters are not the only geographical distributions of interest; dispersion is just as significant. The more interesting question in this case, then, was "were the Irish dispersed throughout New Orleans?" Were they not intensely clustered, as the term Irish Channel might connote? The answer stems from the nature of American cities at the time of Irish immigration. Irish were part of the first great wave of immigration to the United States, from the 1820s to the 1860s an era "when either urban life or employment had been centralized or local transportation had not been improved" in most American cities. Job opportunities for poor, unskilled Irish immigrants in New Orleans were primarily on the waterfront, in warehouses and cotton presses, in slaughterhouses and stockyards, building railroads and digging canals, all of which were located away from the inner city. "From 1830 to 1860," observed one historian, "hardly a canal was built in New Orleans without Irish labor," and most were located in the semi-rural urban periphery. With no pressing need to be near downtown and few transportation networks to commute them to their work sites, Irish settled throughout the low-density, village-like neighborhoods near or beyond the city limits, primarily Lafeyette about New Orleans, the back-off, and the Third Municipality below the city. Germans, who arrived at roughly the same time and under similar conditions, exhibited a remarkably similar geographical distribution (Faubourg Marigny's "Little Saxony") was about as purely German as the Irish Channel was purely Irish—which is to say, not very. Additionally, few housing opportunities were available in the inner city for the bottom-rung poor, as these...

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169 See the end of the chapter, "Little Saxony and the German Enclaves of New Orleans," regarding the notion of an "Irish Channel" has survived but "Little Saxony" has.

167 Ward, Cities and Immigrants, 105.
This map overlays a number of Irish Channel “theories” upon a density distribution of probable Irish residents in 1901, which depicts higher concentrations in brighter shades. Where was the Irish Channel? Answering this question means grappling with complex issues of history, geography, nomenclature, perceptions of place, and mythology. Map and analysis by author based on 1901 City Directory and numerous “theory” sources.
valuable parcels were dedicated to lucrative commercial or affluent residential use. The hundreds of spacious townhouses erected in the French Quarter and Faubourg St. Mary in the 1820s through 1850s were built as mansions for wealthy families, not apartment complexes for unskilled laborers. With no place to rent and no work to sustain them, poor immigrants to mid-nineteenth-century New Orleans had little incentive to settle in the inner city.

All this changed radically for the second great wave of immigration, at the turn of the twentieth century, by which time employment had centralized in the urban core and transportation networks connected it with the outskirts. The wealthy used those streetcar lines to relocate to the garden suburbs—Creoles left the French Quarter for Esplanade Avenue; Anglos left the Faubourg St. Mary for uptown—leaving immense old mansions to be “cribbed” into immigrant tenements. Thus, second-wave immigrants such as Italians, eastern Europeans, and Chinese tended to settle in the residential/commercial belt immediately surrounding the inner city, avoiding the rural fringe just as earlier waves of Irish and Germans avoided the city center. In sum, first-wave immigrant groups, including the Irish, tended to disperse outward more so than cluster (centrifugal forces), while second-wave groups tended to cluster inwardly more so than disperse (centripetal forces). These patterns have been observed in many nineteenth-century American cities; New Orleans’ experience was not unique.

Where was the Irish Channel? Readers can draw their own conclusions. After all, why break with tradition?

170 This is not to say that the French Quarter lacked immigrants in antebellum times; in fact, it had large numbers, though not to the level of adjacent areas. Those foreigners who settled in the old city tended to be the English-speaking Catholics of Latin ancestry.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year/Era</th>
<th>Event/Trend</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Colonial Era to</td>
<td>Though few in number, Irish are present in financial and religious activities. One example is the Macarty family, Irish in heritage but Creole in ethnicity. First arrived in Louisiana in 1726, the Macarty clan would become the largest landowners in what is now uptown New Orleans by the turn of the twentieth century.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Early American</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Era</td>
<td>1809 First St. Patrick's Day celebrated in New Orleans.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1820s</td>
<td>Famines plague and a trickle of destitute Irish starts arriving in New Orleans. Irish community at this point is small, economically mixed, and roughly split between Catholic and Protestant.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1828</td>
<td>Local Irish population becomes sufficiently influential for political purposes, appealing to the “Irish vote” for the first time during the 1828 Adams presidential campaign.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1830s</td>
<td>New Orleans Canal and Banking Company associates with St. Patrick’s to build a six-mile-long, sixty-foot-wide, navigation canal with levees and a toll road from French Quarter to Lake Pontchartrain. Irish immigrants and the Macarty family would become powerful landowners in what is now uptown New Orleans.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1831</td>
<td>Choleran epidemic in autumn claims 6,000 lives in New Orleans, among them many recent immigrants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1832</td>
<td>Thousands of poor Irish immigrants excavate the New Basin Canal (1832-1838); at least 6,300 perish. Irish thereby work on the Pontchartrain Railroad on Eg inverse Canals on rural sugar plantations, and numerous other labor-intensive projects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1833</td>
<td>Irish and German immigration makes New Orleans a majority-white city, a characteristic it would maintain until about 1976.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1834</td>
<td>St. Patrick’s Church is founded at 121 Camp Street in Faubourg St. Mary, by members of the established Irish community. It is only the second Catholic church above Canal Street, after a small circa-1833 chapel on Derbigny Street. Lafayette becomes a residential neighborhood.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1835</td>
<td>City of Lafayette incorporates; its flatboat wharves, unskilled-labor needs, and cheap low-density housing attract thousands of Irish and German immigrants. Lafayette includes what some describe as the “origin” of Irish Channel, Adeline Street, Lafayette, and Audubon Park. Older neighborhoods (today’s Garden District, parishes of St. Charles Avenue) are decided wealthy. Older neighborhoods are still wealthier.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1840s-1850s</td>
<td>Lower class Irish increasingly compete with free blacks, former slaves, and unskilled immigrant labor for jobs such as draymen, boatmen, dock workers, domestics, servants, maids, wipers, and laborers. Others gain skills and become merchants, mechanics, policemen, and firemen. Wide chasm separates “old Irish” and large population of lower-class “new Irish” immigrants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1841</td>
<td>New 185-foot-high St. Patrick’s Catholic Church is erected on Camp Street at the site of smaller, circa-1833 church; new structure inspired by famed Irish-born New Orleans architect James Gallier. St. Patrick’s a premier landmark of Irish New Orleans.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1845-1847</td>
<td>Potato crop in Ireland fails twice; famine ensues, particularly in 1847. Great blight, and immigration to America surges.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1847-1854</td>
<td>Peak time of Irish immigration to New Orleans. According to one source, 93,035 Irish arrive to city during 1847-1854, though not all remain.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1848</td>
<td>St. Alphonsus Catholic Church completed at 725 Dryades Street, serving Irish and others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1849</td>
<td>Peter and Paul Catholic Church built at 725 Lafayette Street for the large German community in the Third Municipality. Initially established German Catholic parishes (Holy Trinity and Annunciation, respectively) operate nearby, reflecting mixed immigration of Creole population of this area.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1850</td>
<td>The first census to record ethnicity finds 20,200 Irish-born residents living among New Orleans’ 116,375 inhabitants, second most (after the second-largest immigrant group Germans) and nearly triple the number of French. In neighboring Lafayette, Irish-born and their children number approximately 2,750, about half the size of the German population.</td>
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<td>1851</td>
<td>27,234 Irish immigrants pass through the port of New Orleans, highest annual figure ever. Many are destined for the interior.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1851</td>
<td>1851 St. Alphonsus Catholic Church is completed at 1139 Dryades Street, serving a large Irish community and working the busy turning basin of New Basin Canal.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1852</td>
<td>Twenty new Catholic parishes are established, up from only two in the 1830s. Many had Irish pastors and large Irish congregations.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1853</td>
<td>Summertime yellow fever epidemic kills 12,000 New Orleans, one in every five Irish-born residents perishes.</td>
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<td>1854</td>
<td>Mid-1850s Know-Nothing activists clash with Irish immigrants in violent riots.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1855</td>
<td>1855 Irish immigration to New Orleans abates, because of potato blight and improving conditions in Ireland, due to famine and immigration to America, and new railroads connecting Northeastern cities with interior.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1858</td>
<td>1858 St. Alphonsus completed area at Constance Street, for English-speaking Catholic community of the area, primarily recent Irish immigrants. Nearby St. Mary’s Aumonerie and Notre Dame de Bon Secours cater to local German and French populations reflectively, reflecting the historical diversity of the so-called Irish Channel neighborhood.</td>
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<td>1860</td>
<td>24,398 Irish-born live in New Orleans (population 168,675), compared to 19,752 Germans.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1860</td>
<td>1860 Sts. Peter and Paul Church, main Irish community landmark in lower faubourg, moves two blocks to its new structure at 2317 Burgundy Street.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Event</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1870</td>
<td>With famine-related immigration peak now past, Irish-born population begins slow, steady decline; 14,643 Irish-born live in city of 191,416; for first time, there are slightly more German-born. Size of locally born Irish ethnic group grows.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1872</td>
<td>Newly completed St. John the Baptist Church, noted for its onion-dome spire, replaces wooden church at 1139 Dryades.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Late 1800s</td>
<td>Building boom in Irish Channel: hundreds of cottages and shotguns are built in the neighborhood, converting village-like blocks into high-density cityscape.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1880</td>
<td>13,970 Irish-born reside in New Orleans (population, 216,090), compared to 13,944 German-born and 1,995 Italian-born.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1890</td>
<td>7,923 Irish-born live among 242,104 New Orleanians.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1892</td>
<td>John Fitzpatrick becomes first Irish-American mayor of New Orleans.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1893</td>
<td>Term “Irish Channel” appears in Times-Democrat story; implies term had been in use locally for a while.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid-1890s</td>
<td>Era of Irish immigration to the United States draws to a close.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>5,398 Irish-born live in New Orleans, compared to same number of Italian-born and 8,733 German-born.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Post-World War I</td>
<td>Gradual exodus of Irish from Irish Channel commences; black population increases.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1938-1940</td>
<td>U.S. Housing Authority clears section of Irish Channel, including Adele Street, for St. Thomas public housing project.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Late-1940s to 1970s</td>
<td>Middle-class exodus leaves Irish Channel and other Old Irish areas in social, economic, and physical decline.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1947</td>
<td>St. Patrick’s Day parade traditions start in the Irish Channel.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>Friends of the Cabildo’s New Orleans Architecture: The Lower Garden District is published; includes parts of broadly defined Irish Channel; helps launch model preservation and restoration movement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>Neighborhood Improvement Association of Irish Channel (later Irish Channel Neighborhood Association) formed; blocks closer to Magazine Street see renovation and gentrification in the decade that follows.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>Irish Channel placed on National Register of Historic Places, at the time one of the largest urban units in the nation.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>St. Alphonsus Catholic Church, premier Irish church in uptown since 1858, closes for lack of parishioners and later becomes a cultural center.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Sts. Peter and Paul Catholic Church, premier Irish church in Third District since antebellum times, closes for lack of parishioners. Later reopened when nearby St. Vincent de Paul burns; new parishioners are mostly Spanish-speaking Latin Americans.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Irish Channel becomes local historic district, ensuring greater protection from demolition.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001-2004</td>
<td>St. Thomas housing project, which replaced Adele Street area in 1938, is demolished for Project HOPE VI mixed-income housing complex “River Garden” apartments and homes, some built in traditional New Orleans styles, on site, while a controversial new Wal-Mart is built precisely on top of old Adele Street.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Niehaus, Baudier, Finn, De Bow, Bornside and Reynolds, Pinner, Kolp, Jackson, Friends of the Cabildo, and others cited throughout this chapter.

Geographies of New Orleans by Richard Campanella Please order on amazon.com
LITTLE SAXONY
AND THE GERMAN ENCLAVE
OF NEW ORLEANS

The patterns of German immigration into seventeenth-century American cities resemble those of the Irish, who arrived in the same era, under comparable conditions, and in equivalent numbers. So it was in New Orleans, where, despite some important socioeconomic differences, Irish and Germans (or, as they were called in the nineteenth-century press, “Dutch,” a corruption of Deutscher) loaded shoulders on the levees and wharves of the bustling Southern port, and in their efforts to rise above the bottom rung. It is interesting, then, to compare the residential geographies of these two antebellum immigrant groups, to each other and to those of other groups who lived under very different circumstances after the Civil War. The story of the Germans in this region begins beyond the limits of New Orleans, at the dawn of the colonial era.

EARLY GERMAN IMMIGRATION
TO THE NEW ORLEANS AREA

In 1717, nearly two decades after Iberville and Bienville founded French colonies in Louisiana, financier John Law and his company of the West received a twenty-five-year monopoly charter for the commercial development of the territory. Law’s premonition that the ragged colonists scattered throughout Louisiana since 1699 lacked critically needed agricultural skills led him to recruit German farmers from the Rhine region for immigration to the colony. Decades of war, famine, and persecution made the prospect of a new life in Louisiana agreeable to weary Germans and Swiss of the Palatinate, Alsace, Lorraine, Wurttemberg, Baden, and neighboring regions. No documents survive recording the number of Germanic peoples who immigrated to Louisiana in this era; historians have cited numbers ranging from a few hundred to 10,000, most of whom perished before establishing their lives in the New World. John Hanno Deiler, the Bavarian-born German professor and community historian, estimated that of the approximately 6,000 Germans who arrived in the early 1720s, only 2,000 survived to arrive in the colonial port along the Gulf Coast, where many perished. After initial failure in the Arkansas River region, a few hundred Germans eventually settled along the Mississippi above New Orleans, in a place that would become known as La Côte des Allemands.171 These farmers had come not to make quick riches and return the same or because they had been shipped out as criminals or moral lepers, but for themselves and their families, and it was this group that “probably saved the Louisiana colony.”172 The German Coast (originally comprising the villages of Hoffen, Marienthal, Augsburg, and Cadsen, with varying orthographies) grew to span both banks of the Mississippi, twenty-five to forty river miles above New Orleans, roughly from modern-day St. Rose to Convent and from Bayou Des Allemands to the southern shores of lakes Maurepas and Pointe a l'Charrain. The modern-day town of Des Allemands and a number of other toponyms recall the old German presence. Do thousands of descendants of the original settlers, who assimilated into French-Creole and later Anglo-American culture. Many intermarried with French and Anglo-Americans. Their German language seems to have given out entirely.2

173 Charles Sealsfield, “probably saved the Louisiana colony.”172 The German Coast (originally comprising the villages of Hoffen, Marienthal, Augsburg, and Cadsen, with varying orthographies) grew to span both banks of the Mississippi, twenty-five to forty river miles above New Orleans, roughly from modern-day St. Rose to Convent and from Bayou Des Allemands to the southern shores of lakes Maurepas and Pointe a l'Charrain. The modern-day town of Des Allemands and a number of other toponyms recall the old German presence. Do thousands of descendants of the original settlers, who assimilated into French-Creole and later Anglo-American culture. Many intermarried with French and Anglo-Americans. Their German language seems to have given out entirely.2

THE GREAT WAVE

The Napoleonic Wars and the severe famine that followed pushed the first major wave of German immigrants to the United States in the 1810s, in search of economic opportunity and freedom from religious persecution. Too poor to pay their own passage, many submitted to “redeemers,” a form of indentured servitude in which the immigrant would commit, upon arrival, his services for three to eight years to the sponsor, often the ship captain. The captain might sell this servitude to merchants at the port of disembarkation, who would contract out the redemptionist as a laborer, only in food, clothing, and quarters. In March 1818, two “Dutch” ships delivered 2,600 German redemptionists—survivors of a group originally numbering 1,100—to New Orleans, initiating the new era of German immigration in the city.174 Described by one writer in 1828 as “white slaves,” the German redemptionists entered New Orleans society very close to its bottom. Once freedom was gained, many settled in the city’s rural fringe and started...
raising vegetables to make a living. “Several years ago a pair of ships arrived with German emigrants, who were sold to pay for the cost of their passage,” recounted the Bernhard of Saxe-Weimar-Eisenach during his 1824 visit to New Orleans. “Amongst these were several gardeners, a class emigrants left their masters shortly thereafter; some established themselves independently, others succumbed to the unhealthy climate.” Germans numbered in the hundreds initially trickled into the city between 1810 and the mid-1830s, when perhaps as many as 7,000 Germans lived in the city.

Counting those Germans setting foot in New Orleans is a tricky matter, for a number of reasons. First, families were likely to list their birthplace as any one of a number of Germanic cities, states, and regions in this pre-unification era, principally in present-day southern Germany and the Rhineland. Second, for every German destined for New Orleans, three more intended to pass transfer vessels here and continue up the Mississippi, and, the primary sources for these numbers—annual reports of the German Society of New Orleans—starting in 1847. Immigration reports from the U.S. Coast House and passenger manifests from ships themselves—rarely recorded exact numbers and sometimes contradict markedly. All generally show that German immigration to or through New Orleans was not a series of discrete waves, but rather one massive (though annually fluctuating) rise, peak, and decline between the late 1820s and the end of the century. The recorded numbers commence at very low rates in 1818, then climb into the hundreds in the early 1830s, then to 2,000-4,000 range per year into the mid-1850s. The late 1850s saw rates climb to the 7,000-10,000 per year range, which jumped into the tens of thousands in the early 1860s, peaking at 35,965 in 1853, according to German Society data. “Throughout all Germany there existed an anxious desire to emigrate to America,” reported the Bernhard during these peak years. “Whole towns are on the move, and companies everywhere organizing to emigrate.” After 1853-1854, numbers dropped abruptly to the 10,000 per year range, mostly because new West-bound railroad lines in the North negated the need to go through New Orleans, but also because the yellow fever epidemic of these years tainted New Orleans’ name. (The year 1853 coincided with New Orleans’ worst yellow fever epidemic, which took the lives of 8,000 residents. By one estimate, Germans comprised 5,500 of the victims.) German immigration evaporated entirely during the Civil War years, and remained in the very low thousands (with a minor peak around 10,000 in 1871-1872) during the Franco-Prussian War until 1872 when they dropped into the hundreds and finally ended.

Those few Germans still trickling into the Gulf of Mexico in the late nineteenth century often landed at the improved deep-water harbor of Galveston instead of New Orleans.

Most German immigrants landing in New Orleans during the high antebellum era soon departed for St. Louis, Cincinnati, and elsewhere in what was, at that time, the West. How many became New Orleanians? Census data from 1850, when New Orleans had the nation’s sixth-largest urban German population, record 11,227 German-born New Orleans plus 205 Prussians and Austrians of probable German ethnicity. Together, these German immigrants in 1850 amounted to 8.6 percent of those living in New Orleans plus Algiers and Lafayette, 11.1 percent of the white population, and 23.7 percent of the foreign-born population. They were exceeded only by the 20,200 Irish-born.

Other summations of the same census data put for Orleans Parish put the number of German-born at 11,425 out of 119,460 total (9.6 percent), or out of 116,375 total (9.8 percent). Many others lived just beyond city limits at the time. These census figures seem the correct side, countered by more liberal estimates from within the German community. If John Hanno Deiler was right in estimating that 20 to 25 percent of the 316,027 German immigrants landing in New Orleans in 1847 to 1860 decided to remain, and assuming an annual rate of 1,000 per year, then the German-born community probably numbered in the mid-30,000 range on the eve of the Civil War, a fact generally concurred with perception within the community, which estimated that at 20,000-30,000 in 1859; around 30,000 in 1867, and up to 36,000 in 1870. The official 1860 census of German-born came in at the lower end of that range—19,553 out of 168,650 total in Orleans Parish, or 11.6 percent, still the highest in the city’s history and the largest German colony in the South. After the 1860 census peak, German-born New Orleanians declined by 2,000-3,000 individuals per decade. In the next eighty years, as the original immigrants died off at rates faster than new immigrants could replace.  


place them. In 1890, there were 11,338 German-born New Orleansians, but 42,321 American-born children of German immigrants, together comprising 22.1 percent of the city's population. By 1930, German-born and first-generation German-born had declined to 2,159 and 15,953, respectively, totaling 5.4 percent of the city's population. The last sizable cohort of German-born New Orleansians, many of whom came in as infants around the Franco-Prussian War in 1870—held all but dozens of similar German charities over the years, including insurance organizations, benevolent societies, and advocates for the many orphanages created by yellow fever.

German immigrants in New Orleans were also a religious people, forming nine congregations of the Catholic faith, thirty-three Protestant churches, at least seven denomination-specific, and four Jewish congregations, between 1825 and 1961. Education ranking high among the priorities of this community, private religious schools often adjoined churches. To satisfy the demand for information and political discussion, Germans in 1846 launched the Deutsche Zeitung, which served the German-speaking community until interrupted until 1907. It competed with a rich array of other German-language periodicals, with names like Der Deutsche Courier, New Orleans, and Die Lächelnde Zeitung. Announcements and pages of these newspapers, printed in elegant calligraphic type, reveal another extraordinary trait of the New Orleans German community: its penchant for cultural affairs, particularly theater, singing, and festivals. German notices appear for organizations such as the German Vaudeville Company, Germania Quartette, the Philharmonic Society, German Theater Shakespeare Club, the Liedertafel singing group, friendship clubs, civic societies, and pony clubs, and theater troupes. They promoted events such as the Volksfest at the Fairgrounds, equestrian balls, symphonic events, picnics, festivals to honor great Germans on their birthdays, and dramatic fare (sometimes politically charged) presented at the German Theater and other venues. So enthusiastic was the love of song among local Germans that the North American Sängerbund, the German singing society, selected New Orleans as the host for its 1900 annual convention. (Housed in a specially built temporary Sangerhalle near Lee Circle, up to 1,700 men and 8,000 spectators witnessed one of the largest performance events in the city's history at the time.) Ellen C. Merrill, author of an extensive literature review on Germans in the lower Mississippi region, identified the nineteenth century alone as forty-three German fraternal organizations, twenty-six religious organizations, twenty-four German benevolent societies, twenty-four military organizations, twenty-three singing and musical groups, twenty-one trade and professional associations, twelve volunteer fire companies, navigation societies, nine honor frater societies, eight sporting clubs, seven political societies, four cultural societies, and two craft clubs in Louisiana. The vast majority in the New Orleans area.

Such high civic-mindedness, however, came from the relatively few at the more stable end of the German community's

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE GERMAN IMMIGRANTS

Before exploring German residential patterns, let us first take a closer look at the German people who chose to risk their lives in a perilous journey into the Mississippi Valley via New Orleans. Many German immigrants from the post-Napoleonic Wars era (1810-1850) were poor rural farmers, nearly a dispossessed and destitute as the Irish famine refugees who had come before them arriving during the peak immigration years of the late 1840s and 1850s. While the late 1840s and 1850s were quite different—often relatively well-educated, urban, skillful, and of moderate means—at least able to pay their passage. Biblical perspectival following the German Revolution of 1848, they sent the entire class (“the 48’ers”) to New Orleans as refugees from America. Within a year, historian Robert T. Clark, Jr., wrote some “German liberals” were “vivid democratic idealists” who were so appeased with their lot under the rule of Metternich...that they were willing to lay down lucrative positions and possessions to try their fortunes in an utterly strange land. They were literate, cultured, religious, humanitarian, and politically outspoken against the tyranny and autocracy that had driven them out of their homeland. Clark suggests that most of the German liberals originally planned to proceed up the Mississippi and settle in the West, but many remained in or returned to New Orleans because their heritage prepared them not for city life than the toil of frontier agriculture. Historian Robert C. Reinders, on the other hand, contends that “the 48’ers simply did not settle in New Orleans...few German with money or zeal stayed in New Orleans and therefore the city’s German population was not composed of the kind of Teutonic immigration.” He further suggests that most of the German liberals originally planned to proceed up the Mississippi and settle in the West, but many remained in or returned to New Orleans because their heritage prepared them not for city life, but the toil of frontier agriculture. Historian Robert C. Reinders, on the other hand, contends that “the 48’ers simply did not settle in New Orleans...few German with money or zeal stayed in New Orleans and therefore the city’s German population was not composed of the kind of Teutonic immigration.”

Whatever their level of preparedness, newly arrived German immigrants lacked the language skills, capital, and cultural familiarity to settle quickly into New Orleans society, particularly in the face of an unwelcoming Nativist element. In response, Germans founded the Deutsche Gesellschaft (German Society) in 1847 as the first to aid immigrants navigating into the city or to make travel arrangements to move on, and later to promote German cultural enrichment. The German Society, source of the immigration data cited earlier, was jointly

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19 These headlines were culled mostly from the Deutscher Zeitung. See also Die Lächelnde Zeitung, Die Lafayette Zeitung.


economic spectrum. Most Germans in the early years “were in desperate condition and eager to find any kind of work,” laboring shoulder-to-shoulder with their own neighbors on the river front loading and unloading ships, constructing and repairing levees, and after Civil War days seasonal occupation in the sugar cane fields.”192 The Louisiana German Dramen’s Association, organized in 1854 as a benevolent society for dock workers, was one of the largest such organizations in the area. Working-class German men also labored for German businessmen in local industries such as the printing of German-language newspapers (particularly during their 1850s heyday) and the making of beer on brewed “city beer” in the early days, followed by industrialized breweries in the 1880s. Germans like the Irish were in high demand as domestics.193 For every few of these laborers, there was one German who secured sufficient means to go into business for himself, often in wholesaling, restaurants, coffeehouses, saloons, beer halls, boarding houses, and hotels. A roughly equal number used their trade skills to make a living as tailors, artists, bakers, merchants, watchmakers, shoemakers, carpenters, clerks, and domestics. And for every few of these businessmen and tradesmen, there was one German who applied his training from the motherland toward a professional career. In New Orleans, a doctor, engineer, lawyer, schoolteacher, professor, financer, or merchant.194

**GERMAN SPATIAL DISTRIBUTIONS IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY NEW ORLEANS**

The New Orleans encountered by German immigrants in the late antebellum decades was one in which the wealthy professional class lived largely in the inner city, and both employment and cheap housing for the working class and poor were urban fringe. Slaughterhouses, cotton presses, a sugar refinery, docks, mills, factories, an early grain elevator, municipal projects, and one of the Mississippi’s busiest flatboat landings offered unskilled work opportunities along both the above and below the city. Similar circumstances prevailed behind the city and along the Basin and Basin canals in the backwater area. Just as the Irish immigrants of this era dispersed throughout this urban fringe, dispersed patterns along the river and in various pockets surrounding the inner city were too did Germans. Another explanation for the dispersed geography of German Germans from the immigrants’ initial disembarkation points, because of a tax levied on each ship captain for each immigrant brought to New Orleans, the German newcomers were impeded because and above the port itself195—in other words, in the urban fringe. This initial peripheral distribution may have exposed German immigrants to certain areas, but socioeconomic factors—housing, wage, and proximity to peers—probably played a weightier role in keeping them there. Whatever the cause, the resultant dispersed spatial pattern was clear. The accompanying map of German Churches and Schools in New Orleans as Inhabitants of Nineteenth-Century German Residential Clusters reflects this dispersion by mapping the locations of German institutions. If one were to ask the location of every German soul in New Orleans in mid-1800s as a white dot upon a field of black, the pattern would form a Milky Way galaxy of greater and lesser concentrations, with no dense clusters and no complete spaces. The main concentrations included upper New Orleans and the then separate city of the Parish cities of Lafayette, Jefferson, and St. Tammany; West Bank communities of Algiers and Gretna; the rear of St. Louis Faubourgs St. Mary and Terre; and the lower faubourgs of the Third District. We focus on the two German concentrations that were earliest, largest, and most developed before the Civil War, situated “in both extremities” of the city, “Lafayette and the Third Municipality.”196 It is these two areas, particularly Lafayette, which have been occasionally dubbed, by residents and historian, “Little Saxony.”

**THE LAFAYETTE GERMAN CONCENTRATION**

The upper reaches of old New Orleans—that is, Faubourg St. Mary and the adjacent faubours of Upper, Saulet, La Course, and Annunciation—were, in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, occupied by low-density residential neighborhoods populated by poor immigrants, particularly German and Irish. So German was the area between present-day Howard Avenue and Felicity Street in 1843 that the Daily Picayune (using “Dutch” to mean “the natives of Holland, Russia, and all the German States”) wrote,

> ...as you will see nothing but Dutch faces and hear nothing but Dutch language, every word as rough as a rock of granite.... This part of the city is so thoroughly Dutch that the very air is impregnated with that language; you may well imagine yourself to be the precincts of Amsterdam.197

One of the earliest German religious congregations in the city, the First German Protestant Church and Congregations of New Orleans (1825–1893) was located in the heart of the then sprawling village-like area, on Clifton between St. Charles and Carondelet.198 The area is now known as the upper Central Business District, the Warehouse District, and the Lower Garden District may well have been New Orleans’ first major German ethnic concentration. Plantations immediately above New Orleans were subdivided periodically in the early decades of the nineteenth century. The Germans in the United States are numbered by two million. In our own borders they are numerous, especially in both extremities—Lafayette and the Third Municipality.”

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192 Nau, The German People of New Orleans, 1850-1890, 51-64.
193 “Most of the servants of the [St. Louis Hotel] were Irish or German,” wrote Sir Charles Lyell in 1846, who described the area as a part of town where we heard French constantly spoken.” Sir Charles Lyell, *Visit to the United States of North America*, 2 vols. (London, England, 1850), 51-64.
194 Nau, The German People of New Orleans, 1850-1900, 51-64.
Churches, schools, clubs, and other organizations proliferated among German immigrants in nineteenth-century New Orleans, and served as reliable indicators of German residential patterns. In general, Germans, like the Irish, dispersed throughout the urban periphery, where jobs for immigrants and low real estate values beckoned, while few lived in the expensive city center. Three major German concentrations, shown here, formed in old Lafayette, the Third District, and Carrollton. Map and analysis by author based on listings compiled by J.H. Deiler.

In the mid-nineteenth century, as owners decided that more money could be made from the urban development of their land than from continued cultivation, those subdivisions above Felicity Street—faubourgs Nuns, Lafayette, Livaudais, and later Delassize—were incorporated as the Jefferson Parish city of Lafayette in 1833. Lafayette toward Nyades Street (now St. Charles Avenue) developed with large, spacious American-style mansions and gardens; Lafayette toward the waterfront and Tchoupitoulas Street developed with small, economical cottages for the working class. The little city as a whole was “a thriving, growing, busy place, with cotton presses, slaughter houses, aud business establishments of all kinds.” Yet Lafayette was sufficiently bu-
Europe, who arrived to the city starting in 1837 and commenced work in Lafayette. In 1844, they founded the New German Roman Catholic Church on Josephine between Laurel and present-day Constance: St. Mary’s Assumption, the first German Catholic church in the city and state, conveniently located just off the heart of Lafayette. It was accompanied by a host of other German Protestant and Jewish congregations formed in the area during the 1840s and 1850s (every church erected in Lafayette between 1840 and 1847 served German congregations206), particularly around the foot of Jackson Avenue. The Tchoupitoulas and Jackson Avenue intersection was Lafayette’s de facto city center, home to its municipal buildings, stores, port of call, boat wharf, market, omnibus station, and ferry to Gretna (which helped form a significant German concentration in that West Bank community). Lafayette also boasted a German Theater, a German English School, a multitude of clubs, political organizations, and cultural societies, such as commercial institutions, and drinking establishments such as the Lafayette Gardens.207

Fueled mostly by German and Irish immigration, Lafayette’s population grew to 4,080 in 1840, 7,232 in 1847, and 14,190 in 1850. Despite its recent plantation heritage, certain parts of Lafayette were not as usual small slave populations (approximately, one slave for every eight whites), for two reasons: the German and Irish immigrants were new arrivals and wealthy enough to afford slave labor, and Germans in particular frown on the institution of slavery. Historians John Leslie Kolp conducted a statistical sampling of the population schedules from Lafayette’s 1850 census (the first to record birthplace), and found that 39.4 percent of the 14,190 residents of Lafayette, roughly 5,600 people, were either German-born or first-generation German-American.208 Intermarriage with around 2,800 American-born people of probable German ancestry; 2,750 Irish; 1,400 residents of foreign French background; 880 people born elsewhere; and only 920 Creoles. Lafayette indeed attracted newcomers more so than natives—by over a nine-to-one ratio, if Americans are considered newcomers—but could not be claimed by any one group as its exclusive ethnic enclave. The highest German concentrations were in the wards closest to the river, particularly Ward 2 (bounded by the river, Harmony, and Chippewa), where 50 percent of the residents were either born in Germany, or both, or those who were.208 If the term “Little Saxony” were used in Lafayette, it would have best described the sixty or so blocks between Chippewa and the river, from Felicity to Old Piano. Another researcher noted a particular concentration of Germans in the area bounded by Magazine, St. Andrew, the river, and Sixth Street and de-

207 This information was culled from the following article synopses catalogued in the New Orleans Public Library-Louisiana Collection newspaper index: Deutsche Zeitung, November 18, 1850, p. 2, col. 4; March 19-22, 1850; May 18, 1853, p. 3, col. 4; and June 1, 1854, p. 3, col. 3.
Germans in New Orleans were a religious people, founding nine congregations of the Catholic faith, thirty-three Protestant churches of at least seven denominations, and four Jewish congregations between 1825 and 1961. Rectories, schools, and orphanages accompanied many of the institutions, which both caused and reflected the German presence in certain areas. Seen here, clockwise from upper left, is the Bavarian-style Holy Trinity, St. Vincent de Paul (now Blessed Francis Seelos), St. Paul Lutheran, Jackson Avenue Evangelical, St. Mary's Assumption, and its predecessor, St. Mary's Chapel. The first three are located in the downtown Third District; the latter three are found uptown, in former Lafayette.

Mary's Assumption continues to serve as a Catholic Church. St. Alphonsus closed in 1979 and is now a cultural center; Notre Dame de Bon Secours had been established in the 1920s.

**The Third District: German Concentration**

A few years after the *Daily Picayune* (1843) observed that parts of the Second Municipality were "so thoroughly Dutch that the very pigs grunt in that language," a visitor from Manhattan made an equally sardonic observation about the municipality at the opposite end of the city:

"The third [municipality], a species of half village, half city, (unmistakable in its Faubourg look,) is given over to the tender mercies of the Dutch and Irish, and the usual accompaniments of flaxen-polled babies and flaxen-tailed pigs."

"The Third," comprising all neighborhoods below Esplanade Avenue, offered to poor immigrants attributes similar to those in the upper fringes of the city: cheap and conveniently located housing and low-skill job opportunities along the riverfront. Immigrants’ exposure to the Third was immediate: "The great bulk of the immigrants—Irish and German—land in this municipality and stay around for hours...despatched to various places, in quest of situations..." Immigrants thus circulated here in the initial explorations of the city, and many eventually settled here. The same pattern occurred in Lafayette, also an immigrant landing, but culturally, the two sections were distinct: whereas generally wealthier English-speaking Americans lived amid uptown immigrants, it was less well-off French-speaking Creoles who lived among those immigrants settling in the much-older downtown area. This lower district, anchored by the Faubourg Marigny, extended downriver to the faubourgs of Daunois, Delphine (occupied by a large cotton press), Montegut, Clouet, Montreuil, Carabay, and Washington, and reached back to Faubourg New Marigny and other developments along the Backswamp edge. Physically and culturally isolated from the booming heart of New Orleans and least developed of its urban amenities, the Third ranked as the poorest of the three municipalities. Itsown newspaper, the *Daily Orleanian*, published in English and French, routinely described its home turf as the "old Third," "dirty Third," "poor Third," and occasionally and ironically as the "glorious Third."

Germans arrived *en masse* to these lower faubourgs in the 1830s, when hundreds, but not yet thousands, landed annually in New Orleans. The exact when and where of this German influx to the lower city is difficult to ascertain, but clues can be garnered from various sources. Enough Germans had settled in the area during the 1830s to warrant the founding of initial German-nationality institutions by the early 1840s. The first such religious entity in the Third Municipality, known variously as the German Evangelical Church, German Protestant Church, or German Orthodox Evangelical Congregation, in New Orleans, and Lafayette, was founded in August 1840 and held services at various temporary locations. Chartered in 1842 under that last name, the church purchased a lot on the corner of Port and Craps (now Burgundy) in 1843 and built a small wooden chapel before year’s end. One of the first priorities of contributing members, who all had Germanic surnames and resided in the section, was...
build a German-language school, another indicator of the growing German population in the area.216

Among the new German residents were an increasing number of Catholics, who had, at the time, but two options to celebrate Mass in their native tongue: the new St. Mary's Assumption, a far-upon St. Lafayette, or St. Vincent de Paul on nearby Dauphine Street, which only occasionally offered German-language Masses. As a third alternative, Bishop Augustine Blanchard, who lived in the new St. Mary's Catholic Church (1845), recently appointed to the former Ursuline Convent on Chartres (Charters) Street in the First Municipality, still a number of blocks away. Nevertheless, a new Catholic parish was established specifically for the growing German Catholic community in the Third Municipality faubourg of Marigny. Father Francis M. Masqueray, formerly based in Lafayette, transferred to this area and established Holy Trinity Church on October 26, 1847, on the corner of Dauphine and St. Ferdinand. The first few years were tumultuous, climaxing in a suspicious conflagration in 1851 that destroyed the church, rectory, school, and a number of neighboring structures. The church was rebuilt in 1853 on an adjacent lot on St. Ferdinand, where it would become the symbolic heart of the German Catholic community of the lower city and, along with the Orthodox Evangelical Congregation a few blocks away, one of the anchors of the German residential cluster known loosely as Little Saxony.217 “Holy Trinity was the parish for all German Catholics: we have, within the multiethnic Third, a German-language church in the middle of the Faubourg Daunois, a development immediately below the original Faubourg Marigny. St. German was it in the 1840s and 1850s that it was sometimes called Faubourg Des Allemandes. But thorough ethnic mixing trumped the predomination of any one group in this area, and as in Lafayette, major groups had their national churches. “We have in the [Third Municipality] observed the bilingual Daily Orleansian in 1849, “a French Catholic Church, a German and an American, or Creole, because] sermons in French and German are rarely understood by the natives of Ireland.”218 Another article in the same paper caricatured the multiethnic Third’s aldermen: Jonathan Peabody, Yacob Mulesheim, Paddy O’Shaughnessy, Emanuel Haman, [and] Adelbert Creoles;219 it wanted another on the matter of language in local government, if “French, Spanish, German, Irish etc., is introduced into the council, it will be necessary to have an interpreter for Alderman Wilitz’s French speeches; Alderman Siewerssen’s German ditto, and Alderman Meehan’s Irish harrangues. Spare! gentlemen, the already too much burlesque Old Third, this Babylonian confusion!”220

Use of the sobriquet Little Saxony or Germanic sections within the multiethnic Third is somewhat ambiguous. One is more likely to come across the term in secondary and tertiary sources, both scholarly and popular, rather than in primary sources such as newspaper articles and records of the era. This is often the case with neighborhood nicknames, especially those with an ethnic slant, as they are generally considered slang and somewhat offensive at the time. Most recent citations of the term trace to John Frederick Nau’s oft-quoted The German People of New Orleans (1958), in which he wrote, “The Germans settled particularly in the municipality that stretched

217 Calvert, “The German Catholic Churches of New Orleans 1836-1898,” 82-86.
218 Friends of the Cabildo, New Orleans Architecture, 4:171.
from Esplanade to Elysian Fields, which, because of the great number of Germans living there, became known as “Little Saxony.” Nau in turn cited two references for the term: a 1901 publication by John Hanno Deiler, and Nau’s interview with an elderly man who resided in the area during the turn of the century. Another researcher, Raimund Berchtold, placed Little Saxony in the rear of the Esplanade—Elysian Fields triangle (the Seventh Ward), “bounded roughly by Elysian Fields, St. Bernard and N. Claiborne avenues and N. Prieur Street.” German-born residents comprised about one-quarter the population of this area during its 1860 peak; by 1880, German ethnicities made up about half the district’s population.222

According to another source, this district, as far back as the Florida Canal, was settled during the 1850s peak of German immigration, and was known as “Soxahaus,” apparently a corruption of “Saxonhaus.” In the late nineteenth century, Soxahaus was lined with wooden shotgun houses in gingerbread ornamentation, built right up to the banquette, which was once a genuine banquette (raised wooden planks), later paved with bricks. Neighborhood boys would roll empty beer kegs down the planks to the fire hydrants to retrieve good water when the cistern water went bad. “In the cool of the morning,” recalled one elderly German grocer a half-century later, “you could see the hausfraus scrubbing the bricks in front of their homes.” Bakers, grocers, bories, florists, and home-based cottage industries operated throughout the area. Mardi Gras in Soxahaus was remembered for the fights between the Morning Glory Social Club and the Woomoomoo which, loaded up on German beer, would attempt to parade down narrow Frenchmen Street. Musicians formed

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Into the twentieth century, German-born immigrants from the 1840s and 1850s, though declining in number, remained dispersed throughout the city. Antebellum concentrations in former Lafayette and the Third District are still evident in these 1910 census data. The patterns would mostly disintegrate after World War I.

In the 1880s, bands and played for food and drink in local dance halls, a practice which was known, in Soxahaus, as “playing for plums.” The percent of German natives in Soxahaus declined from around 25 percent in 1860 to 4 percent by century’s end, when German immigration had all but ceased. All German ethnicities declined from 50 percent of the area to 20 percent in 1900. By the 1950s, only a few aged Germans remained in old Soxahaus, which had deteriorated to a state not all that different from its present condition.

To “find” Little Saxony and Soxahaus through numerical data, I surveyed transcriptions of the 1880 U.S. Census population schedules of the Third District (as it was called after the 1852 reunification of the municipalities) and tabulated all German-born and first-generation American-born Germans at the enumeration-district level. Within Enumeration Districts 1 through 62, there was a population of 36,878 residents, comprising a thorough mixture of foreign-born and locally born people of white, black, and mixed racial ancestry. Most people listed as black or mulatto were born in the 1870s (renovation of the municipalities) and tabulated all Germans and first-generation American-born Germans at the enumeration-district level. These figures were computed using transcriptions of the 1880 census, enumeration districts 48-62, by two local genealogists, Patricia Ann Fenerty and Patricia White Fernandez. Use of transcribed census data allows for much faster analysis than use of microfilm copies of original handwritten population schedules. Census enumerators prior to 1900 usually did a poor job in scribbling house addresses, forcing an abandonment of any original plans to map Germans to the street level.

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locally, in Louisiana, or in neighboring states. Although there were some born in the Caribbean and even Africa. Within this diverse and international population were 2,485 people born in the Germanic areas of Austria, Bavaria, Baden, Denmark, Hamburg, Hanover, Mecklenburg, Hanover, Prussia, Saxony, Württemberg, Oldenburg, and, after unification from Germany. Another 4,871 were American-born with at least one parent born in those Germanic areas. Thus, one of every fifteen residents of the Third District in 1880 was German-born, and one in every five could claim at least half German ancestry. Among whites only (who made up 74 percent of the district’s total population), about 27 percent had at least some German ancestry. The map Little Saxony: German Ethnicity in the Third District of New Orleans, 1880 indicates that Germans lived in greatest density in Enumeration District 56, from Royal to the river between Elysian Fields and present-day Franklin Avenue, near Holy Trinity Church. Largest numbers of Germans, in both absolute and relative terms, lived in Enumeration District 62 (present-day bywater from St. Claude to Royal), home to two other major Catholic churches.

Looking within these enumeration districts to the street level, two areas emerge as being particularly German in 1880. One was Soxahaus, which, as defined earlier, roughly from Annette Street to Spain Street, and from Urquhart to North Johnson. Of those most-German streets within this bounding box, about 32 percent of roughly 2,300 residents were German. The other was the area immediate upriver from Holy Trinity Church, from lower Frenchman Street to Royal Street to Franklin Avenue and the river, where about 33 percent of roughly 2,400 residents were German. The highest specific concentration was lower Frenchman Street from Decatur to Royal, where Germans numbered eighty of about 150 people. In the map, I labeled these two areas “Soxahaus,” and “Little Saxony,” respectively, but such terms were undoubtedly used very loosely, and certainly not to mean exclusive, bounded areas. The former may have been viewed as a subset of the latter, or perhaps they were synonymous; German-speakers obviously used Soxahaus with English speakers presumably using Little Saxony. Like the Irish Channel, such perceptions of ethnic place simply defy resolute delineation in the complex ethnic geography of New Orleans.

DECLINE OF GERMAN ETHNICITY

In 1882, with German immigration well in decline, German ships switched from the deteriorating port of New Orleans to the recently deepened harbor of Galveston, Texas, forcing immigrants to incur extra expense and hassle to settle in New Orleans. Within the city, elderly immigrants from the 1840s and 1850s died off, and with practically no new blood arriving from the fatherland, Deutschtum (German ethnic identity) waned in their fully Americanized children and grandchildren. German residential clusters began to thin out,” wrote Raimund Berchtold in his thesis “The Decline of German Ethnicity in New Orleans 1880-1930.” “German theater died out completely, the German press was reduced to all of one newspaper, German clubs lost members and support, and churches and schools became transformed from German to English-speaking institutions.” Increasing prosperity and declining German ethnic identification dispersed German residential enclaves, which in turn further diminished Deutschtum. Berchtold, “Decline of German Ethnicity in New Orleans 1880-1930,” ii, 2-7.
Germans introduced beer to New Orleans, previously a "wine town," through home-brewed "city beer" in the mid-nineteenth century and through industrial breweries starting in the 1880s. Jax, Dixie, (both shown here) and Falstaff all trace German roots; only Dixie remains in operation. Photographs by author, 2004.

Beer gardens, bakeries, and groceries (one of which, Schwegmann's, became the premier local grocer) were popular businesses in the German community. Kolb's, a German restaurant founded in 1899 by Bavarian immigrant Conrad Kolb, operated at 1230 Charles Avenue until 1994. Photograph by author, 2004.

Ethnic interaction in the economic, political, spiritual, educational, and recreational aspects of neighborhood life—leading to further spatial dispersion. By 1910, differences in the percent of German-born varied only slightly throughout the city's seventeen wards, from a low of 0.9 percent in the Sixth Ward, to a high of 2.7 percent in the Ninth Ward (see map, 1910 Distribution of New Orleanians Born in Germany), home to the largest absolute number of German-born (697).

When war clouds gathered over Europe in 1914, patriotism among German-Americans for their fatherland at first rekindled ethnic pride, but as German U-boats started attacking ships of non-belligerent countries, including the United States, Americans responded with a sweeping anti-German sentiment. When America joined the war, all outward expressions of German culture came under the searching eye of an incensed public. An intolerance of all things German nationwide and dealing in German-made merchandise became criminal acts in Louisiana. Clubs disbanded, schools eliminated German programs, and churches ended German services.²²⁷ Teaching and speaking the German language, flying a German flag, and dealing in German-made merchandise became criminal acts in Louisiana. Clubs disbanded, schools eliminated German programs, and churches ended German services.²²⁷ General Pershing; businesses and institutions eliminated the word German in their names; and some families anglicized their Teutonic surnames. Nationally and in New Orleans, the frankfurter (the sausage popular in Frankfort, Germany) was renamed "hot dog" and sauerkraut was dubbed "liberty cabbage." Nearly a century of local German cultural traditions had become victims of a distant war. When the war ended in November 1918, German ethnicity in New Orleans was devastated. It had almost completely vanished from the face of the city.²²⁸ Geographically, the backlash against German identity further scattered German neighborhoods, to new suburbs such as Lakeview, Gentilly, City Park/Bayou St. John area, and Gerttown, named for German grocer Alfred Cichon, who opened a grocery at Carollton Avenue in 1893 and helped develop the area with German families.²²⁹ The map German New Orleans in 1940 shows the residential distribution by census tract of those few remaining German-born New Orleanians in 1940, when only vestiges of the old Little Saxony, Faubourg, Carrollton, Third Ward/Tremé concentrations may be perceived. The catastrophe enveloping Europe at the time eventually did less cultural damage to the German-American community of New Orleans than the First World War, but only because, by the 1940s, there was so little left to lose.

The geography of German-Americans in greater New Orleans more generally echo the patterns of the larger white population (map, German New Orleans in 2000). Those claiming German ancestry in Orleans, Jefferson, St. Bernard, and Plaquemines parishes numbered 95,151 in the 2000 census, about 9.4 percent of the total population and 18.5 percent of the region's whites. Within New Orleans, those figures were 26,404 (roughly the same as the number of German-born residents at the time of the Civil War).²²⁸²²⁹ Merrill, Louisiana German-American Resources, 1:xv.

²²⁷ Merrill, Louisiana German-American Resources, 1:xv.


²²⁹ Cheryl Q. Wank and Darlene M. Walk, Gerttown/Zion City Neighborhood Profile: City of New Orleans (New Orleans, 1978), 3.03.
Perhaps the best surviving symbol of nineteenth-century German New Orleans is Turner’s Hall, designed by German architect William Thiel and built in 1868 for the Turnverein (“gymnasts”) charitable and cultural society. Photograph by author, 2004.

Deutsches Haus, locus for many local German events (most notably Oktoberfest), is alive the legacy of the circa-1847 Deutsche Gesellschaft from its headquarters on South Galvez Street. Photograph by author, 2004.

Ethnic Geographies

Perhaps the best surviving symbol of nineteenth-century German New Orleans is Turner’s Hall, designed by German architect William Thiel and built in 1868 for the Turnverein (“gymnasts”) charitable and cultural society. Photograph by author, 2004.

Perhaps the best surviving symbol of nineteenth-century German New Orleans is Turner’s Hall, designed by German architect William Thiel and built in 1868 for the Turnverein (“gymnasts”) charitable and cultural society. Photograph by author, 2004.
While German architects were busy throughout the city in the nineteenth century, Germanic architectural styles are scarce in New Orleans simply because they were not in vogue at the time. But certain traits, such as these stepped brick dentils, abound on institutional, industrial, and commercial structures either built by or for Germans. Photographs by author, 2004.

Clues to a German past abound too in the Third District, though they are a good deal more past than uptown. Foremost among these are the elegantly simple twin Bavarian-style towers of Holy Trinity Church, standing since 1853 on St. Ferdinand Street but closed since 1997 for want of a congregation. Forlorn and weather-beaten, its garden weedy and its religious art auctioned off, Holy Trinity, one of the city’s last surviving national churches, is a good deal more past than uptown. Farther down Dauphine Street, the former St. Vincent de Paul Church (1866), once home to a large German congregation, appears in good condition, but was charred on the interior by a blaze in 2002. St. Vincent de Paul, which had been renamed Blessed Francis Seelos Catholic Church when two other nearby Catholic churches were closed in 2001, was host to a vivacious Hispanic congregation until the time of the fire. Bucking the trend of church closures in the Third District is St. Paul Lutheran (1889) on Burgundy and Port, a derivative of the earliest German Protestant presence in the Third District (1840) and a survivor of seven name changes, a number of structural fires, and radical neighborhood transformation. The inscription on its cornerstone is one of the very few remaining vestiges of the German language in Little Saxony today. Like the Lafayette and St. Joseph cemeteries uptown, the cemeteries of St. Vincent de Paul and St. Roch are final resting places for thousands of Third District Germans. Within the walls of the enchanting St. Roch’s Campo Santo Cemetery is a picturesque German Gothic chapel (1876) built by Father Peter Leonard Neumann in gratitude for the survival of his parishioners during the 1868 yellow fever epidemic. Descendents of these Germans, interred in the surrounding crypts, pay visits from the suburbs on All Saints’ Day, when, for a fleeting moment and in small numbers, a latter-day Little Saxony forms once again in the Third District.

While the most prominent surviving markers of the historical German cityscape tend to be religious in nature, scores of commercial and cultural elements remain as well, scattered throughout the city as were their builders. The old breweries of Jax, Falstaff, and Dixie, which all trace German roots, still mark the skyline (though only Dixie still brews beer, far from the vacant Falstaff plant in the former “brewery district”). Schwegmann’s supermarkets, founded by Third District Germans in 1869, and Kolb’s Restaurant, started in 1899 by Bavarian immigrant Conrad Kolb, were part of the city’s “fooodscape” into the 1990s. The old German bakery Leidenheimer’s is still a top maker of “French” bread, and the Deutsches Haus—“ground zero for all local German happenings”230—keeps alive the spirit of the circa-1847 Deutsche Gesellschaft from its headquarters on South Galvez Street. Perhaps the best surviving symbol of nineteenth-century German culture in New Orleans stands on narrow Lafayette Street in a quiet corner of the Central Business District. Turner’s Hall, designed by German architect William Thiel and built in 1857 for the Turnverein (“gymnasts”) charitable

230 Times-Picayune, October 1, 2004, Lagniappe section, p. 3.
and cultural society, symbolizes the city’s old German ethos, “a worthy monument to the genius and patient labor of the population which called it into existence.” On the exterior walls are the intricate brickwork and complex pilasters, cornice, and dentils typical of German architecture in this city. Within those walls, repainted in their original pastel blue, were once a gymnasium, reading room, and game room, and space for music, singing, dance, drama, and the arts, emblematic of the Turners’ mission of a sound mind in a sound body. The Turnverein are long departed, but the success of German immigrants in New Orleans seems to indicate their mission was accomplished.

THE LACK OF A GERMAN SENSE OF PLACE IN NEW ORLEANS

The Irish of New Orleans proudly claim their Irish Channel, despite that the various territories ascribed to that appellation were thoroughly mixed and sometimes more German than Irish. Though the Germans of New Orleans exhibited the same dispersed geography of the Irish—a Milky Way galaxy of greater and lesser concentrations—there is little public memory of their sense of place in the historic tapestry of the city.232 For one, Irish Channel is a unique and compelling term, a circular reference to the English-speaking general population, whereas equivalent place associations regarding Germans were relegated to German-speaking newspapers, concealed from popular culture. Irish Channel is also a convenient moniker for an otherwise nameless riverside swatch; the equally nebulous Little Saxony, on the other hand, may be described as the German faubourgs, Faubourg Marigny, Bywater, and other handle. The Irish Channel is also reinforced annually by the St. Patrick’s Day parades which have rolled in and near the neighborhood since 1947, authenticating the Irish claim to this area to tens of thousands of spectators, many of the dozens of the suburbs. There was no equivalent German civic ritual. The Irish also paraded in the Third District, from Mickey’s Irish Pub up Royal Street to within sight of the spires of Holy Trinity, but again, there is no German response. We are too stolid,” opines one local man of German descent when questioned about the lack of a sense of place among the Germans in Louisiana. “There is no St. Boniface parade.”233 Perhaps, but were not the Germans exuberant in their culture 150 years ago, with their singing groups and Volksfests and friendship clubs? More likely, the lack of a German sense of place in the ethnic geography of New Orleans stems from the traumatic cultural squelch occasioned by the world wars. German ethnic cohesion at the neighborhood level, civic rituals, and the public display of nationality, all of which fuel popular perceptions of place, were extinguished for decades and never fully recovered. To the extent that they have, perhaps some intrepid advocate—a latter-day John Hanno De-iler—may lay claim to the now-deconsecrated Holy Trinity property and convert it into a German cultural center or museum, and its weedy garden into grounds for Oktoberfests or a revival of the Volksfest tradition. Perhaps only then will Little Saxony or Soxahaus return to their place in the ethnic geography of New Orleans.

231 As quoted in Friends of the Cabildo, New Orleans Architecture, 2:180.

232 The term “Irish Channel” appeared 3,030 times in Times-Picayune articles between 1992 and early 2004; the term “Little Saxony” appeared only four times in the same period. An Internet search on “Irish Channel” and “New Orleans” yielded 2,490 results in 2004; a similar search on “Little Saxony” and “New Orleans” yielded only thirteen results. Lexis-Nexis and Google.com searches conducted in February 2004.

Dryades Street Neighborhood and the Geography of Jewish New Orleans

With each major wave of immigration to New Orleans came a small percentage of Jewish peoples. Those arriving with the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century influx from the Francophone, Hispanic, and American worlds encountered the ethnic geography of early New Orleans society, as described in the Creole chapter, and settled accordingly in and near the crowded French Quarter. Those arriving with the great antebellum wave from northern Europe settled in dispersed distributions throughout the semi-rural periphery of New Orleans, as described in previous chapters on the Irish and Germans. Some who came with the smaller late nineteenth-century wave from southern and eastern Europe settled in very different geographic patterns, as we shall see in upcoming chapters. The geography of Jewish New Orleans is particularly interesting because this group, united by religion across a variety of nationalities, traverses many immigration waves and the corresponding residential patterns, allowing us to compare their differing geographies through time. In a national sense, the Jewish community of New Orleans differs from its counterparts in other American cities for its prevailing Reformist heritage, and its long history, dating back to the dawn of the colonial era.234

In 1719, two young men, Jacob and Romain David from La Rochelle, Ault, France, may have been the first Jewish persons (travelling solely by surnames) to settle in Louisiana.235 André Pénicaut, carpenter and chronicler of early French Louisiana, mentioned some Jews among the 4,000 French and German settlers arriving to the colonial Louisiana in 1720, possibly including the Jewish business manager of France’s Company of the West. But the Code Noir, the colonial law in effect from 1724 to 1803 mostly aimed at regulating slavery, banned Jews from the colony in the first of its fifty-five articles, and expulsions at the beginning of Spanish regime further dissuaded Jewish immigration to Louisiana. One researcher cites evidence for no more than a half-dozen or so probable Jewish individuals or families, with names such as David, Jacobs, and Solomon, arriving to New Orleans in the early nineteenth century, making the town [with documentary evidence] until 1757-58, and there is not the slightest hint...that they attempted to meet for worship.236 One may conclude that while there likely was a small “Jewish Creole” presence in colonial Louisiana, a Jewish community was absent.

Early Jewish Society: 1803–1860

Lucrative economic opportunities drew tens of thousands to New Orleans in the early nineteenth century, making the new American city the nation’s number-two immigration destination. A small fraction, perhaps around 1 percent, of these foreign immigrants and American emigrants were Jewish, primarily Sephardic, hailing originally from France, Spain, Portugal, and the Low Countries, French and German Ashkenazic Jews made up the remainder.237 Because these arrivals were small in number, rapidly assimilated, and not particularly religious, no Jewish community, much less a Jewish neighborhood, developed during the first two decades of American dominion. Indeed, it took “much longer to found a synagogue in New Orleans than in any comparable location”238—perhaps because there were high-risk/high-reward opportunities of the dynamic port city, and the sort of ambitious, individualist pioneers who tend to eschew the sanctuary of ancient religious and cultural traditions.

This changed as the Jewish population grew to include more civic-minded individuals and families in the following decades, as evidenced by the founding of the first congregation in 1820s. One early assembly is said to have been founded by Visiting New Yorker Jacob da Silva Solis, who arrived in New Orleans in 1802 by way of Havana, in the wake of the War of 1812, and eventually made his millions as a commission merchant. The anthropophylactic plaque still benefits New Orleans today.

“Photograph by author, 2003. With this historic landmark sign.”

Batchelor, D. (2003). "The Settlement of the German Coast of Louisiana and The Creoles of American Dominon. Indeed, it took much longer to found a synagogue in New Orleans than in any comparable location—perhaps because there were high-risk/high-reward opportunities of the dynamic port city, and the sort of ambitious, individualist pioneers who tend to eschew the sanctuary of ancient religious and cultural traditions.

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“Photograph by author, 2003.”

References: See also Louisiana Historical Records Survey, Inventory of the Church and Synagogue Archives of Louisiana: Jewish Congregations and Organizations (Baton Rouge, 1941), 1-2. A first permanent Jewish congregation in New Orleans was founded in 1827 or 1828 by Jewish merchants of the West. The first permanent Jewish congregation in New Orleans outside of the original thirteen colonies. The congregation, predecessor of today's Touro Synagogue, built an impressive synagogue with Corinthian columns and two Byzantine steeples at this site on Rampart Street in 1851. It was sold in 1882, demolished in the 1920s, and recently commemorated with this historic landmark sign. Photograph by author, 2003.
Early Jewish settlement in New Orleans favored the more Americanized areas of the upper French Quarter and upriver districts. This map shows that of fifty-five probable Jewish surnames found in the 1842 city directory, 71 percent resided above the Place d’Armes in the central French Quarter. The city’s first Jewish congregation, Gates of Mercy (1828), first worshipped on Toulouse Street and later built a synagogue at 420 North Rampart, both located within the more Americanized upper French Quarter. Map and analysis by author.
ed in 1824 by twelve men, but the evidence leads and it may simply represent a misprint.241 Most sources credit the effort of 1827-1828, when the New York-born Jacob da Silva Solis founded the Congregation Shaarai Shomayim (Gate of Mercy) by state charter, as the first permanent Jewish congregation in New Orleans and outside the original thirteen colonies. Although this congregation is a predecessor of today’s Touro Synagogue, comprised mostly of Ashkenazic background, it nevertheless practiced Portuguese rituals in its services (as dictated by its by-laws, written in English and French) and generally reflected Sephardic culture, perhaps in deference to the local French/African environment.242 Gates of Mercy struggled in its first few years in the Crescent City, with scant membership, no rabbi, no temple, and an upper room on Toulouse Street as a place of worship.243 Rural back-swap land for the new, first Jewish rural ground, the original Hebrew Rest Cemetery at Jackson and South White, was also acquired in the year 1828.244

An analysis of the officer counts of the original Gates of Mercy congregation (1828) sheds light on the commercial activity and ethnic geography of this community. The city directory contained entries for sixteen of the thirty-five names; assuming these entries were indeed the men of the congregation, several patterns emerge for the early 1830s:

- 79 percent (eleven of the fourteen whose occupation was listed) operated retail stores. The others included a carpenter, a ship broker, and a surgeon-dentist.
- 64 percent were specifically involved in the dry-goods and/or soft goods (clothing and hats) trade.
- 81 percent of the sixteen men worked and possibly lived in the old city, but mostly in upper blocks, particularly Levee and New Levee Street (present-day Decatur and North Peter), where synagogue members operated dry-goods and clothing stores, some of them adjacent to one another. Only one—the ship broker—worked in the predominantly Creole, lower part of the old city, on 11 Main (that is, Dumaine Street), close to the river.245

Research from later in the antebellum era generally corroborates these findings. Writer historian Elliott Ashkenazi, of the approximately 240 Jewish business firms...identified in New Orleans between 1841 and the Civil War, more than 50 percent traded in clothing or dry goods. Jews as old jewelry, tobacco, and fancy imported goods [while others]

became cotton merchants or general commission merchants supplying several items to the wholesale level to urban and rural customers. Geographically, “Jewish businesses in New Orleans tended to cluster near one another,”246 be they in pushcarts or stalls near the levee or in shops along Chartres Street, which A. Oakey Hall determined to have the most Jewish businesses. One significant Jewish-owned enterprise on Chartres was Benjamin Levy’s printing and publishing operation, which played an important role in distributing literature and business news to the city and in forming something of a “newspaper district” on Chartres Street.247 More prosperous Jews lived and worked in the Faubourg St. Mary streets of Camp, Magazine, and Tchoupitoulas. Comparing these patterns to those of Anglards, Creole bourgeoise general trend indicates Jews generally settled in the upper more American section of the city. The map, A Sampling of Jewish New Orleans in 1842, shows that sixty-five percent of the Jewish surnames found in the 1842 City Directory, twenty-nine resided above the Place d’Arms (now Jackson Square in the central French Quarter) and fifty-six resided below it.248 But Jewish households could be found in most parts of New Orleans, including the lower ninth ward for a long time. In 1808, for example, the Abraham family owned a parcel on the corner of present-day Chartres and St. Philip on the Creole side of the city, with likely Creole neighbors named Alpuente, Lavilboeuf, Forssell, and Landre. Possible Jewish surnames such as Benjamin and Simon owned other old-city parcels that year. The English trader G.W. Featherstonhaugh noted during his 1835 visit, in the typically caustic terms of the day, “a few anxious Jewish-looking faces going up and down the narrow streets” of the Creole part of town, “looking inquiringly, as if they would willingly transact some sort of business with you.”249 An 1843 account of Madison Street, near the market in the Creole area, describes it as “a sort of Congress of Nations,” where you would find

- a Swiss clockmaker.....a French tailor.....Spanish harness maker.....a store of a Jew peddler.....a Dutch shoe grinder.....a negro barber....then to a French restaurant, where professional musicians and others eat gombo....”251

A. Oakey Hall (1847) described among the peddlers approaching docked steamboats, the Yankee with his curious knife-handled hacks,” and “the Jew....with his hundred-bladed penknives, sponges, and metallic bleu.”252
Jewish Enclaves in Downtown and Uptown, circa 1850

Political instability in central Europe sent to America a trickle of Germanic peoples from various cities and states, starting in 1818 and increasing dramatically from the 1830s to the Civil War. Most German immigrants disembarked at major ports of the Mid-Atlantic states, but as it sailed further toward the fine agricultural lands of the Mississippi Valley, landing first at New Orleans, through which passed 255,718 Germans (recorded), between 1831 and 1859. Roughly one in five who disembarked at New Orleans settled there, forming a German-born community numbering up to 7,000 by the 1830s and around 10,000 by the Civil War. Among them was a small percentage of Ashkenazic Jews from rural agricultural areas in Bavaria, Alsace, and neighboring regions. The exact percentage is unknown, but estimates of the Jewish population in antebellum New Orleans range from 125 families in 1843, to 600 “aggregate accommodations of Jewish churches” in 1850, to 1,250 “accommodations” in 1860. Making some loose assumptions, we may estimate that perhaps 10 percent of New Orleans’ German immigrants were Ashkenazic Jews of German ethnicity.

Ethniclastic political and religious pressures by these recently arrived German Ashkenazics in the older, Sephardic-tradition Gates of Mercy congregation led to the replacement of its Portuguese customs with German, and the tightening of its mild by-laws with stricter religious interpretations. A tension developed between the two groups. In the 1840s, the Sephardic congregation abandoned their effort “to unite all members” of the Jewish population in antebellum New Orleans. The foot of Jackson Avenue was home to a small but tightly knit community of Ashkenazic Jewish immigrants during the 1840s and 1850s. When the great wave of German immigration arrived at New Orleans and settled in what was then known as Lafayette, most moved uptown forty or fifty years later. Attesting to their former presence on Jackson Avenue is the Gates of Prayer congregation’s now-empty Lafayette Shul, built between 1857 and 1867 and now the oldest surviving major structural landmark of Jewish New Orleans. Photograph by author, 2004.

Meanwhile, through the most recent wave of German Ashkenazic immigrants, many of Sephardic and Portuguese, began to establish a presence in uptown and in the former Parish city of Lafayette (present-day Lower Garden District, Irish Channel, and Garden District), culturally and geographically apart from the Dispersed of Judah and Gates of Mercy. What attracted immigrants in general to the semi-rural upriver outskirts were the unsaturated, work opportunities afforded by the flatboat and steamboat traffic along the levee (as opposed to the New Orleans waterfront, with its huddled international trade). These interior vessels brought livestock, grains, lumber, coal, and other agricultural and raw materials to Lafayette’s wharves, requiring handling and processing—primarily butchering and tanning—and thus providing employment. These sprawling, malodorous, shipping-dependent activities needed to be on the outskirts of town and by the river, and were as dependent on low-priced real estate as were poor immigrants for that housing. Thousands of laborers in turn created demand for local merchants, grocers, peddlers, tailors, butchers, and other professions traditionally associated with the Jewish community. By no means could this community nor any for the next half-century be accurately characterized as forming a “Jewish neighborhood.”

So that the Second Christ Church was a massive Greek Ionic-style temple designed by James Gallier and Charles Dakin and built in 1835-1837. Protestants worshipped there until Judah Touro acquired and donated the structure to the Dispersed of Judah in 1847. The synagogue was soon demolished to make way for Touro Row, a prominent temple commanding the centrally located corner of Carondelet and Bourbon streets. This became New Orleans’ first dedicated synagogue (1847), but it soon proved too small for the growing congregation, which built a larger temple of similar design (incorporating architectural elements of the predecessor) on Carondelet between Julia and St. Joseph in 1855. With monies bequeathed by Touro, the location of these two synagogue focal points reiterate that this segment of the Jewish community generally created and worked in the upper French Quarter and uptown St. Mary. All, their total numbers were very small and the population density of this area was high, so by no means could this community nor any for the next half-century be accurately characterized as forming a “Jewish neighborhood.”
Jewish community. The gravitation to this area of Irish and German immigrants, including Jews among the Germans, was natural.259 As early as the mid-1830s, "Germania" (society) was formed in Lafayette by these newcomers. Though few documented organizational efforts were not occurring at the late 1840s.260 In 1849 or 1850, the Ashkenazis formed the Jewish Benevolent Society of Lafayette and the Congregation Shangarei Tefiloh (Gates of Prayer, January 1855), and bought land on the rural outskirts (present-day Joseph Street) for their cemetery.

Immigrants were also attracted to the Faubourg Marigny, at the opposite end of town, for the same reasons that made Lafayette appealing. Germans, among them, a small percentage of Jews, settled in this Creole neighborhood starting in the 1830s, when the area became the city's Third Municipality through the annexation of 1836. The Daily Orleanian, the newspaper of this multi-ethnic area, spoke of Third Municipality aldermen who might be "Creoles or Anglo-Saxons, Celts or Jews..."261 Your Jewish institutions were lacking from this Creole area, indicating that the Jewish population, while present, was small, scattered, and not organized.

The map, A Sampling of Jewish New Orleans in 1842, shows a relatively small but not inconsiderable number of probable Jewish names residing in the predominantly Creole lower city. A number of hypotheses might explain this apparent Jewish abundance of lower New Orleans. Indeed, it is the case. On the "pull" side, many Jews were immigrants from other American cities and naturally settled among other Americans, who predominated uptown. Many were English-speakers, while they were French-speakers, and gravitated to those blocks where English tongues and English signs proliferated. For well-established Jews, commercial activity and the banks of lower Royal Street, the retailers and publishers of Chartres Street, the professional offices of Gravier Street, the "push" side, many Jews as newcomers, might have avoided this Creole side of town due to its provincial Old World culture, French language, and relative lack of economic development (the Third Municipality was known as the "Poor Third"). Creoles, on the part, deriving from the same colonial-era influences which produced the Code Noir, may not have been as accepting of Jewish neighbors and business competition.

261 Gates of Mercy purchased a small building on North Rampart Street between St. Louis and Conti, in 1851, as their first permanent Jewish house of worship in the antebellum era; a similar downtown, geographically Jewish community would form again, though with different ethnic components, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Gates of Mercy did, however, respond to the Dispersion Shul's (then Jewish American Society) call to build and dedicate its own new house of worship on a lot on North Rampart Street between Conti and St. Louis (present-day 410-420 North Rampart Street), in 1858.
264 Idib., 247.
265 Idib., 247.
266 These hypotheses might explain this apparent Jewish abundance of lower New Orleans. Indeed, it is the case. On the "pull" side, many Jews as newcomers, might have avoided this Creole side of town due to its provincial Old World culture, French language, and relative lack of economic development (the Third Municipality was known as the "Poor Third"). Creoles, on the part, deriving from the same colonial-era influences which produced the Code Noir, may not have been as accepting of Jewish neighbors and business competition.
Physical landmarks of the uptown Ashkenazi Gates of Prayer congregation arose in the 1850s throughout the modern-day neighborhoods of the Lower Garden District and Irish Channel. These community focal points, now mostly gone, included a benevolent society at St. Washington and Constance, later at Fulton and Chippewa; a rented store at Seventh and Tchoupitoulas used for services; and the first purchased property, a straw wooden shed at Fulton and St. Mary, used as a synagogue starting in 1855. A home for the Association for the Relief of Widow Widows, Orphans, and Half-Orphans—the first Jewish orphanage in the nation—was built on Jackson at Chippewa in 1855-1856, just before a larger synagogue known as the Lafayette Shul at later the Jackson Avenue shul, was built diagonally across the intersection in 1857-1860.

The reasons for the clustering of Jewish institutions in Lafayette were threefold. First and foremost was the aforementioned attraction of German immigrants to this area; beyond, the social and economic gulf between the Lafayette immigrant Jews and the established Jewish community downtown led the immigrant Jews to create their own cultural environment (a benevolent society, a burial ground, synagogues, schools, orphanages, etc.) locally. Theologically, the geographical distance between Lafayette and the downtown Jewish population encouraged the creation of conveniently located institutions. Land for a new Lafayette synagogue (eventually hap of Prayer), for example, was originally sought in 1846 by forty families who were formerly compelled to attend synagogue in New Orleans, at a distance of two miles from the center of Lafayette.262 The streetcar spur on Jackson Avenue connecting with the New Orleans & Carrollton Rail Road and leading into the city was of no use to those Lafayette Jews who refrained from using mechanized transportation on the Sabbath. The tendency of local Jews to organize within political demarcations such as city limits and municipal districts was also noted in the early 1905 *The Israelites in Louisiana*: “New Orleans, even eighty years ago, had its line of demarcation [within which] special Minyanim [quora] were organized, each in turn becoming the nucleus of the congregations. Among the venerable Israelites of the city, reminiscences are related of the ‘Old Lafayette,’ as the upper district of this stream and about Jackson Avenue was denominated.”268 The cluster of Jewish institutions at the foot of Jackson Avenue was accompanied by a concentration of Gates of Prayer members’ businesses along streets such as Tchoupitoulas and New Levee.

Not all Jewish immigrants settled in the Lafayette area. The 1850s saw the arrival of some Prussian Ashkenazic Jews from eastern Germany and western Poland, who established the Congregation Temime Derech (Right Way) in 1857, and bought land and built a synagogue on Cabildo and Lafayette Street, behind City Hall at the time. Right Way, known colloquially as the “Polish group,” remained downtown until it disbanded in 1903; the synagogue was demolished for an extension of City Hall, and many former members later joined Congregation Beth Israel.260 The reasons these early, partly coincidental, Carondelet Street and Canal Street–Lafayette Avenue, was the address for a large number of significant Jewish landmarks, from the 1850s to the present.

**ASIDE: JEWISH POPULATIONS OF AMERICA, LOUISIANA, AND NEW ORLEANS**

Approximately 15,000 Jewish people lived in the United States in 1860. Of them, about 8,000, or 22 percent, lived in the South and border states. As large as this percentage may seem, a 1988 source estimated that, forty years earlier, about half of American Jews lived in the South, roughly 1,350 to 2,500 people. Louisiana in 1860 was home to about 400 to 900 more Jews (1,000) than any other Southern or border state. Maryland was second with 5,000 and all others had between 1,000 and 3,000 each.271 Within Louisiana, New Orleans undoubtedly had the largest population that year. An estimated 1,250 religiously active individuals probably lived in the 4,000–5,000 total population estimated by one researcher.272 The disproportionately high concentration of Jews in Louisiana and the city of New Orleans suggests that the state and city offered certain attractive attributes to Jewish immigrants. In the case of the state, it may have been the large number of tiny townships and settlements, creating numerous opportunities for a favorable Jewish line of business: shop-keeping.273 Or it may have been the availability of arable land. In the case of the city, it was probably the myriad economic opportunities spawned by a robust shipping-based economy. The cosmopolitan, tolerant atmosphere of this highly multicultural city also played a role.

Estimations of the Jewish population of the United States and of New Orleans at this time vary widely, because of intermarriage, congregational inactivity, conversion, and the lack of consistent census data on religion affiliation (questions relating to religion are not asked in modern censuses.)
Following are estimates from various official and secondary sources:

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Reformism in New Orleans

Around the time of the Civil War, a new bifurcation developed in the New Orleans Jewish community, reflecting an international Reformist movement among German Jews that gained popularity in America during the mid-nineteenth century.274 In 1861, an ordained Orthodox rabbi—the first in a community known for its lax interpretation of Jewish law—by the name of Heinrich Lillauw lectured the Gates of Mercy congregation on the righteousness of Orthodoxy over the Reform movement. “Ironically,” wrote Lachoff, “these sermons made New Orleans Jews aware of the possibility of retaining the traditional practices that became the catalyst for the creation of a Reform temple in the city.”275

In response, the Rev. James Koppel Gutheim, the spiritual leader of the Gates of Mercy in the early 1850s, founded the city’s first Reform congregation, Temple Sinai (1870), consisting of many Gates of Mercy members. Without cultivation and spread of enlightened religious sentiment276 as its mission, Temple Sinai bought land on Carondelet Street (near its present-day intersection with the Pontchartrain Expressway) in 1871, and had a magnificent new temple erected upon it. Temple Sinai cost $104,000, seated 1,500 people, boasted a $6,000 organ and one thousand gas jets for illumination, and broke the skyline with twin 115-foot-high towers of Roman-Byzantine style and two-tone striped decoration visible throughout the city. When it was completed in 1872, it was the most prominent Jewish landmark in mostly Catholic city that had ever known.277 Practically every photograph of the Lee Circle area from the 1870s to the 1970s could not help but include the Temple Sinai.

The Civil War, summertime yellow fever epidemics, and the Panic of 1873 beleaguered both the German congregation Gates of Mercy and the Portuguese congregation Dispersed of Judah. As both groups traced their heritage back to the original 1828 Gates of Mercy, the suggestion was made in 1878 that the two congregations merge. The amalgamation was at first rejected but finally accepted and effected in 1881, incorporating as the Sha’arai Shalom Linfuzoth Yehudah (Gates of Mercy of the Dispersed of Judah) and meeting at the older congregation’s circa-1854 synagogue on Carondelet near Julia. The unified orderer surplus Gates of Mercy’s Death Shul on New Rampart Street in the old city, which was sold off in 1882, used by the Troy Laundry Company at the turn-of-the-century, and demolished thereafter. The new amalgamated congregation soon adopted the present-day name of Temple Sinai, though this did not become official until 1907.278

Orthodoxy in New Orleans

Just as the Ashkenazi immigrants diversified the mostly Sephardic-tradition Jewish community of New Orleans in the early nineteenth century, a new trend developed in the late 1800s that would counter the Reform movement and render more complex New Orleans’ ethnic and religious mosaic. Though immigration was low in the post-war years, a steady number of mostly Orthodox, Eastern European Jews (primarily Russians and Poles) arrived to the Crescent City, and, wanting no part of Reformism, organized their own Orthodox congregations. Polish Jews predominated in the founding of the Society of Men for the Glory of Israel (1871), which rented quarters in the 500 block of Carondelet; Baltic-region Jews were among those who organized the Society for the Hope of Israel (1864), meeting variously at two addresses on Carondelet and one on Dryades Street. The Society of the Palsms organized in 1875 and congregated near the Poydras Street Market, while eastward worked. Russian, Polish, and Galician Jews formed the United Brotherhood of the Sephardic Rite (Anshe Sha’arei Shalom) in 1896 and met at 209 South Rampart,

274 Feibelman, A Social and Economic Study of the New Orleans Jewish Community, 64.
277 Ibid., 36.
then South Rampart at Julia, and later at 1347 South Rampart.279 These and other Orthodox Jews from eastern Europe comprised about one-quarter to one-third of New Orleans Jewry in the turn-of-the-century era; culturally and economically, they contrasted with the established Reform community, of which German Ashkenazics were the majority. By 1850, roughly 550 Orthodox Jewish families worshiped in seven small congregations with a total property value of $20,000, while 2,200 Reformists worshiped in two massive congregations (Temple Sinai and Touro Synagogue) valued at $215,000.280 As is often the case in the strained relations between established communities and immigrant brethren, elements within the older German Jewish community dissuaded eastern European Jewish immigration to the city, and as a result, fewer came. New Orleans can did to other American cities in the early twentieth century. Those who did remained unorganized and unheard among the city’s populate,281 scattered among smaller congregations. In 1904, a number of Orthodox groups merged as the Congregation Beth Israel (House of Israel), which acquired the home of former Mayor Joseph Shakespeare at 1616 Carondelet and converted it to a place of worship serving 175 families by 1908. Around this time, another Orthodox congregation, Anshe Scola, also moved to the area—1300 South Rampart—reflecting the concentration of East European Jews in the Dryades Street neighborhood. This area, roughly bounded by St. Charles Avenue, Claiborne Avenue, Julia Street, and First Street, became the focal point of this settlement, as small merchants and peddlers began moving uptown, out of the Faubourg Marigny area (Poydras and Dryades Streets) around 1890.282

**Dryades Street Neighborhood and the New Downtown/ Uptown Enclaves**

Dryades Street near the Mississippi intersection emerged from a semi-rural state in the 1840s, particularly after the influential Irish businessman Patrick Irwin opened the Dryades Street Market in January 1849. “The erection of the present market in the Second Ward will...prove highly advantageous to our up-town population, and largely increase the value of property in the vicinity,” predicted the *Daily Picayune*.283 With the market in place, the Melpomene Canal (which flowed under the market) draining off surface water, and churches and schools constructed in the 1850s, the Dryades Street area was deemed by the 1860s “an accessible dwelling place, socially, morally and religiously a desirable portion of the city.”284 A retail community started forming on Dryades Street in the 1850s and was long established by 1903, when merchants, most of them Jewish, took out a full-page ad in the *Star* to promote their businesses:

*Lined along both sides of Dryades street from Clio to Philip streets, a succession of stores where every article of necessity or luxury may be found in great profusion; it need not be stated that no part of the city offers a wider opportunity for the supply of every necessity from the palatial establishment of the Chas. A. Kaufman Company to the unpretentious little store of the humble trader, all cater for trade and invite the public to become customers.*285

In that charming Victorian diction, the advertisement intimated a litany of Jewish merchants: Hochberg, “the popular young grocer”; Baurhenn, the jeweler; Hunsinger, “one of the most polite men you ever meet”; Stein and Silverstein, the china and glass shop; Schilkoffskey, the furniture dealer; Schilkoffskey, the furniture dealer; and Kauffman’s, “the greatest place in the streets, where shoppers were gently warned that “it would be well not to leave your purchase until the great Christmas holidays.”286 Despite the preponderance of Jewish names in the Dryades Street business district, a predominant ethnic fixture prevailed on Dryades and in the surrounding neighborhood. Next door to Jewish retailers in the heart of the commercial strip stood, in the late nineteenth century, St. Mary’s Dominican Convent, the Christ School, Brother’s College, St. John’s Parochial School, and the German Presbyterian Church.287 Thousands of poor blacks, many of them recent immigrants from Louisiana plantation country, followed emancipation, flocked on the “woods side” of the street. Dryades became the number-two retail district in the city, second only to Canal, and the number-one spot for black shoppers.

Jewish-owned shops could be found not just on Dryades Street but along nearby South Rampart Street (referred to in the 1930s as “the Harlem of New Orleans”288), where a string of tailors, jewelers, and other racially integrated businesses served a predominantly black clientele. Representative of this Orthodox Jewish-owned integrated, commercial presence was Karnofsky’s Music Store at 427 South Rampart, where a young Louis Armstrong worked in 1908 and which, later as Armstrong’s Music, became “the finest music store catering to African-Americans.”289 Rateau’s South commerce maps made by the WPA in the 1930s show that Jewish retailing along South Rampart and Dryades formed a commercial interface between the white front-of-town (including the CBD and residential areas) and the black residential back-of-town. Dryades Street

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279 *Louisiana Historical Records Survey, Inventory of Church and Synagogue Archives of New Orleans* (New Orleans, 1940), 52; and Lachoff, “A Historical Introduction,” 20.


282 Ibid., 24.


284 “Dryades St. and Market,” *Sunday States (New Orleans States)*, December 20, 1903, p. 20.

285 Ibid., 20–21. Roughly half the names in the Dryades Street advertisements accompanying this article are probably Jewish heritage.


287 Ibid., 20–21. Roughly half the names in the Dryades Street advertisements accompanying this article are probably Jewish heritage.

Orthodox Jewish immigrants gravitated to the Dryades area in large part for its municipal market, which provided easy-entry job opportunities and conveniences to working-class immigrants. Opened in 1849, the picturesque Dryades Street Market straddled the Melpomene intersection and was served with streetcar lines connecting with the Poydras Street Market, another source of immigrant employment. The wooden market, shown here in a 1903 newspaper ad and compared to the same place today, was replaced in the early twentieth century with a brick Spanish Revival structure, which still stands (below) on Martin Luther King Boulevard. The market closed around 1950.

Photographs by author, 2003-2004; drawing from the Sunday States, December 20, 1903.

In a piece published in the now-defunct New Orleans Ethnic Cultures journal, Nikki Stiller reported that these tensions were alive and well in 1978, when her attempts to include the uptown Jewish community in a discourse on ethnicity in New Orleans were met with "coldness" and "lack of interest." The uptown Jews of "nineteenth century Western European stock," opined Stiller, "have no desire to identify or affiliate themselves with Yiddish-speaking, pickle-eating, and economically insecure Eastern European Jews" who were "stranded in the city and in the wilds of Metairie." Though other anecdotal evidence suggests that the tensions were perhaps not as strained, the correlation between the cultural chasm and the geographical distance once separating the groups is clear. Nikki Stiller, "The New Orleans Jewish Community and the Russian Jews," in New Orleans Ethnic Cultures, ed. John Cooke (New Orleans, 1978), 60-61.
This detail of a rare aerial photograph, captured in the late 1910s, shows Dryades Street as the second thoroughfare from the left, and St. Charles Avenue at right. Notice the circa-1872 Temple Sinai one block to the left of Lee Circle (upper right), and the Dryades Market at lower left, nestled Melrose in Southeastern Architectural Archive, Special Collections, Howard-Tilton Library, Tulane University.

places of worship, which accordingly must be established within the general residential distribution of their members. But why in the Dryades Street area, and not elsewhere? Several likely factors ensure:

- The community members originally worked as vendors, peddlers, and merchants at the Poydras Market, located in the neutral ground of Poydras Street between Penn and South Rampart. Through the middle of this market—in fact, directly under its cupola—ran perpendicular Dryades Street, and on parts of it ran a streetcar line communicating with the Dryades Street neighborhood. On Dryades at the Melpomene intersection stood another municipal market, the 325-stall Dryades Market, all convenient to the streetcar line and local shoppers and vendors. The Dryades Street line, opened in 1866 and electrified in 1896, provided a convenient transportation connection between residents' neighborhoods, workplaces, and shopping destinations.293

- The position of Dryades Street (as well South Rampart, closer to the CBD) as an interface between the white front-of-town and the black back-of-town availed merchants on these corridors a substantial retail clientele on both sides of the racial divide. Jewish merchants, tailors, and jewelers catered in particular to the black community, which was excluded from most other downtown stores through Jim Crow laws. The abandonment of this source of economic demand by mainstream New Orleans left open a niche for immigrant storekeepers to fill, a niche potentially located wherever predominantly black neighborhoods abutted mostly white areas.294

- The Dryades Street neighborhood at the turn of the century was a working-class area of functional cottages and frame houses. Rent and land were reasonable, yet accessible to the Central Business District and the job opportunities it afforded. The nuisance of living near the congested CBD was, conversely, balanced by the convenience. The Dryades Street area thus fell within that hardened yet advantageous commercial-residential zone immediately surrounding the Central Business District (the immigrant belt). See chapter, “An Ethnic Geography of New Orleans” for one that was also home to Chinatown, Little Palermo, and other ethnic enclaves at the turn of the twentieth century.

Once a critical mass of Orthodox Jews assembled in the Dryades Street neighborhood and religious institutions arose, brethren gravitated to the area because of the existing cultural infrastructure. They were joined by Sicilians, Irish, Germans, eastern Europeans, African Americans, and others who worked and dwelled in this exceedingly diverse neighborhood. In 1938, for example, just on the 1400 block of Dryades, Luca DiMaggio sold fruit and Charles Siracusa cut hair next door to Harry Finkelstein's second-hand clothing store and across from Benjamin Goldstein's shoe store. The Barton Kosher Delicatessen was located a few doors from the Masonic Lodge, Albert Silverman's poultry, and Hibernia Bank's Dryades Street Branch. A block past Dryades Market (where butchers Joseph Labadot, Jacob Grisoli, Jacob Koretzky, and René Freche offered meats for dinner) was dessert at the Pearlman Bakery, and spirits at Palermo Murphy Liquors.295 At its post-World War II peak, approximately seventy households, twenty institutions, and 200 businesses—stalls with names like Kaufman's, Levigne's, Cohen's, and Weiner's, as well as professional offices and market stalls—lined the twelve blocks of Dryades Street from Howard Avenue to Philip Street.296 The sights, sounds, and

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294 Polk's New Orleans City Directory 1938 (New Orleans, 1938), 1269-1270.
295 Data rounded from Ibid., 1947, 94 of pink section.
As the Reform community moved uptown in the late 1800s, incoming Orthodox immigrants from Russia, Poland, and elsewhere in Eastern Europe arrived and settled downtown, primarily between Dryades Street and St. Charles Avenue, from Howard to Louisiana. The "Dryades Street neighborhood" was highly multiethnic; Orthodox Jews probably comprised about 20 to 25 percent of the population. Many operated businesses on Dryades proper, catering to both black and white customers in the days of segregation. Others ran shops on South Rampart for a similar clientele. Map, graph, and analysis by author based on 1890-1960 censuses.
Religious law helps explain the Dryades Street neighborhood: Orthodox Jews cannot ride mechanized transportation to attend synagogue on the Sabbath, and therefore must live within walking distance from their places of worship. Shown here are those synagogues, as well as other Jewish institutions and businesses, in 1940, and the same area in 1998, after the suburban exodus radically transformed the area. The Reform community generally does not adhere to this tradition and settled uptown in a more dispersed pattern. Maps and analysis by author based on 1941 Louisiana Historical Records Survey and 1938 City Directory.
Social transformations in the 1960s brought an end to the Orthodox Jewish community of Dryades Street. The graph at right tracks Dryades' decline by counting entries in city directories from 1938 to 2001. The maps above show ethnic diversity in the area in 1940 and 2000, based on census data. Maps, graph, and analysis by author.
smells of the neighborhood exuded elements of European cities crossed with a New Orleans aesthetic, a community culturally closer to Brooklyn or Manhattan, or to Carrolton or Algiers.

As the Orthodox community settled in the Dryades Street area, the Reformists migrated from the “old uptown” of upper Faubourg St. Mary and Audubon Park to the garden suburbs of “new uptown” upper St. Charles Avenue toward Audubon Park. Their institutions followed the “Boro Synagogue”—that is, the amalgamated Gates of Prayer of the Dispersed Judah congregation—moved from their antebellum synagogue at Carondelet and Julia to a new Byzantine-style building at 4200 St. Charles Avenue on January 1, 1909.296 Gates of Prayer, the Layton-based Ashkenazi congregation formed during the German immigration era, relocated from its antebellum site at Jackson Avenue to the comfortable new environs of 39 Napoleon in 1920. Its main reason for departure was the deterioration of the neighborhood.297 (The Jewish “Row” and Orphan Home, built in old Lafayette in the same era by the same congregation, had relocated uptown in the late 1880s when the enormous Jewish Orphans’ Home was constructed on St. Charles Avenue at the present-day Jefferson intersection, then called Peters Avenue. The long gone home was the most prominent landmark of upper New Orleans, for many years.) In 1924, Temple Sinai continued the uptown migration of Reform congregations when it too decided to relocate. It held its last service in the circa-1872 structure on Carondelet Street in 1926, starting building a new Byzantine-style synagogue at 227 St. Charles Avenue in 1927, and occupied the new site in 1928.298 For many decades a geographical, economic and cultural chasm prevailed between these wealthier, older, more Germanic, totally assimilated, and highly influential uptown, Charles Avenue Avenue Jews, and the uptown Reform congregations, and the working-class, eastern-European-immigrant “Dryades Street Jews” of the downtown Orthodox congregations. In this regard the geography of Jewish New Orleans mimicked that of New York City, where wealthier German Jews resided in the affluent Upper East Side, far from the lower-class Russian Jewish immigrants amassed in the Lower East Side.299 Neither population predominated in their neighborhoods: in fact, both were numerical minorities. The uptown Reform community outnumbered the Orthodox by roughly a two-to-one margin, and was more influential in New Orleans business and society by a wide margin. But it was not as culturally distinctive and geographically concentrated as the Orthodox in part because of the Reformists’ greater wealth, establishment, and assimilation in the community, and for the aforementioned Sabbath tradition. Not compelled to live within walking distance of their place of worship, the Reform community was and remains more dispersed within the spacious confines of uptown. Nor was there ever a particular strip of Reform-owned businesses in uptown; their business enterprises were the great department stores and professional offices of Canal Street and the CBD. For these reasons, the picturesque Dryades Street scene of the Orthodox community that generations of New Orleanians warmly remember as “the Jewish neighborhood.”

Aside: Jewish New Orleans in 1938

Social and Economic Study of the New Orleans Jewish Community, conducted in 1938 by Julian B. Feibelman and published in 1941, revealed the following data:

- There were 6,472 Jews in New Orleans in 1938, or 1.4 percent of the city’s 1930 population of 458,762. This figure fell below an earlier estimate of 7,000, and equated to a smaller percentage than that of eight other American cities with populations over 300,000, in which the average Jewish percentage in 1930 was slightly over 11 percent.
- The average size of the 3,31 Jewish families in New Orleans was 3.03 people, significantly less than the New Orleans average of 3.81 and the Louisiana mean of 4.09. Three-quarters of the population was over age twenty-one.
- In 1938, 47 percent of Jewish families belonged to Reform congregations, 25 percent were Orthodox, and the remainder were unaffiliated. By 1953, 57 percent identified themselves as Reform, while 30 percent claimed Orthodox.
- The community was well-educated on 1938 standards: “one-third gave public school education; nearly one-half has four or five years of college training; and more than one-quarter has some or complete college training.”300 Almost 7 percent of Jewish children received regular religious education.
- 1 percent of New Orleans Jews in 1938 were native-born (that is, possess U.S. citizenship), a year when 95 percent of New Orleanians was native-born. The foreign-born contingent included 985 from Russia and 408 from Poland. During and after World War II, local Orthodox Jews helped settle a contingent of Jewish refugees from war-torn Europe, sharing as they did the Yiddish language. Many among this last significant influx of Jews to New Orleans resided for a while in the Dryades area.
- Among the 90 people gainfully employed, the occupation of manager-executive was the most common

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296 Louisiana Historical Records Survey, Inventory of Church and Synagogue Archives, 22.
298 The majestic old synagogue on Carondelet was sold off, remodeled, and used as offices, storage space, a community theater, and studios before being demolished in 1977. Its site is now an empty lot near WDSU Channel 6’s office.
Regarding intermarriage and assimilation, incomplete but nevertheless interesting data from the 1938 survey showed that “more non-Jewish women marry Jewish men, than do Jewish women marry non-Jewish men.”

Exodus to the Suburbs

The middle-class exodus from New Orleans to the suburbs during the 1950s–1960s had a limited impact on the uptown Reform community. For one, uptown remained prosperous and relatively safe during the crime waves of recent decades. Secondly, post-Reform congregations incorporated in the nineteenth century under charters that bound them to Orleans Parish. An exception was Gates of Prayer, founded in 1850, in the Jefferson Parish suburb of Lafayette, two years before it was annexed into New Orleans. After about seventy years on Jackson Avenue and another half-century at 1139 Napoleon Avenue, Gates of Prayer decided to depart New Orleans starting in 1966 and moved incrementally over the next decade, finally dedicating a new suburban temple in 1975. Members decided to move because of neighborhood deterioration, rumors of a Mississippi River bridge on Napoleon Avenue, and because many members were already relocating to the suburbs. Once again, Gates of Prayer was the first synagogue in suburban New Orleans, albeit briefly. Today, Gates of Prayer operates a world away from the vacant circa-1860s Jackson Avenue Shul, at 4000 West Esplanade Avenue, the site of nine Jewish religious and educational institutions strung out along this suburban Jefferson Parish boulevard.

A generation after the Reform community moved uptown, the Orthodox community began to leave Dryades Street for the same “pull” and “push” factors that sent millions of middle-class urban Americans to the suburbs after WWII. Unlike the Reform community, which relocated from the inner city to uptown decades earlier, the Orthodox had more geographical options from which to choose, because the metropolitan area had expanded considerably toward the lake and into Jefferson Parish. Also unlike the uptown Reform community, the Orthodox Jews of Dryades Street lived in racially mixed residential blocks adjacent to the city’s most expansive African American neighborhoods. These Jews were on the front lines of the social changes of the 1950s and 1960s, and witnessed occasional race tensions. In 1960, civil rights activists had observed that blacks accounted for roughly three-quarters of the clientele at Dryades Street stores, but only one-third of their workforce and one-eighth of the better jobs. “Upwards of two thousand and blacks staged the first civil rights protest in...”


304 A 1958 sociological study reported that “pull” factors weighed heavier than “push” factors among those who left New Orleans in the previous five years: 31 percent moved for more house space, 14 percent for business reasons, 12 percent to buy a home, and 10 percent because of a decrease in family size. Less than one in ten explained their move as leaving an undesirable neighborhood. Leonard Reissman, Profile of a Community: A Sociological Study of the New Orleans Jewish Community (New Orleans, 1958), 40-41.
New Orleans is living memory," and a boycott followed. Concessions were made by the merchants and tensions eased, but in the wake of the incident, many long-time merchants began to seek their future in uptown or the suburbs. Integration played an even greater, though unintended, role in declining Dryades Street; the fall of Jim Crow opened up retail options, once limited to Dryades, South Rampart, and few other places, for thousands of African American shoppers. As they took their business to Canal Street, enterprises on Dryades folded, storefronts were shuttered, and Jewish families departed. The residential exodus was followed by the relocation or closure of the neighborhood's Jewish institutions, which in turn triggered the departure of remaining residents. Concurrently, Orthodox congregations throughout the city lost membership to out-migration, secularization of youth, and internal divisions. In the 1950s, a faction of Chevra Thilim, which had moved from its Central Business District location (826 Lafayette Street) to uptown South Claiborne Avenue in 1949, broke off to form the city's first Conservative synagogue. After a while on Magazine Street near Napoleon Avenue, it moved in 1978 to Jefferson Parish, under the name Tikvat Shalom (Hope of Peace). Chevra Thilim itself became Conservative in 1988.306 The Orthodox Beth Israel, bound by its charter to Orleans Parish, relocated in 1971 to the Lakefront area at Canal and Robert E. Lee Boulevard. It and Anshe Sfard “strive to keep Orthodox Jewish traditions alive in New Orleans”307 today. Only Anshe Sfard (2230 Carondelet Street) remains in operation near the old Dryades Street, the last institutional element of New Orleans’ only popularly recognized Jewish neighborhood. Photograph by author, 2003.

Filled with its own hopes and dreams, but crime and despair taunt those aspirations and seem, at times, to prevail.

Today, the former Dryades Street neighborhood is a ghost of its former self: the Orthodox Jews have departed, the shops have closed, the smells of delicatessens have drifted away, and the ethnic diversity is gone. Even the names have changed. In 1977, Melpomene from Baronne Street to Earhart Boulevard, including its prominent intersection with Dryades, was renamed Martin Luther King Boulevard. Twelve years later, Dryades Street from Howard Avenue to Philip Street was renamed Oretha Castle Haley Boulevard, in honor of a...
local civil rights leader. What was once unofficially but universally known as “the Dryades Street neighborhood” is now officially called Central City. All businesses from the earlier generation are now disappeared, including the large, multi-story department stores dating from the nineteenth century. Those few enterprises launched in recent decades tended to be corner grocery stores, beauty shops, and the like, often with hand-painted signs. Trash, weeds, and immobile old cars predominated in the blocks around Oretha Castle Haley in the last years of the twentieth century.

The graph on page 275, Activity on Dryades Street: Howard Avenue to Philip Street, 1938-2001, developed from city directory listings, tracks the decline of the Dryades business community in the late twentieth century. Certain telltale signs of neighborhood decline start to appear as one peruses directory listings for multiple years. Buildings, for example, are often subdivided into apartments and boarding houses. Substantial businesses are replaced with tiny ones, if at all. The old Dryades Market was closed around 1950 after a century of service, as automobiles carried its clientele out to new suburban supermarkets. Vacancies increase, to the point that directories in the 1990s no longer bothered to list them. The words “Not Verified” start to appear in the listings. The Masonic Temple and the myriad organizations that met there all disappeared. The number of social-welfare organizations for the poverty-stricken began to increase. There was even a “Get ‘Em & Hit ‘Em” Liquor Store at 2136 Dryades in 1978—which apparently did well, because by 1988 it opened up a bar and expanded into a neighboring lot.

The only traces of Dryades Street’s former vibrancy today are fading palimpsests on decaying buildings along what was once the second busiest commercial stretch in the city. But change is on the horizon: urban activists and the preservationist community have teamed with local residents to revitalize the area with architectural restoration, new construction, house relocation, and conversion of former department stores and shops to art galleries and community centers. Colorful murals celebrating New Orleans culture and commemorating the civil rights legacy of the area now cover bare brick walls, across the street from the popular Café Reconcile, a restaurant providing job training for at-risk youth. Initial discussions of a civil rights museum on Oretha Castle Haley, seen by some as the birthplace of the city’s civil rights movement, are currently underway. By late 2004, seven new business and community entities had been established on the boulevard, including the first fibered institution in decades. The street once associated with the Jewish community now thoroughly and proudly reflects a black identity. Said one activist, “we need to make sure we keep investing in this street, that an African-American street has our time, investment and money.” With the same hard work that lifted the Orthodox immigrants from their stalls in the Poydras Market to their present-day prosperity, Central City may also rise again.

When there are no “Jewish neighborhoods” in modern New Orleans, one overriding spatial pattern has persisted since antebellum times: a Jewish preference for the upper reaches of the city and the western half of the metropolis, as illustrated in these 1953 data. Jewish institutions, landscape features, and households are scarce in areas below the French Quarter or east of City Park. This pattern can be traced to the historical Anglo/Creole ethnic geography of the early nineteenth century, in which Jewish families generally settled among the Anglos, towards uptown. Map by author based on data collected by Leonard Reissman.

**Geography of Jewish New Orleans 1800s-2000s**

Present as Jewish peoples were within New Orleans, various waves of immigration, we see in the geography of Jewish New Orleans reflections of the patterns of numerous other groups. Those Jews who lived in colonial New Orleans resided in cultural anonymity dispersed throughout the French Quarter, replicating the pattern of many minority groups settling in the Creole city. Those Sephardim and Ashkenazim who arrived in the early 1800s also dispersed citywide, but soon showed a predilection for the Americanized blocks of the upper French Quarter and Faubourg St. Mary, where the first Jewish congregations were established. This downtown pattern correlated with that of Anglo emigrants who also generally avoided the Creole lower half of the city. The German Ashkenazic Jewish immigrants who arrived in the mid-1800s settled largely uptown in Lafayette, reflecting the tendency of poor immigrants of the day to disperse in the semi-urban periphery, where unskilled employment and cheap land made life tenable. With the more prosperous Jewish establishment living downtown and the poor Jewish immigrant community living uptown, the antebellum geography of Jewish New Orleans echoed the era’s socio-economic geography: the wealthier classes were found in the inner city; the working-class immigrant classes flocked to the outskirt. This trend has been observed in many antebellum American cities.

In the decades following the Civil War, the trend reversed. Wealthier classes evacuated the inner city and headed to the...
uptown garden suburbs, opening up housing opportunities downtown for the working-class poor, where unskilled job opportunities now lay. Orthodox Jewish immigrants arriving in the late nineteenth century from eastern Europe and settled downtown, in the gritty Dryades Street area, while the prosperous descendents of the older Jewish families—now worshipped in Reform congregations—relocated to uptown, in the leafy neighborhoods around upper St. Charles Avenue. “Dryades Street Jews” and “St. Charles Jews” would come into the local lexicon to describe this ethnic, economic, and geographical gulf. This trend, too—of postbellum immigrants settling downtown as established populations moved outward—has been observed in many American cities.

Finally, once again in parallel with other groups and other cities, the downtown Orthodox Jewish community departed for the Jefferson Parish suburbs during the decline of the inner city in the 1960s, while the Reform community generally stayed put in uptown. The Jewish community of the greater New Orleans metropolitan area today resides mostly in the western half, with the possible exception of the French Quarter.

From the late 1800s to the 1960s, the geography of Jewish New Orleans comprised a downtown Orthodox community and an older, more established uptown Reform community. The latter generally remains uptown today, while the old downtown Orthodox community now mostly resides in the Jefferson Parish suburbs, joined by some Reformists. A large out-of-state Jewish population associated with Tulane University also dwells uptown, near campus. Map and analysis by author.

The Jewish Widows’ and Orphans’ Home in old Lafayette relocated uptown in the late 1880s to this impressive edifice on St. Charles Avenue at the present-day Jefferson intersection, then called Peters Avenue. It was the most prominent landmark of uptown New Orleans for many years. The site is now occupied by “the JCC”—the Jewish Community Center. Southeastern Architectural Archive, Special Collections, Howard-Tilton Library, Tulane University.

Congregation Shangarai Tefilo (Gates of Prayer) cemetery is located uptown at Joseph and Garfield streets, near Langenstein’s corner grocery, founded in 1922. Despite the citywide tradition of above-ground burial introduced by the Spanish and often explained as a response to high water tables, all Jewish cemeteries in the city remain below-ground, in accordance with Jewish tradition. This demonstrates that burial customs in New Orleans primarily reflect cultural rather than geographical factors. Photograph by author, 2004.

*bThe 2002 Orleans Parish Assessment Roll records a significant number of probably Jewish surnames among the parcel owners of the French Quarter. It is difficult to ascertain, however, how many owners actually reside in the Quarter.
Ethnic Geographies

One downtown and east. In one curious spot, however, do they symbolically unite: at the Creole Kosher Restaurant on 115 Chartres Street.

Evidence of past Jewish geographies can be found en- sconced in the modern-day cityscape. A few crumbling rem- nants of the Gates of Prayer congregation remain at the foot of Jackson Avenue, most notably the former Lafayette Shul, the oldest surviving major structural vestige of Jewish New Orleans. The Jewish retailers have mostly departed the CBD, although Rubenstein’s (since 1924) and Meyer the Hatter (since 1894), among the last old-line soft-goods stores down- town, still operate on St. Charles Avenue, and Fischer’s Jew- elry still survives on South Rampart. Abundant evidence may be found in the former Dryades Street neighborhood, where most synagogues, institutions, and homes from the Ortho- dox era still stand. There business signs such as Handelman and Levigne still are visible, and where one synagogue, An- she Sfard, miraculously still functions. Jewish New Orleans is most evident during the high holy days along uptown St. Charles Avenue, when hundreds of faithful walk from their homes to Temple Sinai and Touro Synagogue, the two de- scendants of western America’s first Jewish congregation, founded in the French Quarter almost two centuries earlier.

The Dryades area is replete with clues to its former Orthodox Jewish association. Photograph by author, 2003.

Haberdasheries, dry-goods stores, jewelers, tailors, and other Jewish-owned businesses once lined South Rampart Street and other downtown thoroughfares. A few remain (visible in upper photos), last representatives of a long line of downtown merchants, dating in some cases to the early nineteenth century. Clues such as old signs and doorway mosaics attest to their former presence. Photographs by author, 2003-2004.
GREEK NEW ORLEANS
FROM DORGENOIS TO DECATUR

Hellenistic undercurrents seem to pervade the streets of New Orleans. Perhaps they emanate from the city’s aeolicum, a structure that seems as if transported by some magic spell from Greece, the tomb of past greatness, to the sunlit Louisiana cradle of future empire.311 Or perhaps they are vestiges of a slave-holding aristocracy, a heritage shared by both Greece and New Orleans and said to be the provenance of the South’s affinity for the ancients’ customs. Possibly the role was played by the city’s most famous Greek resident, Lafcadio Hearn, who, before gaining fame as a chronicler of Japan, practically “invented” modern notions of New Orleans as a newspaper correspondent to the postbellum city.312 But more likely, the Hellenistic tone comes from a thread of international maritime commerce that unified major seaports, binding cities a thousand miles apart more tightly than they may be to their immediate neighbors. New Orleans resembles Genoa or Marseille, or Beirut or the Egyptian Alexandria more than it does New York,” wrote A.J. Liebling; “New Orleans is with one orbit the Hellenistic world that never touched the North Atlantic.”

The Hellenistic world is not merely a figment of the New Orleans imagination. It is a literal presence. Greek sailors and merchants for a long embraced the Crescent City as a favorite port of call, creating an ephemeral presence among the honky-tonks of Decatur Street, while, at the opposite end of town—bucolic, tree-lined North Dorgenois Street—forming a permanent community responsible for the hemispheric first Greek Orthodox Church. These slaves, which exist today in unsung forms, represent the primary experience of Greeks and Greek-Americans in New Orleans: the Crescent City as home for days, and as home for generations. Those who have called New Orleans home represent one of the smaller pieces of the Crescent City’s ethnic puzzle, but symbolically important one, because their residential geography was typical of the many smaller ethnic groups in the city.

Greeks in America

The modern-day manifestation of ancient Greece emerged as an independent nation in 1832, following almost four centuries of Turkish rule and a prior millennium as Byzantium, the eastern part of the former Roman Empire. During those 900 years under the Ottoman Turk, millet leaders administered a Greek Christian and other groups as autonomous milliats (millet) supervised by a group’s religious leaders. Although Christians were relegated to a second-class status, the millet arrangement allowed the Orthodox Church to assume both an influential religious and political role among the Greek peoples of the Ottoman Empire, and “made possible the survival of the Greeks through four centuries of alien rule.”314 This fusion of religious and national identity eventually flowered in the Greeks’ fight for independence (1821-1829), the establishment of sovereignty (1832), and the installation of a constitutional monarchy (1862). The prominent role of the Orthodox Greek within Greek culture survived over centuries and radiated evident in Greece today would manifest itself also in the ethnic crescent of New Orleans.

The only significant Greek port arrival to the New World in the eighteenth century was a group of about 400 indentured servants brought in the 1760s to work is now only named New Smyrna Beach, Florida. They relocated to St. Augustine in 1777 and eventually blended with the population.315 Small numbers trickled to America after Greece’s revolution of 1821, but for most of the early nineteenth century, Greek immigration was measured in single digits. Only one Greek arrived to the port of New York in 1848, compared to 91,367 Irish and 177,73 Germans; a decade later, that number increased to 1,298.316 Only eighty-six Greek-born residents were reported in the entire United States in the 1850 census. Their number rose to 328 in 1860, and 390 in 1870, years in which most foreign immigration had been stilled by the Civil War. The next decade saw the tiny Greek-born community double to 776, then quadruple to 1,957 by 1890, and again to 8,515 in 1900. It was not until the early twentieth century that Greeks reached substantial numbers on a national scale, as the Greek-born population tipped twice fold by 1910 to 101,282. (Estimates of the total Greek ethnic community in America that time range from 100,000 to a probably overestimated, quarter-million.)317 Most Greek immigrants—males predominating by a wide margin in the early years—escaped rural agrarian lives in pursuit of urban opportunities; almost half ended up in cities like towns, and mining towns in Connecticut, Massachusetts, New York, Illinois, and California. Lowell, Massachusetts, and Chicago attracted the largest numbers at the turn of the twentieth century.

One reason behind the sudden jump in Greek immigration to America in the early 1900s was the decline of Greece’s main export, currents to France and Russia, which had erected import tariffs against the raisin-like fruit. Having destroyed their olive groves to plant currant vineyards, Greek farmers and their dependents now found their produce without a market. Many fled, and some immigrated. Other rea-
sons included a weak industrial sector made unattractive for its lack of diversification, an unstable and shifting government, an occasionally favorable exchange rate with the dollar, and an unyielding mountainous landscape.181 Once these pioneers established themselves, “chain immigration”—the encouragement of relatives and friends in the old country to join those already arrived—brought second and third waves of immigrants to American shores. This process, assisted by many other factors, transpired throughout the twentieth century, when the size of the Greek-born community in America hovered mostly between 100,000 and 200,000, decade to decade.182 These numbers only reflect the actually born in Greece, which, with the passage of time, represents a shrinking percentage of the total ethnic group. The larger Greek-American ethnic community, regardless of birthplace, may be estimated at two to three times more. In 1960, for example, the census statistic “number of persons of foreign stock reporting Greece as origin” yielded 370,183 respondents nationally (2.3 times the Greek-born number that year), with most living in New York, Illinois, California, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania.183

Immigration data, as opposed to the aforementioned census data, show that from 1820 to 1990, over 700,000 Greeks arrived in the United States, slightly over 1 percent of total immigration. With the greatest peak from 1900 to 1910 and a secondary peak in the 1960s and 1970s, these immigrants created, according to the 2000 census, a community of 1,153,307 Americans (0.4 percent of the population) who claimed Greek as their ancestry, or two to four million, according to sources within the Greek community.

Greeks in New Orleans

Among the very few Greeks who colonized in colonial New Orleans was a wealthy Athenian merchant named Michael Dimitry, who arrived in the 1760s and married a local woman of mixed Acadian and Native American lineage. The couple’s daughter, Marianne Celeste Dracos, born in 1777 (who by one account “may qualify as the Greek ‘Virginia Dare’”), married a native of the Greek island Hydra, named Andreas Dimitry. The Dimitry union in New Orleans in 1799 has been described as the first-known marriage of two Greeks in North America.184

Enough Greek visitors and business interests existed in New Orleans to warrant the establishment of a Greek Consulate in New Orleans in 1848, which still operates today. To find Greek New Orleansians in this era, one must scour population schedules for those few entries citing Greece as their birthplace—and this can only be done starting in 1850, when birthplace was first recorded in the census. Even then, the number of Greeks, particularly those ports such as New Orleans, were probably underestimated, because their affiliation with the shipping industry is one many a transitory presence. An 1873 article in the New York Times approximated the size of the New Orleans Greek community as over 200,185 which would make such an estimate in about 1900-1915 for the late antebellum, seem reasonable. This high presumably included all people of Greek ancestry, including locally born, because a census of 1900 for those born in Greece fell far short of 200, such contradictory information is common in historical estimates of national ethnic-group populations; in general, censuses tend to underestimate, and community advocates often overestimate. The 1900 census statistical compendium only gave four Greeks living in all Louisiana, of whom forty-eight lived in New Orleans; these numbers tripled by 1910 to 157 in the state and 175 in New Orleans. Increased immigration in the early twentieth century inspired the publication of a number of books and studies on the Greek immigrant community in America, and these sources provided substantially higher figures. The Thermaikos Almanac of 1904 for New Orleans’ Greek population, at a reasonable 250, and the Greek-American Guide (1920) estimated 300.186 But Symphor G. Canoutas’ circa-1925 estimate of 700 Greeks in New Orleans is probably an overestimation. These independent studies abated as Greek immigration decreased, forcing us to rely again on census data. The 1920 censuses, for example, show that New Orleans was home to 432 of Louisiana’s 600 sons and daughters of Greece, while in 1930 the city contained 341 Greek-born residents plus 311 locally born offspring of at least one Greek-born parent. Accounting for undercounting, the transient seamen community, and second- and third-generation Greeks, the total Greek ethnic population by World War II was probably in the high hundreds. Louisiana in 1960 counted 974 “number of persons of Greek stock reporting Greece as origin,” of which 449 lived in New Orleans, another probably undercount.187 According to sample-based data from the 2000 census, which asked for one’s “ancestry,” there were 5,929 Greek-Americans in Louisiana (claiming primary or secondary Greek ancestry), of which 40 percent lived in the greater New Orleans metropolitan area, with most living in Jefferson Parish (1,321).
Geographies of New Orleans

by Richard Campanella

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...nor was it, or other large-scale, quick-hire employment opportunities to early 1900s simply did not have enough industrial activity...populated Greek community of the day. New Orleans in the such as sponge fishing in Tarpon Springs, the most densely...ore, and other Greek specialties. But it did offer some, and hundreds...opportunities in food service, fishing and fish marketing, and...sufficient to attract unskilled laborers in large numbers...work. Greeks were eyed but not actually recruited for such employment.

The Greek Enclave of North Dorgenois Street

The prosperity of the 1800s—which in New Orleans translated to bustling international maritime activity—sustained the local Greek population and planted the seeds of a permanent community. The most influential segment of this population comprised either immigrants nor seamen but professional representatives of Greek shipping firms. New Orleans’ contingent of “the directors of great Greek mercantile houses in America...that band of financiers from the...fashionable Esplanade Avenue garden suburb. In the 1860s, Benachi aided his Greek compatriots in acquiring land for what would become the western hemisphere’s first Eastern Orthodox Church. It was constructed not far from Benachi’s circa-1859 mansion, which still stands at 2257 Bayou Road. Photograph by author, 2003.

The patriarch of New Orleans’ antebellum Greek community was Nicholas Benachi, scion of a prominent Greek family and diplomat, businessman, and real estate magnate in the fashionable Esplanade Avenue garden suburb. In the 1860s, Benachi aided his Greek compatriots in acquiring land for what would become the western hemisphere’s first Eastern Orthodox Church. It was constructed not far from Benachi’s circa-1859 mansion, which still stands at 2257 Bayou Road. Photograph by author, 2003.
The establishment of the Eastern Orthodox Church of the Holy Trinity gave identity and unity to New Orleans’ Greeks. Their elegantly simple church, built in 1866 at present-day 1222 North Dorgenois, formed the nucleus of a small but significant ethnic cluster for over a century. These photographs probably date to 1900-1910.}

The Insurrection in Candia and the Public Press

333 A street named “Dorgenois,” so called for a nearby plantation owner, appeared on the 1834 Zimpel map from the Girod Canal to Bayou Road, along the northern edge of the Coquet plantation. Parcels around the future church site were foreseen at the time, but not yet laid out. Two years later, the street was depicted as D’Orgenoy, a subdivision plan for the nearby Gueno plantation. The general area later occupied by the Greek enclave was initially subdivided from Bayou Road plantations around this time, with the street divided into upper and lower sections named Dorgenois and a lower section called Delhonde. They were unified as South and North Dorgenois by 1895, and remain so today. Charles F. Zimpel, Topographical Map of New Orleans and Its Vicinity (New Orleans, 1834), and Louis Surgi, Plans of Low Ground in F. [Faubourg] Gueno (1836).


336 Low Ground in F. [Faubourg] Gueno


332 That pamphlet was distributed by the Greek Committee of Relief, the benevolent association said to have existed in the 1840s, and the New Orleans Greek Committee of Relief distributed pamphlets about homeland political issues in 1866. The Greek colony, formed in the 1860s, is not the only Greek association in the city: a Greek seamen’s benevolent association said to have existed in the 1840s, and the New Orleans Greek Committee of Relief distributed pamphlets about homeland political issues in 1866.332

1864-1866, the Eastern Orthodox Church celebrated its rituals on these semi-rural outskirts of the Crescent City. It was not the only Greek association in the city. Greek seamen’s benevolent associations said to have existed in the 1840s, and the New Orleans Greek Committee of Relief distributed pamphlets about homeland political issues in 1866.332

1967).
In time, the Greek cotton merchants who sponsored Holy Trinity liquidated their firms in the city and sent their agents elsewhere, leaving the church to the permanent Greek immigrant community and some Orthodox faithful of Syrian and Slavic background. Being socially and spatially central to the local Orthodox community, yet geographically isolated from downtown New Orleans, Holy Trinity acted as a cultural magnet for these ethnicities, as the premier Eastern Orthodox Church on the continent. Holy Trinity also formed a symbolic node in the vast Mississippi Valley and Gulf Coast region throughout which Greek sailor-immigrants circulated in the postbellum era, as described by the New York Times in 1873. Greeks in America, it reported, mostly go to Chicago, where they easily find work in loading vessels and navigating the lakes... As soon as the lakes are frozen in the Winter time they go down the Mississippi River, and many of them are working on the steam-boats plying between St. Louis, Cincinnati, Louisville, Cairo, and New-Orleans. Over 200 of them are to be found in New-Orleans. They seem to be thriving under the more genial climate, not unlike that of their own country. They have all sorts of professions; many are fruit dealers, keep little restaurants and coffee houses, in [which] are often Greeks talking all at the same time generally, all the points of the Grecian Archipelago, drinking coffee, and smoking paper cigarettes, of them are oyster dealers and stevedores, and some especially their little craft, which they make themselves, to trade all along the coast from New-Orleans to Indianapolis and

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New Orleans around 1900 was home to about three hundred people of Greek ancestry, most of whom lived in the Fifth, Sixth, and Seventh wards between the French Quarter and Bayou St. John. In 1930, at least two hundred Greek Americans lived within a mile of Holy Trinity, roughly half the total Greek population of the city. The neighborhood comprised mostly white working-class and middle-class families, though most were locally born, the area was surprisingly international, with many residents hailing from France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, and elsewhere. The area’s heterogeneity reflects a reoccurring theme in the historical ethnic geography of New Orleans: spatial intermixing of ethnicities usually trumped intensive clustering. *Map and analysis by author based on 1930 Census. Note: in this map, “first-generation” implies the locally born children of immigrants born in Greece.*
New Greek immigrants gravitated to the North Dorgenois Street area of the Sixth and Seventh Wards, where the church and countrymen provided support and company, where nearby streetcar service connected the area to downtown, where adjacent North Broad Street offered amenities and business opportunities, and where the upper-class makeup of the neighborhood kept housing prices reasonable. Cottages and shotgun houses were erected on nearly every parcel, and live oak trees were planted. In essence, the North Dorgenois enclave represented the importance of the Orthodox Church to the Greek community, but out at the city scale, recollecting the same role the Church played in holding together Greek national identity during the 400 years of Turkish rule in Greece.

Yet the North Dorgenois Street neighborhood was by no means a “Greek Town,” as were found in other cities: the area was thoroughly mixed ethnically and to some extent racially, being also the general home of much of the city’s Creole population. Only eighteen people of stated Greek ancestry lived in the census enumeration districts surrounding Holy Trinity in 1880, and one-third of them were members of Nicholas Benachi’s immediate family. In the decades that followed, Greeks never came close to predominating numerically in this neighborhood; more Greeks lived elsewhere in the Third, Fourth, and Fifth Wards (193, fifty-six, and forty-eight people), respectively) individually than in the Sixth and Seventh Wards (thirty-five and ten), which included the Holy Trinity area, combined. But here lived Greeks in greater concentration that anywhere else in the Crescent City. They formed a colony here because Holy Trinity was here; Holy Trinity was here because Leopold Nicholas Benachi offered for its construction a parcel here; Nicholas Benachi was here for the booming cotton trade of the late antebellum age, and New Orleans ruled this trade because of its strategically located port which connected it to seafaring nations throughout the globe, among them Greece. Holy Trinity grew steadily in the twentieth century. The complex at 1222 North Dorgenois Street grew to include the church, rectory, library, and a hall in St. Louis No. 3 center. The organization itself was chartered in 1909 by the State of Louisiana as the Eastern Orthodox Church of St. Holy Trinity, and in 1918 as the Hellenic Orthodox Church. Also growing was the locally residing congregation, with an influx of new Greek immigrants in the 1910s and 1920s which correlated with nationwide wage. A survey of population schedules of the 1930 census, focusing on those enumeration districts within about a mile of Holy Trinity, provides a snapshot of New Orleans’ Greek community at the time:

- There were 177 resident Greeks, of whom at least one was born in Greece or had at least one Greek-born parent, and an additional forty-three people of mostly locally born Greek-American who resided within these households. By this measure, a total of 220 people of probable Greek ancestry lived within the North Dorgenois Street Greek enclave, roughly half the Greek population of the city. These 200 people were distributed in fifty-two households, of which forty spoke Greek at home.
- Of these fifty-two households, eight had members born in Turkey, Egypt, or Bulgaria but nevertheless spoke Greek. These were probably recent Greek ancestry who had emigrated from the Hellenic diaspora (Turkey, Balkan countries, Egypt, Cypriot), another source of an underestimation of Greek-American populations. There were an additional ten Syrian households in the area, home to forty-one Syrian immigrants or first-generation Syrians, and four births born relatives. Half of the households spoke Syrian.
- Spatially, most Greek households lived in the residential blocks immediately west of Holy Trinity at 1222 North Dorgenois, while others lived in the Seventh Ward across Esplanade Avenue. Fewer lived on Esplanade Avenue itself, probably because of its higher rents ($40-$45/month) compared to adjacent neighborhoods.

The Greek-associated North Dorgenois Street area was subdivided from old plantations in the 1830s and developed by the late 1800s. Much of the solidly built housing stock still stands today, under a canopy of live oak trees. The neighborhood suffers from socioeconomic woes but possesses many appealing attributes, and may soon rebound. Photograph by author, 2003.
whose rents decreased at a rate of about $3 per month per block as one moved away from Esplanade.343
• The eighty-one Greeks (including two Syrians) who were born overseas and who specified their year of immigration, arrived as early as 1870 and as late as 1925. There were no surviving antebellum arrivals before 1950, one who immigrated in 1870, eight from the 1890s, fifteen from the 1900s, forty-three from the 1910s, and fourteen from the 1920s. More immigrated in 1914 (both the median and the mode) than any other year. All these figures are consistent with the nationwide trends in Greek immigration.
• Greek households in this enclave were mostly working- and middle-class, with a few professionals. Renters outnumbered homeowners, and nuclear families, usually with two to four children and sometimes an in-law or boarder, predominated.
• Of the sixty Greeks and Syrians who specified their occupation, nearly half (twenty-six) worked in food services. Eleven owned their own restaurants, confectioneries, bakeries, or fruit stores; five were seafood merchants (usually handling oysters); and the remainder were cooks, bakers, vendors, or waiters. The second largest group (twenty) worked as carpenters, electricians, auto mechanics, repairmen, telephone or construction company employees. Fewer were retailers of clothing or dry goods; another five were barbers and cleaners; three were steamship engineers; and the remainder worked in professions ranging from physician to streetcar conductor to acting to pool hall owner.
• The neighboring neighborhood comprised mostly, but not exclusively, white working-class and middle-class families. Though most were Louisiana-born, the area was surprisingly international, with a fair number of people in France, Germany, Italy, and elsewhere, on almost every block. The heterogeneity of the area reflects a general precept of the historical ethnic geography of New Orleans: spatial intermixing of ethnicities usually trumped intensive clustering.

In subsequent decades, these census tracts covering the North Dorgenois area were home to about 20 percent of the city’s Greek-born population (and as many as half of ethnic Greeks), despite comprising less than 5 percent of the city’s census tracts and land area. The census tract in which Holy Trinity was located contained more Greek-born (twenty-two in 1940; sixteen in 1950) than any other tract in the city.344

By mid-century, the circa-1866 church at 1222 North Dorgenois no longer satisfied the congregation’s needs. In place of an empty  

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In 1976, over 110 years after its founding, Holy Trinity sold the North Dorgenois property and moved to Bayou St. John at Robert E. Lee Boulevard. The new Holy Trinity continues to serve as the cultural nucleus for over four hundred Greek-American families spread throughout the metropolitan area, and it is to this site, with its spacious Hellenic Cultural Center and magnificent cathedral, that thousands of New Orleanians come to celebrate the springtime Greek Heritage Festival.

A WORLD AWAY, A MILE AWAY: THE GREENS OF UPPERTOWN, DECATHUR STREET

A minute from the graceful oaks of North Dorgenois, and three from the sunny banks of Bayou St. John, existed a very different Greek enclave in New Orleans. Though the Hellenics confined downtown New Orleans for no more than a few days a year, their influence carved out a place of their own in what was to them, a foreign but favorite city. Today, the thousands of Greek merchant marines who sailed the ships of their homeland, and made a temporary (and sometimes permanent) home at this port of call, Greek Nationals have been a part of downtown New Orleans’ street scene since the seafaring nation that took an interest in the imports and exports of the American interior. For many decades, Greek sailors formed a district on the 200 block of Decatur Street.

In his 1979 essay Odysseus in Louisiana: The Greek Sailors in New Orleans, Andrew Horton explained that the Greek Merchant Marine, at the time largest in the world, sent up to 30,000,000 annually to America’s second busiest port. Since each vessel employed a crew of about forty marines, of which at least 30 percent were Greek, about 10,000 Greek nationals sailed for vessels flying other flags. Prior to the mid-twentieth century, most Greek sailors were islanders by birth and sailors for life, dedicated to their profession; older on average, they were more likely to have families back home and regularly remit earnings to them. By the time of Horton’s research, youthful adventurers from Athens and other interior cities were increasingly replacing the traditional “AB” (able bodied) Greeks aboard, and though most still sent their money...
Greek New Orleans, from Dorgenois to Decatur

Greek seamen, established the St. Nicholas Maritime Center to give the sailors an alternative to the club scene on upper Decatur. Located in the Catholic Church-run Stella Maris Maritime Center on 609 Gov. Nicholls Street and named for Greece's patron saint of the seas, St. Nicholas represented a union of the two distinct manifestations of Hellenic culture in New Orleans.

Starting in the 1960s, new containerization technology radically changed the shipping industry, break-bulk cargo, once laboriously packed into hulls usually by unit, was now stored in a standardized metal container handled in mass-production mode, lifted by cranes directly off ships, onto trucks and trains. The technology thinned the ranks of longshoremen and seamen worldwide by as much as 90 percent because containerized ships were now unloaded so efficiently, those few seamen who kept their jobs had little time to take R&R at the port of call. One of the distinguishing

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For many years, this block of Decatur Street in the upper French Quarter was like few others in the nation in its density of Greek-run establishments catering to Greek sailors. Inside, patrons spoke Greek, ate Greek foods, listened to live bouzouki bands, and danced the traditional zeybekiko. The district dried up in the 1980s with changes in the shipping industry and in the city's economy away from shipping and toward tourism. With it went a vital and historically significant part of French Quarter culture: the last of the sailor hang-outs. Now tourists dominate these streets, and only a few vestiges of the Greek establishments remain. Photographs by author, 2002-2003.

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These maps show the geographical shift of the local Greek ancestry population from a loose concentration around Holy Trinity to a metropolis-wide dispersion. Mobility, suburban lifestyles, and secularization have diminished the tendency of ethnic group members to reside near their churches, synagogues, and schools. These maps and analysis are based on 1940 and 2000 censuses.

Characteristics of port cities—seamen out for a night on the town—began to disappear. The composition of the merchant marine changed in this era. While Greece is still a major ship-owning country, many of its vessels fly the flags of other nations, such as Liberia and Panama, and it is from those and other nations that crews are drawn. As fewer and fewer Greek merchant marines set foot in New Orleans, the Greek clubs of upper Decatur Street began to disappear, starting in the 1980s, just as the tourism industry began overtaking the port as the city's major employer. Today, with about 800 Greek-owned ships calling to Louisiana ports and probably under 10,000 Greek seamen arriving to the Port of New Orleans annually, not a single Greek nightclub remains on upper Decatur. The strip now caters mostly to tourists, who number over ten million annually; one is more likely to hear canned Cajun music spilling out of Indian-run T-shirt shops,

please order on amazon.com
or plunging notes of funk emanating from the Harvard University-owned House of Blues, than the rhythm of a bouzouki and the thump of zeybekiko dancing. Rarely a trace of Greek clubs may be found, save an occasional faded sign on a door or window. The district may have been the last in a long line of sailor’s hang-outs in downtown New Orleans, dating back to early nineteenth century and including red-light districts such as "The Swamp" on Girod Street, Gallatin Street near the French Market, the Faubourg Marigny, and Storyville. Yet a few sailors’ "refuges" still operate in the upper Quarter and CBD, where visiting seamen can call home, take care of finances and paperwork, and even partake of traditional food and sundries from home. Many have signs in Greek in their storefronts. And while the St. Nicholas Maritime Center on Gov. Nicholls Street is now a condominium, Greek sailors and captains continue to pay visits to Holy Trinity and other institutions of Greek New Orleans during holidays and special events.

Greek Places in the Ethnic Geography of New Orleans

Major groups such as those of African, Anglo, Creole, Irish, German, and Italian ancestry dominated the ethnic cityscape of New Orleans. The remainder constituted a multitude of less-celebrated, less-studied groups. Greeks. Filipinos. Slavs. Norwegians. Syrians. Indians. Spanish, including Basque. Peoples from the Arab world, Europe, Africa, the Americas, and Asia. The Greek enclave of North Dorgenois represents a minor geographical experience of these other groups, who often coalesced around an important religious or cultural institution but who did not exclusively live in that neighborhood, and probably did not numerically dominate there. Their impact on the cityscape was usually subtle, but as a whole they helped render New Orleans a truly multicultural city. A perusing of the population schedules of any early twentieth-century census attests to the prevalence and integration of these smaller groups throughout the city. Though they did not form conspicuous concentrations like Little Palermo and Chinatown, the ethnic mosaic of New Orleans would be much less intricate without them.

The geography of transient populations, too, should not be neglected. The Greek seamen of upper Decatur, no matter how brief their stay, nevertheless transformed the cityscape of those two blocks for many decades, injecting an exotic, international milieu into the gritty streets of the upper French Quarter. So too did transients from earlier eras, be they Kentucky flatboatsmen in the early 1800s, Anglo businessmen from the North residing in the great Faubourg St. Mary hotels during rebellious winters, or soldiers on leave seeking the escapism of Bourbon Street during World War II. Ironically, the Greek cityscape of upper Decatur has since given way to one formed by another transient group, tourists, whose expectations and needs have driven the utter transformation of downtown New Orleans.
Does New Orleans remain “within the orbit of a Hellenistic world,” as A.J. Liebling observed in 1941? The Greek presence is not quite as palpable today as it might have been on North Dorgenois in 1920 or on upper Decatur in 1975. In 2004, plans to move the local Greek Consulate, open since 1848, to the larger Greek community in Tampa, Florida, seemed to symbolize that “the oldest Greek community in North and South America” is being overtaken by enclaves elsewhere in the United States. But the august Holy Trinity Cathedral, the Greek-language advertisements on seamen’s outposts in the CBD, and the Greek temple-like designs of Gallier Hall seem to maintain that subtle Hellenistic ambiance in the streets of New Orleans.

352 Liebling, The Earl of Louisiana.
**Paradoxical Yet Typical**
The Geography of New Orleans’ African American Community

“Paradoxical yet typical” describes the complex residential patterns of the African American community in New Orleans since colonial times. Paradoxical, in that Black New Orleanians were residentially most integrated with whites at a time when the races were socially most segregated—during slavery—but as tolerance and integration increased over the next century and a half, spatially drifted apart in their residential settlements. Typical, in that, as counterintuitive as it may seem, this racial geography mimics those witnessed in other Old Southern cities. The geography of New Orleans’ African American community provides startling insights into the history of the city. The nature of urban slavery, the impact of the Civil War and emancipation, economics, land value, the amenities and nuisances of a deltaic urban environment, and, of course, race relations. The result today is a spatial distribution of African Americans that is de facto segregated in many ways, yet more integrated than many major American cities. “Two centuries of paradox” is how one researcher described the phenomenon.354

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**Black Residential Patterns in Antebellum Times**

Premier among the settlement types of enslaved African Americans was the “back-alley” pattern. Many slaves in New Orleans labored as domestics and resided in the distinctive slant-roof quarters appended to the rear of townhouses and cottage. Others, many of them skilled craftsmen and artisans, lived in detached tenement-like quarters on back streets, close to the abodes of their owners, if not immediately adjacent to them. “This arrangement had the twin virtue of keeping [slaves] under close surveillance and providing whites with constant service.”355 Other slaves, particularly those hired out by their owners to do project work, lived in shantytowns along the swamp edge. Living there also were free slaves (not to be confused with the free people of color, who formed a special caste) who found the only affordable living space in the so-called “back-of-town.” Through these settlement patterns, New Orleans’ antebellum racial geography exhibited a thorough spatial integration of white and black, despite the severe and oppressive social segregation. In the words of geographer Peirce F. Lewis, a “racial map of the

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This 1860 map shows a remarkable African American distribution pattern reflective of Creole and Anglo culture. On the Creole side of town (top right, wards four through nine), free people of color increasingly outnumbered the slave population as one went downriver. But above Canal Street (lower left of map), on the predominantly Anglo side, the opposite was true: slaves consistently greatly outnumbered free people of color. Evident in both patterns is the Creole recognition of three racial castes (white, free people of color, and enslaved black), versus the Anglo view of a strictly two-tiered racial caste system. To this day, descendants of the free people of color, who are generally known as Creoles and often possess Francophone surnames, continue to reside below Canal Street, while most African Americans who live above Canal Street are non-Creole Anglo Americans who live above Canal Street are non-Creoles.

Vieux Carré [in antebellum times] would have produced a distinctive salt and pepper pattern.357 This residential proximity of the races, a by-product of urban slavery, was reinforced by an 1817 city ordinance which legislated that “no slave may live apart from his or her owner or hirer without obtaining a ticket from the owner describing the place and specifying the time duration.”358 Geographers have described this low-density intermingling of an “early southern” pattern exemplified best by New Orleans and Charleston and to a lesser degree by Washington and Baltimore. It is distinguished from the “early northern” pattern of intense concentration between blacks and immigrants for convenient inner-city spaces.359

The housing stock of New Orleans was developed with this conveniently proximate racial stratification in mind, and still makes up extensive historical streetscapes today. One commonly sees “Slave Cotters” for rent or sale in real estate ads, a poignant reminder of both a troubled past and the ironic residential proximity of the races at a time when subjugation was most extreme.

The enslaved population accounted for about two-thirds of the African-ancestry population in antebellum New Orleans; gens de couleur libre (free people of color) comprised the remainder. Deeply influential as artisans, builders, and businessmen, free people of color made up 45 percent of the city’s black population in the early American years. 4,950 free non-whites compared to 5,124 slaves in 1810 (31 percent and 31 percent by the Civil War in 1860; free color to 13,385 slaves in a city of 168,675 in 1860).360 Many moved in 1809 as refugees from Saint- Domingue, but many more were native sons and daughters of mixed racial ancestry, Catholic in faith, French in language, and Creole in culture. This “Franco-African American” caste represented a Caribbean-influenced exception to the Anglo-American norm of a “rigid, two-tiered [social] structure that drew a single unyielding line between white and nonwhite.”361 It gave New Orleans an unusual three-caste system of whites, free people of color, and enslaved blacks, commonly seen as “f.p.c.”


Paradoxical Yet Typical: The Geography of New Orleans’ African American Community

Where did African Americans live in late nineteenth-century New Orleans? Detailed data are hard to come by, but mapping out the locations of black churches in 1881 and overlaying them on much-later (1939) racial distribution data indicate that the patterns remained fairly stable over this fifty-year span. Most black New Orleanians lived in the back-of-town, with some residing along the riverfront and others in pockets throughout uptown and downtown. Note the positioning of Congregational churches mostly in the lower city, Methodist Episcopal churches in the front edge of the back-of-town, and Baptist churches in the very rear. Reasons are unclear. (Black Catholic churches are not shown because they were not identified as such in the source material. Most would have been located in the lower city.) Map and analysis by author based on 1881 City Directory and 1941 Survey of Metropolitan New Orleans Land Use.

to seven black slaves for every free person of color, while in the downtown Eighth and Ninth wards could be found three free people of color for every black slave. Why did the gens de couleur libre prefer the lower city? The answer is cultural. This was the Francophone, Catholic, locally descended (Creole) side of town—a historical derivation of the foundation of the city here—and it was in this environment that most free people of color found it more conducive to live, work, raise their families, and prosper. The English-speaking world on the upper side of town was not only culturally strange terrain, but its white inhabitants were more hostile to the very notion of a free person of color—a notion all but unknown in parts of the interior and upper South, from which many Anglos migrated. Descendents of the gens de couleur libre still live generally on the downtown side of Canal Street, particularly in the Seventh Ward, though most have moved away from the old riverside neighborhoods and into twentieth-century subdivisions closer to Lake Pontchartrain.

One additional and especially tragic component of this human geography demands mention, despite its transient and non-residential nature: the presence of dozens of slave camps, dealerships, and auctioning sites in New Orleans, primarily in the Faubourg St. Mary. These were dreaded temporary homes of tens of thousands of slaves known only to history by their first names and prices, as they passed in chains through the South’s largest slave market and to hinterland locales. In the last year of their existence, 1861, eighteen slave dealerships were listed in the City Directory, of which fifteen were located at or near the Gravier/Baronne street intersection in the heart of the present-day CBD. Though some were...

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located on Chartres Street at the lower edge of the old city. No physical evidence of these dealings survives, and only a few old auction sites still stand around town, but their familiar-sounding addresses, listed in city directories under "Slave Dealers." Note: some of these downtown dealerships may have served other vendors of slate and makers of soap, rags, fur, as well as the realities of chattel slavery—and New Orleans wrote in it.\textsuperscript{366}

In sum, the antebellum geography of black New Orleans consisted of enslaved blacks intricately intertwined with the greater population, particularly in the upper half of the city, while free people of color predominated in the lower half of the city. Anecdotal evidence of these patterns comes from an 1843 article in the \textit{Daily Picayune}:

> The Negros are scattered through the city promiscuously; those of mixed blood, such as Gritters, Hidalgoons, &c., [Creoles of color] are given a preference for the back streets of the First [French Quarter, Faubourg Marigny] and part of the Third Municipalities [Faubourg Marigny and adjacent areas].\textsuperscript{360}

With the minor exception of the back-of-town, where very poor males settled black and other free blacks lived in squatting like huts, those were not expansive, exclusively black neighborhoods in antebellum New Orleans. Even Faubourg Marigny, which is sometimes described as America's oldest black neighborhood, was racially intermixed. The factors driving these patterns were the domestic nature of urban slavery, the free will and desire to live among cultural peers in the case of free people of color, and the availability of upland land and the backswamp edge.

**Emergence of the "Classic Southern Pattern" After the Civil War**

As the violent watershed years of the 1860s, the white population of New Orleans declined by 2.5 percent to 140,923, while the black population surged by 110 percent, to 95,456. That total would increase by another 54 percent by the turn of century.\textsuperscript{368} Almost all emigrants were emancipated slaves abandoning plantation life for the hope of the postbellum metropolis. Some came from the Creole-dominant sugar parishes of Louisiana; others came from Anglo-dominant cotton parishes such as the Galilean and nearby counties in Mississippi. "The negroes of this parish are going to New Orleans with a perfect rush," reported a regional newspaper a year after the Civil War ended. "Many of our first plantations are quite deserted. At this rate in another year the parish of Terrebonne will be quite clear of them," they arrived to an unwelcoming city caught up in its own woes but it provided employment opportunities far better than the hated toil of the sugar fields. In 1870, black men who made up 25 percent of the labor force, worked 52 percent of New Orleans' unskilled labor jobs, 57 percent of the servant positions, and 70 percent of certain skilled positions.\textsuperscript{369}

Where were these emigrants to settle? Unaffordable rent and antagonistic residents kept the freedmen from settling in most city neighborhoods. Some townships in the inner city, recently vacated by the wealthier class, had since been subdivided into low-rent apartments, but these hovels were more likely to be occupied by poor immigrants than to poor blacks. Nor could the freedmen take refuge in the downtown neighborhoods of the former free people of color, who often scorned the freedmen as threats to their once relatively privileged (but now rapidly diminishing) social status. Destitute and excluded, the freedmen had little choice but to settle in the ragged back-of-town, where urban development pitted into amorphous low-density slums and eventually dissipated into deforested swamps. The back-of-town offered low real estate costs because of environmental nuisances, inconvenience, and lack of amenities and city services. To many, with many local ex-slaves who also found themselves in the first shot at seeking their own shelter, the freedmen joined those blacks already settled at the backswamp margin in the formation of the city's first large-scale, exclusively black neighborhoods. At the same time, emancipation diminished the "old southern" mingling pattern of black residency in quarters behind white abodes. (Irish and German servants had already replaced many domestic slaves in the 1850s, turning "slave quarters" into "servants' quarters") Thus, in the years after the Civil War, New Orleans' historically intermixed racial patterns began to diminish in favor of a rapidly coalescing, expansive, and overwhelming black back-of-town pattern, pushed away from the increasingly white front-of-town.

Mapping the distribution of black churches in this era helps capture this evolving pattern. Of the thirty-two churches listed as "colored" in the 1881 City Directory, fully two-thirds were located behind the Dryades-Rampart-St. Claude line—that is, the back-of-town.\textsuperscript{371} To a remarkable

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Paradoxical Yet Typical: The Geography of New Orleans’ African American Community

The location of the back-of-town shifted over time. The term originally referred to the backswamp, but later took on economic, social, racial, and cultural connotations, which survive today even though the swamp does not. Louis Armstrong, who was born in the neighborhood at the center left of this photograph and was an infant when the shutter snapped in 1902, routinely described this area as the back-of-town in his recollections later in life. The area at center is now occupied by City Hall.

Southeastern Architectural Archive, Special Collections, Howard-Tilton Library, Tulane University.

degree, their distribution spatially correlates with black residential clusters of the twentieth and twenty-first century (see accompanying map). This racial dichotomization of whites to the front-of-town and blacks to the back-of-town was not unique to New Orleans; it was occurring in many Southern cities. Historians have documented this trend in Savannah and Baton Rouge, in which patterns of racial integration in 1870 had spatially disassociated by 1880.372 “By far the most common sites for these new Negro settlements were the low lands near the 1865 urban boundary,”373 observed John Kellogg in a journal article entitled “Negro Urban Clusters in the Postbellum South.” The post-emancipation movement of African Americans to the city margin “froze” the circa-1860s swamp edge in the streetscape, preserving this old physical geography in the modern racial geography of New Orleans. We are reminded of the pattern in toponyms: it is no coincidence that Marais (“marsh”) Street runs today entirely through black back-of-town neighborhoods. Architecture, too, marked the geographical impact of emancipation. In the decades following the Civil War, Creole cottages, which often featured domestic (“slave”) quarters at the center, and odist Episcopal churches tended to be located in the older, inner tier of the back-of-town, while Baptist churches were usually situated on the far rural fringes.

Parties living near the river have no trouble in obtaining water, but in the rear of the city there is serious destitution, especially among the poorer classes, who are driven to great straits, even to using water for many purposes out of the drainage canals.

The back-of-town cluster was by no means the only geographical pattern explaining African American settlement in late nineteenth-century New Orleans. Many blacks, particularly Creoles of color, gained or maintained a middle-class


373 Kellogg, “Negro Urban Clusters in the Postbellum South,” 313.


pleasurable, and, as thegens de couleur libre before them, chose their neighborhoods on their terms, for reasons of tradition, family, religion, culture, convenience, economics, or real estate. Some had departed for France, Caribbean islands, or Mexico, but most generally remained downtown. Other, poorer members of the black community were relegated to a further, unlike the low-lying back-of-town, might be high on natural levee and free from the threat of flood—but whose other environmental nuisances nevertheless rendered them low-rent and undesirable. These areas included blocks as gas works, smoke stacks, and vacant lots, and the proximity to Charity Hospital (center right), all of which reduced the value of real estate and cost of housing. Shacks and shotgun houses were built here in high density, occupied largely by poor African-Americans. Southeastern Architectural Archive, Special Collections, Howard-Tilton Library, Tulane University.

Aerial view of the back-of-town in the 1920s, from Poydras to Tulane Avenue, with New Orleans Airplane transecting the scene from left to right. Note the area’s environmental nuisances, such as gas works, smoke stacks, and vacant lots, and the proximity to Charity Hospital (center right), all of which reduced the value of real estate and cost of housing. Shacks and shotgun houses were built here in high density, occupied largely by poor African-Americans. Southeastern Architectural Archive, Special Collections, Howard-Tilton Library, Tulane University.

for wealthy whites, they (together with working-class whites) often settled in humble cottages and shotguns located in the “nucleus” of “superblocks,”87 outlined by the great mansion-lined avenues such as St. Charles, Louisiana, Napoleon, and others. Wide avenues were developed for upper-class residential enclaves for their spaciousness, magnificence, and proximity to streetcar service; smaller streets within the nucleus of the network of wide avenues were built up with much humbler housing stock. The grand avenues formed a “lattice” of upper-class whites around cores of working-class blacks and whites, who moved into the smaller houses to be within walking distance of their employment. “Blacks typically lived behind white ‘big houses’ or in small streets lined by major, tree-lined, white ‘backyards’ but not really in a ghetto,” wrote geographers Larry Ford and Ernst Griffin of modern cities in general. Because blacks were employed as domestic servants or gardeners, and because transportation was rudimentary, complete segregation by race was not desirable by whites.87 Peirce Lewis described this phenomenon theoretically in New Orleans: The Making of an Urban Landscape, and hard data largely confirm him. The “superblock” phenomenon may also be thought of as a descendent of the old “classic southern” pattern of blacks living near whites via the domestic nature of urban slavery. A more important difference, of course, is that this post-emancipation pattern was one of convenience and practical necessity, not compulsion backed up with violence.

**Mapping the Patterns: 1939**

Numerical data depicting the spatial patterns of New Orleans’s African American community lie in the written population schedules of the decennial censuses, starting in 1860, the first census year for which Louisiana was American. These valuable records are, unfortunately, highly inaccessible to the purposes of mapping and pattern detection. Those censuses prior to 1880, for example, are unmapable because street addresses were not recorded for each household. The 1890 census was lost to fire. Even those that did properly record street addresses would require literally thousands of hours of labor to map comprehensively, a task challenged by antiquated house-numbering systems, illegible penmanship, and scratched microfilm. So geographers have had to rely on the compendium volumes of the censuses, in which raw data are aggregated into larger units—by state, parish/county, city, ward, census tract (starting in 1940), block group, and finally, at the block level, the most detailed scale, available only for recent decades. But there is an exception. Among the many valuable research projects of the Work Projects Administration in New Orleans was one by Sam R. Carter entitled *Ethnic Geographies*.

The 1939 map at top represents perhaps the most detailed historical racial-distribution information available. It was stored in a 1941 WPA study and transferred, block-by-block, to a digital format to make this comparison with 2000 Census data. The complex and fascinating patterns revealed here are explained in the accompanying text. Map and analysis by author based on 1941 Survey of Metropolitan New Orleans Land Use and 2000 Census data. Special thanks to John Magill for recommending the WPA study.
between back-of-town blacks and neighboring whites. It is striking how decisively Dryades Street and South Rampart, known for their integrated, Jewish-owned retail shops, delineated the black back-of-town from the white front-of-town. Note also the heavy strip of totally white blocks within this back-of-town cluster; this was a whites-only public housing complex, recently opened at the time of the survey. This cluster was separated from the rest of the back-of-town by the racially mixed Tulane Avenue/Canal Street corridor, which included Chutatown. To its east was the oldest portion of the back-of-town cluster (1B), Faubourg Tremé, located behind the original city and once home to many free people of color. Through Tremé ran the Old Basin (Carondelet Canal), railroad tracks, two cemeteries, and the slums of the former Storyville red-light district, and once again the segregated, predominantly black blocks adjacent to these undesirable features. The Tremé cluster also included two public housing projects built around 1940, both of which still stand today. Immediately eastward, on the better-drained Esplanade corridor, was another mostly white enclave, including mansion-lined Esplanade Avenue. Further east, the third component of the back-of-town cluster (1G) occupied the rear of the Faubourg Marigny between Esplanade and Elysian Fields avenues. This cluster—the fabled Seventh Ward—was (and remains) home to most of New Orleans’ black Creole and Creole of Color population. It descends from the antebellum patterns seen in the previously discussed 1860 maps, and hence from patterns traceable to the city’s founding. Additional smaller back-of-town clusters appear in the rear of the upper and lower Ninth Ward (1D and 1E, near the Industrial Canal and the rear of Carrollton (1F, near the Municipal Water Treatment Plant), 1G, near the New Basin Canal and Historic Cemetery, and 1H, Germtown).

2. Front-of-Town Enclaves — The crest of the natural levee, about ten feet above sea level and fifty feet above the back-of-town, hosted much smaller but nevertheless significant enclaves of African Americans. In 1939, these clusters were mostly stretched out along uptown Tchoupitoulas Street (2D) and into Carrollton (2F, in the lower Ninth Ward, 3G), and in the West Bank neighborhood of McDouville (2G). These front-of-town enclaves tended to be smaller and more integrated with white populations than the back-of-town populations. What explains these pockets? One notes that these locales marked the general sites of plantation houses and slave cabins in the days when sugar plantations operated in the rich lands of present-day uptown, and Tchoupitoulas Street was the de facto River Road. Could these pockets represent the descendents of slave communities from these plantations? This is improbable. Most up-town plantations had been subdivided well before the Civil War, and the slaves no once labored there were presumably re-assigned or auctioned, not freed and granted lots on the

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18 Sam R. Carter, A Report on Survey of Metropolitan New Orleans Land Use, Real Property, and Low Income Housing Area (New Orleans, 1941), fold-out maps following page 136. I thank John Magill of The Historic New Orleans Collection for bringing this valuable document to my attention.

19 One of these public projects, the Iberville, was segregated for whites only, but was not yet completed at the time of this survey. The Old black population of former Storyville still lived there when the survey was taken in the late 1930s.
site of their vassalage. In other words, this is a lack of spatial correlation, but not causation. Another theory, that poor black squatters living on the Mississippi River backwater—seasonal sediment banks that accumulated along the levee—explain these predominantly black riverfront blocks, is possible but difficult-to-verify hypothesis. Mostly, these pockets represent communities of black longshoremen, roustabouts, draymen, screwmen, yardmen, and other workers employed along the waterfront docks, warehouses, mills, and railroads. Blacks began working waterfront jobs during the latter years of the Civil War, when white male-ware were off fighting for the Confederacy and when black labor cost less than white. “There is one feature of labor here which must have attracted the attention of all who frequented the levee,” reported the Daily Picayune three months after Lee’s surrender. “The loading and unloading of steamboats, which was once done chiefly by white labor, is now done together in the hands of negroes.”

It is likely that some black riverside residential enclaves started at this time and grew in subsequent decades, amid contentious and sometimes violent relationship with white dock workers. Noisy, smelly, objectionable riverside port facilities also depressed adjacent property values which in turn attracted unaffordable housing and, ergo, an economically poorer class of people, both white and black. Additionally, the erratic schedules of arriving ships may have caused that dockworkers live nearby, ready at any hour to unload the wares of an incoming vessel.

3. “Nuisance Areas” — Railroads and canals (marked as 3), which often occupied already-underdeveloped areas near wharves and backswamps, tended to further depress real estate values and thus attract the poor. The aforementioned Gettingtown (4B), occupying a topographic trough between the “Carrollton Spur” and the Metairie/Ten Mile Ridge, was also an industrial site replete with nuisances, once being at the crossroads of the Yazoo and Mississippi Valley Railroad, the Illinois Central Railroad, and the New Basin Canal. Black families of limited means moved into this area in the 1930s. A few years after Xavier University (1927), the nation’s historically black Catholic university, was established here.

4. “Superblock” Pockets — The “superblock” phenomena—in which working-class domestic servants lived in the nuclei of “superblock”-plans outlined by grid-avenues—explains the African American pockets severed between the riverfront wharves and the backswamps (marked as 3, also including 2E). The grid avenues and adjacent blocks were intended to be developed with spacious and costly houses, while the blocks were built up with simple barge-board cottages and shotgun houses. The geography of domestic laborers, driven by the need to live close to their employers (for convenience) but not too close (for economic and social reasons), may explain other predominantly black areas in this era as well, including those near wharves and backswamps. Consider, for example, that some front-of-town enclaves were a short walk or streetcar ride to the mansions of the Garden District. Blacks were more likely to find jobs in the kitchens and nurseries of wealthier households in non-industrial Southern cities like New Orleans than in Northern cities, where black emigrants were more likely to work in industrial plants and factories.

5. Nascent Middle-Class Suburbs — While most middle-class African American families lived in the Seventh Ward, among the general population in the front of town, a concerning few formed new neighborhoods elsewhere. Tiny black communities had existed in lakeside New Orleans for some time: a black Baptist church operated in Gentilly as early as the 1880s and in Milneburg in the 1890s. Economically well-off black neighborhoods, however, were longer in coming to these lakeside areas. One example was Sugar Hill (5, shown here in its earlier stages), a Gentilly community founded after Straight College and New Orleans University merged into Dillard University and sited its new campus amid these protests. On Gentilly Boulevard in 1930. Black professionals, including businessmen, pharmacists, doctors, and Dillard professors, moved to this pleasant oak-shaded hamlet for its convenient location and for its exclusive suburban-style attributes. Sugar Hill formed mostly in the 1940s, a few years after the 1939 survey was conducted. Although the neighborhood and the oak trees of its main thoroughfare were partially destroyed for Interstate-10 in the early 1970s, Sugar Hill and other subdivisions near Dillard University played a role in attracting the black middle class to Gentilly and the lakefront east of City Park later in the twentieth century.

6. Urban Outskirts — Isolated black communities in Jefferson Parish (6A) and the Lower Coast of Algiers (6B) were, in the most essentially rural linear Mississippi River villages about to be enveloped by the expanding New Orleans metropolitan area. The River Road by Baton Rouge is replete with such communities, extending perpendicularly behind the levee along a single road, most of them exclusively black and very poor. Other black slaves on the rural fringes of 1939 New Orleans included 6E (a segregated blacks-only public housing development, now the St. Bernard Housing Project), 6D, and 6E, in the largely vacant lakeside lands prior to the wave of post-World War II subdivision development.

We have focused on majority-black areas in characterizing the geography of the African American community.

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381 Ibid., 60-41.
But areas where blacks did not live are just as important to understanding the overall “where” and “why” of black New Orleans. Explanation of these absences grew heavily from two general trends: (1) whites have, since the end of slavery, either passively discouraged, actively excluded, or simply fled from black neighbors, and (2) the white community has always been significantly wealthier on average than the black community. Given these realities, whites have generally gravitated to the middle-range of the backslope of the natural levee, roughly following the curve of the Mississippi River along the Royal Street/St. Charles Avenue corridor from the Ninth Ward to Carrollton. This midsection of the riverside upland kept residents far enough from the nuisances of the front-of-town wharves and railroads, yet just as far from the mosquitoes and floods of the low-lying back-of-town. In this deltaic metropolis, while the urban landscape was not all homogenous and people were not all treated equally, those with the financial wherewithal—usually whites—monopolized better-drained, low-nuisance, lower-risk zones—which had higher property values. Those without the means—usually blacks—had to make do with the left-over, more marginal lands. The housing stock was built accordingly—substantial homes in one area, simple cottages in another—thus reinforcing the pattern, since no affluent family would move into a hovel and no poor family could buy a mansion. This was the fundamental bifurcated geography of New Orleans (and ethnic geographies).
of course there were gray zones between these (extreme) until the early twentieth century. In that era, particularly between 1893 and 1915, the city installed a sophisticated drainage system to "reclaim" the backswamps and lakeside marshes for residential development, adding another third element to the old two-tier trend. This new developable lakeside landscape was low in elevation but also low in nuisances and in risk—just as long as the levees kept the surrounding water bodies out and the pumps removed the rainwater from within. The comfortable middle-class subdivisions built in these former lakeside marshes, early in the age of the automobile, were sold to whites often with deed covenants explicitly prohibiting sale to blacks. Lakeview, first of the major twentieth-century lakeside subdivisions, was built through de jure racial discrimination as were other lakeside housing developments. The white community, formerly occupying the midsection of the natural levee and "buffered" on both sides by black areas, now "leapfrogged" over the black back-of-town and settled into the low-lying levee risk new lakeside neighborhoods. This new element of the now-trifurcated geography of New Orleans explains the other vast area (in 1939) of black absence, the lakeside.

The "salt and pepper" racial patterns instigated in antebellum times gradually diminished in the face of a rising residential separation in the early twentieth century. As Daphne Spain observed, the "backyard" pattern of slave residences prevented social and economic segregation from being translated into housing segregation until the turn of the twentieth century. The Jim Crow era, from the 1890s until the 1950s, was the period in which New Orleans began adopting the residential patterns of northern cities. Spain saw much of this latter-day segregation as an inevitable consequence of the federally funded public housing projects launched by the Housing Authority of New Orleans starting in 1937. But the survey data discussed here show that large, exclusively black neighborhoods were well established by that time; the locations of the housing projects tended to intensify and concentrate already-existing racial geographies, not create them. In the three-quarters of a century since emancipation, white and black New Orleanians moved away from each other in en masse. The trend would only strengthen.

**FURTHER DISTANCING SINCE WORLD WAR II**

Tremendous social transformations for New Orleans' racial relationships in New Orleans since the 1930s are woven. Chief among these was Brown versus Board of Education (1954), the civil rights movement, and the ensuing segregation of public facilities, integration of public schools, and overall in-creased opportunities in education, employment, and housing for African Americans. While the "Whites Only" signs came down with less opposition and de facto in New Orleans compared to places like Birmingham and Jackson and Selma, residential integration did not necessarily follow. In fact, it dropped dramatically as other forms of racial interaction increased. Suburban-style subdivisions in lakefront New Orleans, Jefferson Parish, the West Bank, St. Bernard Parish, eastern Orleans Parish, and St. Tammany Parish, and even Mississippi drew white New Orleanians by the tens of thousands between the censuses of 1960 and 2000. White flight was enabled by the construction of the Mississippi River bridges (1958 and 1988), the Lake Pontchartrain Causeway (1956), and Interstate 10/610 (1966-1971), providing access to new residential areas on former marshes and swamps. In general, middle-class whites from uptown tended to move west to Jefferson Parish; working-class whites in downtown generally moved east to St. Bernard Parish; and middle-class African Americans mostly moved lakeward to the neighborhoods east of City Park and thence into the subdivisions of eastern Orleans Parish. Gentrification of historically mixed-city neighborhoods, starting in the 1970s, tended to drive up rent and drive out working-class locals of both races, sending whites to white suburban neighborhoods and blacks to black urban neighborhoods. Urban renewal projects and transportation developments usually ended up altering black neighborhoods to a greater degree, in both the forced relocation of their denizens and the physical damage to their environs. The greater New Orleans metropolitan area, by century's end, had racially de-segregated into a white west and a black east, with pockets of exceptions. While a randomly selected white or black resident of the metropolitan area is now far more likely to work, shop, ride, dine, or socialize with a member of the other race compared to earlier generations, he is less likely than his white or black counterpart to live in the same neighborhood. Perhaps the most pernicious factor of racial segregation today, as a progressive city-government program designed to help those in greatest need during the Depression. In the late 1930s, the Housing Authority of New Orleans (HANO) cleared a number of old neighborhoods (replete with nineteenth-century architectural gems but considered unsightly slums at the time, to make room for subsidized housing to help the poor. Among the first projects completed (1941) were the Cabrillo Housing Projects, one of which the long-closed group of Storyville were razed, and the St. Thomas Housing Project, which replaced a significant portion of what had become known as the Irish Channel. In accordance with the Jim Crow laws of the day, projects were segregated by race. Of the six original projects, the two whites-only developments were higher in elevation and closer to the front-of-town, while the four blacks-only projects were all in lower-elevation, back-of-town locations.306 With the social changes of the 1960s, the projects were de-segregated, and as was happening citywide and nationwide, whites promptly left the units for other workable living alternatives in working-class suburbs. Poor blacks took their places. Within a few years,

306 Carter, A Report on Survey of Metropolitan New Orleans, "slums at the time, to make room for subsidized housing to help the poor. Among the first projects completed (1941) were the Cabrillo Housing Projects, one of which the long-closed group of Storyville were razed, and the St. Thomas Housing Project, which replaced a significant portion of what had become known as the Irish Channel. In accordance with the Jim Crow laws of the day, projects were segregated by race. Of the six original projects, the two whites-only developments were higher in elevation and closer to the front-of-town, while the four blacks-only projects were all in lower-elevation, back-of-town locations. With the social changes of the 1960s, the projects were de-segregated, and as was happening citywide and nationwide, whites promptly left the units for other workable living alternatives in working-class suburbs. Poor blacks took their places. Within a few years,
tens of thousands of African Americans in the city became intensely consolidated into a dozen or so subsidized communities, known by this time simply as “the Projects.” With this concentration of poverty came the full suite of social ills, including fatherless households, teen pregnancy, government dependency, and murders practically on a weekly basis. Again, the paradox: as social integration increases, so does the segregation. So bad did matters get by the 1990s that the federal government, which had slowly come to recognize the disaster of public housing as concentrators and cyclers of indigence and dependency, intervened. The new philosophy, encapsulated in a scheme named Project HOPE, for the demolition of the most troubled projects and called for the replacement with mixed-income housing, in which subsidized units for the poor are intermixed with market-rate units. The new neighborhoods east of City Park. Sugar Hill was partially destroyed for the construction of interstate 610 in the early 1970s. Photograph by author, 2003.

Sugar Hill was founded when Dillard University located its new campus on Gentilly Boulevard in 1930. Black professionals, including businessmen, pharmacists, doctors, and professors, moved to this oak-shaded hamlet for its convenient location and suburban-style amenities. The neighborhood later played a role in attracting the black middle class to Gentilly and other new neighborhoods east of City Park. Sugar Hill was partially destroyed for the construction of interstate 610 in the early 1970s. Photograph by author, 2004.

Southern University since 1959, Pontchartrain Park represents a reversal of the historic trend in which black residential patterns derived from relegation, exclusion, or poverty. In its early years, residents of Pontchartrain East were met with open hostility from white neighbors, and Dwyer Road, adjacent Gentilly Woods, and into the 1970s, the subdivision was the lone black enclave on the lakefront. Since then, tens of thousands of African Americans have moved into the adjacent eastern lakefront neighborhoods, and Pontchartrain Park, as the pioneer, has become one of the most stable and pleasant neighborhoods in the city, home to doctors, civil servants, lawyers, teachers, and two mayors (the Morials). That cannot be said for two other intense clusters of African Americans in these eastern lands, the Edgelake and (now demolished) Desire housing projects. Farther to the east, off the map, are a series of modern subdivisions—ranch-house domains with names like Lake Kalmia, Edgelake, Little Woods, Lake Forest East, and Lake Forest West—created after Interstate 10 opened up this former marshes in the 1960s. At that time and into the 1970s, the oil boom and white flight combined to make this extremely low-lying area potentially lucrative real estate. Whites initially moved here by the thousands, but with the oil crash of the mid-1980s and the failure of the New Orleans East land-development projects, they departed in equally large numbers and were replaced by middle-class blacks. Lower-middle-class blacks followed, drawn in part by the housing opportunities created by numerous multi-family apartment complexes zoned along the Interstate 10 and Chef Menteur Highway corridors. The rapid racial turnaround of these expansive Eastern suburbs, well within a generation, represents the most dramatic recent change in the geography of African American New Orleans. In 1970, 22 percent of the 10,280 residents of the elongated Edgelake, Little Woods neighborhood between I-10 and Chef Menteur Highway were white. Thirty years later, over 86 percent of the same area’s 44,311 residents were black.

2. **Western Orleans and Jefferson Parish** — Lands west of City Park and into Jefferson Parish stand in stark contrast to those in the east, being up the largest area of general black absence in the metropolitan area. The 1939 map indicates that these patterns, too, were well established in the early twentieth century, in part by the deed covenants prohibiting home sales or rentals to African Americans. Metairie and other municipalities in Jefferson Parish played the lion’s share of retaining white New Orleanians during the 1960s to 1990s, and it recently has distant St. Tammany Parish gained in the black.

3. **Former Back-of-Town** — Still clearly visible in the cityscape is the predominant, oftentimes exclusive, black presence in the former back-of-town. A century ago, the municipal drainage project and the backswamp for...
town. Note, for example, the lower Quarter, Faubourg Treme, and Faubourg Marigny: in 1939, these neighborhoods were thoroughly integrated at the household level. But by 2000, African Americans lived almost exclusively lake side of North Rampart/St. Claude, while whites lived on the river side of it, with nearly equal exclusivity. It’s noteworthy that this dramatic Balkanization occurred during—indeed, before—the civil rights movement. What explains this phenomenon, at least in part, is class: the former residents of these neighborhoods, both black and white, were members of roughly the same working class, a commonality that unified them even as racial conventions of the day kept them segregated in streetcars and schools. “We lived cheek by jowl,” recalled Cosimo Matassa of growing up in the French Quarter during the Depression. “We were integrated—we just didn’t know it.”

Most of the white working-class families in these areas departed for St. Bernard Parish and elsewhere, while blacks either moved toward the lake or stayed put. They were soon joined by a steady stream of upward-out-of-town white professionals—the “lifted-pinky” set, according to Matassa—along with local white culture and commerce, who bought up the cheap real estate and restored the nineteenth-century town. Thus, the gentrifiers changed the property values and inadvertently ousted the low-income renters living next door. Gentrification delivers many benefits to cities, and few one complains about the reduced crime rates, but the criticism that it uproots local neighborhoods, both black and white New Orleans from Bywater to Carrollton tend to class lines as much as race lines. They are social lines as well. The African American side is mostly native to the city; the white side largely comprises transplants, particularly downtown. African American neighborhoods are much more family-populated; the streets are filled with playing children overseen by elders perched on porches. On the white side, many households constitute young singles, childless couples of both sexual orientations, and “empty-nesters”; their children are rarely seen except in parts of uptown. In 2000, one out of every forty-two residents of the majority-black downtown neighborhoods riverside of Rampart/St. Claude was a white child. In the majority-black neighborhoods across those streets, one out of every three residents was a black child. In other words, children of the predominant race were fourteen times more common in the black neighborhoods lakeside of Rampart/St. Claude than in the white—neighborhoods riverside of the dividing line.

An unspoken and discomforting cognizance of “the other side of St. Charles” rampart, St. Claude and other racial dividing lines prevails among New Orleanians of both races.

4. The “White Teapot”
Another area of black-white bifurcation is the teapot-shaped section formed by the greater downtown Carrollton/University area (the pot) and the St. Charles Avenue/Magazine Street corridor (the spout) into the French Quarter, Faubourg Marigny, and ending in Bywater near the Industrial Canal. When the town thinks of New Orleans, most of the iconic images that come to mind—ironlace galleries, streetcar famous restaurants, Mardi Gras parades, oak-lined streets and columned mansions—occupy this area. The vast majority of tourists spend most of their visit somewhere in the teapot, exploring the taxi ride to and from the airport. This spatial phenomenon, clearly correlated to the topography of the natural levee, is the modern-day descendent of the previously discussed bifurcated geography of historical New Orleans. It represented a low-risk swath of natural levee equally far from both the riverside nuisances of wharves and railroads and the backswamp nuisances of flood, dirt roads, mosquitoes, and isolation. It also (and remains) conveniently accessed by the streetcars of the New Orleans & Carrollton Rail Road (1835), now the St. Charles Avenue Streetcar Line.

One striking recent development is the intense clarification of the line between the predominantly black back-of-town, particularly downtown, and the white front-of-town, particularly downtown. Whereas in 1939 the races lived in a somewhat intermixed manner, by 2000 they were separated decisively by the North Rampart—St. Claude corridor. What explains this phenomena, at least in part, is class: the upper residents of these neighborhoods, both black and white, were members of roughly the same working class, a commonality that unified them in their residential distributions even as Jim Crow laws segregated them elsewhere. Today, white residents of these areas tend to be markedly wealthier than their black neighbors.

Streetcar Line. After the installation of this passenger line, wealthier residents of mostly Anglo ancestry bought parcels and built mansions along St. Charles and in the present-day Garden District, and for the most part, the investments have retained their value. The late nineteenth-century development of Audubon Park and the universities rooted a similar affluence in the upper part of the crescent, and these areas too remain prosperous, and white. The high percentage of whites in the “teapot”—the French Quarter, Faubourg Marigny, and Bywater—is a more recent phenomenon deriving from the attraction of living in a unique historical and cultural environment. Gentrification arrived to the French Quarter starting as early as the 1920s, picked up after World War II, and rendered it almost entirely white and affluent by the end of the twentieth century. The same process started in the Faubourg Marigny in the early 1970s and is nearly complete today. The next neighborhood downriver—the “tip” of the spout—Bywater, the “tip” of the spout—Bywater, is currently about 50 percent white and half black, with property values rising every day. African Americans thus form the minority in the “white teapot” today for historical-geographical, economic, and social reasons. Few would deny that racial discrimination, or perceptions of being unwelcome, also play a role, as do a few pockets in which black residents are descended from the “superblock” clusters discussed earlier. Many of these areas are currently experiencing intense gentrification pressure from all sides (map, Uptown “Super Blocks,” 1939-2000, page 306), as are the black clusters riverside of Magazine Street. Outward signs of gentrification—crews restoring old houses, For Sale signs, shiny new SUVs parked next to beat-up old jalopies, and the occasional curbside pile of belongings from a recent eviction—became a common sight in this area in the late 1990s and 2000s. “Two cultures are in collision,” commented the Times-Picayune on the socio-economic transformations playing out along Jackson Avenue between Magazine and the river in 2005. “Vestiges of the old order—illicit drugs—are openly exchanged against a backdrop of change. Renovators paint old houses bright yellow, green and blue.” Uptown racial patterns also play out along the two dozen or so Mardi Gras parades that roll down St. Charles Avenue each Carnival season. White families head toward the river and black families toward the opposite direction, toward the back-of-town. The pattern is particularly noticeable between Lee Circle and Louisiana Avenue, where the line between the front and back of town is barely one block off St. Charles Avenue.

The causative forces behind the race-related residential patterns of the past are now mostly disappeared. The backswamp is drained and no longer infested with mosquitoes; the riverfront is no more or less environmentally objectionable than the rest of the city; domestic workers no longer need to live close to their employers; and racist deed covenants are illegal. Yet these patterns persist in the cityscape, as geographical vestiges of the history and society of the city.


395 Parade routes also reflect racial geographies. White krewes usually organize their floats on mostly white Napoleon Avenue, whereas the only major black krewe, Zulu, forms in the mostly black back-of-town (Jackson Avenue) and disperses in Tremé.
Racial Geographies and New Orleans Society

What do these shifting patterns say about New Orleans society? The question is as common as the hundreds of thousands of New Orleanians who formed the patterns over the nearly three hundred years of the city’s history. For one, New Orleans’ persistent claim to uniqueness is not, in this case, seem fully warranted. Some patterns played out here since antebellum times generally paralleled in other large Southern cities, and the recent spatial parcellation of white and black is all too familiar today. But there are some distinguishing aspects of New Orleans’ experience. The large society of free people of color added a twist to the typically spatially integrated patterns of urban slave societies; their preference for the lowlands helped fuel their genetic identity and complexify the ethnic landscape. The unique physical circumstances of this deltaic city, geographically restricted to a narrow crescent, compressed spatial patterns into elongated and intertwined shapes that, in other inland cities, might have sprawled outwardly. And the subsequent draining of the swamps, kicked off by the all但table “leap-frogging” by the suburban-bound white middle-class population over the poor back-story black population, creating white and black sections in both the highest- and lowest-elevation areas in this boom-trapped metropolis.

As for the correlation of African American populations with high-nuisance areas, this phenomenon, too, is seen far and wide—so much so that it has spawned a field of social theories ranging from environmental justice, environmental racism. Its proponents, who view the correlation as a product of deep-seated social and economic inequities, point to the predominately black River Road industrial corridor (“Cancer Alley”) as the lollapalooza of their cause, and New Orleans’ situation is not far behind. Others dispute that this phenomenon (of poor, mostly minority communities living close to polluted or vulnerable environments) insinuates iniquity, arguing that different levels of income will always exist in a free capitalist society. Those who earn more will naturally seek better and costlier real estate; those who earn less must select from less, else move to rise economically. There is no “relegation” or “exclusion,” only the forces of free-market economics. Causative agents aside, few dispute that African Americans bear a disparate share of the burden of living near nuisances like noisy railroads or malodorous industries, and near potential threats like flood zones or toxic dumps. This has always been the case in New Orleans, as illustrated by the recent Agitation Street controversy.

What do the patterns say about race relations in New Orleans? Many first-time visitors note a visibly near proximity of black and white in New Orleans compared to big Northern cities, and take this street-level observation as evidence of better race relations in the Crescent City. Locals point out with pride that the civil rights era transpired here with relatively little violence, and that the city has not witnessed a large-scale race riot since 1900. Indeed, it is almost a cliché, at least among many whites, that the city’s French and Spanish colonial heritage, penchant for revelry, and historically multicultural milieu has softened the tensions and narrowed the chasms between the races, instilling a “laissez faire” tolerance in the ethos of this society. If Atlanta is the “too busy to hate,” one might say, then New Orleans may be the city “too festive to hate.” But, impressions aside, one cannot help but draw a critical interpretation from the underlying paradox of racial residential patterns in New Orleans: that whites and blacks are more residentially separated now than in the days of Jim Crow and even earlier.396 Is this evidence of deep-seated racial intolerance or unstartled but absolute refusal to live together? For those who depicted their city protests failed to halt segregation in 1960, this may well have been the case. For others, and additional variables are at play, among them education and employment opportunities, violent crime, taxes, public schools, and the high cost of urban living. Many whites and blacks moved away from these factors, rather than from people of the other race. The prevalent racial separation, in this benefit-of-the-doubt interpretation, is a fortunate consequence rather than an original motivation of the flight to the suburbs. Scholars and pundits call for more young families for moving to the cheaper, greener, lower-crime suburban neighborhoods with better public schools, but the motivations for such relocations are complex, and the same critics—now often do not live the lifestyle they preach—usually prefer to have their way when pressed for alternative solutions.

How do New Orleans’ racial geographies compare to other major American cities? Researchers have devised indices to measure the integration and integration of groups. One of the most popular is the dissimilarity index, which measures the percent of one group that would have to move to another geographical unit (block, block group, census tract, etc.) to match the distribution of the other group. Perfect integration produces a dissimilarity index of zero, while a completely segregated city would measure as 100. For large American cities, researchers have dissimilarity indices in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s, meaning that roughly three out of four white of one group would have to relocate in order to disrupt themselves evenly among the other group. Like all quantitative measures of social characteristics, the dissimilarity index is an oversimplification of a complex phenomenon, and may produce misleading results based on the quirks and quirks of the input data. Nevertheless, it is a useful tool. Compared to the nine largest American cities in which whites outnumber whites,397 New Or-
These comparative maps of black residency visually indicate that racial patterns in the old Southern port cities of New Orleans and Charleston remain more spatially intermixed than those in other selected cities. Maps are author based on 2000 Census data. City maps are not shown at consistent scales.
leans’ dissimilarity index of 70.6 ranked more integrated than those of Chicago (87.3), Atlanta (83.5), Washington, D.C. (81.5), Philadelphia (80.6), Cleveland (78.2), and Baltimore (75.2). Only Memphis (68.6) and Detroit (63.3) produced lower (more integrated) indices.398 Looking to other American cities, New Orleans ranked more integrated than New York (85.3), Miami (80.3) Boston (76.5), Houston (75.5), and Los Angeles (74.0), not to mention nearby Baton Rouge (75.1) and a host of other prominent cities. But three sister cities most historically comparable to New Orleans—Mobile, Pensacola, and Charlotte—were all more integrated than the Crescent City, with indices of 69.9, 69.3, and 63.8, respectively. Perhaps, in these data, we are seeing the modern-day remains of the nine southern patterns of racial integration, especially in the very oldest southern entrepots. According to these measures, the positive impression of relatively high racial integration in New Orleans, albeit much less than it used to be, seems founded. An inspection of the accompanying comparative maps of black residency in 2000 also suggest that racial patterns in old Southern port cities like New Orleans and Charleston remain more integrated than big Northern industrial cities. Investigations of 1990 and 2000 census data have shown that the Northern and upper-Midwestern cities continually rank as the nation’s most segregated in their residential pattern, while Southern and Western cities measure as the most integrated. 

Cities like [those] pour cold water on the ostensible prototypes of a reenighted South and an enlightened North,” concluded one satisfied Southern journalist regarding these findings,399 whether these racial integration patterns genuinely translate into better race relations—or only reflect historical patterns of subservience and poverty, the potential of new housing construction in the Sun Belt, or municipal-expansion tendencies in Western cities—is a tough question.

Finally, what impact do these patterns have on the New Orleans cityscape? Since whites are roughly double the average household income of African Americans, New Orleans racial geographies tend to correlate strongly with areas of just about any socioeconomic phenomena that can be quantified: voting patterns, property values, single-parent homes, average monthly rents, blighted housing, crime, and so others. One can detect a correlation both in maps and in the streets, where crosses avenues like St. Claude by Bywater, St. Charles in the Lower Garden District, and Opelousas in Algiers take a pedestrian across distinct race- and class lines, and into dramatically different cityscapes. Visitor’s guides routinely warn tourists not to cross North Rampart Street while exploring the French Quarter, and many residents in Marigny and Bywater prefer to drive miles for groceries than visit a neighborhood store a few blocks away on St. Claude Avenue. So distinct are the urban characteristics of the “other side” of these racial Rubicons that they seem almost like sub-cities, separate communities that happen to abut each other but otherwise do not interact. Often I overhear students at Tulane University, who generally come from affluent, white, out-of-state families, marvel that New Orleans is such a small city, and constantly runs into friends while eating in the Riverbend, shopping on Magazine Street, or hitting the downtown clubs. In fact, New Orleans is a major American city, thirty-first largest in a nation of almost 300 million, home to nearly half-a-million people in a metropolitan area of over a million. The reason for the “small city” impression is that, in this case, the average Tulanian spends the vast majority of her time within the “white teapot”—that kettle-shaped, predominately white and well-off swath stretching from Carrollton to Bywater—which is indeed a small sub-city. The suspicion of the same resistance to crossing racial geographies is felt among predominantly African American communities in Canal City and eastern New Orleans, and predominantly white communities such as in Lakeview and the Lower Coast of Algiers. 

So is the effect of these racial geographies on the cityscape of New Orleans, then, as obvious: the patterns not only foretold a myriad and profound socioeconomic difference, but also deeply inform people’s perceptions of place. New Orleans’ paradoxical—yet typical—racial patterns have come in so many ways since the days when on the levee, could “be seen people of every grade, colour and condition: in short...a world in miniature.”400

Epilogue: The effect of Hurricane Katrina on African American neighborhoods can only be likened to the drop of a bomb. Of the nearly 460,000 blacks who resided in the contiguous urbanized portions of Orleans, Jefferson, and St. Bernard parishes, full two-thirds saw their residences flooded immediately after Katrina, and of them, 90 percent remained flooded ten days later. Poor blacks comprised the vast majority of those stranded in the city during Katrina’s week-long aftermath. For many, the traumatic evacuation marked the end of 140 troubled years in New Orleans, starting with their arrival as emancipated slaves after the Civil War, followed by centuries of Jim Crow and a generation of high crime and urban decay. Post-Katrina New Orleans may experience increased property values and more gentrification on the natural levee, which may further squeeze out black populations. Many of the historical spatial patterns described in this chapter may be radically altered in the years ahead.

**Little Palermo and the Sicilian Italians of New Orleans**

Around the turn of the twentieth century, people from the Italian island of Sicily settled in New Orleans in numbers larger than any immigrant group since the mid-eighteenth-century waves of Irish and Germans. Poor, scorned, and unable to speak the language, the Sicilians encountered a city whose circumstances at the time—a well-developed CBD with entry-level job opportunities immediately surrounded by a ring of cheap housing—bred the formation of ethnic enclaves. The resultant Italian residential cluster represented the sort of ethnic neighborhood reminiscent of turn-of-the-century Manhattan, with old Sixth Ward houses and tenements instead of Lower East Side tenements, and wide, open plazas in place of fire escapes. *Piccola Palermo*—"Little Palermo," the lower French Quarter—figured prominently in the ethnic geography of historic New Orleans. Other enclaves exhibited such a dense concentration, with such large a population, and with such a significant impact on the cityscape.

Others have told the stories of influential Italians in New Orleans, such as the Monteleone brothers. Andre Campanella.1 See Paul Anthony Giordano, "The Italians of Louisiana: Their Cultural Background and Their Migrant Contributions in the Fields of Literature, Arts, Education, Politics, and Labor" (Ph.D. dissertation, Louisiana State University, 1978) and Frédéric Rossignol, La question italienne, 1880-1910 (Ph.D. dissertation, Louisiana State University, 1986), for a survey of Italian community history in New Orleans.

The "trickle" had picked up sufficiently by the early American decade of the 1820s to allow one observer comment in 1809, "Make a tour throughout that city, and in every street you will encounter native Americans, native Louisiana, Spaniards, Englishmen, Germans, Italians, &c & c."2 The population was then large enough to support representatives in local government and business community (Pietro Maspes’s New Exchange coffee saloon on Chartres and St. Louis became the New Orleans Chamber of Commerce in 1806 and a rendezvous for businessmen for decades), in military and paramilitary activities (Italians fought in the Battle of New Orleans and counted among Lafitte’s pirates), and in all economic and social classes. In an aggregate sense, however, Italians in early nineteenth-century New Orleans formed communities; where and how did they live upon arriving; why there; how did they affect the cityscape; and why and to where did they move? What can these patterns in time and space tell us about New Orleans society, and about the Italian-American society that calls New Orleans home? And what evidence of these past cultural geographies remains in the streets of New Orleans today?

**A Constant Trickle**

Italians participated in the early European exploration and settlement of the region dating back as Hernando De Soto’s Spanish expedition through the future American South in 1539-1543.3 A more lasting role was played by Henri de Tonti, the Neopolitan nobleman who sailed down the Mississippi with La Salle in 1682 and witnessed this claim of Louisiana for France. After La Salle’s disappearance in coastal Texas in 1684, Tonti gave life to La Salle’s vision of a strategic French settlement near the mouth of the Mississippi among skeptical French officials preoccupied with other matters. His activity in the region formed a critical bridge between La Salle’s explorations of the early 1680s and those of the Le Moyne brothers starting in 1689 and leading to the establishment of New Orleans in 1699-1722. Early colonial Louisiana history could be significantly different were it not for Henri de Tonti.4

Confronting with a handfulers in New Orleans during the founding years, Italian immigration to colonial New Orleans and Louisiana formed a "constant trickle."5 Some were soldiers, many were laborers and artisans; others were undesirable shipped out of France. Many had social or economic ties to France, its colonies, or Francophile culture. The "trickle" had picked up sufficiently by the early American years to allow one observer comment in 1809, "Make a tour throughout that city, and in every street you will encounter native Americans, native Louisiana, Spaniards, Englishmen, Germans, Italians, &c & c."6 The population was then large enough to support representatives in the local government and business community (Pietro Maspes’s New Exchange coffee saloon on Chartres and St. Louis became the New Orleans Chamber of Commerce in 1806 and a rendezvous for businessmen for decades), in military and paramilitary activities (Italians fought in the Battle of New Orleans and counted among Lafitte’s pirates), and in all economic and social classes. In an aggregate sense, however, Italians in early nineteenth-century New Orleans formed communities; where and how did they live upon arriving; why there; how did they affect the cityscape; and why and to where did they move? What can these patterns in time and space tell us about New Orleans society, and about the Italian-American society that calls New Orleans home? And what evidence of these past cultural geographies remains in the streets of New Orleans today?

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3 Among De Soto’s original expedition of six hundred men were at least three Italians, who apparently were among the 322 survivors who escaped down the Mississippi River in the summer of 1543. Italians thus may have been among the first Europeans to cast their eyes upon the future site of New Orleans, probably in July 1543. Russell M. Magnaghi, "Louisiana’s Italian Immigrants Prior to 1870," Louisiana History 27 (Winter 1976): 43-44.


5 Magnaghi, "Louisiana’s Italian Immigrants Prior to 1870," 46.

a small component of a large and complex society, not yet large enough to be viewed as a distinct community with an extensive social network. Besides, at this time, the Italian peninsula remained a collection of small, often warring states, many of them dominated, especially in the south, by one or another foreign power. Italiannational sentiment inspire much loyalty from the majority of its emigrants, who continued to think of themselves in terms of native region, locality, or village.408

According to historian Russell M. Magnaghi, port records starting from 1820 show a “small but continuous migration of Italians to Louisiana,” many of whom were transient merchants or seamen rather than immigrants. The largest recorded group during the 1820s was twenty mostly single working-class male “servants, blacksmiths, carpenters, masons, and farmers” who disembarked on February 5, 1821. A few score more—merchants, professionals, traders, and craftsmen—came later in the 1820s.409 Enough resided in New Orleans by 1828 to catch the attention of visitor Charles Sealsfield, who described the city’s white population as comprising Creoles, Anglos, Germans, “English, Irish, Spaniards, and some Italians, amongst whom are several respectable houses.”410

The city’s small Italian cohort represented an extension of the very old presence of Italian merchants throughout the Spanish and French colonies of the West Indies, of which New Orleans formed the northernmost node as well as a gateway to interior markets.411 Many Italian fruit merchants relocated to the lucrative New Orleans market from Caribbean and Mexican ports, where they had previously conducted business with the booming American city. Henry Didimus saw evidence of this niche in his 1835 visit to New Orleans, mentioning the Italians he saw in the French market as well as “sundry heaps of West India fruit, [the Italian’s staple article].”412 Other Italians took the trade to the streets: one visitor recalled seeing in 1848 “an Italian banana and orange man” who “cleared a space among the bustle of rank weeds and erected a rude fruit stand on the middle of the Canal Street neutral ground, undeveloped at the time.”413

Italians in early nineteenth-century New Orleans originated from northern states such as Veneto, Sardinia, Piedmont, and Ticinno, as well as from central and southern regions around Lazio, Naples, and Sicily. New Orleans attracted enough northern Italians for this era to distinguish it from most other American cities with Italian populations: according to Humbert S. Nelli, “the only [Italian] communities that developed somewhat differently [from other American cities] were in San Francisco and New Orleans.... New Orleans attracted southern Italians from the beginning of the colony, while San Francisco remained northern Italian long after other cities were inundated with immigrants from the south.”414 Sicilians, however, were in the minority. As early as the 1830s and continuing well into the twentieth century, Italians made the Crescent City a major node in the Mediterranean-American tropical fruit trade, and it is this commercial shipping link that the later Sicilian-New Orleans connection may be tied to.

The “constant trickle” of Italian immigration gradually increased toward the middle of the nineteenth century, by which time we can measure settlement through official records, namely the 1850 census, a first to record place of birth. Unfortunately, it and just about every decennial census that followed—not to mention American immigration authorities, Italian statistics on departures, and other primary sources of information—used differing (and often unclear) criteria and standards in their tabulations. Italy was not a unified country until 1860, prior to this date and even after.415

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terwards, “Italian” immigrants actually identified themselves by their region of origin, such as Piedmont, Malta, or Sicily. Some records lumped all Italians together while others categorized by region; some included only those born in Italy while others counted American-born people of Italian ancestry. Most ship manifests and immigration records do not distinguish between those working at New Orleans and those intending to stay. Turn-of-the-century community members are equally erratic, because the seasonal flow of thousands of Sicilians between Southern plantations and Southern cities simply eluded accurate record-keeping. These problems make the citation of specific statistics subject to conditional statements. Nevertheless, enough data exist to track general patterns through time and space.

ITALIANS IN ANTEBELLUM NEW ORLEANS

In 1850, Italian-born people in New Orleans were outnumbered three-to-one by Irish-born immigrants, seventeen-to-one over those born in Germanic states, and eleven-to-one by those born in foreign French. There were even more Sicilians than Italians in that year. Nevertheless, the 658 Italian-born New Orleanians outnumbered those in any other city except New York, which had almost fifty more, despite its far larger population.418 The figure 658 may be an underestimate: one researcher counted 711 Italians in the 1850 population schedules for New Orleans (compared to only 163 in much larger New York City), while another put the New Orleans figure at 915. Whatever the exact count, New Orleans had by far the highest per-capita population, and possibly the highest absolute number, of Italians of any American city in 1850. Louisiana as a whole had more Italians than any other state, a surprise as no one researcher has detailed New Orleans in the 1850s as the first significant Italian settlement and “first Italian-American community” in the United States.419

That researcher, Samuel Leo Bono, shed new light on this little-known pioneering community by tabulating immigration data from the 1850 and 1860 censuses. Bono found Italian New Orleans in 1850 to comprise 711 individuals, of whom arrived during the 1840s. Ship manifest data confirmed that “very few Italians entered the port of New Orleans in 1840.”420 Believing that those few who did arrive earlier came mostly from the Caribbean basin and therefore were not specifically recorded as hailing from Sicily, Sicilians made up only 5 percent of the 1850 Italian community; others cited “Italy” or any one of a half-dozen regions, states, or cities for their birthplace. This Sicilian heritage would reverse almost precisely a half-century later. In their residential distribution, Bono found that over 83 percent of the Italians settled below Canal Street, and just over 50 percent of people settled in the First Municipality—that is, mostly in the French Quarter, with some in the Faubourg Tremé directly behind it. Despite geographical concentration, the Italian population still fell short of representing a cohesive, settled community in 1850, remaining in the city. Its members were more likely to be young, male, single, with fewer-than-average children if they had any at all, and relatively uninterested in sending those children to school. In fact, most Italians in New Orleans in 1850 were transients, making money in the bustling port and then moving elsewhere. Bono found that only 3.5 percent of the Italians in New Orleans in 1850 remained there in 1860.420

A cohesive and prominent Italian community seems to have formed in New Orleans during the 1850s, as captured in the 1860 census. All entries in the 1860 census with Italian or Italian-provincial birthplaces were analyzed, along with their ward of residence, claimed birthplace, age, and gender,
to produce the map Residential Patterns of Italians in New Orleans, 1860, and the following observations:

- 893 heads-of-households of Italian birth were listed in the 1860 census population schedules of New Orleans.
- 61 percent recorded “Italy” as their birthplace, a curious drop from 78 percent in 1850, in spite of the migration forces underway in the mid-1850s.
- 16 percent cited Sicily as their birthplace, and another 2 percent specified Palermo. This percentage represents a tenfold increase of Sicilians since 1850, probably reflecting the increasingly buoyant slave and tropical fruit trade between Palermo and New Orleans. By century’s end, Italian immigration to New Orleans would become almost 99 percent Italian.
- 14 percent were born in Sardinia, from which there had been a previous exodus, 1868-1859.
- The remaining 9 percent claimed birthplaces of Rome, Savoy (Savoie), Naples, Parma, Florence, Genoa, Messina, and others. These cities, regions, nations, and kingdoms illustrate the varied allegiances felt in 1860 by people now recognized collectively as Italians.
- Males outnumbered females by a three-to-one ratio, not as high as in 1850. Among the males were many single sailors and merchants, as well as married men who had not yet brought their families over. Among the females were women overseeing the home and children while the husband worked away. In all, Italian men in 1860 were less likely to be male, and more likely to (1) be married, (2) have children and more of them, and (3) send their children to school, than their counterparts in 1850. These are all indications of an increasingly permanent and less transient community.

45 percent of entries (574) lived in French Quarter wards four, five, and six. Sixth Ward, between Royal and St. Philip streets, had the highest Italian population in the city—366 households. Bono further found that the dense Italian settlement occurred on Dumaine Street between Chartres and Dauphine; lower blocks of Bourbon and Dauphine, and Decatur Street, called Old Lower at the time. These residential clusters would grow and intensify by century’s end.

- 76 percent of residents lived below Canal Street, and 23 percent lived above it, showing that Italians still strongly preferred the lower city in 1860, though not quite as much as in 1850. The remaining 11 percent—seven male, 23 households with an average age (forty-three) eight years older than their counterparts—lived in Algiers.

This residential pattern refutes popular notions that the French Quarter was overwhelmingly French and Creole before the Civil War, and did not host a sizable Italian population until the century’s end. Reasons for the early Italian concentration here were economic and cultural. Along the French Quarter were the “old food wharves”424—where Italians found employment for the most part possessed. Opportunities abounded at the French Market, where Italians—who throughout urban America “congregated to distribute fresh food from the central wholesale markets”425—practiced the traditional fruit trade. Aecdotal evidence indicates that the Italian presence in the French Market dates to at least the early 1840s, if not earlier. Wrote an observer in an 1843 article in the Daily Picayune, “The Italians live in the dirty, dingy streets, near the market, that are strongly of a seacoast.”426 Enough Italians stayed around Chartres Street, described as the “St. Giles of New Orleans,” for A. Oakley Hall to observe in 1851 “The Italians chatter up and down” as well as “Frenchmen...gesticulating...and Dutchmen jabbering...”427 The 1850s also saw the initial departure of the wealthy from the French Market to Esplanade Avenue and elsewhere (a trend that would surge in upcoming years), which opened up apartments for those of modest means. Some Italians might have been drawn in by Catholic, Latin ambience of the lower section, feeling a home among Catholic Creoles of Latin culture and Protestant Americans of Anglo culture. Only one in six Italians settled in the predominantly Protestant, Anglo and Protestant immigrants from northern Europe may have sought refuge in the old Latin sector to escape this sentiment. Indeed, Catholics and immigrants formed a political coalition with the Creoles during the mid-1850s municipal elections, and this alliance may have drawn in immigrants to the Creole-dominant neighborhoods. Additionally, Italians attended mass at St. Louis and St. Mary’s churches (the latter opposed to the old Ursuline Convent on Chartres Street in 1835), both of which were located in the heart of the French Quarter. About 157 probable Italian surnames (about 7 percent) are listed among the approximately 2,125 baptismal records out in St. Mary’s Church.

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Footnotes:
- These entries were entered into a computer file by Jessie Marie Roseman, who graciously granted me permission to analyze data for this study, and the results are shown here. Two years later, I encountered the research of Samuel Bono, who ran similar tabulations; our independent counts and figures strongly corroborate the other's.
- A. Oakley Hall, “The Italians in New Orleans,” or Phases of “Creole City” Life (New York, 1851), 102-03.
- Roger Baudier, The Catholic Church in Louisiana (New Orleans, 193-
during 1845-1855. In the early 1860s, because New Orleans was receiving many immigrants, especially from Italy, a chapel and infirmary were established near the foot of Esplanade Avenue, again in this general area of interest for Italian preference. The Società Italiana Donna Maria Benezza, founded in 1843, erected in 1857 and elaborate $40,000 tomb in St. Louis Cemetery No. 1 behind the Quarter was a strong indication of an established community with plans to stay. Thus, with these institutions both reflecting an Italian presence and drawing new Italian immigrants to the area, we see in the late antebellum era the development of a bona fide community and the presence of a late nineteenth-century intense concentration in the lower French Quarter.

**The Great Wave**

In 1860-1861, nation-building sentiment swept the Southern states, leading to the establishment of the Confederate States of America and a violent, history-altering struggle over slavery and state’s rights. The Civil War all but destroyed Louisiana’s sugar civilization, leaving hundreds of its manorial plantations on a near-incomplete ending its traditional system of labor-slavery. Many freedmen “considered themselves emancipated not only from slavery but also from the system of manual labor,” and subsequently emigrated to cities, to the North, or west to Kansas for better-paying jobs and Southern plantations. For years to come, Southern planters would grapple with the issue of a steady, reliable source of labor. A 1867 conference to address this and other Southern economic woes encouraged “establishing steamship intercourse with the nations of the Mediterranean Sea,” and suggested the Mediterranean region for its past source of labor, but of new crops, cultivation expertise, and commercial centers for Southern exports:

> The northern shores of the Mediterranean, embracing Italy, Sicily and Sardinia, with Greece, are teeming with a population of fifty millions. The climate is the same of that on the Southern States. Their farmers...would be at home in the sunny fields of the South. The climate which the Northern emigrant shuns they are accustomed to.... They would bring with them, and introduce, the modes of producing their various fruits and wines. The wasted but now deserted, would, under their patient labor, become fruitful with the grape, the olive, the fig, the orange, and kindred products....

Five thousand miles away, on the dry, rocky Mediterranean island of Sicily, emigrants ran in the opposite direction of the South. Poverty, crowded countryside overcame millennia of foreign neglect and eventually unified politics with the mainland, producing Italian and brightening the concept of

impoverished masses living in practically medieval circumstances. Instead, conditions only worsened, and within two years of unification, Italian troops occupied the island, martial law was declared, economies of land redistribution were broken, and taxes were raised. Worse, prosperous northern Italians looked down upon the Sicilians and only alleged a racial inferiority. Political corruption and organized crime only exacerbated the sense of hopelessness. Sicilians looked elsewhere.

Twelve Genoans destined (according to their ship manifest) for the Confederate States of America disembarked at New Orleans on May 11, 1861, the start of the antebellum arrival. The Civil War years saw a new wave hit arrive, both from 1866 to the end of the decade, almost 200 Italian two-thirds from Genoa, arrived to the acculturated Crescent City. Many moved onto Louisiana, who remained helped form an Italian-born community of 571 individuals by 1870. Also in this decade, the press started reporting on the establishment of organized Sicilian criminals in the city, where in 1869 appeared an offshoot of the Mafia known as the Stoppagherra Society. Organized crime would plague the city and stigmatize the Sicilian and Italian community for decades to come in modern times. Despite that the criminal element constituted a negligible percent of Sicilian New Orleansians, near two-thirds of the local press articles about this community between 1869 and 1963 related to criminal activity.

The pace of Italian immigration to New Orleans gradually increased in the 1870s. When 238 men and women from four Sicilian cities applied to emigrate to America in 1870, almost one-third (twenty-six) specified their destination as New Orleans. “When asked for their reason for travel,” wrote Italian Louise Edwards-Simpson, they responded, to seek my fortune,” to meet relatives,” to find work,” and to exempt self from military conscription.” They came from coastal and interior villages mostly in the agricultural provinces of western Sicily, primarily from Calfa, Bisacquino, Termini Imerese, Poggio Reale, Corleone, Cefalù, Palazzo Adriano, Chiusa Sclafani, Palermo, and the port city of Castelvetrano. They also came from Messina Entellina, a Sicilian village with an Albanian ethnic heritage that contributed disproportionately to New Orleans Sicilian population. Almost all boarded ships in Italy on direct lines to New Orleans.

**Notes**

4 Computed by counting newspaper articles filed under “Italians” and “Italians in the United States” in the New Orleans newspaper catalog (which covers articles from 1804 to 1963) in the New Orleans Public Library-Main Branch of eighty-six articles (the earliest in 1849 and the last in 1963), fifty-six related either to organized crime or specific violent crimes.
Orleans. About two out of every three would later permanently return.

That same year, 1870, an influential native-born planter and sugar-industry advocate named John Raymond hired Sicilian laborer, Antonio Musacha, to work on his newly established sugarcane plantation in Plaquemines Parish. The hire, coordinated by a New Orleans labor broker, represented the latest attempt to resolve post-war agricultural labor problems in the wake of emancipation. A few hundred Chinese immigrants had been sent in from Cuba, San Francisco, and Hong Kong in 1866-1871, but the process failed, in part because, as the National Geographic Magazine stated in 1875, "the South will not tolerate the introduction of large numbers of Chinese, for fear of possible race complications." Some laborers from the Iberian peninsula were recruited into Lafourche Parish in the early 1870s, but Spain and Portugal soon denied entry to labor recruiters. A brief attempt with Scandinavian laborers gathered from Midwestern cities also failed. This particular strategy, however, proved to be a good employee, and Dymond hired more from a New Orleans population. Other planters did the same. Word spread among their colleagues in the lower river region, and to cotton planters in the interior, that Italians may solve their pressing labor-shortage problems, which needed to be solved alongside political and the weather as a favorite subject of genteel conversation.442

Word spread throughout the lower Mississippi River region in the 1870s, planters conducted experiments which compared Negro and immigrant productivity as agricultural laborers. In every one of the 'scientific' studies, wrote historian Jean Ann Scarpaci in 1972, "the Italian worker won praise for his industry, thrift and reliability, whereas the Negro worker received a poor rating as a shiftless, unreliable, and lazy laborer." The New Orleans' small, established Negro and Italian population was already gainfully employed, mostly in the fruit trade, and held little interest in grueling field work in rural plantations. Planters turned to recent immigrants, who upon finding work, relayed the message home, but even this flow could not satisfy the demand for labor. Between 1877 and 1880, the sugar industry formed recruitment organizations such as the Iberia Immigration Society and forged alliances with the Louisiana Bureau of Immigration, which sent agents overseas to find work. Increasingly, the agricultural and cultural industry worked with the state to open the flow of immigrants to supply its labor needs. While demand increased "pulling" subsistence farmers out of the old country, conditions in Sicily only worsened, thus more "pushing" the peasants toward making the immigration decision. More came to Louisiana via New Orleans and headed for work in the sugar fields. Each new arrival served as a potential communicant to others contemplating a move from the troubled Italian countryside.

The increased flow of Sicilians through New Orleans starting in the 1870s was just that—through New Orleans, and to the sugar parishes of southeastern Louisiana. For this reason, immigration statistics of arrivals to the Port of New Orleans is not an accurate guide to the size of the city's Sicilian-Italian population. That information is only somewhat better derived from the census. The 1880 census recorded 9,577 foreign-born and 17,597 native-born residents.445 The trend of Italians moving to downtown neighborhoods continued, as almost 60 percent lived in the blocks between St. Louis Street and Elysian Fields Avenue (Wards five, six, and seven), and of them, 80 percent lived in the lower French Quarter (Ward six).446 Overshadowing these numbers was the skyrocketing Sicilian population in the sugar parishes. Wrote historian Donna Gabaccia, "as planters sought harvesters for their plantations around 1877, the Italian settlements of the sugar parishes generally surpassed the New Orleans Italian community in size and importance. Many migrants landed in New Orleans but soon left for the cane fields; others traveled directly to the plantations from their ships." During the next two decades, the Sicilian experience in Louisiana shifted from urban to rural.447 "While only 15 percent of Louisiana's Italian-born residents lived in sugar parishes in 1880, almost 47 percent did so in 1890, by 1900 almost 90 percent of the state's Italian residents lived there."

In 1881, the Louisiana Sugar Planters Association formed the Shoot Louisiana Immigration Association to work with state officials to facilitate the flow of peasants from the rocky hills of Sicily to the alluvial soils of Louisiana. Over the next few decades, other sugar industries joined the effort to bring southern Italy to the Louisiana labor force. State officials coordinated recruitment on the immigrant port, 1820-1860. Wrote historian Victor Hugo, "in 1834-1880" (Ph. D. dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 1967), 258, 719-34. "The peak immigration spanned, according to an amalgam of data sources, from 1890 to 1908, when at least 42,568 entered Louisiana or listed Louisiana as their destination, and in particular 1898 to 1904, when upwards of 320

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3,000 to 4,000 arrived nearly annually (2,147 arrived during a single week in 1903). Over 98 percent hailed from southern Italy—that is, Sicily. ANOTHER BATCH OF SURLY SICILIANS Arrives in Port and Undergoes the Deal of Inspection groaned a Daily Picayune headline, October 1898. “The Bolivia Brings Nearly Fourteen Hundred.” Humbled of Them, Who Hope to Find Here the Land of Promise and Plenty. They landed at the harry at the foot of Esplanade Avenue or Toulouse Street, where some remained for a while and most eventually headed upriver to the sugar parishes. Along the River Road between Baton Rouge and New Orleans—the apex of Southern sugar culture and iconic local of ante bellum slavery—the Italian laborer [had] largely displaced the negro, as in many of the many other localities. The image of thousands of southern European immigrants laboring in the shadow of columned mansions is one that eludes modern notions of Louisiana’s plantation mystique. Figures vary widely regarding how many Italians worked the cane fields in the late 19th-century: most evaluated census enumerations and other permanent records, because the same from varied places (as far away as New York and Chicago, not just New Orleans), records at particular parishes are not adequate. The situation is not unlike estimations of Mexican migrant workers on American farms today. By Donna Gabaccia’s estimate, 60,000-70,000 Italian field hands arrived in Louisiana every October to harvest and grind cane. Historian John V. Baiamonte put the number at around 14,000, noting that “there were 50,000 cane workers in the sugar parishes in 1910, consisting of Negroes, Span Creoles, and Italians.” According to conservative census data, there were 17,577 Italian-born residents residing in Louisiana in 1900, of which about 90 percent were Sicilians, and about 15,000 were sugar workers. The total number for Louisiana nearly doubled to 30,000 in 1904, and, by 1910, many as 100,000 Sicilians and other Italians labored in fields throughout the lower Mississippi Valley, Louisiana included.

Cane cutters could earn daily wages of $1.10 to $1.50 during good seasons, plus standard housing (often in slave cabins) and sometimes the opportunity to grow vegetables on a tiny plot of land. After la zucarata (the autumn harvest), when sugar plantations ran nonstop, exhausted Sicilians would wander in search of work. Few planned to settle in these rural parishes. Trains transported them far and wide to other sugar fields and other towns throughout the deep south, and many of these farmers would not outlast the first generation and seem destined to be forever tenants, rather than owners of their own land. Occasional financial panics and hard times in the sugar industry “pushed” other Italians to abandon their plantation jobs for better opportunities elsewhere, which “pulled” them with the lure of higher wages and better conditions. As documented by Richard Campanella, the late nineteenth-century Southern “railroad towns,” centered around the station and tracks, figured prominently in these Italians' early experiences of their adopted nation. Many more came to New Orleans to reside temporarily with family or friends; according to one account, “planters sometimes organized weekly transportation by box car” between New Orleans and the plantations. Others returned to work or headed for northern ports but did so by first returning to New Orleans. Come next sugar season, many Sicilian men would return to the plantations, leaving their growing families behind in New Orleans. In this manner, the turn-of-the-century Italian population in New Orleans swelled and shrunk with the seasonal cycles of Southern agriculture. The difficulty in measuring this population is evident in official statistics: A Census Bureau data for 1880, 1890, 1900, and 1910 indicates the number of Italian-born residents in New Orleans at 19,995; 3,622; 5,866; and 1,006, respectively. Italian consul reports cite more realistic states of 10,000 to 12,000 in the city in 1892; 16,000 in the city and 80,000 in Louisiana in 1903, and about 15,000 in New Orleans in 1907. In 1920, Italians comprised fully 3 percent of the foreign-born population in the Bayou State. Though their absolute numbers could not be compared with those in the Northeast, this rate was triple their proportion (1 percent) among foreign-born at the national level.

Thousands of Italian immigrants toiling in the cane fields did not last long. Sugar planters could hardly keep many immigrant workers for more than two seasons, because in the 1902 odd season, noted, “by that time they have laid by little money and are ready to start a fruit shop or a grocery store at some cross-roads town. Those who do not establish themselves thus strap packs and peddle black jeans, woolens and red handkerchiefs to the Negroes.” Italians’ desire to own land for truck farms (small, intensively cultivated plots) pushed them out of the sugar parishes, where planters thought at best to sell them a parcel, but not an estate. Concluded a special Immigration Commission report in 1910, “Where land is cheap and where opportunities for economic and social advancement are many[,] the Italian rural laborer... will not outlast the first generation and seems destined to be only a tenant farmer, rather than an agricultural laborer.”
Recruitment — Satisfaction among planters with Sicilian labor on sugarcane plantations in 1870 accounts for much of the transfer of peoples from Sicily to Louisiana. "The solution" to the South's labor problems, stated National Geographic in 1906, seems to be to induce the Italians to come to farm labor...with the prospect of becoming land owners on a small scale....Much to the surprise of all, they have proved successful farmers on the cotton and sugar plantations. The great lumbering companies also employed them. . . ."466 The marketing effort was coordinated and funded by professional Louisiana labor recruiters, railroad and shipping lines, industry associations, and the Louisiana Department of Agriculture itself—one of the few Southern state efforts to sponsor immigration. For a while, the state agricultural agency was so involved in recruiting for the labor that its name was changed to the Louisiana Department of Agriculture and Immigration.467 How can we secure the proper kind of foreign immigrant for Louisiana? Louisiana State Commissioner of Agriculture and Immigration Col. Charles Schuler responded in 1906:

The only answer that I can give is to advertise. Advertisements allow any possible way. Publish your immigration office in the Italian literature, translated in the immigrants’ native language. Show the people of the old world in every possible way that Louisiana is a land State for a new settler...[S]how them...the magnificent opportunities [in agricultural pursuits]...the health and religious advantages...in every possible way. Furnish your immigration office with the prospective homeseeker.... Let this agent...distribute the literature...translated in the immigrants' native language. Show the people of the old world in every possible way that Louisiana is a land State for a new settler...[S]how them...the magnificent opportunities [in agricultural pursuits]...the health and religious advantages...in every possible way. Furnish your immigration office with the prospective homeseeker.... Let this agent...distribute the literature...translated in the immigrants' native language.

Direct, Cheap Shipping Access — In the early 1880s, the state and sugar-industry labor recruiters augmented the decade-old direct-shipping line between Palermo and New Orleans to thrice monthly, to accommodate increased numbers of immigrants. Direct lines from Trieste and Naples to New Orleans were also added. Steerage rates cost around $40 per passenger, but competition would sometimes reduce fares to less than half that amount. Many traveled back and forth.

Reasons behind the mutual attraction:

Early Commercial Interchange — Shipping lines had been in place between Palermo and New Orleans since the early nineteenth century. Cotton and other Southern exports were shipped to the Mediterranean region, and citrus fruits and other dry-laden agricultural products came in turn, often accompanied by Sicilian merchants and some families. This circa-1840s commercial tie is not the true origin of most Sicilian-American families in Louisiana today, for only a small number arrived at this early stage, but it is the origin of the relation...between the two cities.468 Because a New Orleans-Palermo trade route was already in place," wrote sociologists Anthony V. Margavio and Jerry Salomone, "it was a natural mechanism for handling the immigrants who chose to come to Louisiana. And come they did."465 The American tropical fruit industry can be traced to New Orleans, which in turn can be traced to Sicilian and Italian merchants in the antebellum era.
to the old country according to seasonal work opportunities.469

Chain Immigration — Immigration is a frightening and risky plunge into the unknown, particularly for the uneducated rural poor. The peril abates when kin await at the destination, and when other countrymen are clustered in a specific area, along with religious and cultural institutions, risk is further reduced. In the traditional image of Italian family cohesiveness, many immigrants cited the desire to join relatives as among their top reasons to migrate. Through “chain immigration,” the arrival of pioneering individuals to Louisiana was followed by adventurous young single males (“birds of passage,” usually recruited by a padrone who in turn encouraged family and friends to come. As the chain lengthened, the reputation of New Orleans as a favored destination strengthened.470 Traditional gender relationships often dictated that the male head-of-household’s decision to immigrate meant that the wife, children, sisters, and mother came in tow, consensus or not. Chain immigration, or network immigration, explains how...persons from the small village of Contessa Entellina in western Sicily’s remote interior, eventually created a distinct identity and wielded influence among Sicilians living thousands of kilometers away in New Orleans. Migration networks also partially accounted for the uneven empying of the island of Sicily in the decades prior to the First World War.471

470 Gabaccia, Militants and Migrants, 84.
472 Gambino, Vendetta, 55.

The Italian presence in the French Market dates to at least the 1830s. It was here that Sicilians and other Italians practically invented the local tropical-fruit trade, helping draw Sicilians to the “Little Palermo” that was the lower French Quarter. Shown here in the early 1900s are the Bazaar (dry goods) Market at left; the river side of the market complex at loading time (right); and the main thoroughfare of Little Palermo, Decatur Street (lower left). Southeastern Architectural Archive, Special Collections, Howard-Tilton Library, Tulane University.
Business Opportunity — Some Sicilian immigrants, interest in New Orleans stemmed from their expertise in the international trade of tropical and semi-tropical fruit, an enterprize which local Italians dominated for over a half a century. *Harper’s Weekly* alluded to this specialization a year after the Civil War, when licenses for fruit sales, the French Market became

a monopoly in the hands of a few Italians, to buy in the cheapest market, and sell under the best prices, are all these estimable foreigners of great deal that a man coming into port with a cargo of fruit has to take the first offer made to him, or run extreme risk of losing it all.476

A remarkably essential 1890, *Daily Picayune* article, entitled “The Obligation Due the Italians” and written in the midst of the “cosmopolitan tradition” controversy, cited the Italian domination of this business.

It is mainly through Italian enterprise and capital that the importation of foreign fruit (the port of New Orleans) has been developed from a mere peddling business conducted in a few small shoppes to the dignity and proportions of a great commercial interest, impelling a score and more of steamers of hundreds of thousands of dollars of capital. New Orleans has risen through the efforts of native citizens of Italian parentage, not cities, and were destined for the rural sugar parishes, not the narrow streets of the French Quarter. Other observers, including contemporaries, have supposed that physical-geographical similarity, reaching to the tropics, and furnishing every possible facility for transatlantic operations in fish and fruit.

Cultural-Geographical Similarity? — It is often said that Sicilians were attracted to the New Orleans area for its Mediterranean ambience and aesthetic charms. In fact, this factor played a significant role in the Sicilian-New Orleans connection. Educated, poverty-stricken people living thousands of miles away, ignorant of the most basic aspects of their options, do not take major life decisions on the basis of esoteric factors. Besides, most Sicilians came from cities, not cities, and were suited for the rural sugar parishes, not the narrow streets of the French Quarter. Other observers, including contemporaries, have supposed that physical-geographical similarity, reaching to the tropics, and furnishing every possible facility for transatlantic operations in fish and fruit.

Louise Reynes Edwards-Simpson cites evidence that some letters extolling the virtues of the Bayou State were written under false pretenses, under the watchful eye of plantation owners intent on increasing their labor force.

... that “Italians found in Louisiana a climate and crops very similar to those of the regions south of Rome,” that “the United States also offered the same division that existed in Italy, between an industrialized North and a rural South,” and that Italian immigrants “instinctively felt more attracted by what they were familiar with.”477 Even the deeply anti-Italian Mayor Joseph Shakespeare bemoaned how “our congenial climate attracted emigrants from the lowest classes of Europe, Southern Italians and Sicilians, to Louisiana.”478

These environmental explanations are overstated. While immigration promoters did indeed cite the state’s attributes, supposedly similar climate and agriculture with Italy, and attracted Sicily in part with the proposition in mind, the only real commonalities were that crops were needed and labor were rare. To compare a dry, rocky, rugged island in a Mediterranean climate to humid, alluvial, the plantation country in the sub-tropic is to compare cultural opposites. Even if the climates were some similarities, it would not explain why neighboring Mississippi, Texas, and Arkansas combined attracted only half the Italian immigrants than did Louisiana,480 or why hundreds of thousands of other Italian immigrants settled instead, northern climates. And the “instinctive” attraction of Italian immigrants to the rural South as opposed to the industrialized North flies against the fact that the vast majority of Italian immigrants to America headed for industrialized cities in the Northeast—a climate, living condition, and economy that was alien to them on every level. But said, immigration promoters did cite cultural and religious conditions (the Latin atmosphere and Catholic predominance in Louisiana) as appealing aspects of the state. It is probable that some immigrants were seduced, or at least comforted, by this notion, and even more likely that the friendliness of the host culture in southern Louisiana would eventually benefit Italian immigrants once settled. One previously cited researcher asked Louisiana’s “cosmopolitan tradition”482 as the third most important reason for Italian success in attracting Italian immigrants, behind climatic similarity (which I dispute) and the presence of the port.

Little Palermo

People seek refuge among their own when transplanted to foreign environs, be they growing Americans in Paris, immigrants in American cities. Little Italys—like Chinatowns, Dutchtowns, Little Haitis, Greektowns, and other

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48 *The Obligation Due the Italians,* Daily Picayune, November 12, 1890.
49 Giordano, *The Italians of Louisiana,* 162.
Little Palermo and the Sicilian Italians of New Orleans

Little Palermo formed in the lower French Quarter, from about St. Peter Street to Esplanade Avenue and running into the neighboring faubourgs of Marigny and Tremé. Fewer Sicilians lived in the upper Quarter because it was and remains predominantly commercial. Little Palermo is traceable to the 1840s and 1850s, rose in context in the 1880s, peaked during 1890s to 1910s, stabilized, then fell steadily in the mid- to late twentieth century, by which time the lower French Quarter continued longer to be identified as a distinctively Italian neighborhood.

The “main street” of Little Palermo was lower Decatur Street, from just St. Ann to Esplanade, where Italians clustered at least since the 1870s. Some called Decatur “Dago Street,” and certain blocks (Maine to St. Philip, by one account; adjacent Madison Street by others) were dubbed “Vendetta Alley,” in the sensationalistic local lexicon of the day. Lower Decatur was central to Little Palermo because of its heavy traffic, its multi-story storehouses conducive for commercial/residential use, and its frontage with the French Market, the main focal point of Sicilian New Orleans.

Life in Little Palermo would have seemed familiar to countless other poor immigrants in turn-of-the-century urban America. During the peak era, Sicilian men fluxed in and out with agricultural seasons, ship and train schedules, dockside work, and other cycles of port-city life, leaving mostly women and children in the hovels, courtyards, and streets of the inner city. Those men with no families stayed in crowded lodging houses—"as many transients as ten, twenty, or even thirty odd are frequently accommodated in one room overnight," awaiting transportation back to the cane fields.

Conditions in Little Palermo were miserable: crowding, extreme, sanitation was as bad as the notorious tenements of lower Manhattan, and disease and crime were rampant. In 1905, one representative block of seventy-one houses contained 493 rooms, in which were crammed the 517 members of 144 families. Almost three-quarters of the people in this block were men and children, and 2 percent were foreign-born, mostly from Sicily. Most families shared common toilets, water supplies (sometimes infested with arboviral diseases) came from leaky, exposed cisterns. Such conditions helped create the darkest time in Little Palermo’s history, summer 1905, when what would become the city’s last yellow fever epidemic afflicted the community and cost its residents an enduring contempt from the rest of the populace.

The four blocks in the absolute heart of Little Palermo—Duane to Barracks, between Decatur and Chartres, an area that included St. Mary’s Italian Church—saw 219 cases of yellow fever, or 8 percent of the total cases in the entire city. Italian-born people made up slightly more than 2 percent of the city population in 1905, but suffered 39 percent of the yellow fever deaths that year, with locally born Italian Americans accounting for an additional 6 percent. New Orleanians blamed the residents of Little Palermo for the fever epidemic; cost its residents an enduring contempt from the rest of the populace.


Written use of the terms “Little Palermo” or “Piccola Palermo” was particularly common. One example appears in a 1905 journal article entitled “Behind the Yellow Fever in Little Palermo,” by Eleanor McMain. Use of other terms—such as “Sicilian Quarter,” “Italian Quarter,” “Italian section,” or “Italian neighborhood”—were commonly used at the time.

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Historical faubourg names fell out of use by the 1950s, and the term “Quarter” by preservationists in the 1970s. The French Quarter, often referred to as “the French Quarter,” “the old French section,” “the historic French Quarter,” or “the French section” were used at the time. One still hears “the Quarters” today.


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1905 epidemic, as well as for violent crime and the general decay of the city’s oldest neighborhood. An interview with an elderly Irish Channel resident in 1941 captured the perceptions commonly held for the Sicilians of Little Palermo vis-à-vis the 1905 outbreak:

“It’s a wonder we didn’t have worse than yellow fever or bubonic plague the way them dagoes lived. I remember over on Ursuline Street they were tearing down a place and whole families were living in one room sleeping on straw. And listen to this—on the third floor, lived a big family all in one room and they kept two goats in the same room to furnish them milk! Dagoes! My God! we never had anything like that in the Irish Channel!”

The scorn directed toward Sicilian immigrants certainly predates the 1905 epidemic and was not limited to the working class, as evidenced in this 1891 attack by Mayor Joseph Shakespeare’s administration in the wake of the Mafia-related lynching incident:

“We find [Southern Italians and Sicilians] the most idle, vicious and worthless people among us.... They monopolize the fruit, oyster and fish trades and are nearly all peddlers, tinkers or cobblers.... They are filthy in their persons and homes and our epidemics nearly always break out in their quarter. They are without courage, truth, pride, religion or any quality that goes to make the good citizen. New Orleans could well afford (if such a thing were lawful) to pay for their deportation.”

Shakespeare suggested, the disdain held for the Sicilians was also directed at their neighborhood, which some New Orleanians, particularly uptowners, would have happily razed in the name of slum-clearance and economic progress. Elderly Sicilians today rightfully decry the use of the pejorative and judgmental word slum to describe the lower Quarter of the Sicilian era, but prime real estate it was not.

Hard knocks and all, Little Palermo played a central role in the experience of the region’s Italian immigrants, as a sort of home port, base camp, and central marketplace, around which satellite communities of Italians (field laborers, fruit and vegetable farmers, women, dockworkers, market vendors) orbited for over half a century. It was the figurative “capital” of not just Italian New Orleans, but Italian Louisiana. An Italian consul estimated in 1905 that between one-third and one-half of the roughly 30,000 residents of the French Quarter were Italian immigrants or their offspring. Concentrated as it was, Little Palermo, according to some researchers, was not as central to the local Italian immigrant population as were Little Italy’s in other major American cities. New Orleans was also unique in the nation in the high level of integration of Italian immigrants with the rest of the white population. Indeed, census data as far back as 1950 show that Italians could be found throughout the city, almost always in various degrees of integration with whites and blacks.

As Shakespeare suggested, an ethnic enclave need not harbor 100 percent of a particular group in a city, nor comprise exclusively that group, to form a focal point and cultural hearth of that population.

Sicilian ascendency into the middle class led to the decline in Little Palermo. The 1900 census tabulated 292 Italian-born people resident in the Little Palermo census tract, more than any other in the city. Presumably most were elders who shared households with New Orleans-born children and grandchildren. The number declined to 156 by 1950, probably due mostly to natural death, though this figure still exceeded any other ward. The 1960 census tally increased to 316, but it is not clear whether this unexpected rise came from...
new immigration or a change in enumeration standards. In any case, the number dropped to ninety-eight by 1970, a few years after St. Mary’s Italian School closed. Enough Sicilians remained connected to the lower French Quarter into the late twentieth century to make Italian names in business- and home-ownership still fairly common. Even today, one occasionally sees elderly neighborhood folks of possible Sicilian descent strolling the quieter streets of the Vieux Carré, or attending Sunday morning mass at St. Mary’s Church or St. Louis Cathedral. They are the exception: most old Sicilian families, like the Creoles before them, departed downtown New Orleans for suburban environs, though a fair number still own properties and businesses in the district. (By one count, people of probable Italian ancestry own almost 9 percent of the Quarter’s properties.)

494 Census tract #38 data from U.S. Census publications released in 1942 (23-45); 1952 (7-14); and 1961 (13-28).
495 A perusal of the 2003 Orleans Parish Assessment Roll for the French Quarter revealed 236 probable Italian/Sicilian surnames among the owners of 2,718 parcels in the district, or 8.7 percent. A roughly equal number (8.9 percent) had Francophone surnames.

The WHY Behind the WHERE

That an enclave like Little Palermo could form is easily understood. Geographical clustering of immigrants provides safety, support, convenience, a familial and linguistic environment, campanilismo (parochialism), economic opportunities, and proximity to religious and social institutions. That it was formed within the general environs of downtown New Orleans can be explained. The phenomena of the “immigrant belt” (see chapter, “An Ethnic Geography of New Orleans”), a loosely concentric ring of high ethnic diversity that formed around the downtowns of many major American cities a century ago. This zone provided the right mix of convenience and opportunity on one hand, and housing availability and cheap cost-of-living on the other. Theoretically, an enclave like Little Palermo could have formed anywhere in this amorphous belt surrounding New Orleans’ commercial core. Why did it settle up in the lower French Quarter?

A small colony of Italians had settled here by the 1840s and 1850s, representing the seed from which an enclave of thousands would later grow. The area may also have been
As hand-laundring businesses helped to distribute Chinatown denizens throughout New Orleans, corner grocery stores played the same role for the Sicilians of Little Palermo. Both enterprises benefited from a broad geographical dispersion, to minimize competition and maximize convenience to the customer. This map shows the 1937 distribution of 740 Italian American owned businesses, from shipping firms to refreshment stands, overlaid upon the 1940 distribution of Italian-born New Orleanians. Fifty-two percent of the 740 businesses were grocery stores. Map and analysis by author based on Directory of Italian Americans in Commerce and Professions (1937) and 1940 Census.

"seeded" in the sense that many vessels bearing Sicilian immigrants unloaded their human cargo barely a stone’s throw from Little Palermo, at the foot of Esplanade and Elysian Fields avenues. Immigrants thus had immediate exposure to this part of the city, just like the German and Irish immigrants who disembarked in Lafayette and the Third District—and ended up living there—a half-century earlier.

Departure of wealthy white Creole families from the lower Quarter around the time of the Civil War opened up hundreds of old townhouses and cottages for rent. Subdivision of spacious antebellum mansions into tenements (“cribbling”) maximized profit for landlords. With shelter available, the other major needs—employment and convenience—had to be satisfied for an enclave to form. The French Market, which at the time lined the levee from St. Ann to Ursulines, offered both to Sicilian immigrants. The market’s 550 stalls, distributed throughout its beef, fruit and vegetable, and bazaar (dry goods) sections, made it by far the largest and most important market in the city in 1880, a status it held since its founding and still does today.496 The end of the workday in the French Market, wrote Lafcadio Hearn in an 1885 publication, offered “an opportunity to study the queer habits of the ‘dagoes’—the Italian fruit and onion dealers, who make up so important and picturesque an element in the market.”497 By 1892, up to one thousand Sicilian vendors sold fruit and vegetables from market stalls or loaded their peddle carts there for sale in the streets. Just as the Sicilian-run market fed the city, the Sicilian-owned Macheca Shipping Line fed the market with a steady stream of fresh produce.498 In addition to employment, the circa-1791 mar-

497 S. Frederick Starr, Inventing New Orleans: Writings of Lafcadio Hearn (Jackson, 2001), 24.
Little Palermo and the Sicilian Italians of New Orleans

The French Market was not the only employment source drawing Sicilians to the lower French Quarter. The shipping industry, across the levee from the market, needed cheap, reliable labor ("roustabouts") and helped establish the planters in the sugar parishes. Standard Fruit and Steamship Company, a local Sicilian-owned firm which helped make New Orleans the world's largest importer of fruit in the early 1900s, hired many Italians, did the export shippers and the sugar men on the upper levee. In some cases, it was the better pay and convenience of dock jobs that drew Sicilians away from the plantation and helped plant their roots in Little Palermo.499

Important institutions of Roman Catholicism, social aid and benevolence, and entertainment also drew Sicilians to the lower French Quarter. St. Mary's Church on Chartres Street, as well as St. Louis Cathedral, provided religious and social focal points for the immigrants of this era. Both were within the confines of Little Palermo: St. Mary's—"the Italian Church"—was in the geographical center. Italians also created their own mutual-aid societies (the circa-1843 Società Italiana Di Mutua Beneficenza may be the oldest Italian society in the nation) to help members through costly crises of health or employment. These societies, of which there were thirty in New Orleans by 1910—collaborated to purchase a large edifice on Esplanade Avenue and form the Unione Italiana in 1912, a political and social center of Little Palermo. Additionally, Italian-language newspapers operated offices in the district, did financial and business services catering to the immigrants.

Little Palermo was convenient. Streetcars passing near or through there could take residents anywhere. Passenger trains on Elysian Fields or the levee could transport residents to the lake or rural parishes in a few hours. It was almost impossible for newly arriving immigrants not to be exposed to the area, and hard for them not to establish some tie to it. In sum, the lower Quarter offered a plethora of benefits at a minimum of costs for Sicilian immigrants, who responded accordingly. They moved to it when that ratio of benefits to costs reversed.

Many observers cite the Mediterranean ambiance of the French Quarter as reason for the Italian clustering here. Some Sicilian immigrants may have felt at home among the narrow streets, balconies, and courtyards of the old city, and one can only help see visages of picturesque Italian cities in turn-of-the-century photographs of the Vieux Carré. But poor immigrants are universally pragmatic; they do not seek new abodes with an eye toward taste and charm. Sicilian immigrants—whom were mostly country folk—prioritized for frugal living, social stability, geographical convenience, and economic opportunity in their efforts to establish themselves permanently in America or return to their homeland. They would have settled anywhere in the city, so long as these goals; Little Palermo simply delivered them most effectively. Later generations may well have invented the "Mediterranean ambiance" platitude—which is very popular in secondary sources—from their own assessments of those poignant old photographs of Little Palermo (busy market scenes; laundry hanging from balconies), and oft-repeated anecdotes (pigs and chickens in stately courtyards; a cow on the second floor of the Pontalba Building), concluding that the Mediterranean ambience of the French Quarter simply did explain the Sicilian presence in it.

SICILIAN CITYSCAPES

The Sicilian era in the French Quarter influenced the cityscape in a number of ways, many of which are discernable today. Italians may have played an inadvertent role in the

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500 Official communication from Robert Ariatti, secretary of the Società Italiana Di Mutua Beneficenza, dated June 3, 1933, provided by Joseph Maselli of the American-Italian Research Library and Museum. This letter indicates that the New Orleans-based Società Italiana Di Mutua Beneficenza was incorporated in 1852 but founded in 1843, making it the oldest such organization in the United States.

“Little Palermo” originated in the late antebellum age, rose in earnest in the 1880s, peaked around 1900, and declined steadily to the mid- to late-twentieth century. These maps track the latter stages of the ethnic cluster’s dispersion by counting residents and business owners with probable Italian surnames in city directories. By century’s end, most had moved to the suburbs. Note the unusually high number in the block by Burgundy and Iberville: these were dentists, doctors, and other professionals with offices on the upper floors of the Maison Blanche Building.

Map and analysis by author based on city directories of 1938, 1968, and 1999.

Another lasting impact of Little Palermo is the differentiating nature of lower Decatur from other Quarter streets, such as upper Decatur, Chartres, and Royal-Decatur, “a jumble of Italian signs and Italian sounds,” was home to landmark Sicilian-owned businesses and restaurants, catering to neighborhood people as well as to French Market vendors and shoppers. The flow of cash coming out of the market, and the reputation for frugality among working-class Italians, led to the siting of a number of prominent banks on Decatur, most of which still stand. On Decatur Street, the Sicilian dialect predominated; facades and interiors were often renovated with the white tiles favored in Sicilian culture; advertisements with Italian names were painted on walls; Sicilian cooking aromas emanated from stores; and Sicilian children were part of almost every street scene.

Though the Sicilians are gone, that sense of place survives today. There are no historical markers or “welcome centers,” but even first-time visitors to the French Quarter, rolling along Standard-Odier-Raymond-Chartes-Chartres-French-Market tourist corridors, sense that, upon attaining Decatur Street, something different prevailed here. The sense comes from the handful of Italian restaurants here, from Central Grocery and its neighbors, and from the sliced muffaletta in the “Famous Window” of Frank’s Restaurant (a stretch of Decatur lightheartedly described as “the known universe’s capital of muffaletta production and consumption”). It emanates from the beautiful tile doorway mosaics, the Italian names in pediments and palimpsests, the white tile interiors and facades of certain buildings, and from the bustle of the French Market, where certain signage uses the tricolor of the Italian flag. It can be found in Matassa’s on Dauphine and St. Philip, founded in 1924 and now among the last Italian

501 Gambino, Vendetta, 50.
503 The visual “Italianness” of this area may increase in the near future: the French Market Corporation in 2004 devised a revitalization plan to create “the feel of an Italian piazza” in the French Market. For St. Joseph’s Day 2004, its marketing branch encouraged people to “Celebrate Our Italian Legacy—To Accurately Describe It, We’d Have to Use Our Hands,” and even used the term Little Palermo to describe the French Market. For Lynne Jensen, “French Market Takes 1st Steps in Upgrade,” Times-Picayune, March 18, 2004, B1; Times-Picayune, March 12, 2004, Lagniappe section, p. 11.
Italian-owned businesses still operate in former Little Palermo, helping keep a sense of ethnic place in the modern cityscape. Some are recent enterprises; others have been around for generations, namely Central Grocery, which maintains an authentic early twentieth-century interior and vends specialty products from Italy. It is famous for its muffaleta sandwiches. Matassa’s on Dauphine is among the last Italian corner grocers, catering to a local crowd; Pap’s Cleaners & Laundry has been in business since 1947.

Modern Geography of Italian New Orleans

The thousands of Sicilians who arrived in poverty a century ago rose to the ranks of the middle-class practically within a generation. UNO sociologists Margavio and Salomone explain this rapid rise, achieved in the face of discrimination, as a product of two overriding factors. First, the sheer number of Italian immigrants was sufficiently large and concentrated to create a self-identifying community. Large numbers, ethnic solidarity, and geographical concentration translated to economic demand for the very goods and services that the particular group knew how to supply, particularly in foodstuffs such as pasta, olive oil, Mediterranean fruits, and wines. (For decades, a number of macaroni factories operated in the French Quarter, illustrating how Italian immigrants supplied their own demands.) By 1937, over 76 percent of

504 The city’s most influential real-estate developer in recent decades is Joseph C. Canizaro, responsible for the former Lykes Building, Texaco Center, Canal Place, and numerous other major projects.
the 740 Italian-American-owned business in New Orleans dealt with the preparation, retailing, or wholesaling of food or beverage.505) Second, Italian immigrants possessed a number of old-country cultural and social values, particularly in business relationships, which equipped them well for their challenges in New Orleans. Margavio and Salomone also cite "the friendly compatibility of the host culture in southern Louisiana,"506 reflected in family unification, the central role of food, and other factors, for the rapid socio-economic rise of local Italian immigrants.

505 Directory of Italian-Americans in Commerce and Professions (Chicago, 1937), 124-35.
506 Margavio and Salomone, "The Passage, Settlement, and Occupational Characteristics of Louisiana's Italian Immigrants," 345.

The economic ascent of Sicilian New Orleans coincided with the era—roughly between the world wars—when New Orleans rapidly expanded into the recently drained backswamp toward Lake Pontchartrain. These attractive new lakeside homes beckoned to Sicilian-Americans still living in crowded and passé Little Palermo. Business opportunities also beckoned elsewhere; 89 percent of the 740 businesses owned by Italian-Americans in New Orleans, listed in 1937 Directory of Italian-Americans, were located beyond the confines of the French Quarter.507 Sicilian-Americans thence began to migrate out of the lower French Quarter at first into adjacent areas and later into the twentieth-century subdivisions of Gentilly, Lakeview, and what is now called Mid-City. The

507 Directory of Italian-Americans in Commerce and Professions, 124-35.

Clues to an Italian past are overhead and underfoot in the lower French Quarter and adjacent areas today. Tile façades, interiors, and mosaics in doorways and sidewalks were especially popular in Sicilian culture. Photographs by author, 2002-2004.
dispersion to new areas of Orleans Parish was followed by a spread to the outer suburbs of Jefferson and St. Bernard parishes during the 1960s through 1980s, when working- and middle-class whites fled the city by the tens of thousands. According to the 2000 census, 83,080 residents of the greater New Orleans metropolitan area (excluding the north shore) claimed "Italian" as their primary ancestry (another 26,000 claimed secondary Italian ancestry), more than that of any other local white ethnic group except French. Sixty-three percent (52,020) of them lived in suburban Jefferson Parish, while only 19 percent (15,695) remained in New Orleans, the city that was once home to nearly all of their ancestors. St. Bernard and Plaquemines parishes were home to another 13,444 and 1,921 Italian-Americans, respectively. Like those of Greek, German, Irish, and other ancestries, the modern-day distribution of those of Italian ancestry in greater New Orleans can be gleaned simply by looking at the overall distribution of whites. There is, however, some variation in the distribution. According to the 2000 census, those claiming Italian ancestry lived in relatively higher numbers (three to four times the census-tract average) in certain pockets of Jefferson and St. Bernard parishes. In Jefferson Parish, these tracts included the neighborhoods around Clearview Parkway from West Napoleon Avenue to West Metairie Avenue, where 1,857 out of 6,604 residents claimed Italian ancestry, and around the Baronne/West Esplanade intersection, where the figures were 1,598 out of 5,060. In St. Bernard Parish, which, with job opportunities at now-closed Kaiser Aluminum, received the lion's share of former Quarter-area residents, three tracts in Chalmette counted 4,103 Italian-ancestry residents out of 14,767 total population. The single most Italian census tract in the metropolitan area in 2000, in both absolute (1,399) and relative numbers (33 percent), was located north of Judge P. Perez Drive and east of Gallo Drive in Chalmette. Names of nearby streets, such as Palmisano, Campagna, Lena, and Ventura, seem to reflect a significant Italian presence. Within Orleans Parish, Italian-Americans lived in largest numbers in the Lakeview neighborhoods between City Park Avenue and Lake Pontchartrain, with West End registering the most (763 out of 4,724). Only 378 people living within French Quarter census tracts claimed Italian ancestry (of whom 128 lived in the lower Quarter), by many, probably most, were recent transplants who happen to be Italian American, rather than local Sicilian Americans who can trace their roots to the days of Little Palermo.

The 150,763 Louisianians who claimed Italian as their primary ancestry in 2000 resided through 90 percent of the state’s 3,006 census tracts. In roughly one-third of the tracts where Italian Louisianians concentrated in above-average numbers. Those tracts tended to be in larger cities, especially greater New Orleans, as well as in the old sugar parishes and the truck-farming belt beyond the perimeter of the metropolitan area. This geography can be traced back to the late nineteenth-century diaspora of Sicilian immigrants to Louisiana. Outside New Orleans, the census tract with the largest Italian population in 2000, both in absolute (1,328) and relative (28 percent) numbers, was the small Tangipahoa farm community of Independence. A trip to Independence visually confirms the Italian presence revealed in the Italian names, roads, and signs, in the downtown Italian bakery, and in the water tower, painted in the Italian tri-color to promote the town’s annual springtime Italian festival.

The historical geography of Italians in the Crescent City divulges certain trends and traits about New Orleans society and the Italians within it:

- The antebellum fruit trade between Palermo and New Orleans exemplifies the Crescent City's close association with the Latin Mediterranean region, traceable to its colonial roots and deeply influential in its modern-day character.
- That New Orleans had perhaps the nation’s largest Italian population and first Italian community by 1850 shows the strength of this connection, and of antebellum New Orleans’ overall attractiveness to immigrants.

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[508] The characteristics, 2000, Summary File 3
[509] Computed from 2000 U.S. Census data on primary ancestry (based on statistical samples, not actual counts), at the census tract level.
These maps capture the movement of the Italian population from the French Quarter to the suburbs in the span of an eventful century. The 83,000 New Orleanians currently claiming primary Italian ancestry reside in patterns generally reflective of the larger white community, with some concentrations in certain Jefferson and St. Bernard parish census tracts.

Maps and analysis by author, based on censuses of 1860-1980.
Little Palermo and the Sicilian Italians of New Orleans

• The movement of Italians into the French Quarter can be traced to before the Civil War—indeed by the 1840s-1850s and possibly earlier—in predicting popular perceptions that the Italianization of this district did not transpire until the postbellum era. In fact, the French Quarter in the late antebellum era had a large and diverse immigrant population, of which Italians were a significant part.

• Sicilians came to New Orleans in large numbers after the 1870s because they were actively recruited by sugar planters, differentiating them from most other immigration waves. Were it not for this organized, state-supported effort, New Orleans may not have attracted any significantly sized immigration flows after the Civil War. As it turned out, Sicilians were the last.

• The antebellum Palermo-New Orleans connection and the postbellum sugar recruitment made New Orleans home today to the nation’s highest per capita population of Sicilian-Americans. As much as 97 percent of the local Italian-ancestry population is Sicilian.

• Little Palermo developed predictably within the “immigrant belt” of turn-of-the-century New Orleans. It was among the first, most concentrated, and longest-lived immigrant clusters in the city’s history. But compared to other Little Italys in urban centers throughout the nation, New Orleans’ Little Palermo was relatively short-lived and harbored a relatively small percentage of the city’s total Italian population, which were generally integrated throughout the predominantly white areas of the city. This testifies to the ethnically intermixed and integrated residential geography of historic New Orleans.

• The citywide dispersion of Italian families via this ubiquitous Italian grocery store is displayed in the accompanying map, Distribution of Businesses Owned by Italian-Americans in New Orleans, 1933. Corner groceries were to the Italians what laundries were to the Chinese: a popular and easy-to-start family business which served to disperse members of each group citywide (to avoid competition) yet tie them to each group’s ethnic enclave (for supplies). Although both Little Palermo and Chinatown are gone today, some Italian grocers and Chinese laundries still exist, even in the French Quarter.

• It is difficult to overstate the role of the French Market in helping form Little Palermo in the lower French Quarter. It saw a major increase of demand for Sicilian shrimps, oysters, and meats created by Italian immigrants into the interbellum era in the 1920s and early 1930s. The former Little Palermo still manages to evince a subtle yet palpable ethnic ambience. Urban planners might as well study how this transpires, in an effort to breathe new life into New Orleans’ other disappearing historical ethnic cityscapes.

• Even beyond the muffaletta said to be a Little Palermo invention, Sicilian New Orleans’ food culture has always served to breathe new life into New Orleans’ other disappearing historical ethnic cityscapes.

Photograph by author, 2002.
For decades, even during its decline, Little Palermo formed a cultural home base to which many Italian Louisianians were tethered. Margavio and Salomone noted that the practice “boarding”—staying in a relative’s home for an extended time—was commonly practiced in the New Orleans Italian community of 1900, providing the recently arrived Italian a friendly haven in a foreign land. World War II revived the practice, as some departed Italians returned for war-industry jobs and stayed with their city cousins in Little Palermo and elsewhere. “Boarding” would continue among shoppers visiting the city for supplies, relatives in town for a religious ceremony, college students attending classes, and even newlyweds who selected their ancestral hometown for weddings and honeymoons. While these researchers made these observations in a discussion on family relationships, a geographer may interpret them the relevance of place in this ethnic group’s historical memory. The lower French Quarter is central to that memory. The Italian American Marching Club, for example, draws its membership region-wide, but on the most important Sicilian feast, St. Joseph’s Day, it parades down the heart of Little Palermo. And when a genuine farmer’s market returned to the otherwise tourist-oriented French Market in 2004, one of the first farmers to participate was a multi-generation Sicilian vegetable and citrus grower from St. Bernard Parish, who, in his childhood, used to ride his father’s mule-drawn wagons into Little Palermo. In his senior years, he returned.

Epilogue: Structurally, Little Palermo fared well during Katrina, its sturdy historical housing stock and high elevation protecting it from wind and water. But many former denizens who moved to St. Bernard Parish in the mid- to late-twentieth century saw their suburban homes destroyed by storm surge from the MR-GO and industrial canals. The single most Italian census tract in the metropolis, plus a number of other tracts with high Italian populations, were decimated. It is unknown to what degree St. Bernard Parish will rebuild, and how its Sicilian-Italian population will re-settle.
CHINATOWN, NEW ORLEANS

For six decades straddling the turn of the twentieth century, a tiny Chinatown at the edge of downtown New Orleans anchored members of the Chinese American community scattered throughout the Crescent City. As one of the very few genuine Chinatowns in the eighteenth-century South, New Orleans’ Asian enclave, and the few thousand Chinese-Americans who have called New Orleans home ever since, attest not only to this port city’s international stature but also its position at the apogee of the Caribbean region. For it was the Greater Antilles island of Cuba, during the mid-nineteenth century order following the demise of slavery, that supplied early groups of Chinese workers to the banks of the lower Mississippi. The New Orleans region shared sundry species with Caribbean societies—to this day, the city’s Caribbean aesthetic is palpable—but one in particular set the stage for the arrival of a few hundred Chinese in the years after the Civil War: the sugar cane industry and its post-emancipation labor shortage. That need for field hands would lead Southern planters and New Orleans merchants to look eventually beyond Cuba and the Caribbean to California in the ports of China itself. This effort failed within five years but succeeded in enriching New Orleans with an Asian presence, which in turn created a little-known downtown enclave within the city’s complex turn-of-the-century ethnic cityscape. New Orleans’ Chinatown is distinct in both form and function today, but the underlying story sheds light on the cultural geography of the Caribbean region, New Orleans’ role in the world network of port cities, and the sense of place that aggregates, disperses, and yet persists in the streets of the Crescent City today.

ANTEBELLUM CHINESE IN THE CARIBBEAN CONNECTION

The little is known of the few Asians who lived in the New Orleans region prior to the Civil War. The Quong Sun Company is said to have constructed a shrimp-drying platform on Bayou Defond (Du Fon) as far back as 1840, and one Su Lee was recorded in the St. Bernard Parish marriage records in 1857—this in a region where, it is believed, the first Chinese (that is, Filipino “Manilla”) settlement in the present-day United States was founded near the shores of Lake Pontchartrain in the 1760s.1 One instance of a tiny Chinese colony in antebellum New Orleans comes from an 1843 Daily Picayune article entitled “A Kaleidoscopic View of New Orleans.”

The Chinese in China are located in the neighborhood of Congo Square, where you may see, at day or night, wind is high enough, Hong-Kong, Choo-Loo, Pom-Poo, and several other Celestials, flying pretty, parti-colored paper kites.2

A bit more can be gleaned from the 1860 census schedules for New Orleans, which recorded around thirty people of Chinese birth residing in the city. Some worked as cigar makers, stewards, ice makers, cotton mill workers, merchants, and mariners; others may have been guests escorted by Christian missionaries. Still others represented intermediary companies trying (unsuccessfully) to contract Chinese laborers from Gold Rush-era California and the Caribbean to work in Louisiana. Some anglicized their names to the likes of “John Robinson” or “John Young”; others (particularly the cigar makers) hispanicized them to “José” or “Marías,” indicating a prior stint in either or other Spanish-speaking countries. Most were families; some married Caucasians and started their families in northeastern cities before moving to New Orleans; all were classified as white.3

This tiny Chinese community in antebellum New Orleans was separated from its homeland by half-a-planet of maritime travel, but other brethren residing not quite so far away. Countries and colonies of the Caribbean Basin, which, like Louisiana, depended on sugar production almost as much as sugar production depended on slavery, grappled with new sources of labor as the prospects of emancipation loomed throughout the region. Starting in 1845, Chinese indentures by the shipload arrived to Cuba, Peru, Hawaii, Trinidad, Jamaica, and elsewhere in the plantation tropics. Eight hundred Chinese “coolies” entered Cuba in 1847, followed by 124,835 more from 1853 to 1874, destined for the island’s vast sugar cane fields. One contemporary observer suggested that up to 200,000 Chinese were imported to Cuba alone between 1853 and 1860 alone. Most came from the Portuguese colony of Macao; others were from Canton, Hong Kong, and elsewhere. The British who oversaw colonies in the demarcated and supply side of labor, also expanded this labor pool: in the sixty years after the 1833 abolition of slavery throughout the British Empire, 13,533 Chinese and 238,909 South Asian Indians were brought to British Guiana (present-day Guyana) alone. Conditions under the indentured labor system were so close to traditional African bondage, its economics as well as its brutality, that many plantation owners in Cuba smoothed transition from one system to the other.4 “I find it to be the universal impression,” wrote abolitionist traveler John S.C. Abbott in 1859, “that in Cuba the Coolie trade is merely a Chinese slave-trade under the most fraudulent and cruel circumstances.”5 American observers took note of the phenomena in the 1850s, and pondered its

1 A study of 1840s listed New Orleans as the only city in the heart of the South (excluding places such as San Antonio and Baltimore) with an established Chinatown. Rose Hum Lee, “The Decline of Chinatowns in the United States,” American Journal of Sociology 54 (March 1949): 423.

2 Betsy Swanson, Historic Jefferson Parish, From Shore to Shore (Gretna, 1975), 138; Center for the Pacific Rim, University of New Orleans, The Asian Peoples of Southern Louisiana: An Ethnography (New Orleans, 1990), 71; Su Lee was recorded in St. Bernard Parish marriage records in 1857—this in a region where, it is believed, the first Chinese (that is, Filipino “Manilla”) settlement in the present-day United States was founded near the shores of Lake Pontchartrain in the 1760s.

3 As analyzed by Laura C. Cohen, Chinese in the Post-Civil War South: A People Without a History (Baton Rouge, 1984), 20, and other sources.


5 John S.C. Abbott, South and North; or Impressions Received During a Trip to Cuba and the South (New York, 1860), 50.
extension into the American South as a way to exploit plant costly labor with relatively cheaper contract workers. But such a policy could undermine slavery—or the investment it represented for Southern planters—at a time when the peculiar institution ranked as one of the most divisive issues in the nation. Advocacy of the recruitment and importation of Chinese laborers was not only rooted in favor of the status quo, but "overshadowed by arguments in favor of re-opening the slave trade."521 A traumatic decade later, the defeat of the Confederacy in the Civil War and the emancipation of slaves deprived the Southern planter elite of the luxury of the choice. Freedmen, more often than not, turned their backs on further toil on plantations and migrated to cities and towns, leaving the planter masters scrambling to fill the labor void.

Louisiana sugar planters, reeling from the devastation of their industry, looked to their British, French, and Spanish peers throughout the Caribbean Basin for guidance. "Southerners formulated and implemented their original plans for the recruitment of Chinese by drawing heavily on their ideological and cultural bonds with the West Indian societies," wrote anthropologist Lucy M. Cohen, granddaughter of a Chinese immigrant in Central America and a pioneering researcher on Chinese immigration to the South. The piece described their experiences in a reorganized post-emancipation period with similar past events in the British and French Antilles.522 Particularly, they looked to Cuba, the world's greatest sugar producer, which had done well with contracted Chinese laborers. Prominent planters and journalists with connections to both Louisiana and Cuba encouraged the idea through articles in regional newspapers. As of 1866, "After the War reports, the influential New Orleans-based business journal De Bow's Review furthered the concept in an article entitled "Coolies as a Substitute for Negroes." The piece described the importation of primarily South Asian Indians to the English colonies of Guiana and Trinidad, with statistics evidence that post-emancipation sugar harvests were "much more than in the years of slavery," illustrating "the advantages of the coolie system...a system that has raised [these colonies], from almost entirely ruined to highly flourishing dependencies."523 A similar article in the Daily Picayune in the latter that year, entitled "The Chinese Question: A Mongolian Invasion," reviewed the Caribbean experiences of the English and French and the contemporary situation in California, but assumed an ambivalent stance on Chinese immigration to the South. It coldly concluded that "however hideous and revolting this population may be[,] we cannot, by legal discriminations, drive them away, [thus] it would be well to consider the best means of making the most of their industrial powers and incurring the least mischief from their social vices."524

First Arrivals, 1867

In 1866, a few laborers from the Philippine Islands were brought to Louisiana by one T. Edmonstou. The next year, Jules H. Normand, a planter with Cuban connections, brought fifty Chinese laborers from Havana and Matanzas, with names such as Francisco, Miguel, Carlos, and Seraphine, through New Orleans and delivered them to two cotton growers in Natchitoches Parish. Other Chinese laborers whose contracts had expired in Cuba were offered arrangements to come to Louisiana and fill the plantations labor void. They would be paid around $12 to $14 per month plus subsistence rations for a period of eighteen to twenty-four months. Normand and planter Benjamin W. Bullitt brought approximately fifty-five more Chinese to New Orleans by March 1867, of which two were destined for Natchitoches cotton fields and the rest for Mississippi River sugar plantations. The two agents formed a company, New Orleans to ship in more Chinese and advertised regionally to appeal to labor-starved planters. In competition was another Louisiana planter with Cuban connections, Edward T. Wyche, who, using a fill-in-the-blank contract form printed in Spanish and English, recruited fifty Chinese to the Bayou Lafourche region in the spring and summer of 1867. "A cargo of twenty-six coolies arrived at New Orleans on July 25," reported a national magazine, probably in reference to Wyche's group, and several others, who arrived previously, were ready at work on the plantation.525 A local journalist visiting one such plantation wrote to a remarkable Bayou State ethnic amalgamation. Here in the heart of Acadian Louisiana, a Creole-speaking planter, Edward T. Wyche, brought Chinese laborers from Havana and Matanzas, Cuba, and the United States to replace recently emancipated African-American slaves.526 That summer, Harper's Weekly reported that 2,000 "coolies...whose terms of service have expired in Cuba, are to be introduced into Louisiana, and it is a matter to which public attention should be intelligently directed."527

The importations were briefly interrupted in late 1867, when the federal government, fresh from waging four years of civil war, intervened on the basis that the shipments violated an 1862 law against the "coolie trade" and came disturbingly close to re-instituting a form of slavery. The shipments resumed when the government grudgingly agreed that the Chinese were coming voluntarily as free agents and not as "coolies," but the State Department continued to keep a disapproving eye on the operation for the next few years.

523 Cohen, Chinese in the Post-Civil War South, 93-94.
524 Cohen, Chinese in the Post-Civil War South, 50-58.
527 Cohen, Chinese in the Post-Civil War South, 50-58.
Wyche shipped twenty-three more Cuban Chinese to New Orleans in August 1867 and an additional two in November, accompanied by an ordained minister named Tye W. Orr, a Christian Chinese missionary and interpreter with connections throughout the Caribbean and the Pacific Rim.

Then, starting in 1868, Cuba, in what would be called the Ten Years’ War, increased their bound Chinese “coolies” to Cuban plantations, restricting their movement across the Gulf of Mexico.528 Within a year, the flow of Chinese from Cuba to Louisiana ended. Nevertheless, the idea of the Chinese labor solution was planted, born in the circum-Caribbean sugar world, of which Louisiana was a part. The next step, from the planters’ perspective, was to look to the Pacific Rim.

**Second Wave: 1869-1871**

Interest in Chinese labor rekindled in 1869, when planters discussed and debated the issue at regional meetings through the South and at big commercial conventions held in Memphis, New Orleans, and Louisville. Voir-dire concerned about the importation of foreign “heathens” who were only slightly outnumbered by those who saw the Chinese as a likely and worthy labor source. The Memphis meeting resulted in the formation of the Mississippi Valley Immigration Labor Company, dedicated to bring “as many Chinese immigrant laborers as possible, in the shortest time,”529 to the United States. Planters’ eyes shifted from Cuba and its restricted pool of Chinese, to California and its larger (but costlier) supply, and then to China itself, with its unlimited supply and wide selection of new workers. George W. Gift of Arkansas was first to make the trip, arriving in California, where the labor market was too competitive, and then to East Asian Hong Kong, where he navigated legal gray zones and suspicious authorities.530 He eventually persuaded a group of Chinese to board the Ville de St. Lo, journey across the Indian Ocean, around the Cape of Good Hope, across the Atlantic, into the Gulf of Mexico, and up the Mississippi River to New Orleans, arriving June 1, 1870. It may very well have been the first emigration trip to New Orleans directly from East Asia. These newcomers were shipped up river to Mississippi and Arkansas cotton plantations to cut their three-year labor contracts; there, many Southerners, both white and black, would encounter Asian people for the first time. Four months later, a larger group of 222 Chinese, assembled by New Orleans resident and missionary Kim Orr, arrived to New Orleans and thence to Louisiana plantations.530 Asian faces became an increasingly familiar sight in sugar-producing towns such as Donaldsonville, where Chinese sugar workers would congregate in such numbers on La che Street in the early 1870s that the local newspaper referred to it as “the precincts of Chinatown.”531 Between 1869 and 1870, another 1,200 Chinese were brought in to work on railroads in neighboring states. Many first disembarked at Gretna en route to Texas, and hundreds others would eventually be lured away from railroad construction in Alabama to plantation labor in Louisiana, and in particular, to cotton milling jobs in Baton Rouge. When the Alabama and Chattanooga Railroad folded, this largest group of Chinese in the South, plus new Chinese laborers from California, dispersed to other labor-demanding areas in the nation, one of which was the large Millaudon/Merrill sugar plantation in Jefferson Parish. Of the 141 Chinese who arrived there in July 1870, only twenty-five remained in 1872, the rest having departed for various reasons of dissatisfaction.532 In this manner, the Chinese labor solution was temporarily floated via Cuba, California, and China circulating from job to job throughout the Deep South and Midwest on constant turnover. Fewer and fewer new recruits arrived into the 1870s. Planters lost interest in Chinese labor and looked elsewhere across the globe to replace the replacements of their emancipated slaves.

**The Failure of Chinese Recruitments to Louisiana**

Reasons on both the supply and demand sides explain the failure of Chinese recruitment to the South. On the supply side, the three major sources of Chinese immigration all proved problematic. In 1868, Cuba, as previously mentioned, restricted Chinese laborers’ freedom of movement in response to revolutionary threats to the sugar industry’s dependence on slave and coolie labor. Two years later, British colonialists in Hong Kong banned Chinese labor recruitment in British colonies. California, the third major Chinese labor market, offered low wages with which Southern planters could not compete. Chinese in California were more likely to emigrate on their own accord to better pay and opportunity in the industrialized Northeast than to be recruited to less of both in the rural South. It was a tough sell, and few Chinese bought it. The restriction of labor supply was加之 high labor demand explained the rampant turnover and relocation among these new Chinese who did come to the South: a laborer on a railroad in Alabama might be cotton miller in Baton Rouge a few months later; a cotton picker in Natchitoches one season might be a sugar harvester in Houma the next.

On the demand side, planters were displeased to discover that the apparently docile Chinese were in fact perfectly cognizant of the stipulations of their contracts, and ready and willing to fight for what was rightfully theirs. “John Chinaman seems to entertain a very lively sense of his own interest
in any bargain he makes,” observed the New Orleans Republican of the Millaudan plantation laborers just three weeks after their arrival. “The man of the Flowery Kingdom is not a whit behind the descendants of Canaan’s conquerors in business shrewdness.”535 Withheld wages, covert contract changes, convenient mistranslations, disparagement, altered hours, and ill treatment were not met with cowered compliance but confrontations, work stoppages, walk-outs, lawsuit and self-defense. Planters “attributed their labor problems to the stereotypical Chinese character,” wrote Larry M. Cohen, but the real problem was the contract labor system and its abuses. “When the Chinese protested or rebelled, the qualities of fidelity and exactitude for which they had formerly received praise became cunning and shiftless.”534 In many areas, particularly the cotton country of the interior South, contract labor declined in favor of sharecropping. Planters abandoned “John Chinaman” and vice versa.

Additionally, Southerners were increasingly hostile to the notion of another ‘other’ racial type in the tense social landscape of postbellum society, particularly one of a completely different culture. For every notion extolling the industrious and disciplined Chinese was one condemning them as “heathens,” “Mongols,” “a demoralizing blight to any community,” thievish, and infamous.”535 Harper’s Weekly warned that “the people are the lowest and in very many respects the least desirable portion of nations the mostmen to us and our civilization.” In his recent dissertation, Moon-Ho Jung saw parallels between the contradictory prejudices from the 1870s and the later representations of Asians in America as either a “model minority” or the “yellow peril.”536 In the postbellum South, it was the “yellow peril” interpretation that predominated. Some Southerners as opposed Chinese labor. In order that it be able to breathe new life into the fallen aristocracy and re-isolate the former Confederacy from its efforts at economic restoration.538

Legally, the 1862 Act to Prohibit the Coolie Trade and the experience of the Civil War made the U.S. Government anything but an advocate of what it saw as a dangerous and substitute for slavery. While the government only investigated temporarily in the South’s recruitment of Chinese, never did it expressly support or encourage them. By 1870, the state of Louisiana had sent a hand as, it would be up to the upcoming decades for the immigrant labor groups.11 U.S. government would explicitly exclude Chinese immigration.

in later years, from 1882 to 1965, contributing to the paucity of Asian immigrants to the South and elsewhere.

As sharecropping yielded to take hold in sugar country,539 Louisiana sugar planters in the 1870s continued to experiment with contract laborers—Spanish, Portuguese, Scandinavian, and others—to fill the void created by emancipation and left open by the Chinese experience. Perhaps they would have also considered South Asian Indians or other Asian-Caribbean peoples, as did the British in Trinidad and Guyana starting in the 1840s, if the colony allowed it. Satisfactory replacements were eventually found in Sicily, and for the remainder of the nineteenth century, thousands of Sicilians were recruited to Louisiana plantations and in the city of New Orleans. Within a few years, Chinese and Sicilian immigrants would graduate from the cane fields, move into cities, and climb the social and economic ladder settling for a while in two particular neighborhoods at opposite ends of downtown New Orleans.

**Chinese in Postbellum New Orleans**

The few thousand Chinese working and travelling throughout the Southern plantation country, and rapidly losing interest in sugar as a commodity, began by 1870 gravitate to the larger towns and cities. New Orleans attracted the lion’s share, in part because it was home to a number of Chinese importing firms but mostly because it was an accessible and opportunity-rich port city to which most Chinese had been exposed from their arrival. That same year, the first shipments of Chinese merchandise reached the city directly from China. By 1871, Fou Loy and Company opened a popular store at 98 Chartres Street (present-day 408-412 Chartes) while suffering provisions to Chinese, the field and a tempting coordinate more immigration from the West Coast. The store was “a centre of attraction for hundreds who delight to gaze upon the curious manufactures of China, and the person of John himself.”540 A similar operation run by Yung Ping was located at 40 Royal, with a Chinese laundry operated on Carondelet Street. The New Orleans Bee, whose office was located a block from Fou Loy & Company, commented on its new neighbors.

“Chinese Merchants—The Celestials have a real tact for business, and the merchant of the Flowery Kingdom are among the keenest in the world. A year ago we had no Chinese among us; we now see them everywhere in the streets of New Orleans, and they have opened two large stores for the sale of Chinese articles, one in Royal and other in Chartres Street. The latter is owned by Fou Loy & Co., who have just effectuated an insurance for twenty thousand dollars of their stock. This looks, indeed, like success.”541

It was in 1871 that people of Asian descent—specifically Chinese—established themselves in the city in sufficient

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536 Quoted from a number of sources, including “The Importation of Coolies,” Harper’s Weekly, August 31, 1877, p. 547.
539 Wrote sugar planter Henry J. Hyams on the potential impact of imported Chinese labor on plantation labor, “We will have again a fat and pampered aristocracy, worse than it ever was, and far more haughty and overbearing. It will then be ‘how many Coolies does he own?’ instead of ‘how many negroes does he own?’ so commonly used antelbellum.” Ibid., 331.
539 “Chinese Merchants—The Celestials have a real tact for business, and the merchant of the Flowery Kingdom are among the keenest in the world. A year ago we had no Chinese among us; we now see them everywhere in the streets of New Orleans, and they have opened two large stores for the sale of Chinese articles, one in Royal and other in Chartres Street. The latter is owned by Fou Loy & Co., who have just effectuated an insurance for twenty thousand dollars of their stock. This looks, indeed, like success.”541
numbers to become a noticeable presence in the city. Contemporary newspaper articles discussing the newcomers (whom the local press referred to generically as the "Celestials," "John Chinaman," or simply "John") and derisively as "Coolies" or "Chinks") divulged feelings ranging from condescension to curiosity to admiration. These excerpts, taken from an article entitled "John Chinaman" in the New Orleans Times of June 28, 1871, reveal certain aspects of Chinese life in New Orleans interpreted by one not-quite-typically local journalist:

...John has come to be held upon as a well-behaved member of society in our streets.

The outside style of dress worn by the Celestials attracts notice wherever he appears in the street, and truth to tell, his long white blouse, short coat, and extended pigtail, together with the extraordinary shoes worn, permit him in an aspect decidedly opposed to the ideas of elegance. Still he holds on to the "even tenor of a way..." and a samovar, from observation, that he has learned that most difficult of all accomplishments—the handling of his own business.

One interesting old shop, run by the Fou Loy & Co. shop on Chartres Street, is constantly engaged in pretending to write in a large ledger-like book, with a view no doubt to delude him and the public into the belief that business is heavy.

An interview with John's family fails to reveal the existence of any of the female portion of Chinese humanity, as we could not find a lovely woman to yet make their appearance in our Southern country. However, the "heathen" is so thoroughly a domestic animal that housekeeping suffers none of the unfair ones.

In New Orleans, where certain Chinese engaged in the selling of cigars or other banquettes in front of the city street Arabs have contracted a vicious habit of playing jokes upon these men, one of which consists in a party slipping behind the iron fence, and seizing the Chinaman's pig tail, which is a custom of no little consequence when it attempts to change his course in a moment. Let the New Orleans John take warning. However we wish the Celestials all success, and have no doubt that in the course of time they will contribute much to the prosperity of our city. Good-bye John.542

Lucy M. Cohen, citing 1880 census data, characterized the ninety-five Chinese living in New Orleans that year (there were 489 in Louisiana) as a segment of the city's white-immigrant society, primarily comprising single men residing in boarding houses and apartments. Less than a dozen were married at one point or another, and only two were married Chinese women; the others, whose spouses represented the New Orleans' ethnic mix, the most common occupations related to laundering, cooking or selling cigars, and building, but many other vocations were listed and no one was eliminated. At this time, there was no tightly knit Chinese community in New Orleans, and few owned the urban center at Canal Street and the French Quarter.

The lack of geographical cohesion derived from the small size of the Chinese community, its highly transient nature, and the extreme lack of Chinese women. Nevertheless, by the mid-1870s, we see early evidence of a Chinese presence in the Third Ward neighborhood that would eventually grow as New Orleans' Chinatown for the next half-century. It came in the form of the Loung Sing Laundry at 41 South Rampart (present-day 160 South Rampart, recently demolished), recorded in the Soard's City Directory of 1874 and depicted in the Sanborn Insurance Map of 1876. Two other Chinese laundries opened nearby, at 117 and 153 Gravier. The 1880 census, the area bounded by Canal, Barron, Julia, and South Liberty lists four Chinese-born males in their twenties, probably brothers, working at the aforementioned laundries.

In 1881-1882, a Maine-born missionary from Boston named Lena Saunders recently arrived to New Orleans and teaching at the Freedmen's School, began offering classes in English, American culture, and Christianity to her home to a group of five Chinese immigrants. The popularity of the classes caught the attention of the Canal Street Presbyterian Church, which in 1882 incorporated the effort as part of its mission to foreigners. As the costs of sponsoring the charitable endeavor grew, the Presbytery of New Orleans took over responsibility for the mission, funding it at $600 a year. Miss Saunders' Chinese Sunday school became an officially sponsored Chinese Mission in New Orleans.544 At this time, the Canal Street Presbyterian Church worshipped in a circa-1872 edifice at the corner of Canal and Derbigny, but its present site—when it was known as the Fourth Presbyterian Church—was a much grander church on the corner of South Liberty and Gasquet (present-day Cleveland, between Canal Street and Tulane Avenue), built in 1860.547 It was next to

542 "John Chinaman.
543 Chinese in the Post-Civil War South, 137.
545 Sanborn Insurance Maps of 1876, Soard's City Directory of 1874, 1876, and 1882. Chinese businesses were identified by name in earlier directories; the entries were not categorized under "Chinese" as they would be in later years.
546 February 12, 1882, is the founding date of the Chinese Mission, according to the modern-day Canal Street Presbyterian Church.
547 Canal Street Presbyterian Church, 100 Bars Canal Street Presbyterian Church New Orleans, La., 1847 (New Orleans, 1947), 10-15.
this building that Miss Saunders rented a property for the Chinese Mission, a large, 77x120-foot American-style center-hall raised cottage with an airy gallery and twin domestic quarters, numbered as 40 South Liberty according to the old address system and later 215 South Liberty. It was a "roomy house ideal for teaching purposes, with its large rooms offering adequate space for classes of any size, and for entertaining of groups large and small. There were rooms where the scholars could have a 'home away from home....'"

The Presbytery of New Orleans later purchased the house and three lots for $2520, making it the permanent home of the Chinese Mission. The pier-supported structure was later raised even higher for the installation of a ground-floor room used as a chapel, giving it an imposing street elevation.

Lena Saunders' mission served over 200 Chinese and other Asians (the first convert was "Corean") in the mid-1880s and became the hub of the transient Chinese community in the Crescent City—a place to feel welcome, learn English, and be among friends. "Find the school at 40 Liberty Street," advised a returned Chinese immigrant to his New Orleans-bound brother in 1887, "and go every week;" he listened, "having attended every session since his arrival." Visitors included Chinese merchants en route from California and cities in the South and Caribbean, field laborers returning to New Orleans, and Chinese New Orleanians setting down roots in their adopted home. Some students even formed a Chinese Society of the King's Sons, a benevolent organization to help brethren in need. (One Chinese Mission student was ten-year-old Lee Bing, brought to New Orleans by his father in 1913. The Lee family would later open a laundry in Algiers and then at 1132 Caroline Street, where the parents and six children "lived in the back room that barely held two double beds and a single canvas cot." One of those children would become one of the most popular public figures in the region today, Jefferson Parish Sheriff Harry Lee, born in 1932, visited Chinatown many times as a child and even lived there briefly in 1941, after the merchants had left for Bourbon Street.)

In establishing the Chinese Mission, Miss Saunders unwittingly helped make the Third Ward neighborhood near 215 South Liberty, at the fringes of the business district immediately upriver from Canal Street, the geographical hub of the Chinese community. In 1900, the Times-Democrat estimated that 150-175 Chinese, representing roughly 25 to 30 percent of New Orleans' Chinese community, received

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55 Ibid., 15.
56 Southwestern Presbyterian, October 20, 1887, as quoted by ibid., 24.
57 Cohen, Chinese in the Post-Civil War South, 137-40.
Chinatown, New Orleans

An institutional history is the fact that helps form ethnic enclaves; families sponsor them. A woman named E.P. Radford, who took over the Chinese Mission in 1894 after Saunders' incapacitation, also transformed a transient group of Chinese males into a permanent community of residents when she escorted Chinese women from San Francisco to be brides in the Chinese Mission's first marriage. “This was the beginning of the trend that made the Chinese Presbyterian Church possible, the permanence of the Chinese presence in New Orleans,”556 Earlier years had seen primarily young men arriving to make money and return to the homeland, an instinct so strong that the bodies of those who died there were shipped back to China. “But when families began to be established, the end of that custom was bound to come.”557 Because of the Chinese exclusion laws, women of Chinese descent usually came to New Orleans from other American cities, primarily San Francisco.

As the Chinese Mission welcomed immigrants to its doors, it also exposed them to its neighborhood, becoming a critical role in the development of Chinatown. In 1886, for example, when there were fifty-seven laundries with Chinese names operating in the city, ten were located in the vicinity of the Chinese Mission and another eight were nearby—despite the fact that laundries were usually dispersed citywide for the convenience of their clientele.558 Starting around 1892, the cluster known as Chinatown began to develop. In 1895, the Soong Wolee merchandise store opened on or within a block of 1100 Tulane. In 1900, seven Chinese markets, groceries, and merchandise shops filled the short block in its entirety.

What did Chinatown look like? Photos and illustrations from the 1900s present a vivid picture of this ethnic neighborhood. Some photographs show a circa-1930s image of the Chinese Mission curio shop, a 1911 interior shot of a Chinatown curio shop, and a 1911 exterior shot of a Chinatown curio shop. Other photographs depict the Chinese Mission's first marriage, a circa-1930s image of the Chinese Mission's interior, and a 1911 photograph of the Chinese Mission's exterior.

This circa-1902 detail, looking up Common Street as it widens into Tulane Avenue, captures Chinatown at center, on both sides of the first wide block of the avenue. The towering Criminal Courts Building (1893) overlooked the bustling intersection.


556 Ibid.
557 Langtry, Chinese Presbyterian Church of New Orleans, 1882-1982 (Jackson, 2001), xiv and 89.
natown, a sketch in a 1950 Coca-Cola ad, and some low-elevation aerial photographs taken in the 1920s. They show, on the downriver side of the block, a one-story, seven-unit market-like structure with a low hip roof and an overhanging parapet adorned with dentils. According to the Coca-Cola ad—admittedly not a particularly reliable record—CHINATOWN was spelled out across the roof, visible to shoppers on Tulane Avenue. Its most distinctive feature was its wrap-around permanent awning, which gave the block the pavilion-like appearance of a market. Inside was a solid line of Chinese grocers specializing in their unique foodstuffs and merchandise. It was not, however, a true retail market. The upriver side of 1100 Tulane was a block of homes, comprising about ten units in a single, irregularly shaped row of one to two stories. Most structures on the block appeared to date from the late antebellum era, and from the decade following the war that spanned the first decades of the century thus comprised a small but dense core along 1100 Tulane Avenue—the one place where the genuine wall-to-wall Chinese streetscape prevailed—adjoined by a lower-density cluster of Chinese-related institutions, businesses, and upper-story residences in the blocks encircling Tulane, South Rampart, Canal, and South Liberty. There were, of course, no hard boundaries to the district; one modern source described the district as “amoeba-like,” for its sundry components scattered between the markets of 1100 Tulane and the Chinese Mission of 215 South Liberty. Others, such as the Times-Picayune in 1910, restricted it to the core zone: “Squatting dingily along Tulane Avenue, between South Rampart and Saratoga streets, Chinatown extends on both sides of its one block of existence,” although the article also acknowledged the influence of the nearby Chinese Mission. One Daily Picayune article in 1910 alluded to the amorphous shape of the enclave as well as its residential makeup: “Chinatown, as it is commonly called, is clustered at the base of Elk’s Place, in the vicinity of police headquarters [present-day site of the New Orleans Public Library], and a round-up would reveal there types of the Oriental as ‘peculiar’ as any ever dreamed of...from the rich Tulane Avenue merchant, who has waxed prosperous through the bondage system [payments to sponsors by immigrants smuggled in illegally], to the most efficient gun-man of the largest tong [a clan of families]. And just down the street, and around the corner in South Franklin Street, live little Mrs. Fung John and her brood of five children...”

According to the Sanborn Fire Insurance Map of 1908-1909 and city directories of that time, the Chinese colony in this thoroughly interracial neighborhood included a Chinese Club House, some at times to the Chinese Mission House as well. The anti-Manchu Dynasty Chee Gung Tong organization, at 145 Elk Place; a Chinese restaurant directly across the street at 156-158 Elk Place; a store at 215 South Rampart, and a “Chinese and American Restaurant” in the corner at 1204 Canal; a Chinese laundry at the corner of South Villere and Canal; and the aforementioned merchants at 1100 Tulane. These businesses were scattered within two to three blocks of the Chinese Mission and School at 215 South Liberty. The year 1916 stands out as one of the peak years of New Orleans’ Chinatown, when fifteen institutions and businesses were listed in various sections of the Soard’s City Directory of the following year:

- Chinese Mission Presbyterian Church, 215 South Liberty
- Chinese Mission Presbyterian School, 215 South Liberty
- Chinese National League, 207 South Rampart
- Chinese Republican Association, 145 South Basin Street
- Green & Young Co., Grocer, 1113 Gasquet Street
- Lung Sing Land Co., Grocer, 1112 Tulane Avenue
- Kee Nau Him & Co., Grocer, 1113 Tulane Avenue
- Ben Hing Low, Chinese Restaurant, 156 South Basin Street
- On Yee & Co., Grocer, 1107 Tulane Avenue
- Quan Wing & Co., Grocer, 1108 Tulane Avenue

![](https://example.com/chinatown_image.jpg)

Had the photographer tilted his camera slightly downward, this 1909 panoramic shot would have captured Chinatown perfectly. The roof of the main Chinatown market structure is visible at extreme bottom left, between Basin and South Rampart streets. Storyville appears in the distant upper left. Courtesy Library of Congress.
Chinatown, New Orleans emerged in the 1870s and rose in earnest in the 1880s, when missionary Lena Saunders opened a Chinese Mission at the nearby Canal Street Presbyterian Church. The operation exposed Chinese immigrants to this area, which afforded retail economic opportunities and reasonable rent. Chinatown lasted until 1937, when its core structures were demolished.

Map and analysis by author based on 1917 City Directory.

- Quong Chong Lung & Co., Grocer, 1116 T ulane Avenue
- Sun Wah Lung Co., Grocer, 1117 T ulane Avenue
- Tung Charley, Chinese Restaurant, 1106 T ulane Avenue
- Yee Wah Sing, Chinese Restaurant, 209 South Rampart Street
- Yuin Ton, Grocer, 1105 T ulane Avenue

Chinatown was also, to a degree, a residential neighborhood, with some households residing above or near the store, and others living here but working elsewhere. Hing L. King operated a Chinese restaurant at 240 North Franklin in the Faubourg Treme, but lived at 150 South Basin in Chinatown. Chin Chou Poo managed the well-known Fou Loy & Company Chinese merchandise shop at 1128 Chartres, founded in 1871 as the first store of its type in the city, but lived at 1128 Tulane Avenue, in Chinatown’s “main drag.” Those Chinese who came of age overseas continued to wear their traditional garb, speak their native tongue, and practice homeland customs, while their locally born offspring adopted language, dress, and practices of the only environs they knew. Some elders refrained from donning their kimonos in public for the curious attention they drew, and the sight soon disappeared from the streets. So too did the “pig tails,” which caused local journalists endless amusement in the early years.

As is often the case in cultural assimilation, food preferences proved to be among the most tenacious customs. “Most of the Chinese cling to their native dishes, even when they discard Oriental costume. Rice is their staple food, in season and out, but fish, beef, and other delicacies are imported from China. They drink tea as Americans do water.”

568 Soard’s City Directory of 1917.
569 Branan, “The Dual Life of Chinatown.”
of the community, which totaled around 200 in the city in the early 1900s, was commonly held for a lack of Chinese women: there were only five married Chinese women recorded in New Orleans in 1910. According to one outside observer, “Chinese wives are treated with the utmost consideration, and they are overindulgent in the treatment of their children.”

Chinatown denizens voiced their politics through organizations such as the Chinese National League at 214 South Rampart and the Chinese Republican Association at 145 South Basin. In that latter location convened perhaps the most exotic entity in the district. There, “in the heart of New Orleans,” as the Daily Picayune proclaimed dramatically in 1906, “the very center of a great modern city where western civilization has reached its highest development, stands the small two-story brick dwelling, within the walls of which a Chinaman has set out the Occident at only the things suggestive of the mysterious Far East are to be found.” This was the headquarters of the Chee Gung Tong, the revolutionary organization advocating the philosophy of Sun Yat-Sen, the reformer of Ming Chow, and the offspring of the Manchu Dynasty. The upper floor of this building, at the present-day corner of Cleveland and Elk Place, contained a magnificently appointed temple, which the local newspaper described as “dedicated to the worship of heavenly deities” and “constructed along the lines of barbaric picturesque.” A block and a half away, at South Rampart and Tulane, convened the local branch of the Bow Wung Wei, an organization of Chinese expatriots established in numerous large Western cities and dedicated to spreading reformism in China. Among New Orleans’ Chinese community, including both the Chee Gung Tong and the Bow Wung Wei, supported reform in the homeland, hoping to see the land of their birth take her place among nations as the leading paternal government of the world. In front of the shops on 1100 Tchoupitoulas, recalled a newspaper many years later, “congregated nightly Chinese merchants, laundries and philosophers, who discussed the sing-song Cantonese, everything of moment in China and the world of Sun Yat-Sen’s attempts to make China a republic.”

As the 1890s witnessed the development of the heart of Chinatown, it also saw Chinese immigrants and migrants citywide rise from the status of boardhouse transients to find their niche in the local society and economy. In other Southern cities, that niche was grocery stores and food preparation, but perhaps because Sicilians and other groups had found their specialization in, according to one observer in the Picayune, “the fascinating pursuit of other people’s clothes for the purpose of cleaning them for a nominal charge.”

Hand laundring—the ubiquitous Chinese laundry—was defined everywhere in this fashion-conscious town, with all social and business functions, all one needed was the smallest capital outlays for a specialized iron, a board, washing equipment, and a roof overhead—which could be a house. Chinese domination of the hand laundering market was predicted early as 1871, when Chinese first began to settle in the city in significant numbers. “The peculiar forte of the Chinese,” wrote the New Orleans Times-Picayune, “is that of laundryman. In this particular branch of trade he excels to a remarkable degree, and in San Francisco, where Chinsmen abound, there are hundreds of laundries, which, thanks to the extreme neatness and scientific arrangements of the Chinese, have almost exclusive control of the washing trade of the city.... The versatile talent of the Chinese is well known, and it would not surprise us to see some day an individual... becoming a fixed institution in New Orleans, even as he is in other cities.”

The journalist was right; the 1876 city directory recorded two laundries with Chinese names. That number rose to thirteen Chinese laundries in the 1882 directory, fifty-seven in the 1886 directory (which also recorded possibly New Orleans’ first Chinese laundress). In 1906, the Chinese males ran some 120 laundries in the city; the women ran several laundries.”


570 Ibid.

571 “Chinese for Reform: Local Colony Follows the Example of Other Cities,” Daily Picayune, January 14, 1907, p. 4, col. 4.

Chinese New Orleans

Chinatown, New Orleans

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Geographies of New Orleans
by Richard Campanella

75 Chinese laundries along the seventy-five or so blocks of Magazine Street, from Canal Street to Audubon Park, in 1913. Peterson, “Inside the Chinese Community.” Chinese laundries outnumbered them that year by nearly seventeen-to-one. While eighteen of the 198 Chinese laundries (and four of the eight restaurants) operated in or near the Chinatown area in 1898, the vast majority—91 percent—were scattered throughout residential and commercial neighborhoods of New Orleans. In the automobile age, a laundry had to be located within a convenient distance from its middle- and upper-middle-class clientele, but not too close to other competing laundries.75

Chinese New Orleanians went to Chinatown for social and institutional functions, for specialty items from the homeland, for laundering supplies and equipment, and for Chinese food, both for the markets and prepared in restaurants. A Tulane Avenue grocer would stock “the queer Chinese wares, the embroideries, the tiny sandals, the dried shrimps, the jars of fiery confections and preserves” over which hung “a sinister atmosphere, to the foreigner.”76 Not so sinister: New Orleanians of all backgrounds regularly visited the district for Chinese merchandise, exotic foodstuffs and lunch plates. The Yee Wah Sen Restaurant on South Basin, for example, catered to both the “tough” specimens of the underworld and “respectable members of...polite society,” serving both blacks and whites (in segregated seating), such that the aristocrat...rubbed elbows with the hoi polloi.77

The curio shops specialized in linen, ivory, teak wood tables, silk kimonos, and mandarin coats popular with upwardly mobile musicians, and narcotics for the denizens of nearby Storyville. Recalled jazz musician Jelly Roll Morton, “I was personally sent to Chinatown many times with a sealed note and a small amount of money and would bring back [for the prostitutes in Storyville] several cards of hop. There was no slipping and dodging. All you had to do was walk in to be served.” Among the drugs available for delivery to Storyville were “opium, heroin, cocaine, morphine, etcetera.”78

Street-level photographs of Chinatown are exceedingly rare. This sketch of the main market building at 1100 Tulane Avenue comes from a nostalgic 1950 Coca-Cola ad. An International-style office building was built on the site in 1950; it now houses facilities for Hibernia Bank. Coca-Cola sketch from the Times-Picayune/New Orleans States; photograph by author, 2004.

Graham’s City Directory of 1898, 968-69. There were twenty-six Chinese laundries and seventy-three in the 1892 directory, which listed three Chinese laundries. By 1898, those numbers more than doubled to eight restaurants and 198 laundries.75 So were the Chinese control the laundry business, that the city directory listed them separately as “Chinese” laundries as opposed to “Steam” laundries. Although steam laundries were larger operations requiring more capital and serving larger institutional clients (the Chalmers Laundry near Charity Hospital was one of the largest in the world), Chinese laundries outnumbered them that year by nearly seventeen-to-one. While eighteen of the 198 Chinese laundries (and four of the eight restaurants) operated in or near the Chinatown area in 1898, the vast majority—91 percent—were scattered throughout residential and commercial neighborhoods of New Orleans. In the automobile age, a laundry had to be located within a convenient distance from its middle- and upper-middle-class clientele, but not too close to other competing laundries.75

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Loxoly, masked by a modern façade.) Dispersed throughout this area were important places associated with the emergence of jazz, particularly around the South Rampart/Perdido intersection, only two blocks from Chinatown.585 Jazz musicians in their golden years, interviewed in the 1950s and 1960s, commonly recalled this general district and much of the color and lore from the early days of jazz.586 The stories of this area. In particular, famous for the bustling excitement of its street life, the sights, smells, and sounds of this back-of-town district must have been superlative. Louis Armstrong, born on nearby Jane Alley in 1901, reminisced warmly about the area (907) in his elder years:

"The neighborhood was filled with Negroes, Jews of many races and lots of Chinese.... The latter finally worded for a little section of their own and called it "China Town," a few blocks from their Chinese dishes. I used to order the Negros brought about their Lead Beans and Lye. That was the way an old waiter would order it for you....."586  Mother + my Stepfather used to take me + Mama Lucy (my sister) down in "China Town" to have a Chinese meal for a change. A kind of special occasion.586"

**CHINATOWN BY THE NUMBERS:**

**THE 1920 CENSUS**

A survey of the blocks bounded by Canal, South Rampart, Poydras, and South Liberty in the 1920 census reveals the presence of a clear and distinct Chinatown, but not a substantial Chinese residential neighborhood.587 Only forty-eight of the 1,903 people living in this area were listed as Chinese, a greater proportion compared to 644 whites and 122 blacks in the same enumeration district. This represents a decline from 1910, when there were 1,059 Chinese residents in this same area, most of them comprising single men (mean age forty-five) living alone, of whom 93 percent were born in China and the remainder in California.588 Among whites in 1920, there were significantly more Sicilians and Eastern European Jews than Chinese; the neighborhood as a whole was extraordinarily diverse and intermixed. Judging from the mother tongue of the individual’s father, the non-Asian white community was 38 percent Italian (Sicilian), 12 percent Jewish (Yiddish speaking), 7 percent German, and 4 percent Spanish-speaking, with other 5 percent claiming French, Irish, British English, Greek, Hungarian, Indian, and Norwegian-speaking fathers. Only about one-third of the white community comprised English-speaking Americans with no recent immigrants. The black population, which outnumbered whites two-to-one, lived mostly in

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588 Based on analysis of digitally transcribed 1910 Census population schedules for New Orleans City Guide (Boston, 1938), 216.
In the pre-automobile age, a laundry had to be close to its clientele to maximize convenience but far enough from other laundries to minimize competition. Citywide dispersion was the solution. Since family members often lived near, above, or behind the laundry, the laundering industry geographically dispersed younger Chinese families throughout the city. Middle-aged single Chinese males, on the other hand, were more likely to cluster in Chinatown, usually to retail Chinese merchandise and groceries.

Map and analysis by author based on numerous sources.

The rear of the district, and was predominantly non-Creole in its ethnicity, with many born out-of-state. Despite their small (and likely undercounted) numbers, the twenty-eight Chinese residents were tightly clustered around the 1100 block of Toulouse Avenue. The census tells us that the population was:

- Overwhelmingly male and single. Only two of the Chinese men were married; married Chinese men, mothers, and probably housewives. One Chinese man had a white wife; their five children were all classified as Chinese. Nineteen of the thirty-five adult men were single or widowed. Indeed, most young Chinese families lived elsewhere in the city, often in association with a laundry business. Chinatown, with its rough reputation and proximity to vice, was not an optimal place for young families.
- Not particularly young. Thirty residents were in their forties, another twelve were in their fifties and sixties. Eleven were between twenty and thirty-nine, and an equal number were children, including some infants.
- Mostly Chinese-born and Chinese speaking. Only one adult man was born elsewhere, in California. Nineteen of the thirty-five adult men were single or widowed. Indeed, most young Chinese families lived elsewhere in the city, often in association with a laundry business. Chinatown, with its rough reputation and proximity to vice, was not an optimal place for young families.

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Traditional Chinese laundries are mostly gone from the New Orleans cityscape, victims of wash-and-wear clothing and changing tastes in apparel. Many laundry families reinvested in dry-cleaning enterprises and restaurants. Shown here is a laundry still operating in Tremé (left, photographed on Mardi Gras), a closed laundry on Freret Street (center), and a unique former laundry on Bayou Road and North Dorgenois.


Ethnic Geographies

Why There?

Younger Chinese with families in early twentieth-century New Orleans were more likely to disperse themselves throughout the city. This pattern can be explained by the nature of the laundering business. Middle-aged single Chinese males, on the other hand, were more likely to cluster in Chinatown, usually to retail Chinese merchandise and groceries. This explains the location of Chinatown? An analogy of seed, soil, and water aids in answering this question.

Chinatown’s “seed” was the Chinese Mission. This was the institution that initially drew significant numbers of Chinese to this area, exposing them to a likely neighborhood and even likely locale to start a business. The Chinese Mission in turn was so located because its patron, the Canal Street Presbyterian Church, had operated in this general vicinity since 1860. While it is important to note that a few Chinese businesses existed in this area six to eight years prior to the founding of the Chinese Mission, the latter did not really form until after the mission was opening.

Chinatown’s “soil” was the abundance of reasonably priced, structurally appropriate commercial real estate in this section of the Third Ward. The area was close enough to downtown to maximize convenience, yet far enough away to remain economical. It was well within walking distance of the commercial, cultural, and political heart of New Orleans, yet close enough to the undesirable back-of-town to keep the rent down. The double lanes of electrified trolleys on South Rampart Street and Tulane Avenue connected it with the rest of the city; in fact, the Tulane Belt streetcar line looped immediately around the Chinese merchants at 1100 Tulane and connected them with all of uptown. Chinese families operating laundries throughout the city could reach Chinatown for foodstuffs and laundry supplies by means of these urban railways. It was as good a place as any for a business-minded immigrant group to get its start—just as long as the “soil” was “watered.”

The “water” that helped fuel Chinatown was the steady stream of Chinese countrymen who visited the mission, and the greater stream who patronized the stores and institutions once Chinatown was established. When a critical mass was reached, Chinatown “seemed its own seed,” and those Chinese migrants who came afterward did so simply because other countrymen were already there. Additionally, and perhaps more significantly from an economic perspective, the local black community of the back-of-town, excluded by Jim Crow laws from visiting stores on Canal Street and elsewhere provided an important customer base for Chinese shops and restaurants. The WPA New Orleans City Guide described South Rampart Street as the “Harlem of New Orleans,” and the area bordered by South Rampart, Claiborne, Canal, and Louisiana Avenue, which included Chinatown, was one of the most predominantly black sections of the city in the 1930s. In this sense, Chinatown was the same


Federal Writers’ Project of the Works Progress Administration, New Orleans City Guide, 44, 343.

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commercial interface along South Rampart Street, between the predominantly white front-of-town and the mostly black back-of-town, that Jewish tailors and merchants occupied.

In sum, an enclave like Chinatown could have formed anywhere within the “immigrant belt,” that medium-density, medium-priced, mixed commercial/residential zone that lay between the city’s expensive high-density commercial core and its residential perimeter. This fascinating zone stretched loosely from the lower French Quarter and the Faubourg Marigny, through the Faubourg Tremé, through the Chinatown/back-of-town area, to Dryades Street, and around to the uptown-riverfront area known loosely as the Irish Channel.

**“Strange, Wild, Picturesque”**

**The Asian Shrimp Dryers of the Louisiana Coast**

Orbiting the Chinese community of New Orleans was a network of Asian shrimp drying stations and working in the remote salinarine marshes of coastal Louisiana. While shrimp drying had been practiced elsewhere for years, it was Louisiana’s Asian immigrants in the Barataria Bay and the marshes of St. Bernard, Plaquemines, and Jefferson parishes who introduced the practice of shrimp drying here, producing a much cheaper, abundant, and thus more popular product than the canned delicacy. The process involved boiling the crustaceans in salty water, then raking them upon a platform under the sun to dry. Members of the community would then wrap their feet in burlap and rhythmically dance upon the thick, packed shrimp to the rhythm of a chant, creating a motion that removed the heads and shells from the salted, dried catch. The final product was then packed 220 pounds to a barrel and shipped to New Orleans. The industry may have begun in the 1840s in Louisiana but grew in earnest in the 1870s, with the attention of a rice-plantation investor from San Francisco named Lee Yam and his son, Lee Yat. The son, by the early 1900s, owned over 700 acres of marsh plus platforms, dwellings, and warehouses. He employed as many as eighty people, ran some of the largest shrimp seine boats, and oversaw his operation like a “feudal landlord.” Shrimp drying produced a unique built environment—“stilt villages” built on wooden platforms—surrounded by an inhospitable natural world, a sight more reminiscent of southeast Asia than southeast Louisiana. One such community, Saint Maló in the west end of Barataria Bay, was described by Lafcadio Hearn in 1899:

> “The Decline of Chinatown”

One Times-Picayune journalist noticed in 1920 a natural assimilation among the Chinese that, as it turned out, foretold Chinatown’s decline. “The Chinatown of New Orleans is passing,” he noted. “The honored ancestors...in the Flow-ery Land must stir in their sleep if they know how their descendents who lived the world have taken in the language and customs and methods of their adopted country within the last few years.” Chinese merchants attended telephones, cash registers, and account ledgers to replace their abacuses. Children and entire families learned English at the Chinese Mission and huddled around English textbooks while tending their Tulane Avenue shops. Once so despised, became as dear to the district’s shops as shopsticks in the enclave’s restaurants. In 1920, “the only atmosphere left [was] the remnants of the East that is as separable to the Orient living garlic to the Latin races.”

Exclusionary immigration laws on the books since 1882 had greatly restricted the flow of new immigrants directly from China, rendering the Chinese American population of New Orleans decreasingly Chinese and increasingly American. Nevertheless, even as the number of Chinese laundries halved...
increased their access to the suburbs—and less dependent on a downtown district to fulfill social and retail needs. The next few decades saw the easing of Chinese exclusion laws (an effect of the China/U.S. alliance against the common enemy of Japan in World War II), which increased Chinese immigration in general, and slowly augmented the local Chinese community. Recent immigrants followed in the steps of the established Chinese American community, or steps that led away from downtown, and away from Chinatown.

Although exact year-to-year counts are difficult because city directories used inconsistent categorization standards each year, the number of Chinese businesses in Chinatown remained fairly stable into the early 1930s—enough in 1932, to warrant the local branch of the national On Leong Chinese Merchants Association at 1112 Tulean Avenue. But the aforementioned trends took their toll, and by 1944 only two remained. The final block on the upriver side of 1100 Tulean was slated for demolition. Being renters rather than owners, the merchants of Chinatown were at the mercy of their landlords. “Chinatown is moving lock, stock, and herd barrel from Tulean Avenue to the 500 and 600 blocks of Bourbon street,” announced a front-page article in the Times-Picayune on Monday, September 20, 1937, “Chinese merchants...started moving their pungent bales and barrels of rice, their Chinese clothes, nuts and herbs, dried fruit, firecrackers and noodles...their chestnuts and mushroom barrels from Tulean Avenue to the 500 and 600 blocks of Bourbon street,” announced a front-page article in the Times-Picayune on Monday, September 20, 1937.

“Chinatown merchants...started moving their pungent bales and barrels of rice, their Chinese clothes, nuts and herbs, dried fruit, firecrackers and noodles...their chestnuts and mushroom barrels from Tulean Avenue to the 500 and 600 blocks of Bourbon street,” announced a front-page article in the Times-Picayune on Monday, September 20, 1937. In 1926, the Presbytery of New Orleans sold the 215 Tulean property and moved the Chinese Mission to a double-gallery house at 223 South Roman Street. The new building was criticized by the congregation as an inferior structure in an undesirable location—perhaps cementing the fact that such a move would extract the congregation from the Chinatown area—but the money saved allowed for further investment in the mission. Concurrently, the Chinese American community rose from its status as a marginal community in New Orleans immigrant society to that of a native, stable middle-class. The citizens were now more mobile—economically, geographically, and literally, in the sense that automobiles

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“Rubble All that Remains of Old N.O. Chinatown.”

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Soard’s City Directory of 1925.
Mission) was relocated, the “soil” was destroyed. Demolition of Chinatown structures and exodus of the city’s working class, and the “water” (steady stream of clientele) had evaporated. Reflecting the same geographic patterns of New Orleans’ other ethnic communities, the Chinese American community gradually moved from the size and not nearly as culturally significant as the old Tulane Avenue Chinatown. 603 Also on Bourbon Street started in late 1937, when Bourbon had its share of bars and jazz clubs but had not yet become the world-famous strip that World War II would make it. Even with the eventual complete demolition of the first nine blocks of Bourbon Street nightlife tourism—or perhaps because of it—this tiny Chinatown lasted for a remarkably long time. There were only more than a half-dozen Chinese retailers, restaurants, and laundries plus the On Leong Chinese Merchants Association, operating on or within one block of the 500 block of Bourbon. In a way, the On Leong Association, which “closely bound the city’s Chinese businesses together and through its social activities [preserved] some Eastern customs,” unified the new Bourbon Street Chinatown as the Chinese Mission formally organized as the Chinese Presbyterian Church. 602 This Mid-City neighborhood incorporated over the next three decades, forcing the relocation of most members to Jefferson Parish by the 1980s. The church followed them in 1997, moving to its fourth and current home—2901 West Esplanade Avenue in Kenner—in 1995.

The “new Chinatown” on the 500-600 blocks of Bourbon Street started in late 1937, when Bourbon had its share of bars and jazz clubs but had not yet become the world-famous strip that World War II would make it. Even with the eventual complete demolition of the first nine blocks of Bourbon Street nightlife tourism—or perhaps because of it—this tiny Chinatown lasted for a remarkably long time. There were only more than a half-dozen Chinese retailers, restaurants, and laundries plus the On Leong Chinese Merchants Association, operating on or within one block of the 500 block of Bourbon. In a way, the On Leong Association, which “closely bound the city’s Chinese businesses together and through its social activities [preserved] some Eastern customs,” unified the new Bourbon Street Chinatown as the Chinese Mission formally organized as the Chinese Presbyterian Church. 602 This Mid-City neighborhood incorporated over the next three decades, forcing the relocation of most members to Jefferson Parish by the 1980s. The church followed them in 1997, moving to its fourth and current home—2901 West Esplanade Avenue in Kenner—in 1995.

The last remaining structure of Chinatown is the two-story building at center, seen here with a white modern façade, on the Uptown side of 1100 Toulouse Avenue. Ironic, a Vietnamese-Chinese restaurant operates next to it. Photograph by author, 2003.
people of Chinese ancestry in the seven-parish metropolitan area, mostly dispersed in a pattern generally reflecting the larger white population. They are concentrated most heavily in Jefferson Parish, and particularly in a Metairie census tract (with 154 Chinese residents) near the West Esplanade Avenue/Division Street intersection. Together with 14,863 people of Vietnamese ancestry; 3,800 residents from India; 2,370 Filipinos; 1,204 Koreans; and 707 Japanese, these Chinese New Orleanians form the region's growing and increasingly influential Asian American community.608 In 2003, plans were even in place for a new Chinatown of thirty stores, a large restaurant, and an Asian Market, at 925 Behrmann Highway in Algiers.609 Old Chinatown, meanwhile, is today the most utterly obliterated of New Orleans' historic ethnic enclaves. The reason: it had the misfortune of being located precisely between modern New Orleans' two most dynamic economic districts. On one side is the Central Business District, which experienced extensive demolition and new construction from the 1950s to the end of the oil boom in the 1980s. On the other side is the expansive “medical district” along Tulane Avenue, consisting of vast research, teaching, and care facilities affiliated with numerous institutions. Add to this the demand for parking space and the lack of historic/district protection for this area and structurally speaking, Chinatown did not stand a chance. Not only have the original Chinese Mission and the adjacent circa-1860 Presbyterian Church been demolished, but their entire block on South Liberty—street and all—is gone, subsumed by Tulane University Medical Center. The castle-like Criminal Courts building that dominated the area since 1893 was demolished in 1949; its site is now partially occupied by the main branch of the New Orleans Public Library. Major arteries have been widened, and street names have been changed.


Starting in 1957, the Tulane/South Rampart/Elk Place intersection was reengineered to accommodate the widened streets and increased traffic, reducing the widths of former Chinatown’s broad sidewalks but a handful of surviving nineteenth-century buildings have been cleared away, replaced by functional modern medical structures and office buildings. At the obtusely angled corner of South Rampart and Common streets stands a partial demolition,610 a series of late nineteenth-century Italianate commercial structures that housed Chinese and Jewish occupants a century ago. A building next to them—160 South Rampart, recently demolished—was the site of the Loung Sing Laundry, recorded in the Soard’s City Directory of 1874 and the Sanborn Insurance Map of 1876 as perhaps the earliest Chinese establishment in what would become Chinatown.611 The parking lot

610 These buildings were finally destroyed on August 30, 2004.
611 Proposed demolition of these last structures became a controversial issue in 2000-2001. Asked Shae-Mei Temple in a brochure by Operation Lotus Roots entitled Discovering the Forgotten Chinese Quarter, “Why has it come to this in a city that...
that paved over the lower side of 1100 Tulane in 1937 was replaced in 1950 by the International-style office building of the California Company oil firm. It is now the computer center for Hibernia Bank. Across the street, the high-rise Oil and Gas Building was erected in 1960 on the site of a number of former Chinese establishments. Only one structure from Chinatown days remains on the 1100 block of Tulane; though its façade is modernized, its old brick side wall is still visible.\textsuperscript{612} Next to it, in splendid irony, stands a new Chinese-Vietnamese restaurant, its owners and patrons probably oblivious to the history of their location. Stranger yet, a number of other Chinese lunch spots are scattered throughout the former Chinatown area today. In 2002, seven were located in the blocks between the Canal/Burgundy intersection up to Tulane/Claiborne avenues. By comparison, only one currently serves the entire French Quarter. Granted, some were closed and others served Vietnamese as well as Chinese food; indeed, the cluster surely just reflects the large lunch crowds from nearby hospitals and universities. Probably zero relationship exists between these new establishments and those of "the Celestials" from a century ago. But the gigantic sign reading CHINATOWN at one such spot at 1005 Canal Street, only two blocks from the heart of the old enclave, makes one wonder.

Is New Orleans so much pride in its rich and diverse heritage? How could this be in a city where preserved historic landmarks form the cornerstones of its vibrant tourism industry, (albeit multi-cultural tourism is all the rage? What is the heritage in a city with well-established modern Chinese-American community? Is it to be that we have already lost touch with that part of our collective past? Alas, Temple died suddenly of meningitis in 2002.

\textsuperscript{612} This last structural vestige may also soon disappear: in 2004-2005, the city approved the addition to make room for the garage of a planned hotel. Bruce Eggler, "Last Vestige of Chinatown May Fall," \textit{Times-Picayune}, October 16, 2004, B1; and "Final Remnant of City's Chinatown Cleared for the Ax," \textit{Times-Picayune}, January 19, 2005, B1.
Geographies of New Orleans
by Richard Campanella

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THE VIETNAMESE OF VERSAILLES: ETHNICITY AT THE SUBURBAN PERIPHERY

The Vietnamese community of eastern New Orleans neighborhoods known collectively as Versailles counters the overriding trends of New Orleans’ historical ethnic geographies. Most local ethnic distributions exhibited patterns of integration and dispersion; the “Versailles Vietnamese,” on the contrary, are both intensely clustered and physically isolated from the main population. Most immigrants once lived within a nebulous belt immediately encircling downtown; the Vietnamese reside at the urban periphery of the metropolitan area. Most foreign-settling foot into New Orleans since 1803 were immigrants; the Vietnamese were refugees—the largest wave received by the city since the Saint-Domingue exodus of 1809. Versailles stands alone among local enclaves in that it has been the subject of nationwide scholarly attention—among geographers, social scientists, and writers such as Robert D. Eder, whose collection of Versailles residents’ stories, A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain, won the 1993 Pulitzer Prize. And most significantly, while almost all ethnic enclaves in New Orleans history are just that—histories—the story of the Versailles Vietnamese unfurls today. Extraordinary as it is, the Vietnamese community of Little Saigon helps complete the picture of the complex ethnic geography of the Crescent City.

ORIGIN

The Catholicism of French colonialism brought to the delta of Vietnam in the seventeenth century and the delta of the Mississippi in the eighteenth century formed the link that brought Vietnamese refugees to New Orleans at the close of the twentieth century. Catholicism arrived as a minority religion in predominantly Buddhist Vietnam for hundreds of years, despite persistent persecutions by native governments. Some pockets, particularly in the Red River Delta region, the driver from the north to the city of Hanoi, comprised an exclusively Catholic population and were rigorously targeted for harassment. In response to this and other factors, these communities formed “self-contained, self-centered settlements,” wherein priests organized land clearance and the mission provided welfare services, education, and an environment of social cohesion, labeled chrétien by the French. The rise of the Communist Vietminh government in the twentieth century further threatened the Catholics, leading them to

... side with the French during the war for independence. Communist victory in 1954 and the resultant partitioning of the East Asian nation left the Catholics of the chrétien in the increasingly hostile territory of North Vietnam. An exodus began, aided by relief groups and the French and American governments, and over the next few years hundreds of thousands of North Vietnamese refugees, 80 percent of them Catholic, relocated to South Vietnam. For a few thousand refugees of the Red River Delta chrétien, the exodus was the beginning of a long and perilous journey that would eventually lead them to Chef Menteur Highway. The refugees resettled in Melio Delta villages in the vicinity of Saigon, reconstructing a sense of place in the new region with similarly self-sufficient hamlets. Dorned with statues of the Virgin Mary and flying the white-and-yellow flag of the Vatican, most villages were encircled by palisades for protection against the same Communist insurgents who forced them from their central land. Catholicism in Saigon formed a privileged class, most familiar to Western values and favored by the Diem regime. With the fall of Saigon in 1975, the Vietnamese Catholics of both urban and rural areas once again accompanied thousands of their non-Christian countrymen deep into the jungles of the reunited Communist state. The first wave of refugees derived mostly from the urban Saigon Vietnamese establishment associated with the American military presence during the war, for which the U.S. government felt a primary protective responsibility. To counter deliberately abandoned military bases—in California, Florida, Pennsylvania, and Arkansas—the refugees were sent.

THE LOUISIANA CONNECTION

The United States Catholic Conference Migration and Refugee Service and relief agencies nationwide were settling the Vietnamese refugees into American society. Criteria for selecting settlement sites were set out, among them “a good economy, an existing Vietnamese community, higher welfare benefits, and warm weather.” Although New Orleans offered none of the desired attributes, it gained favor on other grounds. The city and region offered a similar brand of conservative, Vatican-reverent Catholicism practiced by Vietnamese Catholics, possibly because of the similar Francophile heritage and isolation from their larger respective national cultures. Its fishing industries, from harvest to processing and distribution, offered potential employment. And most importantly, it offered local advocacy, in the form of a strong relief agency (the Associated Catholic Charities), the sponsorship of the Archdiocese of New Orleans, and the leadership of Archbishop Philip M. Hannan.

In spring 1975, a New Orleans representative of the Associated Catholic Charities met with Catholic refugees from the hamlets of Vung Tau and Phuc Tinh at Eglin Air Force Base with the French during the war for independence. Communist victory in 1954 and the resultant partitioning of the East Asian nation left the Catholics of the chrétien in the increasingly hostile territory of North Vietnam. An exodus began, aided by relief groups and the French and American governments, and over the next few years hundreds of thousands of North Vietnamese refugees, 80 percent of them Catholic, relocated to South Vietnam. For a few thousand refugees of the Red River Delta chrétien, the exodus was the beginning of a long and perilous journey that would eventually lead them to Chef Menteur Highway. The refugees resettled in Melio Delta villages in the vicinity of Saigon, reconstructing a sense of place in the new region with similarly self-sufficient hamlets. Dorned with statues of the Virgin Mary and flying the white-and-yellow flag of the Vatican, most villages were encircled by palisades for protection against the same Communist insurgents who forced them from their central land. Catholicism in Saigon formed a privileged class, most familiar to Western values and favored by the Diem regime. With the fall of Saigon in 1975, the Vietnamese Catholics of both urban and rural areas once again accompanied thousands of their non-Christian countrymen deep into the jungles of the reunited Communist state. The first wave of refugees derived mostly from the urban Saigon Vietnamese establishment associated with the American military presence during the war, for which the U.S. government felt a primary protective responsibility. To counter deliberately abandoned military bases—in California, Florida, Pennsylvania, and Arkansas—the refugees were sent.

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Base in Pensacola, Florida, “telling them that New Orleans had a warm climate and plenty of good fishing nearby. This information seemed very appealing to a great many refugees in the camp and...a large number of Vietnamese [applied] to go to New Orleans under theegis of the Catholic church.617 On May 26, 1975, the first group of refugees sponsored by the archdiocese, two families numbering seventeen plus two single men, arrived from Eglin A.F.B. to the Tulip Bus Station in downtown New Orleans. Hundreds more were on their way. Working with urgency in the spring and summer of 1975, the Associated Catholic Charities surveyed the region to locate adequate housing in advance of the arrival of the refugees,618 primarily seeking contiguous, unoccupied low-cost rental units as well as opportunities for employment, education, health care, and amenities. One such opening was a 405-unit subsidized apartment complex, the Versailles Arms, built in the early 1970s in the southeast corner of Orleans Parish. To its immediate west were circa-1960s developments known as Versailles Gardens and Village de l’Est. The original residents of these subdivisions were middle-class locals, many of whom worked at the nearby NASA facility at Michoud. Rapid social and economic change, including contractor layoffs at Michoud, sent many residents packing for the west suburbs, leaving the Versailles Arms in particular in low occupancy rates and cheap rents. The Associated Catholic Charities acquired units within this complex for the settlement of about 1,000 refugees (at an average cost of $318 per refugee), thus “seeding” the development of modern New Orleans’ most distinctive ethnic enclave. An additional 3,000 refugees arrived in 1976 and were settled mostly in Versailles Arms. These arrivals, mostly in 1977, mostly middle-class Catholic anti-Communist political refugees, formed the first wave of Vietnamese arrivals to New Orleans. The second wave, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, were “boat people”—poor rural Vietnamese farmers and fishermen as well as Sino-Vietnamese merchants—who arrived under much more arduous conditions than the earlier so-called “élites.” By 1978, the Associated Catholic Charities had acquired seventy-five units in the Woodlawn Estate complex in Algiers, eighty-nine units in the Normandie Apartments in Bridge City, plus other complexes in Marrero, Harvey, and Gretna.619 During this time, thousands of new apartments in Bridge City, plus other complexes in Marrero, Harvey, and Gretna, were destitute, few had skills to offer, and even fewer spoke English. Despite limited employment opportunities and tensions with the local black community,620 the refugees stabi-

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618 Ibid., 46, and Airriess, “Creating Vietnamese Landscapes and Place in New Orleans,” 237.
621 This conflict arose from the circumstance of two poor groups living in proximity and competing for limited resources. An overview of the differing perspectives...
The Vietnamese enclave at Versailles formed in 1975, when the Associated Catholic Charities helped settle refugees from Communist Vietnam in an apartment complex at the eastern fringes of the metropolis. Immigrants joined the refugees in the 1980s and 1990s. Within a few years, Versailles had become home to the largest Catholic Vietnamese congregation in America, one of the nation's densest Vietnamese concentrations, and the hub of the regional Vietnamese community. As exotic as the neighborhood may seem to visitors, it embodies many traits typical of its south Louisiana surroundings. Map by author based on 2000 Census.
Alcée Fortier Boulevard is the social and economic center of New Orleans’ (and the region’s) Vietnamese universe. Only five hundred feet long, the street is lined with twin strip malls crammed with Vietnamese-owned and operated grocery stores, video and electronics retailers, medical and legal services, gift shops, bakeries, cafés, and restaurants. Lack of space and other factors have led to the opening of additional Vietnamese businesses along nearby Chef Menteur Highway. Photographs by author, 2003.

Families began moving into their first homes, some of them developed by Vietnamese businessmen for Vietnamese buyers on streets with Vietnamese names. Poverty and social problems were (and remain) no strangers in Versailles, but considering that this refugee community started “low-income and low-skilled[,] concentration in the poorest part of a poor area in a poor city in a poor state,”628 its progress was impressive. Within a few years, Versailles had become home to among the largest concentrated Vietnamese populations in America, and the hub of Vietnamese residents scattered throughout the central Gulf Coast region.629 It is also the largest Catholic Vietnamese community in America, home to many of the roughly 10,000 parishioners who make New Orleans the largest Vietnamese Roman Catholic diocese in the nation. By no means was or is the greater Versailles area exclusively Vietnamese (though certain sections come close): in 1980 it was occupied evenly by blacks, whites, and Vietnamese, and by 2000 had split between Asian (4,655, or 43 percent, mostly Vietnamese, but some Chinese and Laotians) and African American (5,556, or 51 percent), with a small white popula-


628 Zhou and Bankston, Growing Up American, 81.


appears in a series of reports issued in the late 1970s by the mayor’s office, which felt that the incoming Vietnamese refugees did not significantly impact the housing and employment situation, and the Urban League, which felt differently. See Ragas and Maruggi, Vietnamese Refugee Living Conditions in the New Orleans Metro Area, and Rose W. Black, “Chicagoland Vietnamese: A Diverse Group,” in Various Sources of the Ragas-Maruggi Study: Vietnamese Refugee Living Conditions in the New Orleans Metro Area (New Orleans, 1979). Similar tensions between whites and Vietnamese and Asian Americans Families began moving into their first homes, some of them developed by Vietnamese businessmen for Vietnamese buyers on streets with Vietnamese names. Poverty and social problems were (and remain) no strangers in Versailles, but considering that this refugee community started “low-income and low-skilled[,] concentration in the poorest part of a poor area in a poor city in a poor state,” its progress was impressive. Within a few years, Versailles had become home to among the largest concentrated Vietnamese populations in America, and the hub of Vietnamese residents scattered throughout the central Gulf Coast region. It is also the largest Catholic Vietnamese community in America, home to many of the roughly 10,000 parishioners who make New Orleans the largest Vietnamese Roman Catholic diocese in the nation. By no means was or is the greater Versailles area exclusively Vietnamese (though certain sections come close): in 1980 it was occupied evenly by blacks, whites, and Vietnamese, and by 2000 had split between Asian (4,655, or 43 percent, mostly Vietnamese, but some Chinese and Laotians) and African American (5,556, or 51 percent), with a small white popula-
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By Richard Campanella

The map *The Vietnamese of Versailles* shows the spatial distribution of these populations at the block level in 2000, when the area was home to 10,883 people.

As Versailles grew, the ethnic census became a bone of contention for the census bureau, which was reluctant to publish the data.

One particular family learned of balmy Versailles from relatives already residing there, and soon relocated from their original settlement site in rural Minnesota. Other Vietnamese Americans, living in rural areas throughout the US, learned about the area through word of mouth or by joining family or to partake of the community's opportunities and resources. Environmental factors also attracted many residents. One particular family learned of balmy Versailles from relatives already residing there, and soon relocated from their original settlement site in rural Minnesota.


637 Airriess, "Creating Vietnamese Landscapes and Place in New Orleans," 228.

638 The corridor stems from historic Gentilly Boulevard, which runs along the slightly elevated Chef Menteur Ridge, the point of confluence between the Mississippi River and the path of one of its distributaries. It assumes the enigmatic name, Chef Menteur—"big liar," for reasons explained by Treadway—after the Peoples Avenue intersection, where Gentilly's California bungalows and beautiful canopy of live oaks give way to a gritty, automobile-dominated commercial scene. Large boxy retailers, dating from the 1960s and 1970s and not without a certain kitschy appeal, offer domestic goods to a mostly lower-middle-class populace. The section near the Interstate 10 overpass is something of a red-light district, lined with strip clubs, X-rated bookstores, and seedy motels. Past the interstate, Chef Menteur assumes a stature that an urban planner may call "suburban" but a sociologist would call a "first name," but because it comes second in the Vietnamese naming convention, it has become the *de facto* surname of tens of thousands of unrelated Vietnamese Americans. In 1974, only one *Nguyen* appeared in the New Orleans telephone book; two years later, there were sixty-six. This figure rose to 149 in 1977; 256 in 1978; 318 in 1979; and 751 in 1990. By 2002, *Nguyen* listings in the telephone book numbered 1,229. This corroborates with the rise of the Vietnamese population in the area, from a mere handful in 1975 to 14,863 according to the 2000 census. A perusal of *Nguyen* addresses indicated a geographical clustering of Versailles on the east bank and in the aforementioned spots on the West Bank.

Each Vietnamese "village" in greater New Orleans maintains its own identity and sense of place, and views itself as distinctive from the others. According to one 1990 study, three major Vietnamese settlements in the region had acquired their own Vietnamese names: Versailles was called *Hùng Vương Village* after the mythic dynasty of the mother country; Woodlawn was dubbed *Hưng Phúc Village* in honor of a military hero, and the Avondale community in Harvey became *Tu Du Village*, meaning freedom.638 While Alec Fortier Boulevard in Versailles is the designated commercial/retail epicenter of the regional Vietnamese population, the West Bank boasts its own Vietnamese retail district near the Stumpf Boulevard intersection with the West Bank Expressway in Gretna. Here, the Pho Tau Bay restaurant, started around 1980 and named after the popular Hanoi Min City restaurant chain, has attracted a number of other Vietnamese businesses, making that strip mall the densest cluster of Asian businesses on the West Bank.636

**The Vietnamese Landscape at Versailles**

Landscape, according to geographer Christopher Airriess, implies the "commonplace visual elements of a community that residents create to satisfy their needs, wants, and desires. It is a visual manifestation of the culture that residents have constructed and can be interpreted or read as a cultural autobiography."637 Or, equipped with this enlightened perspective, one can appreciate a drive down raffish Chef Menteur Highway. The corridor stems from historic Gentilly Boulevard, which runs along the slightly elevated Chef Menteur Ridge, the point of confluence between the Mississippi River and the path of one of its distributaries. It assumes the enigmatic name, Chef Menteur—"big liar," for reasons explained by the Peoples Avenue intersection, where Gentilly's California bungalows and beautiful canopy of live oaks give way to a gritty, automobile-dominated commercial scene. Large boxy retailers, dating from the 1960s and 1970s and not without a certain kitschy appeal, offer domestic goods to a mostly lower-middle-class populace. The section near the Interstate 10 overpass is something of a red-light district, lined with strip clubs, X-rated bookstores, and seedy motels. Past the interstate, Chef Menteur assumes a stature that an urban planner may call "suburban" but a sociologist would call a "first name," but because it comes second in the Vietnamese naming convention, it has become the *de facto* surname of tens of thousands of unrelated Vietnamese Americans. In 1974, only one *Nguyen* appeared in the New Orleans telephone book; two years later, there were sixty-six. This figure rose to 149 in 1977; 256 in 1978; 318 in 1979; and 751 in 1990. By 2002, *Nguyen* listings in the telephone book numbered 1,229. This corroborates with the rise of the Vietnamese population in the area, from a mere handful in 1975 to 14,863 according to the 2000 census. A perusal of *Nguyen* addresses indicated a geographical clustering of Versailles on the east bank and in the aforementioned spots on the West Bank.

Each Vietnamese "village" in greater New Orleans maintains its own identity and sense of place, and views itself as distinctive from the others. According to one 1990 study, three major Vietnamese settlements in the region had acquired their own Vietnamese names: Versailles was called *Hùng Vương Village* after the mythic dynasty of the mother country; Woodlawn was dubbed *Hưng Phúc Village* in honor of a military hero, and the Avondale community in Harvey became *Tu Du Village*, meaning freedom. While Alec Fortier Boulevard in Versailles is the designated commercial/retail epicenter of the regional Vietnamese population, the West Bank boasts its own Vietnamese retail district near the Stumpf Boulevard intersection with the West Bank Expressway in Gretna. Here, the Pho Tau Bay restaurant, started around 1980 and named after the popular Hanoi Min City restaurant chain, has attracted a number of other Vietnamese businesses, making that strip mall the densest cluster of Asian businesses on the West Bank.

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635 Center for the Pacific Rim, University of New Orleans, 1990, section 2, p. 2; South Central Bell (1990-1991), and BellSouth (2002-2003).


637 Airriess, "Creating Vietnamese Landscapes and Place in New Orleans," 228.
ciologist “inner city.” The area seems to suffer its afflictions of both environments sans the blessings of either. Overgrown yards, outdated billboards, and weary 1940s-era commercial architecture commingle with Cyclone-fenced lots, half-naked businesses, and mundane 1970s-era residential structures. A troubled subsidized-housing complex increasingly abuts a luscious hardwood forest. Crime is amenable dangerously close to speeding cars, as there are no sidewalks next to it. Crime is a problem, and a general malaise hovers over the litter-strewn thoroughfare. It was not always this way: Chef Menteur Highway (part of the I-10 coastal Highway 90) was once the main ingress and egress of New Orleans to all points east along the Gulf Coast, viewed by real estate investors as a potential goldmine. The construction of Interstate 10 in the late 1960s, coupled with social and economic setbacks and the bankruptcy of the New Orleans East land development project, isolated Chef from the city’s principle flows of traffic, and set it on a gradual decline.

Predicaments aside, a reading of the cultural landscape discloses a deeper relevance belied by the sense of placelessness a visitor can detect but not feel. One notes the well-kept Saint Eustache Church and School, and St. Mary’s Academy, all in close proximity: we are not at all anywhere in the South, but along its Catholic coastal edge—black and white, so fundamentally Creole ethnically. Across the street from Holy Family is the Henriette Delille Inn, named for the Congregation of the Sisters of the Holy Family’s much admired co-founder, complete with a portrait of the Creole nun. Nearby street names like Baudin, Almonaster, and Evangeline evoke elements of the local past: we are not just anywhere near the Gulf Coast but in coastal Louisiana, on the Read Boulevard intersection is “Readeaux’s Butcher Shop,” and a few blocks away is the “Smokin’ for Jesus” bars and “Tremé Show Therapist,” named for the historic Creole faubourg behind the French Quarter. Multi-brand-pop restaurants lure passersby with announcements of boiled crawfish, fried seafood, and overstuffed po’ boys. We are in New Orleans—real all. These clues give way to forest, field, the Interstate 310 (Parish Road) overpass, and familiar physical landmarks on the other side. But culturally, the landscape transforms. What is that of southeast Louisiana to that of southeast Asia? The first indicator is the conspicuous Van Hanh Buddhist Center, an exception in an exception place in that it is that of the few Buddhist clergymen in this otherwise extremely Catholic Vietnamese community. Retail and service providers with Vietnamese signs and messages start to appear, along with American and Vietnamese flags flying from their flagpoles. Only this is not the Communist yellow-on-red, but the bold banner of Free Vietnam—three wide stripes of yellow, two of gold, the same colors used for decoration of the Van Hanh Buddhist Center. We then reach a crowded commercial strip perpendicular to the north side of Chef Menteur Highway. It is Alcée Fortier Boulevard, the social and economic center of the region’s Vietnamese universe. Though only five hundred feet long, the twin strip malls are crammed with Vietnamese-owned and operated businesses catering to every need of not only the local Vietnamese, but African Americans who also live in Versailles. Grocery stores, video and electronics retailers, medical and computer services, gift shops, bakeries, cafés, and restaurants compete for attention with Vietnamese colors mostly in Vietnamese. Supermarkets carry imported foods and delicacies from Asia, from seaweed to Jumbo spiced shrimp, and usually offer large prepared bakery items, as well as produce and meat. Vietnamese soap operas and variety shows play on ceilings of painted television sets, and behind the counter stands the sort of religious shrine one might expect to see in a Latin market or home. This is the “downtown” Versailles Village, and researchers on hundred years from now will look back up at this present-day heyday with the same fascination that New Orleanians feel today for Chinatown, Little Palermo, Irish Channel, Dryades Street, Little Saxony, and other ethnic enclaves of the past.

Immediately beyond the Alcée Fortier business district is a sluggish inlet called “Metcourt Bayou,” clogged, clogged with invasive water hyacinths and lined with disheveled squatter’s camps, the water body appears to be a squandered resource. It is not: Vietnamese residents cultivate the banks of this bayou with elaborate polycultural market-garden systems, creating an agrarian landscape reminiscent of their former lifestyles and unique within the metropolitan area. Leafy greens, legumes, squashes, herbs, medicinal medicines, and fruits grow intermixed and intricately layered, on lattices and chicken-wire frames, which form a network of foot paths connecting parcels. The hyacinth-choked bayou adds to the display of exuberant tropical vegetation, and when a rooster crows it is far away, the sense of being in the Mekong Delta is palpable. Reflected from that region comes the gardening story of their arrival in 1975, using lawns and backyards in and around the Versailles Arms apartment complex and the Versailles Garden subdivision. Those plots on Versailles Arms met with the disapproval of management and were eventually relocated to an area behind the hurricane-protection levee near Bayou Pratt, which was cleared of forest through a 1981 agreement negotiated by charitable and government agencies. This may be the last example of forest-clearing for agriculture of the east bank of New Orleans land-use transformation which first occurred locally in 1708 along Bayou St. John.) Backyard gardens along Metcourt Bayou in Versailles Gardens were expanded into the public easement and right up to the water’s edge. It is these projects that are most visible due to their proximity to the Alcée Fortier commercial district. Aerial photographs of both market-garden areas in Versailles show a patchwork quilt of plots, paths, lattices, shades, and other elements of traditional, low-technology market gardening. It is a cultural landscape that is not only transplanted from a different place, but a different time.
Ecological similarity, an agrarian heritage, and the difficulty of obtaining favorite Old World vegetables explains partially why the refugees have invested time and energy into these verdant hanging gardens. More significantly, the cultivations—which are large enough and commercial enough to be considered market gardens rather than hobbies—are the handiwork of community elders. It is the older generation, uprooted from the homeland while well into adulthood, that struggles the most with adaptation to a new land and culture. Intensive gardening in the tradition of their ancestors allows community elders to re-create the senses of place, personal responsibility, dignity, and physical stamina remembered from their youth. Viewed in this manner, the horticultural landscape of Versailles is as much a poignant commentary on the plight and humanity of the refugee as it is an element of the East Asian landscape transplanted to similar environs in semi-tropical America. Like many traditions brought over by refugees and immigrants to new environments, the market-gardens of Versailles will probably disappear from the New Orleans landscape and the cultural reservoir of the local Vietnamese—up on the passing of the elders. Versailles youth show about as much interest in maintaining these backbreaking traditions as an American teenager may feel about holding a quilting bee with her grandmother. It is fortuitous that the refugees had the opportunity to garden in the first place: had the Archdiocese of New Orleans not secured the semi-rural Versailles area for resettlement in 1975, instead locating them in a more urban environment, the tradition may never have taken root locally.

Geographers Christopher A. Airriess and David L. Clawson counted forty-three plants cultivated in the gardens of Versailles during their field research in the early 1990s. The more exotic cultivars included taro, water spinach, Malabar nightshade, tumeric, ginger, Vietnamese coriander, and Oriental melon. But there were also sweet potato, corn, onions, tomato, squash, collard and mustard greens, and sugar cane, evoking a Louisianian feel right at home. Some produce consumed domestically, the rest is consigned to grocery stores on Alcée Fortier or to vendors who sell them to the public at the social and economic apex of the Versailles week: the Saturday morning outdoor market where, starting at dawn and lasting until mid-morning, women vendors wearing traditional garb and conical sun hats crouch beside their vegetables, fruit, seafood, and other offerings laid out upon sheets. Sellers and buyers, who come from local and regional

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Vietnamese enclaves, engage not only in business and marketing but in socializing, recreating, and worshipping at the nearby Catholic church, where a specially dedicated Mass is celebrated. The Saturday morning Asian Market at Versailles is one of the last genuine outdoor markets in a city once famous for them. It is one of the great cultural experiences of modern New Orleans.

What also strikes the visitor about Versailles is the tiny vegetable gardens growing in so many back yards, side yards, and front yards—and not just around humble ranch houses. Many celebrate new mansions along Willowbrook Drive, where iron lions guard front doors and SUVs stand in driveways, still save room for carefully nurtured vegetables. St. Louis, too, is the palisades of Versailles Gardens and Village de l’Est. Perhaps it is “keeping up with the Nguyens,” perhaps it is a response to the threat of crime; or perhaps it is a carry-over of Old World customs. The enclosures bring to mind the palisades that once surrounded their ancestors’ self-sufficient hamlets in Vietnam; that vegetables are cultivated intensively within the fenced yards makes the parallel that much more intriguing. Versailles’ fences come in a wide variety: simpler abodes have Cyclone fences; fancier ones have prefabricated iron ones with geometric designs, painted white or beige or black. Fishing boats rigged with nets are parked within some fenced compounds, illustrating the community’s ties with the coastal fishing and shrimping economy. Many front yards also have flagpoles in the shape of ship masts, from which flutter both the American flag and the banner of Free Vietnam: three red stripes on a field white and pastel-blue color. Used for Vietnamese flags, it is one of the last genuine outdoor markets in a city once famous for them. It is one of the great cultural experiences of modern New Orleans.

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Catholicism at Versailles is practiced devoutly and expressed outwardly, salient in the landscape even against the backdrop of Catholic south Louisiana. The community’s focal point is Mary Queen of Vietnam Church, a temporary structure on a compound that also features an outdoor stage and ancillary buildings. Bulletin boards inside post architects’ designs for a new permanent house of worship, an impressive edifice with two pagoda-like towers bearing a faint resemblance to St. Louis Cathedral before its 1850 reconstruction. All these elements render the Versailles cultural landscape as Catholic as any place in rural Acadia. Garden occasionally spots tree trunks painted white, a tradition usually explained as a way to keep insects off trees but possibly with deeper cultural and religious significance (see below). One set of trees near Mary Queen of Vietnam Church is painted in the lime white and pastel-blue colors used for Virgin Mary statues. The toponyms of Versailles, too, mix the cultures: My Viet Drive, St. Helena Place, My Viet Drive, and Bayou Lane. But the elderly women wearing sandals, loose chins painted and traditional Vietnamese conical hats secured securely under the chin remind outsiders that this is still very much a place apart.

Since the first refugees arrived in 1975, the Vietnamese in the general Versailles area have drifted westward through three sections, forming a triangle. At the easternmost corner stands the subsidized Versailles Arms apartment complex, original home of the first wave of Vietnamese. As the community’s economic prospects rose, most residents moved out of Versailles Arms and westward into Versailles Gardens, a subdivision of modest ranch houses on standard suburban lots. Versailles Arms today is mostly poor and black, and the dividing line between the Versailles Gardens and Versailles Arms is marked not only in the racial geography but in the landscape as well. A high fence runs between the districts, and Saigon Drive actually reverses directions at the Rubicon, a jarring surprise to a motorist even with the WRONG WAY signs. One Vietnamese homeowner living on the fence line oriented his front-lawn Virgin Mary statue to appeal directly to the community across the way. Versailles Gardens is mostly poor, not entirely working-class Vietnamese, and the housing stock and neighborhood infrastructure resemble

Catholicism at Versailles is practiced devoutly and expressed outwardly, salient in the landscape even against the backdrop of Catholic south Louisiana. Statues of the Virgin, Mary, Jesus, and nativity scenes are common in front yards, and religious shrines stand behind the counters of many stores. From flagpoles fly the American flag and the banner of Free Vietnam: three red stripes on a field of gold (background of photograph at left). Photographs by author, 2003.
white neighborhoods of the same class in Chalmette or Kenner. Continuing westward to the other side of the bayou is Village de l’Est, the most prosperous of the three sections. This subdivision resembles Versailles Gardens, but parts of it, particularly Willowbrook Drive, are opulent in the manner often seen among immigrants indulging in their hard-earned success for the first time. With increased prosperity, then, the Vietnamese community since 1975 has gradually relocated and spread westward from its original Versailles Arms hearth. The community’s religious infrastructure marks this westward path: the first place of worship, Church of the Vietnamese Martyrs (1978), abuts Versailles Arms, while Mary Queen of Vietnam (1986) is located a half-mile to the west. But Vietnamese immigrants have also settled in Versailles, and recently built the Van Hanh Buddhist Center on Chef Menteur Highway (right). Photographs by author, 2003.

The religious hearth of Versailles is Mary Queen of Vietnam Catholic Church, to be replaced by a more elaborate permanent edifice. Vietnamese residences in this area since 1975 have drifted westward through three subdivisions, first in Versailles Arms, later Versailles Gardens, and then into prosperous Village de l’Est. The community’s religious infrastructure traces this westward movement: the first place of worship, Church of the Vietnamese Martyrs (1978), abuts Versailles Arms, while Mary Queen of Vietnam (1986) is located a half-mile to the west. But Vietnamese immigrants have also settled in Versailles, and recently built the Van Hanh Buddhist Center on Chef Menteur Highway (right). Photographs by author, 2003.

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Versailles Arms today is mostly poor and black, while Versailles Gardens and Village de l’Est are better-off economically and mostly Vietnamese. A high fence separates the two areas; Saigon Drive even reverses directions at the line (right; note WRONG WAY sign). One homeowner living at the fence line oriented his front-lawn Virgin Mary statue (left) to appeal directly to the community across the way. Photographs by author, 2003.
Aside: On the Whitewashing of Tree Trunks

Ordinary street scenes and landscapes serve as Rosetta Stones of culture and history. Consider, for example, the tradition of whitewashing the lower portions of tree trunks, seen throughout New Orleans and the Gulf Coast region. Little scholarly research has been conducted on this peculiar custom, but personal (unscientific) observations throughout the Americas suggest three hypotheses. Americans why they do it and most will offer a pragmatic environmental reason: to keep potential harmful borers off the tree. This may well be true, especially if lime-based whitewash (toxic to insects) is used. Others see the coating as protection against sun scald and winter-time freeze/thaw cycles. When telephone poles and lamp posts are given the same treatment, public safety (marking of traffic obstacles) probably explains the phenomenon. But there may also be a deeper significance here. Throughout the Americas, whitewashed tree trunks are seen in parques centrales, along grand avenues, in schoolyards, and in courtyards. Asked about the tradition, many Latinos will explain that it gives a clean, manicured, bonita appearance to vegetation that, if left unchecked, could come overgrown, unruly, and feo. French geographer Elisée Reclus seemed to prescribe to this aesthetic explanation in his 1855 critique of New Orleans society:

Under the pretext of art, rich individuals confine themselves to whitewashing the trees in their gardens. This luxury has the double advantage of being pleasing to their sight and of serving a utilitarian purpose. Whitewashing tree trunks may represent a controlling nature, a taming of its ragged and potentially threatening edge. It may be a product of the same cultural instinct that makes Americans spend untold hours and countless dollars cutting grass and trimming hedges. Unlike mowed lawns, whitewashed tree trunks are not evenly distributed throughout the United States. They are rare in the northern and central parts of the country, but common in certain neighborhoods in the urban Northeast and the border country fromTexas to California, in southern Florida, and in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. They are also typical of societies of the Mediterranean region and other parts of Europe and Russia. The tradition may be a Mediterranean-region aesthetic trait which diffused primarily into areas colonized by France and Spain, and, later, into areas where immigrants from the Mediterranean region settled. This may explain why whitewashed tree trunks were found throughout the Latin world,
What explains the whitewashing of tree trunks in south Louisiana? These examples in Slidell (top left), on the River Road (top right), on Esplanade Avenue around 1900 and elsewhere in New Orleans in 2003 and 2004 may simply reflect attempts to thwart insect infestations or to mark traffic obstacles. But the example on North Carrollton Avenue (middle right) and in the Vietnamese neighborhood of Versailles (bottom) suggest a deeper cultural significance. Note the shrine-like appearance of the North Carrollton example, and the pastel-blue and white colors used for both the trees and Virgin Mary statues. Photographs by author, 2003-2004; historical photograph from Library of Congress.
in both cool, dry mountain environments and hot, moist, coastal environments, but less so in the Anglo world, regardless of environment. They are also found in many tropical East Asian societies.

Which brings us to the Vietnamese neighborhood of Versailles in eastern New Orleans, where whitewashed tree trunks also appear. Did these Catholic East Asian peoples adopt the tradition recently from their Louisiana neighbors, or did they pick it up long ago from French colonizers and bring it here when they immigrated to the Catholic world of southern Louisiana, which also happened to have a French heritage? Or did they develop it independently for pragmatic environmental reasons? Note in the accompanying photograph that the Vietnamese trees are painted the same pastel-blue-and-white colors used for Virgin Mary statues. Is this to deter insects or mark traffic obstacles? Not likely, or at least not entirely, as evidenced further by the example on North Carrollton Avenue, which incorporates a whitewashed tree trunk into a religious shrine.

In this seemingly mundane landscape feature, we may be seeing a centuries-old tradition that informs on topics ranging from European colonization and immigration, to the spatial extent of the Latin and Anglo worlds, to religion and public religious expression, to the relationship between people and nature. Examining this phenomenon would add to our understanding of the cultural geography of the United States. And it might well place New Orleans—Versailles and all—in the heart of America’s Latin southern tier.

Epilogue: Two to seven feet of filthy brackish water inundated Versailles in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, swamping houses, destroying gardens, and stranding hundreds of residents at Mary Queen of Vietnam Catholic Church. Storm surge in the Intracoastal Waterway and MR-GO, coupled with the area’s low elevation and geographical isolation, put Versailles in a particularly bad position for the catastrophe. Thousands of former political refugees evacuated from the thirty-year place of refuge, the nature of Versailles at first appeared in question. But later in the autumn of 2005, community unity and determination to rebuild made Versailles the bright spot in the dismal, destroyed east. “Before Katrina, when we said homeland, we meant Vietnam,” the Rev. Nguyen Vien of Mary Queen of Vietnam told the Times-Picayune on October 22. “When my people say homeland now, they mean New Orleans. It’s a radical shift in the people’s mentality. It’s a very pervasive sense.” Still, we may see a Vietnamese population shift from Versailles to the West Bank, particularly with the opening of the major new Asian Market complex on Behrman Highway a month before Katrina. It remains to be seen whether community elders will replant their famous hanging gardens, once a relic of their lives in Vietnam, now possibly a relic of their lives in post-Katrina Versailles.
AN ETHNIC GEOGRAPHY
OF NEW ORLEANS

People do not distribute themselves randomly across the cityscape. They gravitate toward areas that, first and foremost, are available to them, and since those that are perceived to maximize their chances of success in terms of housing, employment, services, amenities, convenience and existing social networks, while minimizing costs and obstacles (such as price, distance, crime, discrimination, noise, and environmental nuisances). The resultant spatial patterns, which range from intensely clustered to thoroughly dispersed, are complex and dynamic, varying by group, place, and time. The ethnic patterns analyzed in this book, whether limned three major eras in New Orleans historic ethnic geography, starting with the antebellum era, when American migration and foreign immigration rendered post-colonial New Orleans arguably the most diverse city in America.

ANTEBELLUM ETHNIC GEOGRAPHIES

Prior to industrialization, prosperous members of charter groups usually resided in the inner city, with domestic servants and slaves living in adjacent quarters, and middle- and working-class families residing in a ring of adjacent neighborhoods. Indigenes, among them immigrants, tended to settle at the city’s raggled outskirts or waterfronts. The pattern is an ancient one—“in many medieval cities in Europe, the city centers were inhabited by the well-born, while the outer districts were the areas for the poorest elements of the population” and it carried over to most colonial cities in the New World. The force behind the pattern was the lack of mass-based transportation, which made the inner-city living a convenient and expensive luxury. Antebellum New Orleans’s charter groups mostly comprised the upper classes of French Creole, Français de France, and Anglo American society, who tended to live in townhouses in the French Quarter and the Faubourg St. Mary. Observed Elisée Reclus in 1855, “The oldest district of New Orleans, the one usually called the French Quarter, is still the most elegant of the city,” where “the oldest district of New Orleans, the one usually called the French Quarter, is still the most elegant of the city,” where “houses had been “mostly purchased by American capital” in the French Quarter, is still the most elegant of the city,” where “houses had been “mostly purchased by American capital—” in many medieval cities in Europe, the city centers were inhabited by the well-born, while the outer districts were the areas for the poorest elements of the population, and it carried over to most colonial cities in the New World. The force behind the pattern was the lack of mass-based transportation, which made the inner-city living a convenient and expensive luxury. Antebellum New Orleans’s charter groups mostly comprised the upper classes of French Creole, Français de France, and Anglo American society, who tended to live in townhouses in the French Quarter and the Faubourg St. Mary. Observed Elisée Reclus in 1855, “The oldest district of New Orleans, the one usually called the French Quarter, is still the most elegant of the city,” where “houses had been “mostly purchased by American capitalists.”

Encircling this closed, desirable commercial/residential inner core was an annulus of middle- and working-class faubourgs. Further out, along the wharves, canals, backswamp, and upper and lower fringes of the city, was a periphery of muddy, low-density, village-like developments—shantytowns in some places to which gravitated the unestablished and the poor during the first great wave of immigration to New Orleans (1820s to 1850s, corresponding to national trends). The force behind the pattern was the lack of mass-based transportation, which made the inner-city living a convenient and expensive luxury. Antebellum New Orleans’s charter groups mostly comprised the upper classes of French Creole, Français de France, and Anglo American society, who tended to live in townhouses in the French Quarter and the Faubourg St. Mary. Observed Elisée Reclus in 1855, “The oldest district of New Orleans, the one usually called the French Quarter, is still the most elegant of the city,” where “houses had been “mostly purchased by American capitalists.”

The antebellum ethnic geography of uptown remains written in brick today. The former St. Alphonsus Catholic Church (left), attended by Irish immigrants, sits across Constance Street from still-active St. Mary’s Assumption, built for German immigrants. The proximity of the two Redemptorist churches, both dating from the late 1850s, reflects the similar settlement patterns of these two largest immigrant groups of antebellum times. The third largest, the foreign French, worshipped in nearby Notre Dame de Bon Secours, also built by the Redemptorists in the 1850s. Photograph by author, 2004.
This graph tracks immigration trends of selected ethnic groups to New Orleans during the past two hundred years. Different residential-settlement geographies are associated with three discrete historical immigration eras: (1) the antebellum, particularly 1820s-1860, when immigration was highest; (2) the postbellum, particularly around the turn-of-the-century; and (3) during and after the suburban exodus, when smaller numbers of Latino and East Asian immigrants arrived to the metropolis. Graph and analysis by author based on numerous sources.

"truck farming" operations, a favorite extra-income activity particularly among Germans. They avoided the inner city for its lack of unskilled-labor employment, its high real estate prices and crowding, and because mechanized transportation (early horse-drawn streetcars) for commuting was limited and costly. Better-off Irish and Germans, who likely arrived earlier (such as the "lace-curtain" Irish establishment in the Julia Street area), worked in downtown-based professions and lived in costly downtown dwellings, generally not living in with the charter groups and rarely rubbing shoulders with poorer Irish and German immigrants. The ethnic geography of antebellum New Orleans, then, comprised:

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

The antebellum dispersion pattern explains why, to this day, the location of the Irish Channel remains a hotly debated subject, as very no one particular neighborhood claims a German sense of historical place. (It's hard to pin down the
An Ethnic Geography of New Orleans

The millions of southern and eastern Europeans who arrived in the United States (and the thousands who came to New Orleans) during the second great wave of immigration, 1880s to 1920s, encountered a rapidly transforming urban landscape. By this time, industrialization, the installation of urban streetcar networks, and the rise of commercial districts triggered two important repercussions. First, in New Orleans, the gentry moved out of the inner city and resettled in “garden” suburbs, particularly St. Charles Avenue, Uptown, Esplanade Avenue, and the City Park area. In some cases, wealthy families moved out of their opulent townhouses because they lost their fortunes to the Civil War or struggled economically in its aftermath; in other cases, they simply moved away from new nuisances and toward amenities. Unsightly and smelly breweries, warehouses, and sugar refineries arose in the French Quarter in this era, a sight that would never have been tolerated downtown to market housewares, peddle fruit, prepare food, or sell notions. Newly arrived immigrants, particularly those with economic reasons to settle close to downtown, but also availability of affordable apartment to rent there as well. Thus, unlike their predecessors, immigrants of the late nineteenth century relocated and resetled in the semi-rural periphery, favoring the need to live not in the absolute commercial heart of the city, which was simply non-residential, but in a concentration of neighborhoods immediately beyond the inner core. This immigrant belt also offered sufficient amenities (proximity, convenience, housing) to make life easier for impoverished newcomers, but suffered enough nuisances (noise, vice, crime) to keep the rent affordable. It offered poor immigrants a place to work, a nearby and affordable abode in which to live, and after an enclave developed, a social support haven, including religious and cultural institutions. The immigrant belt was loosely from the lower French Quarter and Faubourg Marigny, through the Faubourg Tremé and into the Third Ward back-of-town, around the Dryades Street area, through the Lee Circle area and toward the Mississippi, what is now called the Irish Channel. In this amorphous and fascinating swath, immigrants and their descendents clustered in a fairly intense manner, almost into the mid-twentieth century, such that their enclaves earned

Exact location of something that was never pinned down to an exact location.) The antebellum clustering of the wealthy in the inner city is also evident today: vice townhouses and upper-middle-class townhouses outnumber humble cottages in the French Quarter, while the reverse is true in the adjacent faubourgs of Marigny and Tremé. Racially, one of the most fascinating spatial patterns of antebellum times was the numerical predominance of free people of color over slaves in the Creole lower city, and the exact reversal of this ratio in the Anglo upper city. This trend reflects the Creoles’ adherence to a Caribbean-influenced three-tier (white, free people of color, and enslaved black) racial caste system, versus the Anglos’ recognition of a strictly white/black dichotomy. To this day, the descendents of the free people of color (who may be thought of as “Franco-African Americans”) remain downtown, particularly in the Seventh Ward, while “Anglo-African Americans” predominate uptown, mainly in Central City.

**Turn-of-the-Century Ethnic Geographies**

The nation of southern and eastern Europeans who arrived in the United States (and the thousands who came to New Orleans) during the second great wave of immigration, 1880s to 1920s, encountered a rapidly transforming urban landscape. By this time, industrialization, the installation of urban streetcar networks, and the rise of commercial districts triggered two important repercussions. First, in New Orleans, the gentry moved out of the inner city and resettled in “garden” suburbs, particularly St. Charles Avenue, Uptown, Esplanade Avenue, and the City Park area. In some cases, wealthy families moved out of their opulent townhouses because they lost their fortunes to the Civil War or struggled economically in its aftermath; in other cases, they simply moved away from new nuisances and toward amenities. Unsightly and smelly breweries, warehouses, and sugar refineries arose in the French Quarter in this era, a sight that would never have been tolerated downtown to market housewares, peddle fruit, prepare food, or sell notions. Newly arrived immigrants, particularly those with economic reasons to settle close to downtown, but also availability of affordable apartment to rent there as well. Thus, unlike their predecessors, immigrants of the late nineteenth century relocated and resetled in the semi-rural periphery, favoring the need to live not in the absolute commercial heart of the city, which was simply non-residential, but in a concentration of neighborhoods immediately beyond the inner core. This immigrant belt also offered sufficient amenities (proximity, convenience, housing) to make life easier for impoverished newcomers, but suffered enough nuisances (noise, vice, crime) to keep the rent affordable. It offered poor immigrants a place to work, a nearby and affordable abode in which to live, and after an enclave developed, a social support haven, including religious and cultural institutions. The immigrant belt was loosely from the lower French Quarter and Faubourg Marigny, through the Faubourg Tremé and into the Third Ward back-of-town, around the Dryades Street area, through the Lee Circle area and toward the Mississippi, what is now called the Irish Channel. In this amorphous and fascinating swath, immigrants and their descendents clustered in a fairly intense manner, almost into the mid-twentieth century, such that their enclaves earned

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648 In 1939, there were 5,941 dwelling units within a 1½-mile radius of downtown, of which 4,605 were rented to tenants. Carter, A Report on Survey of Metropolitan New Orleans Land Use, Real Property, and Low Income Housing Area (New Orleans, 1941), 36 and 52.

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popular monikers ("Little Palermo," "Chinatown") or strong people-place associations, such as "the Orthodox Jews of the Dryades Street neighborhood."

The postbellum era also saw the migration of thousands of emancipated slaves into the city from nearby plantations. Destitute and excluded both de facto and de jure, their settlement patterns were driven in large part by the geography of environmental nuisances. Flooding, mosquitoes, swamp "miasmas," noisy railroads, smelly wharves, and unsightly warehouses, industrial buildings, odd-shaped lots, pollution, lack of city services, inconvenience: nuisances such as these drove down real estate prices and thus fostered the lands of last resort for those at the bottom rung. The natural and built environment of New Orleans dictated that most nuisances were located at the two lateral fringes of the metropolitan area: the immediate riverfront and the backswamp edge. Poor African Americans, most of whom were culturally "Anglo" rather than Creole, clustered in these troubled areas, particularly the back-of-town, while others settled in the nuclei of "superblocks," living within walking distance of their domestic employment jobs in uptown mansions. Creoles, particularly Creoles of Color, remained in their historical location in the lower city, and mixed lakeward as drainage technology opened up the backswamps of the Seventh Ward and adjacent areas. Other sections of the new lakefront subdivisions laid out in the early twentieth century explicitly excluded black residency through racist deed covenants. By that time, wealthier whites resided in the convenient low-nuisance swath sandwiched between the riverfront and the backswamp (particularly uptown, along the St. Charles-Magazine corridor), and in the new lakeside neighborhoods, while working-class whites intermixed throughout the city, especially in downtown wards.

Following are some observations on the "immigrant belt" era in New Orleans, starting after the Civil War and lasting to around World War II:

*Not Unique* — New Orleans prides itself on its uniqueness, sometimes to the point of extolling peculiarities where none exists. In fact, the Crescent City's ethnic distributions mimic those observed in other American cities, from ante-bellum times to today. The expression of immigrant enclaves,
In antebellum times, immigrants settled in the periphery of the city, drawn by low-cost housing and laborer jobs. The inner city tended to be wealthier, with Catholics of Creole and Latin culture generally settling downtown, and Protestants of Anglo culture gravitating uptown. After the Civil War, the wealthy departed the inner city for new "streetcar suburbs," just as the second wave of immigrants arrived. Unlike their antebellum predecessors, the new immigrants gravitated to a concentric zone immediately outside the CBD. This "immigrant belt," depicted here in a shaded pattern, offered enough advantages (proximity, convenience, quality housing) to make life easier, but suffered enough nuisances (crowding, decay, noise, vice, crime) to keep the rent affordable. Areas where advantages outweighed nuisances (such as the land halfway between the riverfront and back-of-town) tended to be settled by better-off white charter groups; areas where nuisances outweighed advantages (such as the immediate riverfront and back-of-town) were more likely to be settled by poor African Americans. Map and analysis by author based on numerous sources.
migrants and their descendents settled in the workers’ zone (former Lafayette, the Third District, and other areas of the old semi-rural periphery). And Burgess’ restricted residential zone and commuter zones described the leafy garden suburbs (often called “trolley suburbs” in other cities), the developmental role played by streets and of uptown, Esplanade, and Chevrest—right down to the bungalows.

**Not Really a Belt** — A glance at the ethnic maps in this volume may evoke the question, what belt? Of course, this is a theoretical belt, one forged by the various physical and infrastructural constraints of specific cities. New Orleans’ restriction to the upraised natural levee squished the theoretical belt to an irregular, amoebae-shaped configuration, thicker in some areas, thinner in others, and interrupted by canals, highways, and variations in land use and housing stock. These interstices distorted parts of the belt into wedge-shaped areas of various ethnic composition and sectors. Only a theoretical city on a piece of paper would produce a perfect belt. This amorphousness has also been seen elsewhere: “such [ethnic] zones are often patchy, the discontinuities reflecting variations in the urban fabric.”

**Not Particularly Clustered** — It would be a serious mistake to conclude that ethnic groups in New Orleans were intensely and exclusively clustered within the immigrant belt. “Cluster,” “concentration,” “congregation,” “community,” “enclave,” “ghetto”—these are all subjective terms, despite urbanists’ attempts to formalize them into jargon. Even the line between “integration” and “concentration” is blurred. “If a neighborhood is inhabited by 10 different groups, each accounting for 10 per cent of the total population,” pointed out one researcher, “we might call it a residentially mixed area. But if all of the Chinese of that particular city live in this neighborhood... it is also a concentration area for the Chinese.” The Greek community of the North Dorgenois Street area and the Orthodox Jews around Dryades Street are good examples of neighborhoods that may be described as ethnic neighborhoods.

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Modern Ethnic Geographies

Even as ethnic enclaves thrived in the early twentieth century, the overall ethnic geography of New Orleans began to transform massively. The first change was effected by the municipal drainage system installed during 1893-1915, which opened up the backswamp and made it feasible for new urban development. With this two hundred-year-old topographic restoration finally lifted, middle-class homes “leapfrogged” over the predominantly black backswamp and settled in new lakeside suburbs (which were closed to black ownership through racist deed covenants and other discriminatory mechanisms). As the century wore on, more and more whites from old neighborhoods made the move to new lakeside developments such as Lakewood and Gentilly. The second stage of twentieth-century ethnic geographical transformation occurred with the great social and structural changes of the 1950s and 1960s, enabled by the rise of the automobile and highway infrastructure since the beginning of the century. New Orleans’ “white flight” experience was similar to those of dozens of other American cities, only delayed by a decade or so. Between 1950 and the 1980s, most of the old white ethnic enclaves dispersed for the suburbs of Jefferson, St. Bernard, and eastern Orleans parishes. Even those who left lakeside divisions in Orleans Parish often in the century often left again for Jefferson Parish. Reasons were typically the “push” side were the precipitous decline of public schools, increasing crime rates, and urban decay; on the “pull” side were good school districts, safety, suburban lifestyles, less congestion, and a lower cost of living. Resistance to school integration drove many white families out, particularly from the working-class Ninth Ward, which relocated into adjacent St. Bernard Parish. New interstates and bridges provided access between new suburban bedrooms and old downtown offices, which, in turn, would often relocate to the suburbs as well. Into the old ethnic enclaves moved commercial interests (in the case of Chinatown), poor black residents (in the case of the Irish Channel, the Greek North Dorgenois area, and the Jewish Dryades area), and affluent white professionals and politicians (in the case of Little Palermo, Faubourg Marigny, Bywater, and parts of the Irish Channel). Middle-class African Americans, too, relocated into the new subdivisions mostly to the eastern and lakeside sections of Orleans Parish, while poorer blacks remained in neighborhoods they had inhabited since the late nineteenth century, were constricted into Depression-era public housing projects.

In the closing decades of the twentieth century, the factors that once drew immigrants to that amorphous belt around the CBD diminished or evaporated entirely, and reappeared in very different forms. Far away from new subdivisions and strip malls of suburbia, immigrants in Greater New Orleans today—are in number not enough to form patterns—generally settle far away from the inner city, in the extreme western suburban periphery, like Kenner (now home of “Little Honduras”), or Versailles in extreme eastern Orleans Parish (“Little Saigon”), on the fringes of the West Bank. Others live in Metairie and elsewhere in Jefferson Parish. It is in these modern ranch houses/strip-mall suburbs that new immigrants find affordable housing, maximized economic opportunities, and minimized obstacles, including a decent environment to raise and educate their children. Once again, New Orleans is not alone in this remarkable trend: it is playing out in most major American metropolises. “In 1990,” stated a recent Preservation Magazine cover article entitled The New Suburbanites, “immigration meant taking a ferry from Ellis Island to a tenement on the Lower East Side. Today, it often means taking the airport limo to a three-bedroom house in the suburbs.”

A drive along Williams Boulevard in Kenner finds a plethora of Hispanic and Asian businesses, a cityscape of ethnic diversity that makes downtown New Orleans look monocultural by comparison. Same trend nationwide. Suburbs are on their way to becoming the most common place of residence for Hispanic and Asian-Americans. 31 percent of the nation’s Hispanics, and 53 percent of Asian Americans, live in suburbia, both up by about 10 percent from 1990. That most immigrants in Greater New Orleans live in relatively comfortable suburban conditions attests to the fact that while this metropolis attracts few from foreign lands, most who do come are fairly economically stable and arrive into established and nurturing communities. There are no immigrant slums in modern New Orleans, and one almost never sees a Hispanic or Asian or Indian among the city’s large homeless populations.
1970 census information on “mother tongue” (the language spoken in one’s childhood home) is shown here at the census tract level. Maps at left include English included at left and excluded at right, to reveal patterns of less-common tongues. The complex patterns manifested shed light on the ethnic geographies in 1970 as well as the historical patterns in the childhood homes of the respondents. Note the uptown/downtown divide the distribution of English versus French, a vestige of two-hundred-year-old Anglo/Creole settlement patterns. Map and analysis by author.
By the late twentieth century, the factors that once drew immigrants to neighborhoods surrounding the CBD shifted to the suburbs. Immigrants in New Orleans today generally settle far from the inner city, in the extreme western suburbs of Kenner (home of “Little Honduras”), to Versailles in extreme eastern Orleans Parish (“Little Saigon”), or to the fringes of the West Bank. Others live in Metairie and elsewhere in Jefferson Parish. It is in these modern ranch-house suburbs that new immigrants find affordable housing, maximized economic opportunities, and minimized obstacles. These 2000 census maps show that immigrants today generally reside at the very fringes of the metropolitan area, while the descendents of nineteenth-century immigrants live in nearby suburbs, principally in Jefferson Parish. So utterly reversed is the present-day ethnic geography of New Orleans that formerly lily-white Metairie—Fat City, no less—ranked in 2000 as the most ethnically diverse census tract in the metropolitan area, while the lower Ninth Ward, once practically the Brooklyn of the South, ranked the least.

Maps and analysis by author.

In other cities that attract far larger numbers of much poorer immigrants, such as New York, Washington, Chicago, and Los Angeles, the traditional immigrant belt is alive and well, and social problems are rife. New Orleans, however, simply does not offer a sufficiently robust economy to attract large numbers of poor immigrants; thus its old inner-city immigrant belt has vanished and most immigrants opt for suburban lifestyles. An inspection of a recent census map of greater New Orleans’ ethnic groups (now recorded as “ancestry”) shows an even dispersion throughout the metropolitan area, beyond old New Orleans. Immigrants today—the Hispanic community and Asian Indians of Kenner, the Chinese of West Esplanade Avenue in Metairie, the large Vietnamese community of the Versailles neighborhood, the Filipinos on Lapalco Boulevard on the West Bank,656—generally reside at the very fringes of the metropolitan area. Ironically, they often live next door to descendents of circa-1900 immigrants; West Esplanade Avenue in particular abuts a number of census tracts in which high concentrations of locals of Italian, Greek, Chinese, and Jewish ancestry may be found.

So utterly reversed is the present-day ethnic geography of New Orleans that formerly lily-white Metairie—Fat City, no less—ranked in 2000 as the most ethnically diverse census tract in the metropolitan area. Even more stunning was the least diverse tract: the lower Ninth Ward, once practically the Brooklyn of the South.657 The same trend is seen in public schools: most in New Orleans are racially homogeneous—overwhelmingly African American—whereas those in the


once all-white suburbs are now held up as “exemplars of successful integration.”658 Equivalents of this statistical irony can be found in most other modern American metropolises. So vast is the change taking place in the suburbs of many urban cities that the definition of suburbia needs rewriting.

One highly visible immigrant presence still exists in the historic heart of New Orleans, in fact within the confines of former Little Palermo. Every day, hundreds of South Asian, African, East Asian, Hispanic, and European immigrants gather in the French Market flea market to set up their stalls for a day of vending to tourists. Today, as one hundred years ago and as two hundred years ago, the French Market remains one of the most ethnically diverse areas of land in the city, at least from the vendor perspective. But come nightfall, when the market closes and the vendors put up their wares, most point their minivans and SUVs not for the adjacent faubourgs, but for Interstate 10 and the subdivisions of suburbia.

**Distinguishing Characteristics of New Orleans’ Experience**

Wrote geographer Peirce F. Lewis, “It is easy to conclude that New Orleans’ urban growth...obeys special rules which apply only to it and nowhere else. It is a tempting conclusion, but untrue.”660 Indeed, an important lesson to be learned from New Orleans’ shifting ethnic geographies is that they generally parallel those observed elsewhere. The centrifugal pattern of immigrant settlement in antebellum times, the centripetal clustering in the turn-of-the-century era, and the centrifugal suburban settlement after World War II have all been witnessed in other large American cities. Nevertheless, some unusual aspects distinguish New Orleans’ experience from the norm. The Crescent City is arguably the oldest genuinely multicultural city in the nation, and may well have viewed and enacted certain ethnic spatial patterns before other cities saw similar trends on grander scales. Its Franco-Hispanic colonial heritage, deeply influenced by Caribbean culture, and further rendered by sheer isolation, spawned the enigmatic notion of Creole, a home-grown ethnicity that in time would manifest itself in spatial patterns of New Orleans. (How many cities render their own ethnicity?) Sudden politicization, followed by gradual cultural Americanization, would create perhaps the greatest ethnic geographical chasm in New Orleans history: the downtown Creoles and the uptown Anglos. This principal dichotomy informed the residential geographies of numerous other groups: Saint-Domingue refugees, foreign French, and Italians, for example, gravitated to the Creole side, whereas Jews, Scandinavians, and emancipated African Americans settled on the Anglo side. New Orleans was also one of the few places in America to harbor a three-tier racial caste system, which further differentiated the Creole and Anglo sides of town. The Creole side, for example, had a three-to-one ratio of free people of color to slaves in 1860; the Anglo side of town had the exact opposite.661 Physical geography also differentiated New Orleans’ experience: its unique deltaic topography constrained urbanization to the narrow natural levee between riverfront...
wharves and the backswamp, creating a bifurcated environment in which empowered groups gravitated to the more desirable middle ground, and the disenfranchised poor clustered along the high-nuisance, high-risk margins. These aged patterns—akin in theory, if not perfectly in form, to los conturones de miseria (misery belts) surrounding Latin American capitals—are still vividly apparent in modern racial distributions. In some areas, the interface between black and white neighborhoods today marks the edge of the backswamp at the time of emancipation. Many cities have natural barriers which constrict development to certain areas, but New Orleans' backswamp constraint was adjustable: with drainage, it receded and eventually disappeared, leaving behind only its imprint in the distributions of humans.

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

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