

Appendix B. New Orleans in the 1820s–1830s

~ Rough start in a place apart ~ A dramatic change of destiny ~ Creoles in a new American city ~ Americans in an old Creole city ~ Cotton and sugar commerce ~ Risk, ruin, and reward ~ A growing and diversifying population ~ Ethnic tensions ~ Slavery and race relations ~ Geography of slavery ~ A city of bondage ~ Slave trading ~ The city from afar ~ The port up close ~ Port management ~ Port controversy ~ Urban growth and internal improvements ~ The Great Southern Emporium

As Anglo-Americans migrated westward and southward into the lands of the Louisiana Purchase, they contacted, fought, and displaced indigenous populations whose ranks had been previously thinned by European disease. The emigrants also encountered occasional trading posts and settlements left behind by recently departed French and Spanish colonial routines. The contact positioned Anglo-Americans, often for the first time, in the backyards of Franco-, Hispano-, Caribbean, and African Americans: different language, law, government, religion, architecture, and foodways. Chief among those culturally divergent places was New Orleans.

Isolated from the heart of North American colonial activity by over a thousand terrestrial miles and two thousand nautical miles, the French colonial port city of Nouvelle Orleans and its adjacent Gulf Coast enclaves marched to a markedly different beat for two generations before the American nation even formed. While societies of the Eastern Seaboard looked primarily to Protestant England to inform their culture, Nouvelle Orleans looked to Catholic France and its New World colonies. Denizens came from the geographic and economic fringes of the Francophone world: some from the lower strata of French society, others from French Canada, still others from Saint-Domingue and the West Indies via the nascent coastal outposts of Pensacola, Mobile, and Biloxi. Nearly half the city's population was forcibly removed from the Senegambia region of Africa throughout the 1720s for enslavement in Louisiana. As in the Caribbean, a small mixed-race caste emerged from the intermingling, one that enjoyed more rights than the enslaved but far less than the white ruling caste. A few miles upriver from Nouvelle Orleans settled German and Swiss farmers who immigrated a few years after the city's founding in 1718; beyond this "German Coast" lay the "Acadian Coast," where French

Canadian exiles settled after the British victors of the French and Indian War expelled them from Acadia between 1755 and 1765.

Crushing defeat in that conflict forced France to relinquish most of its North American empire to the detested English. King Louis XV, however, foregoing the loss in 1762, secretly ceded areas west the Mississippi to his Spanish cousin King Carlos III. Cleverly included in the treaty was *Louisiane* (Louisiana), which, on account of Bayou Manchac and the lake formed something of an “isle,” cartographically detached from the east-of-the-Mississippi mainland destined for British hands. Louisiana thus became *Luisiana*, and Nouvelle Orleans became Nueva Orleans. While dominion fully transferred by 1769 to the hands and standards of the Spanish colonials, the populace generally retained its Francophone culture and obeyed its new government with thinly veiled disdain.

So too did Spain view Nueva Orleans, perceiving it as an unpromising distraction from its vast and valuable (but increasingly restless) New World empire. Distant and disappointing, the city came to be seen as nothing of a colonial afterthought in the late 1700s, even more so as revolution and insurgency rocked the Atlantic world. Violence to the north ousted British colonials and launched a new American nation; violence across the ocean overthrew the French monarchy and spawned a shaky new republic; violence in the Caribbean fueled a slave insurrection in France’s most valued colony, Saint-Domingue. Agitation for independence bubbled up throughout New Spain further threatening the imperial *status quo*.

As political tumult transpired internationally around the turn of the nineteenth century, technological breakthroughs began to alter the lower Louisiana landscape. Eli Whitney’s 1793 patent for the “cotton engine,” which efficiently separated lint from seed, made cotton cultivation lucrative and fostered its dramatic spread into newly cleared lands in the lower Mississippi Valley. Two years later, Jean-Baptiste de Boré of New Orleans succeeded in granulating Louisiana sugar cane (a process practiced for centuries in the tropical West Indies but elusive in the subtropical climate) and replicated the process commercially. Sugar cane cultivation swiftly replaced fading colonial-era crops such as indigo, rice, and tobacco throughout the delta region. Cotton and sugar shipments had only one economical way to reach sources of demand: down the Mississippi for deposit at Nueva Orleans and transshipment to world markets—where new steam-engine technology revolutionized the processing of cotton lint into fabric and garments.

Dramatic political news punctuated these advancements. Spain, declining in power and apprehensive about the United States' mounting interest in Nueva Orleans, secretly retroceded (1800) its Louisiana colony to Napoleon's and finally mighty France and prohibited Americans from depositing goods (1802) there. Upon learning of these provocations, an alarmed President Thomas Jefferson aspired to gain control of the once-marginalized, low-treasure port city, as France shockingly returned to the North American stage. But where Jefferson saw strategic advantage, Napoleon saw subterfuge: the future emperor viewed his regained Nouvelle Orleans and its adjoining Louisiana colony as little more than a breadbasket to feed the astonishingly lucrative sugar colony of Saint-Domingue, one of course, as insurgent slaves were crushed.

Instead, Napoleon's 20,000 troops, sent to Saint-Domingue in 1802 to restore order, were vanquished through bloody battles and lethal yellow fever outbreaks. Loss of the keystone colony undermined whatever passive interest Napoleon had in Louisiana. Wary of overextending his colonial empire, in need of money, and in light of impending war, Napoleon decided to sell the entire colony to the United States, which had bargained previously only for Nouvelle Orleans. "The vast and unlimited territory [became American] without the loss of a drop of blood," marveled one sanguine Westerner.¹ The eighty-five-year-old port vice envisioned to command that territory for France instead became the new American city of New Orleans.

Colonial authorities lowered the French tricolor for the last time during the Louisiana Purchase ceremony in the Place d'Armes on December 20, 1803. In only a few years, New Orleans' fortunes had dramatically reversed. For decades the colonial orphan of two distracted Old World monarchies, the city now found itself strategically positioned under the dominion of an ascendant, expanding, unabashedly capitalist New World democracy. Westward-bound Americans received the news "with elated heart and joyful countenance," enthused that they could now do business with the "friendly hand of a fellow citizen" rather than the foreign "tyrants . . . whose every glance was dire jealousy and suspicion . . . bombastic pride and ostentation . . . thievery, fraud, and chicanery."² Prominent observers routinely predicted that this new American city would, as one put it, "doubtless one day become the greatest [on the] continent, per-

1. *The Navigator, or the Traders' Useful Guide in Navigating the Monongahela, Allegheny, Ohio, and Mississippi Rivers* (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Zadock Cramer, 1806), 128.

2. *Ibid.*, 128.

haps even in the world.³ Another went further, forecasting New Orleans as “one of the greatest commercial cities in the universe.”⁴

Yet New Orleanians, who numbered roughly 8,000 in 1803, found themselves woefully unprepared for such radical change in dominion and destiny. Compared to their new compatriots, they spoke a different language, practiced a different religion, and followed distinct legal philosophies. They perceived race and managed slavery differently. They surveyed land and built houses in their own way. They ate different foods, celebrated different festivals, and idolized different heroes. They even remembered their dead differently. Their leaders for the previous eighty-five years had been appointed to office, not elected amongst them. New Orleanians were *told*, not polled, decisions and policies flowed from the top down, with little feedback tolerated from the bottom up. River commerce was controlled not by entrepreneurs serving market forces, but by “individuals purchasing the rights of monopoly from the king” through which “wealth circulated in a very partial manner” as one visitor disapprovingly huffed.⁵ Provincial, culturally conservative, resistant to change, often times unlettered, naïve to the ways of republican government, and ill-equipped for the fiercely competitive world of free-market capitalism, New Orleanians fretted, then resented, then resisted the onslaught of *les Américains*.

In the face of this impending threat, New Orleanians’ mostly Catholic Francophone population came to view its shared colonial-era heritage and deep-rooted Louisiana nativity as a unifying bond—a pan-racial, place-based sense of ethnicity—that distinguished them from the incoming English-speaking, Protestant, Anglo-Americans. In certain contexts, the natives described themselves as the *ancienne population*; in others, including vernacular speech, they became known far and wide as “the Creole”—a modification of the old Spanish and Portuguese word *criollo*, which originally meant New World-born offspring of Old World-born parents. Other appellations loosely dropped upon this ethnic group by

3. Hugh Murray, *Historical Account of Discoveries and Travels in North America* (London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, & Co., 1829), 426.

4. Daniel Blowe, *A Geographical, Historical, Commercial, and Agricultural View of the United States of America* (London: Edwards & Knibb, 1820), 5.

5. Thomas Ashe, *Travels in America Performed in the Year 1806* (London: Richard Phillips, 1809), 309–10.

contemporary Anglophones included “the French,” “the Gallics,” “the Gauls,” or “the Latins.”

New Orleans’s physical environment differed, too. It occupied a dynamic, fluid, and youthful deltaic plain rather than the ancient hardened lithosphere of the rest of North America. Its meager topography provided not a single visual landmark or vantage point beyond the slightly unraised natural levee. The region enjoyed a subtropical rather than a temperate climate, nurtured crops that tolerated those temperatures, and suffered diseases and disasters associated with those environs.

New Orleans, in sum, formed the expanding American nation’s first major encounter with a large, complex, subtropical urban society that, from the Americans’ perspective, seemed exotic and foreign, and just about every way imaginable.

“There is in fact no part of the world where a fortune may be made more speedily and certainly,” was one commentator about New Orleans; “there is more employment in every trade than there are hands to execute: even a good tailor may make a little fortune in a few years.” That sense of opportunity trumped aversion to the alien, motivating waves of outsiders to cast their lot with this peculiar place. “The Americans [are] swarming from the northern states,” recollected Pierre Clément de Laussat, the last French official to oversee Louisiana. “Each one turned over in his mind a little plan of speculation[;] they were invading Louisiana as the holy tribes invaded the land of Canaan. Their arrival rapidly affected the city’s economy. The influx of American speculators was so great” after the Louisiana Purchase, wrote one observer a few years later, “that the character of commerce instantly busily changed, and violence and competition, which in America means contention, reigned triumphantly. . . .” The number of merchants in New Orleans, he continued, increased fifty-fold within six years.⁸ Similarly and the numbers grow for bankers, factors, agents, lawyers, and planters—all eager, “on the make,” laying claim to as much opportunity, power, and influence as the city could offer.⁹ The

6. Murray, *Account of the Discoveries and Travels*, 427.

7. Pierre Clément de Laussat, *Memoirs of My Life* (Baton Rouge and New Orleans, 1978 translation of 1831 memoir), 1.

8. Ashe, *Travels Performed in 1806*, 309–10.

9. Joseph G. Tregle Jr., *Louisiana in the Age of Jackson: A Clash of Cultures and Personalities* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999), 3.

Americans also changed the city's ethnic geography, as they generally settled in the upper streets of the original city and then upriver into the Faubourg Ste. Marie (which became anglicized as "St. Mary"). American emigration increased after statehood in 1812 and again following the resounding defeat of the British at the Battle of New Orleans in 1815. That victory launched Maj. Gen. Andrew Jackson to national fame, and further introduced countless Americans to the exotic city now within their country.

Anglo-Americans were not the only *arrivistes*: more than 9,000 refugees—roughly equally divided among whites, free people of color, and the enslaved—arrived in 1809 from former Saint-Domingue, now the independent nation of Haiti. The Francophone refugees beached their lives into the city's Franco-Afro-Caribbean culture, and complicated the process of Americanization. They also complicated the position of the Creoles, who now had to share power, resources, and living space with a third faction. Such also was the Creoles' relationship with immigrants arriving directly from France, who like the Americans tended to be more worldly, erudite, competitive, and ambitious—but like the Creoles spoke French, practiced Catholicism, and exhibited Latin cultural ways. Immigrants from the Spanish-speaking world further diversified New Orleans' ethnic landscape, arriving since the 1770s from Mexico, Cuba, Central and South America, the Canary Islands, and Spain itself. At least a few representatives of nearly every society of the greater Atlantic Basin, and many beyond, circulated in New Orleans in the early 1800s. They came for countless proximate reasons, but the ultimate reason usually involved the myriad commercial opportunities generated by the city's supreme geographical advantage. Topping the list were all things related to cotton and sugar.

[P]lantations . . . from Natchez to New Orleans and still lower down, were formerly appropriated to the culture of indigo and rice, but the demand for these articles . . . being on the decline, the attention of the planters is now turned to that of sugar and cotton, both of which [make] excellent shipments. . . .

—Fortescue Cuming, 1810

10. Fortescue Cuming, *Sketches of a Tour to the Western Country through the States of Ohio and Kentucky* (Pittsburgh, 1810), 338.

Following Whitney's invention of the "gin," cotton production in Louisiana rose to 2 million pounds by 1811, grown mostly in the Anglo-dominated regions north of Baton Rouge. That figure quintupled in ten years, quadrupled again to 33 million pounds in 1826, then rose to 62 million by 1834. Production in the state of Mississippi (the vast majority from the southwestern corner) rose from 10 million pounds in 1821 to 85 million pounds in 1834.¹¹ Louisiana and Mississippi contributed nearly two-thirds of the cotton arriving to New Orleans' wharves; Alabama and Tennessee sent down most of the remainder, with places as far away as Illinois and Florida contributing as well. Bales arrived first on flatboats and later on steamboats, in such quantities that the city began to develop a sophisticated cotton marketing and services industry. In the seven years leading up to Lincoln's first visit, cotton handled at New Orleans doubled from 156,030 to 304,848 bales, and was shipped to Great Britain (47 percent, principally to Liverpool), states of the northeastern United States (28 percent, mainly New York), France (22 percent), and a host of smaller international ports.¹³

Sugar cane boomed commensurately, although it was raised on a more local scale compared to cotton, and shipped mostly to domestic markets. South-eastern Louisiana produced 2,500 tons of sugar in 1802, just seven seasons after Boré's granulation breakthrough. A year later, sixty to seventy sugar plantations lined both banks of the river from present-day Kenner to English Turn.¹⁴ While Anglos generally dominated cotton production, Creoles and Acadians controlled most sugar production. By 1816, with over \$20 million invested regionally in the sugar industry, "the great impetus thus given to the trade was felt in every direction and the

11. *The Southern States, Embracing a Series of Papers Condensed from the Earlier Volumes of De Bow's Review* (1856), 1:123; *New Orleans Price Current and Commercial Intelligencer* (October 10, 1835); and J. D. B. De Bow, *The Commercial Review of the South and West* (1848), 1:3.

12. These figures are from 1821. John Willie, "Exports of cotton and tobacco from the port of New Orleans during the last seven years . . . [1821–28] Imports from the interior . . . Exports of sugar and molasses . . ." (New Orleans: Benjamin Levy, 1828), broadside stored at Tulane University, Louisiana Collection, 976.31 (380) E96.

13. Willie, "Exports from New Orleans," broadside stored at Tulane University, Louisiana Collection, 976.31 (380) E96.

14. John G. Clark, *New Orleans, 1765–1842: An Economic History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1970), 200. By another count, Louisiana's sugar-related production in 1802 included 5,000 hogheads of sugar, 5,000 barrels of molasses, and 5,000 casks of rum. "The Sugar Exchange: Formal Opening of the Beautiful Building," *Times-Democrat* (New Orleans), June 4, 1884, address by J. Dymond, p. 3, c. 3–5.

city of New Orleans rapidly increased in wealth and population, tripling the same within twenty years after the opening of the sugar industry.¹⁵ Between 1824 and 1830, the number of sugar plantations grew from under 200 to nearly 700.¹⁶ Of the 39,063 hogshad of sugar handled at New Orleans in the year preceding Lincoln's first trip, nearly half went to New York, a quarter to Philadelphia, and the rest to fourteen other large American cities.¹⁷

The two commodities, not to mention tobacco and numerous other crops from the rapidly populating trans-Appalachian West, spectacularly increased port traffic at New Orleans. The exportation of a mere 100,000 bales of Louisiana, fifteen years ago, was carried on with thirty ships of moderate size," wrote a Frenchman in 1807 after visiting the region in 1801–02; "Since the cultivation of sugar and cotton, it has so increased, that more than a hundred are employed."¹⁸ The freight arrived in New Orleans at first via a fleet of flatboats originating from numerous lower Mississippi River villages, joined after the 1810s by a new fleet of steamboats. "The flatboat coast trade and the fortunes of the flatboatmen . . . were entirely dependent on the success of the cotton and sugar plantations of Mississippi and Louisiana," explained one trader who knew firsthand; "When crops were bad, it was 'hard times' among the flatboatmen."¹⁹

Vast quantities of capital, largely from Northeastern and European financial hubs, poured into the city's banks to fund agricultural enterprises, as well as internal improvements, buildings, factories, and land development. New Orleans emerged as a key Southern node in the Atlantic Basin economic system. The city's banking system as a whole expanded markedly in the 1830s; at least fourteen banks operated around the time of Lincoln's visits. Clustering primarily on upper Chartres and Royal streets, they included the venerable Citizens, the Union, the Orleans, Consolidated, the State, the Louisiana, the Gaslight, and the Commercial; even the Orleans Theater Company got into the financial scene. Bankers interacted with commission merchants, who advanced funds speculatively

15. "The Sugar Exchange," *Times-Democrat*, June 4, 1884, p. 3, c. 3–5.

16. H. Galloway, *The Sugar Cane Industry: An Historical Geography from its Origins to 1840* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 190.

17. Willie, "Exports from New Orleans," roadside stored at Tulane University, Louisiana Collection, 976.31 (386) E96.

18. M. Perrin Du Lac, *Travels Through the Two Louisianas . . . in 1801, 1802, & 1803* (London: Richard Phillips, 1807), 92.

19. "In Flatboat and Keelboat Times On the Mississippi Over Seventy Years Ago," *Daily Picayune*, March 19, 1896, p. 14, section f, c. 6–7.

to plantation owners, oftentimes driving up commodity prices. Cotton and sugar factors allied themselves with planters and represented their interests in urban affairs, while lawyers oversaw their legal matters and sued relentlessly over every imaginable dispute. Merchants, brokers, and commercial agents added to the professional class: the 1822 city directory listed 265 merchants, 6 commission merchants, 24 brokers or exchange brokers, 1 cotton broker, and 2 commercial agents.²⁰ By the mid-1830s, the city was home to 573 wholesale merchants, 786 retailers, 81 brokers, 16 auctioneers, and 11 notary publics (not to mention over 1,300 taverns, cabarets, and hotels). Countering the speculative risks encouraged by liberal capital was a parallel rise in insurance companies, each with their teams of agents, bookkeepers, and lawyers.

New Orleans' vast class of professional middlemen prospered enormously on the risks taken by planters, who in turn profited on the forced labor of slave—the foundation upon which the entire system rested. The early-nineteenth-century cotton and sugar cane boom in fact breathed new life into the institution of slavery; importations from Africa into the porous underbelly of the Louisiana coast continued even after the United States prohibited international slave trading in 1808. Domestic slave trading from Virginia and the Upper South filled in place, delivering thousands of “surplus” bondmen into the brutal, high-priced Deep South slave market. Yet another professional class tended to the handling of human chattel, making New Orleans the nation's premier slave-trading post. New Orleans in the antebellum era served as the South's financial nerve center in just about every way imaginable. No surprise, then, that the lower Mississippi River region boasted the nation's highest concentration of millionaires.²²

This is not to say that every ambitious free white male became rich, or that the economy did nothing but hum. Many entrepreneurs strived doggedly and lost everything. Prices for many Louisiana commodities actually declined for much of the 1820s, leaving investors less return for greater risk or toil. Markets crashed infamously in the Panic of 1837 and

20. *New-Orleans Directory and Register* (New Orleans: John Adams Paxton, 1822), paginated section entitled “List of Names.”

21. James E. Winston, “Notes on the Economic History of New Orleans, 1803–1836,” *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 11, no. 2 (September 1924): 216–218; Gavin Wright, *The Political Economy of the Cotton South* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978), 223.

22. Winston, “Economic History of New Orleans,” 223; Wright, *Economy of the Cotton South*, 13.

struggled for six years thence, losing many a New Orleans aristocrat his family's fortune.²³ Then the very lifeblood of the city's success—the monopoly on Western traffic afforded by the Mississippi River—came under assault in this era, with the completion of the Erie Canal (1825) and subsequent waterways and railroads connecting the eastern metropolises directly with the trans-Appalachian West. It was because the “pie” represented by that region's agricultural bounty grew so dramatically in the absolute terms that it disguised the fact that New Orleans' relative slice of that pie was shrinking. Likewise, the magnificent wealth accumulated by those who *did* succeed drew more far attention and inspired more emulation than did the money lost quietly by those who failed.

Nevertheless, did the allure of riches beckon, ambitious entrepreneurs willingly exposed themselves to the risks of a hazardous physical environment. Those further down on the social pyramid had no choice but to suffer even greater exposure to those hazards. New Orleans became known as the Necropolis of the South—the Wet Grave—filthy, flood-prone, storm-battered, disease-infested city that suffered forty to seventy deaths annually per thousand people (and still over a table that rate during epidemics).²⁴ Crime and vice took additional toll on health and welfare. Many people sensed a causative relationship between the city's physical mortality and moral depravity. An 1812 article in a New York paper, for example, viewed the city's recumbents with hurricanes and fires as divine retribution for being “a second Sodom . . . exhibiting . . . scenes of the most licentious wickedness.”²⁵ An 1815 editorial characterized the city “as a place that has disgraced America by its worthlessness and vice . . . very little better than old Sodom and Gomorrah.”²⁶ A missionary minister visiting in 1823 reminded his readers that New Orleans is of course exposed to greater varieties of human misery, vice, disease, and want, than any other American town. . . . Much has been said about [its] promiscuity of manners . . . morals . . . debauchery, and low vice. . . .²⁷ A true descrip-

23. Thomas E. Redard, “The Port of New Orleans: An Economic History, 1821–1860” Ph.D. dissertation, Louisiana State University, 1985), 1:18–21.

24. The City Planning and Zoning Commission, *Major Street Report* (New Orleans, 1927), 75.

25. *New-York Gazette & General Advertiser*, October 12, 1812, p. 2, c. 3.

26. *Independent Chronicle* (Boston), September 25, 1815, p. 4, c. 4.

27. Timothy Flint, *Recollections of the Last Ten Years . . . in the Valley of the Mississippi* (Boston: Cummings, Hillard, and Co., 1826), 305 and 306.

tion written by Hugh Murray at the time of Lincoln's first visit assessed the city's "moral aspect" as "the most sinister [of] any city of America," a by-product of the city's ability to attract "adventurers" and "refuge":

[T]he sound of music and dancing echo[es] from the ball-rooms [even] on a Sunday. . . . Gaming-houses abound in every quarter, and nothing prevents the inhabitants from plunging into the utmost excesses of dissipation, except the avidity for making a fortune. . . . Masked balls, ball-fights, and sensual indulgences, form almost the exclusive enjoyments of the greater part of the inhabitants.²⁸

An Englishman visiting the next year corroborated those observations. "The number of billiard-rooms, gambling-houses, and tavern-offices is immense" wrote James Stuart after his 1830 tour of New Orleans. "In the old city every second house seems to be [so] occupied. . . ."

Pious? Hardly, Murray went on to say, pointing out that decade-old Pittsburgh had four churches for its 10,000 citizens, while century-old New Orleans counted only five for 40,000. Stuart concurred, "There are few churches here in relation to the population than in any other of the American cities," noting also that even some houses of worship got into the gambling business. "There is the French Evangelical Church Lottery, the Baton Rouge Church Lottery, the New-Orleans Catholic Church Lottery, &c." Both visitors shuddered at the rampant disregard of the sabbath, a local cultural distinction in which nearly all judgmental visitors shook their heads.²⁹

And literacy? Even less so. The city's only free library in 1830, sponsored by an out-of-state Jew, had to beg space from a church owned by out-of-state Presbyterians.³⁰ A small college had recently shut down for want of students, and "all attempts have failed to form even a reading-room, though there is not in other parts of the Union a town of 2000 inhabitants without one."³¹ The state's exploding population, which increased nine-fold between 1810 and 1830, could not prevent the number of Louisiana newspapers during those years from declining, ten to nine.³² Such judg-

28. Murray, *Account of Discoveries and Travels*, 428–429.

29. James Stuart, *Three Years in North America*, (Edinburgh and London: Robert Cadell and Whittaker and Company, 1833), 236–239.

30. *New-Orleans Directory & Register* (New Orleans: John Adams Paxton, 1830), unpaginated entry for Touro Free Library.

31. Murray, *Account of Discoveries and Travels*, 428–429.

32. Stuart, *Three Years in North America*, 2:245–246.

ments of New Orleans—moral, civic, religious, and intellectual decadence—were by no means exceptional in this era; they were the rule—so much so that writers grappled with words and built upon others’ denunciations to express the sheer magnitude of the city’s perceived iniquity. Murray himself quoted another visitor, Henry Bradshaw Fearon, who wrote in 1819,

to all men whose desire only is to be rich and to live a short life but a merry one I have no hesitation in recommending New Orleans.³³

“But the movement appears at least not to be of a very refined nature,” noted Murray before moving on to a chapter on American industry, in which—incidentally, New Orleans earns not a single mention.

In spite of these universally recognized city stigmas (or perhaps because of them) New Orleans witnessed during the 1820s and 1830s the most dramatic sustained population growth of its entire history. The 1820 census enumerated 27,276 people in the city proper, more than triple the population at the time of the Louisiana Purchase. That figure increased by 82 percent over the next decade, and by another 105 percent between 1830 and 1840. When Lincoln visited in 1828 and 1831, at least 45,000 and 65,000 people, respectively, resided in the city—now including thousands of “strangers” (part-time residents, visitors, and transients) nor uncounted indigents, many of whom circulated in the same riverfront sections traversed by visiting flatboatmen. One journalist estimated the city’s permanent population “near 60,000” at the time of Lincoln’s second visit, and reported that there are frequently from 25 to 50,000 strangers in the place” during winter.³⁵

Indeed, seasonal activity waxed and waned so dramatically that a wintertime visitor and his summertime counterpart (few that there were) might come away with divergent impressions of the Southern metropolis. Shipping activity of all types began to increase in mid-autumn as farmers harvested crops and sent them to market. It peaked in late winter and early spring, then declined and bottomed out in late summer and early autumn when only one-quarter to one-fifth of the peak traffic called at the port.³⁶ Traffic from upcountry (as opposed to the sea) ranged particularly

33. Henry Bradshaw Fearon, *Sketches of America: A Narrative of a Journey of Five Thousand Miles Through The Eastern and Western States of America* (London, 1819), 278.

34. Murray, *Account of Discoveries and Travels*, 429–430.

35. “New-Orleans,” *New-Bedford Courier* (New Bedford, Mass.) August 16, 1831, p. 1.

36. Estimated from Collector of Levee Dues records of 1818–23 and from monthly shipping arrival records from 1826–29, as summarized on the last page of the *New-*

widely with the seasons: a typical April saw two hundred to four hundred flatboats, steamboats, barges, and rafts arrive at New Orleans' wharves, while the month of September might see as few as five.³⁷ That shipping cycle fueled the economy and thus the number of visiting businessmen, sailors, boatmen, and itinerants, plus all those locals in the secondary and tertiary economies who fed, clothed, sheltered, and served the cash-carrying transients. One observer in the late 1840s estimated that while the city's official population exceeded 100,000, "a transient population of thirty or forty thousand [departs] in swarms . . . as soon as the warm season commences [and returns] as wild geese do from the North, on the first appearance of a flake of snow."³⁸ The seasonal visitors found accommodations according to their means: sailors would sleep aboard their ships; laborers crowded into notoriously rowdy "caravanserais"³⁹ (dorm houses for poorer transients); and professionals stayed at exchange hotels, found apartments, or boarded with affluent residents. "A few gentlemen can be accommodated with boarding in a genteel French family; in a central part of a city," and one *Courier* notice at the outset of the 1828–29 boating season. To screen out undesirables—and there were many—the family directed prospective tenants to apply, not at their house, but "at the Office of *The Courier*."⁴⁰

Oppressive heat, humidity, and a slack economy gave sufficient cause for people to avoid a New Orleans summer, but the premier reason for the annual exodus was to minimize the chances of a long and excruciating death by the scourge of "the sickly season," yellow fever.⁴¹ The dreaded late-summer plague scared off vessels calling at the port and drove away visiting businessmen as well as wealthy residents. Their departure stifled economic activity, which only intensified the pressure to flee. "In summer it becomes intensely hot, and the resident is cruelly annoyed by the mosquitoes [*sic*]," reported one traveler in 1828. Unaware of the relationship between certain mosquitoes (namely the invasive African *Aedes aegypti*)

Orleans Directory & Register (1830).

37. V. Harfinger Reports, Microfilm #75, 19, QN420, 1818–23, New Orleans Collector of Levee Dues-Registers of Flatboats, Barges, Rafts, and Steamboats in the Port of New Orleans.

38. Anonymous, *New Orleans As It Is: Its Manners and Customs* ("By a Resident, Printed for the Publisher," 1850), 23.

39. A. Oakey Hall, *The Manhattan in New Orleans; or, Phases of "Crescent City" Life* (New York: J. S. Redfield, 1851), 17.

40. "Private Boarding," *Louisiana Courier*, November 13, 1828, p. 3, c. 4.

41. Henry Tudor, *Narrative of a Tour in North America* (London: James Duncan, 1834), 2:380.

and the “terrible maldy,” he went on to say that yellow fever

makes it first appearance in the early days of August, and continues till October. During that era New Orleans appears like a deserted city; all who possibly can, fly to the north or the upper country, most of the shops are shut, and the silence of the streets is only interrupted by the sound of the hearse passing through them.⁴²

Those of African ancestry, as well as those born in the city (Creoles who were “acclimated” to the virus through childhood exposure) seemed to be more resistant to yellow fever, although this may have been mere perception than reality. Newcomers, on the other hand, suffered disproportionately (especially if they lived near swamps or stagnant water). The poor suffered more than the rich, for reasons of inequitable residential-settlement geographies, inferior domestic environs, and the lack of financial wherewithal to depart. Summertime New Orleans in the antebellum era thus constituted a markedly quieter, riskier, poorer, less cosmopolitan, more male, more black, more gender-balanced, more Catholic, and more Francophone urban environment than wintertime New Orleans—not to mention hotter, more humid, and more prone to hurricanes. (Ten weeks after Lincoln’s 1831 departure, a powerful hurricane struck New Orleans, destroying, among other things, a number of flat bats and killing their crews.⁴³) Even slave commerce quieted down, as traders reduced the prices of their human chattel in the face of weak demand and threat of illness.⁴⁴ “I am now at the cold-quarters of Death! bemoaned one visitor in 1831, “and were it the month of August or September[,] I should scarcely expect to be alive this day [next] week.”⁴⁵ Winter and springtime population, however, had Mississippi River flood threats to worry about, while Asiatic cholera, smallpox, and other diseases struck with little regard to season. (A year after Lincoln’s second visit, the city’s worst-ever cholera epidemic claimed 7,340 lives and scared away another 11,000.⁴⁶) Risks to public health, in sum, were not evenly distributed in antebellum New Orleans,

42. Murray, *Account of Discoveries and Travels*, 427.

43. *New Orleans Bee*, August 18, 1831, p. 2, c. 1. The hurricane struck on August 16–17.

44. Frederic Bancroft, *Slave Tradings in the Old South* (Baltimore: J. H. Furst Company, 1931), 317.

45. Tudor, *Narrative of a Tour in North America*, 2:64.

46. John Wilds, *Collectors of Customs at the Port of New Orleans* (United States Customs Service, 1991), 14.

not spatially nor demographically nor temporally. Neither were they ever particularly low—a place, for anyone, at any time, risk of death was the cost of opportunity.

Opportunity prevailed, population data attest to it. The early antebellum era—up to 1840—proved to be the only sustained period in which New Orleans's permanent population rose in absolute numbers and relative to other American cities. Not only was the city growing, it was gaining on other cities. New Orleans ranked as the tenth-largest American city at the time of its first U.S. Census in 1810; when Lincoln visited, it ranked fifth and rising; by 1840, it peaked at number three. The city's total population would continue to rise for another 29 years, but not for a century would it ever rise in relative rank again (and then only slightly and briefly, at the century's end). Abraham Lincoln visited New Orleans when it was the largest and most important urban center in the South, and the ascendant city in the nation.⁴⁷

New Orleans in the early 1800s also presented the most diverse society in the nation, in terms of ethnicity, nativity, race, religion, language, and culture. Even unobservant visitors noted, from circulating throughout the bustling entrepôt, strikingly high ratios of immigrants to those born locally; of African-descended peoples to those of European stock; of free people of color to slaves; of Gallics and Latins to Anglos and Germanics; and of Francophones to Anglophones. Curious visitors came in droves and recorded their impressions emphatically in their travel narratives popular in that era. "No city perhaps on the globe," wrote William Darby in 1817, "presents a greater contrast of national manners, language, and complexion, than does New Orleans"—an assessment that precedes by decades the arrival of the major waves of European immigration.⁴⁸ Locals, too, extolled their city's cosmopolitan nature. "The population is much mixed," wrote John Adams Paxton in the 1822 City Directory: "there is a great confusion of tongues, and on the levee, during a busy day, can be seen people of every grade, colour and condition: in short, it is a world in miniature."⁴⁹ Alexis de Tocqueville, who visited New Orleans a year after

47. Decennial census figures derived from compendium volumes of the U.S. Census; interpolations computed by author.

48. William Darby, *Geographical Description of the State of Louisiana* (New York: James Olmstead, 1817), 75.

49. *New-Orleans Directory and Register* (1822), 45–46 (emphasis in original).

Lincoln's second trip, learned of the city's ethnic mosaic through an interview with the prominent local lawyer Etienne Marcasau:

Q. They say that in New Orleans is to be found a mixture of all the nations?

A. That's true; you see here a mingling of all races. Not a country in America or Europe but has sent us some representatives. New Orleans is a patch-work of peoples.⁵⁰

Testimonies to New Orleans' superlative diversity, often expressed in a simple lexicon and cadence, augmented during the peak immigration decade of the 1830s–50s. Numerical records substantiate the eyewitness explorations. The limited demographic data offered by the 1820 census (white, non- and naturalized foreigners, free people of color, and slaves) places New Orleans alongside Charleston, South Carolina, as the most diverse city in the nation. Over the next four decades, far more immigrants arrived at the United States through New Orleans—more than 550,000 from 1820 to 1860, with 300,000 in the 1850s alone—than through any other Southern city. For most of the late antebellum era, New Orleans ranked as the nation's number-two immigrant port, ahead of Boston and behind only New York.⁵¹ An analysis of the 1850 census, the first record birthplace, shows that New Orleans was home to more significantly sized ethnic groups (measured by ancestry, nativity, race, and enslavement status) than any other American city. That is, when we break urban populations into the sub-groups tabulated by the 1850 census, fully seven groups in New Orleans each constituted at least 5 percent of the city's total population. No other major American city had more than five such groups.⁵²

All this went without saying to an editor-in-chief for the *Daily Picayune*, who wrote:

When we state that in no city in the New or in the Old World

50. As quoted by George Wilson Pierson, *Townsville in America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 627–628.

51. Treasury Department, Bureau of Statistics, *Tables Showing Arrivals of Alien Passengers and Immigrants in the United States from 1820 to 1888* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1889), 103–109.

52. The subgroups were aggregated as: (1) locally born; (2) born elsewhere in U.S.; (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. Analysis by Richard Campanella based on J. D. B. De Bow, *Statistical View of the United States—Compendium of the Seventh Census* (Washington, D.C., 1854), 395–99.

is there a greater variety of nations represented than in [New Orleans], yet these but asserting an established tradition. New Orleans is a world in miniature, subdivided into smaller commonwealths, [in which] distinctive traits of national character are to be seen, and the peculiar language of its people is to be heard spoken.⁵³

The *Picayune's* subtly ambivalent editorial hints at the discord beneath New Orleans' colorful social diversity. What amazed visitors more often than not, beyond angst and antagonism among residents. Competition among Creoles, Anglos, and immigrants underscored all aspects of social, political, and economic life. Exacerbating the tensions were deeper hostilities between slave and master and between free people of color and whites—not to mention between free blacks and bondmen and between domestic slaves and field slaves. The slow and painful absorption of post-colonial Creole New Orleans into the Anglo-American United States, which on occasion came “seriously close to armed violence,”⁵⁴ peaked around the time of Lincoln's visits.

On one side was an uneasy alliance between Francophone Creoles, foreign French (that is, immigrants from France and refugees from Haiti), and Mediterranean, Caribbean, and Latin American immigrants. Possessing the numerical majority, this Catholic, Latin-influenced maintained political and cultural control. On the other side were Anglophone Protestants of Anglo-American ethnicity, who enjoyed commercial dominance and padded their numbers by establishing alliances with Germanic and Irish immigrants. Each side criticized the other's wielding of influence, cultural habits, and idiosyncrasies. “There is, as everyone knows,” wrote the English sociologist-philosopher Harriet Martineau,

a mutual jealousy between the French and American creoles of Louisiana. . . . The division between the American and French factions is visible even in the drawing-room. The French complain that the Americans will not speak French; will not meet their neighbors even half way in accommodation of speech.

53. “A Kaleidoscopic View of New Orleans,” *Daily Picayune*, September 23, 1843, p. 2, c. 3.

54. Joseph G. Tregle Jr., “Creoles and Americans,” in *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization*, ed. Arnold R. Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 153.

The Americans ridicule the toilet practices of the French ladies; their habitual use of rouge and pearl powder. Till lately, the French Creoles have carried everything their own way, from their suits for numbers.⁵⁵

Because Americans generally settled in upriver neighborhoods of “Faubourg St. Mary, Delor, Saulet, and La Course” (known as the *banlieue supérieure* or upper outskirts) while Creoles and Latin immigrants predominated in the City District and the lower “bourgs” (*banlieue inférieure*), some viewed the manipulation of political geography as the solution to the endemic “differences of opinion.” On December 2, 1826, City Council members called for what one journalist termed the “dismemberment” of New Orleans, cleaving the city down the center of Canal Street.⁵⁶ A bill circulated in the state legislature in subsequent months for “convert[ing] the whole [of New Orleans] into two cities, to be called the Upper and Lower city . . . arising from the opposing influence of American (as they are called) and French interests.” The proposal passed the House of Representatives but failed the Senate by a narrow margin. Seeing the writing on the wall, French (Creole) interests countered with a conciliatory proposal “re-organizing the city government [such that] measures objected to by the Americans were removed, and their influence on the city councils greatly increased.” Concluded an “impartial spectator” in 1828,

This measure has restored harmony for the present, but it is easy . . . to perceive that Gallic influence must at no distant day succumb under the weight of talent, enterprise, and population annually rolling in from the northern states.⁵⁷

Into the midst of this complex and contentious social, economic, and political landscape walked a young Abraham Lincoln in 1828 and 1831. Evidence of civic tension would have abounded to an observant visitor—in

55. Harriet Martineau, *Retrospect of Western Travel* (London and New York: Saunders and Giltner, 1838), 1:263 and 271.

56. *Conseil de Ville*, Session of December 2, 1826, pp. 294–295 of microfilm #90-223, AI 307, NOPL-LC.

57. Robert Goodacre, “New Orleans—Goodacre’s Lecture,” *Baltimore Gazette and Daily Advertiser*, January 11, 1828, p. 1. The divisive forces eventually prevailed in 1836, when the Americans won legislative assent to divide New Orleans into three semiautonomous units, essentially to free themselves of Creole predominance. The inefficient “municipality system” was abandoned in 1852, but only after the Americans established alliances with uptown German and Irish immigrants to ensure numerical superiority over the Creoles.

the streets, in conversation, and in the press. One Anglo editorial, for example, complained of a new Supreme Court decision that City Council ordinances be published in French, despite that “most of those whose mother tongue is [French] speak [English], and a majority of those whose native language is English do not speak anything else. . . .”⁵⁸ In another paper, the *New-Orleans American* (note the name) announced its intention to establish a publishing operation in “the faubourg St. Marie . . . the location is considered ‘advantageous,’ on account of its Anglo-American population, ‘to whose interests and gratification [the newspaper] will be especially, almost exclusively devoted.’” The editors promised that their “views and principles . . . shall be *purely American*,” even as they assured potential subscribers that they “will be shackled by no party. . . .”⁵⁹ Both papers ran in newspapers while Lincoln visited the city in May 1831.

Ethnic discord eventually did “dismember” New Orleans. In 1836, the American contingent finally won legislative consent to divide the city into three semiautonomous municipalities, essentially to free themselves of Creole political predominance. For sixteen years, New Orleans operated under one mayor but three separate systems of governance in everything from policing to education to port management. Municipalities even issued their own treasury notes. The terribly inefficient “municipality system” further poisoned social relations, pitting the populations of the First, Second, and Third municipalities against each other in fierce competition. “Had the Legislature sought, by the most careful efforts,” wrote the Third Municipality’s *Daily Orleanian* in 1849, “to create a war of races, to make distinction between Creole and American, they could not have chosen a better means for the objects than the present division operates.”⁶⁰ The city reunified in 1852, but only after the Americans established alliances with German and Irish immigrants to ensure numerical superiority over the Creoles.

The cultural distinction between Anglo and Creole would blur over time. The distinction between white and black, however, was subjected to the legally regimented institution of chattel slavery.

The presence, experience, and treatment of people of African ancestry

58. *Mercantile Advertiser*, May 26, 1824, p. 2, c. 4.

59. “New-Orleans American,” *New Orleans Bee*, May 13, 1831, p. 2, c. 4. The paper never got off the ground.

60. *Daily Orleanian*, February 19, 1849, p. 2, c. 3.

figured prominently in forming the impression cast by New Orleans upon first-time visitors to Lincoln. That impression may be assessed from three angles: via the population's magnitude and characteristics in local society, via its residential settlement patterns, and perhaps most importantly, via the ubiquity and nature of the institution of slavery in the cityscape.

By the time of Lincoln's visits, many New Orleanians of African blood traced roots over a century deep into Louisiana soil, their ancestors having been forcibly removed from Africa's Senegambia region by French colonialists starting in 1719. Two main waves of African importation followed: the first under French rule in the 1740s and a larger one under Spanish dominion in the 1780s. Coupled with the New World slave trade and the unrelenting increase in New Orleans' demand for African-ancestry population, by 1808 (compared to 3,948 whites) at the time of the Louisiana Purchase. Unlike most North American cities, New Orleans maintained the Caribbean notion of a "gradient" between free white and enslaved blacks, manifested in the somewhat privileged mixed-race middle caste known as the *gens de couleur libre* (free people of color). Slaves outnumbered free people of color by a 2.1-to-1 ratio in circa-1803 New Orleans, a ratio that would equalize in upcoming decades. Despite increasingly oppressive laws, more free people of color would call New Orleans home than any other Southern city (and occasionally more than any American city in both relative and absolute terms) throughout most of the antebellum era. According to the decennial census, their populations in New Orleans totaled 6,237 in 1820, 8,041 in 1830, a suspiciously high 19,726 in 1840 (probably a mistake), 9,905 in 1850, and 10,689 a year before the Civil War.⁶¹ Most free people of color belonged to the working or lower-middle class, but a significant number gained middle- or upper-class status through skilled trades, real estate, and business investments. By one count, nine of the twenty-odd richest blacks in antebellum America were New Orleanians, while an additional eight came from nearby parishes. By another estimate, free people of color in New Orleans lived, worked, and earned better than their counterparts in New York City—indeed better than some whites.⁶²

61. Figures differ somewhat in various aggregations of census data. Richard Wade, *Slavery in the Cities: The South, 1820–1860* (London, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 326.

62. Juliet E. K. Walker, "Racism, Slavery, and Free Enterprise: Black Entrepreneurship in the United States before the Civil War," *Business History Review* 60, no. 3 (Autumn, 1986): 350; Robert William Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, *Time On The Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery* (Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown and Com-

Free people of color could not vote but they could legally earn money, own property, sue in court, and begeth wealth to the next generation. Some even owned slaves, who themselves might possess significant amounts of white blood. The racial complexity of Louisiana-style slavery is evident in an announcement that ran during Lincoln's 1831 visit, which listed the slaves belonging to "f.w." (free woman of color) Marie Cordeviola of the Faubourg St. Amé:

Sally, a negress . . . with her two children named Louis a negro [and] Daniel mulatto . . . Henriette a negress . . . with a child named Louis a mulatto . . . Marianne, a negress . . . now with child . . .⁶³

The presence of the free people of color as a distinct and legally recognized caste helped distinguish New Orleans and Louisiana society from the American two-caste norm—that is, pure white on one side and black to any degree on the other. ("The French in Louisiana," geographer Friedrich Ratzel later commented, "never set themselves off strictly from their slaves and freedmen as the Anglo-Americans did in the other slave states."⁶⁴) That sense of cultural deviation lasted also to 1809, when more than 9,000 refugees from Haiti doubled the population of New Orleans, augmenting each of its three castes (white, free people of color, and enslaved black), and breathing new life into its Francophone Caribbean culture.

The city's African American population further reconfigured when the U.S. banned international slave trading in 1808. The law shifted the movement of slaves into the hands of illegal international smugglers and legal domestic traders, the latter sending "surplus" slaves from the Upper South into the Deep South plantation economy to satisfy its insatiable demand for labor. More than 750,000 slaves were forcibly shipped southward during the antebellum era—a shift in the geography of people of African descent so significant that one historian described it the "second Middle Passage."⁶⁵

1974), 244.

63. *Louisiana Courier*, 1831, 104–105.

64. Friedrich Ratzel, *Sketches of Physical and Cultural Life in North America*, trans. and ed. Stewart A. Stehlin (New Brunswick and London, 1988 translation of 1873 treatise), 214.

65. Ira Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 161–163.

Disproportionately the victims of this domestic slave trade landed in New Orleans. As we have understood that from Maryland and Virginia alone," wrote one visitor in the early 1820s, "from 1,000 to 5,000 [slaves] per annum are occasionally sent down to New-Orleans; a place, the very name of which seems to strike terror into the slaves and free Negroes of the Middle States."⁶⁶ In addition to the "coastwise" trade along the Eastern Seaboard, slave importations came to New Orleans from the West (that is, down the Mississippi), sometimes on the same flatboat that transported corn, flour, and hogs. The Pittsburgh-published river guide *The Navigator* listed 286 slaves among the 64,750 pounds of hard, 266 bushels of potatoes, 155 horses, and dozens of other loads from the Ohio River in 1810–11.⁶⁷ Henry Bradshaw Fearon witnessed fourteen flatboats docked at Natchez loaded with "a great many coloured people, particularly females" from Louisville, destined for market.⁶⁸ In a single month shortly after Lincoln's 1831 trip, more than one thousand slaves disembarked at the New Orleans levee, with 180 arriving aboard a Louisville steamer in a single day.⁶⁹ Roughly 50,000 enslaved African Americans were imported into Louisiana between 1800 and 1830, a period in which the state's total slave population more than tripled. From the Louisiana Purchase to the Civil War, no era saw more imported slave sales in New Orleans than 1820 through 1831, when 2,000–4,000 were sold annually.⁷⁰ Abraham Lincoln visited New Orleans in 1828 and 1831.

The enslaved population did not constitute a monolithic group. Masters, keen to exploit cultural similarities and differences, pointed out slaves' birthplaces, ethnicities, and racial mixtures (as well as their ages, skills, and, reluctantly, their defects) when preparing them for the auction blocks. One typical advertisement for an 1828 plantation auction listed "Lob, from Senegal . . . Joe, mulatto . . . Abraham, American . . . Tom, a griff American . . . Honore, a mulatto creole . . . Gilles, a Spaniard . . . Jacques, Congo . . . Jean Giles . . . from St. Domingo," and Charlat and Zenon,

66. Adam Hodgson, *Remarks During a Journey Through North America in the Years 1819, 1820, and 1821* (Samuel Whitting: New York, 1823), 178–179.

67. *The Navigator, Containing Directions for Navigating the Monongahela, Allegheny, Ohio, and Mississippi Rivers* (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Cramer, Spear, and Eichbaum, 1811), 360.

68. Fearon, *Sketches of America*, 267–268.

69. *New Orleans Bee*, November 18, 1831, p. 2, c. 1.

70. Jonathan B. Pritchett, "Forced Migration and the Interregional Slave Trade," paper presented to the 1991 Annual Meeting of the Social Science History Association, p. 8 and Figure 3. This information is based on Notarial Records originally collected by Robert W. Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman and analyzed by Jonathan B. Pritchett.

both creoles, among others.⁷¹ Linguistic, religious, and other cultural differences among the African-born or Virginia-born or Caribbean-born or Louisiana-born people were as broad and complex as those of any immigrant group of this era. New Orleans' slave markets were, in their own way, as diverse and multi-cultural as the city's famed food markets.

Whites with a stake in the game revelled in the booming interstate commerce of human beings. Traders profited in handling the casualties of the business; planters relied on the growing labor force; investors sunk wealth into the human chattel. Yet much of the white population was vexed by the constant importations, not out of concern for the victims but for fear of being racially overwhelmed and possibly overthrown. State government in the late 1820s curtailed the flow when it became apparent—or suspected—that Upper South masters were unloading “unfit trade” slaves—sickly, lazy, violent, or rebellious, from the white perspective—in the Louisiana market, thus benefiting nobody in the process. The state legislature banned domestically imported slave sales together in 1827, but strong demand forced the repeal of the act in 1828. Importations resumed immediately: around the time of Lincoln's first visit, “three vessels from Norfolk having on board nearly six hundred slaves [arrived] at New Orleans.” White concerns resurfaced, as evidenced by this alarmed message in the *Louisiana Courier* in January 1829:

There has been *TWO THOUSAND SIX HUNDRED & SEVENTY SEVEN* SLAVES brought to this place [since October 1, 1828] by way of the Balize!⁷²

A compromise act in 1829 allowed the imports to continue so long as a Certificate of Good Character accompanied all slaves over the age of twelve, signed by two or more non-vending whites from the exporting country who swore to the slaves' obedience and “moral character.”⁷⁴ Enforcement of this law, too, waned after two years, despite widespread consternation among whites about growing black numerical superiority. Those worries heightened after Nat Turner launched his revolt in August 1831

71. State of Louisiana—Parish of St. Charles—County of German Coast—Court of Probate: A Sugar Plantation,” *Louisiana Courier*, October 4, 1828, p. 3, c. 5 (emphasis in original).

72. *New York Gazette*, as quoted by the *Baltimore Patriot*, November 28, 1828, p. 2.

73. *Louisiana Courier*, January 13, 1829, p. 3, c. 1 (emphasis in original).

74. Herman Freudenberger and Jonathan B. Pritchett, “The Domestic United States Slave Trade: New Evidence.” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 21, no. 3 (Winter 1991): 447–49.

rebellion in Virginia (the source region for many Deep South–destined slaves), frightening the Louisiana slave-owning class that they might be importing future insurgents. The disturbed editors of the *New Orleans Bee*, noting the “fishing interests” in the state legislature on this controversial issue, reported on November 18, 1831, that “[o]ne hundred and eighty slaves” arrived just yesterday from Louisville, bringing the total from the past eleven months to “ONE THOUSAND AND ELEVEN.”⁷⁶ The state again banned the importations in 1832, diverting business to Natchez (the second busiest slave mart)—then lifted the ban yet again two years later.⁷⁷

Racial fears were not only directed at imported slaves. Incoming free people of color—occupants of that curious middle caste in New Orleans society with whom Anglo Louisianans in particular never felt comfortable—also came under increasing scrutiny in the 1820s. Many whites saw “f.p.c.’s” as potential subversives fomenting racial rebellion and spreading abolitionism. A state law in 1817 prohibited the entry of free blacks convicted of crimes; two additional pieces of legislation in 1827–28 proposed to keep out “free colored persons and negroes” altogether, but fell short of passage. Two years later—amid rumors of a fugitive arson, and an incident in which four freedmen of color were apprehended for circulating a “diabolical Boston pamphlet” urging running away—a new law passed to prohibit *all* free blacks from moving into Louisiana, to expel those who arrived after 1825, and to require all those arriving before 1825 to register with the mayor or face a fine.⁷⁸ Lincoln arrived in New Orleans when discourse on these charged topics raged in local coffee houses and exchanges—so much so that they spilled into the streets and the ears of first-time visitors. Englishman James Stuart devoted three pages of his book to express his moral outrage at the new racial-oppression laws passed during his March 1830 visit.⁷⁹

Despite attempts to restrict interstate slave trading, Louisiana’s slave population increased dramatically in the 1830s. That decade, by one assessment, would prove to be “the beginning of the heyday of the profes-

76. Joe Gray Taylor, *Negro Slavery in Louisiana* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1963), 37–45.

76. *New Orleans Bee*, November 18, 1831, p. 2, c. 1 (emphasis in original).

77. Michael Tadman, *Speculators and Slaves: Masters, Traders and Slaves in the Old South* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 96.

78. Donald Edward Everett, “Free Persons of Color in New Orleans, 1803–1865” (Ph.D. dissertation, Tulane University, 1952), 89–96.

79. Stuart, *Three Years in North America*, 2:242–244.

sional slave trader.” Some slaves arrived at the city auction blocks via speculative sales, others through successions, still others through tax-related seizures or foreclosures—of which there were many, so dependent on credit was the plantation economy. Most slave transactions—nearly nine in ten, by one count—occurred at public auctions, held at well-advertised times and places by professional auctioneers following ritualized protocols. The remaining transactions were private sales, carried out for a negotiated price on the street, in pens, or at masters’ houses. Sometimes slaves were even raffled off, “by authority of the state” in intricate lottery schemes complete with legal disclaimers, like modern-day contests. One such lottery offered, a few months after Lincoln’s first visit, eight prizes, including Prize Nos. 1, 4, 5, and 7, along with twenty other prizes of land, horses, oxen, ploughs, and a carriage.⁸¹

With every transaction, the institution of slavery grew increasingly entrenched economically, protected legally, sacred politically, and unquestioned socially. “[T]he people of the south are so extremely sensitive [about slavery],” remonstrated one Northerner, “that they will hardly allow you to hold or express an opinion respecting it . . .”⁸² By the time of Lincoln’s arrival into Louisiana, slavery in the region had, according to historian Kenneth M. Stampp, “crystallized” from its relatively malleable colonial-era form into a “hardened” and “fixed” institution on which Southern agriculture depended utterly, and to which southern society had invested intrinsically. “In 1860,” wrote Stampp, “the peculiar institution was almost precisely what it had been thirty years before. If anything, the chains of bondage were strengthened, not weakened. . . . [S]laves . . . were to labor diligently and breed prolifically for the comfort of their white masters.”⁸³ To the slave-holding establishment the enslaved Negro represented the promise of future wealth and a vessel for past profit; slavery itself symbolized a proper moral order, a paternalistic favor granted to an

80. Taylor, *Slavery in Louisiana*, 45–46; Robert L. Gudmestad, *A Troublesome Commerce: The Transformation of the Interstate Slave Trade* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003), 25. At times during the antebellum era, Charleston’s market exceeded that of New Orleans.

81. Taylor, *Slavery in Louisiana*, 25–26; Judith Kelleher Schafer, “New Orleans Slavery in 1850 as Seen in Advertisements,” *Journal of Southern History* 47, no. 1 (February 1981): 41; “Plan of a Lottery on the Property of William Wikoff, Senior,” *Louisiana Courier*, October 3, 1828, p. 4, c. 4–5.

82. “Slavery in New Orleans,” *Jamestown Journal* (Jamestown, NY), November 10, 1830, p. 4 (emphasis in original).

83. Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* (New York: Vintage Books, 1956), 27–29.

inferior race incapable of self-sufficiency and governance. White Southern society married itself to the institution of black slavery by continually buying into it and constructing wealth upon it.

New Orleans' strident urban expansion increased internal demand for domestic, artisan, and clean-gang labor, and occasioned a commensurate increase in the city's African-ancestry population. By 1830, New Orleans enumerated 28,545 blacks (both enslaved and free) and 21,281 whites, with the slave-to-free colored ratio declining to 1.4-to-1. The next ten years witnessed a remarkable demographic shift, as Irish, German, and other immigrants made New Orleans a majority-white city for the first time since early colonial times. Greater numbers of working-class whites meant domestic, port, municipal, and other menial tasks could be performed by low-paid white immigrants, rather than by valuable slaves receiving food and housing. The racial breakpoint occurred around 1835; by the time of the 1840 census, the city had dropped to 42 percent black (42,674 blacks and 59,519 whites, with a slave-to-free colored ratio of 1.2-to-1.) That figure diminished to 23 percent black in 1850 and 15 percent in 1860. Replaced largely by white immigrant laborers and domestic servants, urban slaves had, in the late antebellum years, been sold off by the thousands to rural plantations. Ironically, the resident slave population of New Orleans decreased even as the *commerce* of slaves increased in the city's auction houses and slave pens. When war broke out in 1861, slaves comprised only one out of every twelve New Orleansians.⁸⁴ Lincoln thus witnessed New Orleans in the waning years of its status as a majority-black city. It would not regain that status until the late 1970s.

Where did African American New Orleanians reside? Urban slaves who labored as domestics usually resided in the distinctive slant-roof quarters appended behind townhouses and cottages. Others, ranging from skilled craftsmen and artisans to hired-out laborers, lived in detached group quarters on back streets, close to the abodes of their masters. A city ordinance in 1817 prohibited slaves from living in "any house, out-house, building, or enclosure" not owned by their master or representative (except with documented permission), else the slave face jail time and twenty lashes,

84. These statistics represent only the city's permanent population. Inclusion of the thousands of seasonal visitors renders the city's *de facto* demographics more white and male for seven or eight months out of any given antebellum year.

and the master a five-dollar fine.⁸⁵ The following real estate advertisement, which ran during Lincoln's second visit, exemplifies the residential adjacency arranged by masters for slaves:

To Let, a good brick house, No. 113 Casa Carre [Royal Street], faubourg Marigny, consisting of 4 rooms—2 closets and gallery, a kitchen, stable, coach house, and 2 wells, also a large frame ous. on the adjoining lot, calculated to hold 200 negroes.⁸⁶

Most masters needed no legislative prodding to keep their slaves close by; it abetted their financial interest and personal comfort to do so. Proximity enabled monitoring of movement and promptness of service. This so-called back-alley settlement pattern imparted an ironic spatial integration in New Orleans' antebellum racial geography, despite the severe and oppressive racial segregation of chattel slavery. Master and slave, white and black, lived steps away from each other. Dempsey Jordan, born to live in New Orleans in 1836, described just that arrangement when interviewed a century later: "Our quarters was small, one room house built in the backyard of Maser's home . . . built out of rough lumber like [a] smoke house . . ."⁸⁷ Not unique to New Orleans, the intermixed pattern has been documented in Charleston, Washington, and Baltimore.⁸⁸

Free people of color, who unlike their enslaved brethren chose their residences, clustered in the lower French Quarter, Bayou Road, the faubourgs Tremé, Marigny, New Marigny, Franklin, and those making up the present-day neighborhood of Bywater. This was the older, Francophone, Catholic side of town, a social environment rendered by Creole culture and mores conducive to their interests. The mostly Anglo-American Protestant world on the upper side of town was not only culturally foreign terrain, but its English-speaking inhabitants were generally more hostile to the very notion of a free person having African blood.

The geography of black New Orleans, then, consisted of slaves' intri-

85. "An ordinance in relation to slaves in the city and suburbs of New Orleans," October 17, 1817, *A General Digest of the Ordinances and Resolutions of the Corporation of New Orleans* (New Orleans: Jerome Bayou, 1831), 153.

86. *Louisiana Courier*, May 28, 1831, p. 4, c. 3 (emphasis added).

87. Interview, Dempsey Jordan, by E. T. Davis, 1937, *American Slavery: A Composite Autobiography*, Second Supplemental Series, Texas Narratives, Vol. 6T, 2156.

88. Larry Ford and Ernst Griffin, "The Ghettoization of Paradise," *Geographical Review* 69, no. 2 (April 1979): 156–57. See also David T. Healy and Colin J. Thomas, *Urban Geography: A First Approach* (Chichester, New York, Brisbane, Toronto and Singapore, 1982), 312–314.

cately intermixed citywide and free people of color predominating in the lower neighborhoods. Anecdotal evidence of these patterns comes from an 1843 article in the *Daily Picayune*:

The Negroes are scattered through the city promiscuously; those of mixed blood, such as Griffes, Quarteroons, &c., [Creoles of color] showing a preference for the back streets of the First, French Quarter, Faubourg Tremé and part of the Third Municipalité [Faubourg Marigny and adjacent areas].⁸⁹

With the exception of the backswamp edges, where very poor (or a limited or hired-out blacks and other indigent) lived in squatter-like conditions, there were no expansive, exclusively black neighborhoods antebellum New Orleans. An observant first-time visitor like Lincoln thus might see slaves residing on (or behind) nearly any street on which lived people of the middle or upper class. But he would see a predominance of light-skinned blacks—free, often landed, and sometimes slaveholding—only in the Old City and the lower faubourgs. Here too he would hear French, cast his eyes on older and more unusual buildings, smell more exotic aromas, and sense a more foreign ambience.

How was slavery inscribed into the cityscape, visible to a visitor like Lincoln? Its ministerial emblems were ubiquitous. Broadside for slave auctions paneled walls and posts. Signs for slave dealers, pens, and bondage accoutrements protruded into city streets. Any newspaper on any given day listed numerous auction notices and runaway announcements, accompanied by a terse clinical description of the slave and, for runaways, an unintentionally sympathetic drawing of a frightened fugitive in flight. The ads' brutally banal lexis offers insights into the ethnicity, linguistics, dress, and circumstances of the slave (viewed, of course, from the slaveholders' perspective). In the following ad, which appeared during Lincoln's first visit, we see the youthful age at which some ran away, as well as clues to ethnicity, garb, and physicality:

Notice—The creole *Negro Boy by the name of PHILIP* aged about 9 years, who speaks French only, disappeared. . . . He

89. *Daily Picayune*, "A Kaleidoscopic View of New Orleans," September 23, 1843, p. 2, c. 3. "Griffe" or "quarteroon" implied a black person with one white grandparent; that is, the offspring of a mulatto and a negro.

was clothed in a jacket and pantaloons . . . of blue-striped printannie, he is very black, bowlegged, and has a scar on the right side, below the lower lip. He is the son of a creole negro woman named Rose, who belonged for a great while to mr David Daughart. Ten Dollars reward. . . .⁹⁰

By one count, at least 3,500 slave-sale ads and 475 runaway-slave notices appeared locally in a single year.⁹¹ Additionally, sheriffs and jailers throughout the sugar coast, from Baton Rouge to Plaquemine Parish, regularly posted in New Orleans newspapers descriptions of the suspected runaways they caught and imprisoned.⁹²

Urban slave labor assumed myriad forms, ranging from the surprisingly unsupervised, to the carefully regulated, to the violently oppressive. Domestic slaves drew little attention from outsiders, if they could be seen at all. Skilled artisans hired out by their masters might work one-on-one or side-by-side with whites, making the institution appear benevolent to naïve newcomers—until they noticed the brass badges pinned to the blacks' shirts, indicating their caste. One ad "For Sale or to Hire" that ran during Lincoln's first visit extolled the mattress-making skills of "[t]he creole mulatto JUSTIN," apparently learned from his former owner, an upholsterer. The current owner, J. B. Cajus, "requests the person employing said mulatto to pay the amount . . . to [me]."⁹³ Other slave-peddling merchandise or running errands freely in the streets—activities that might give a softer impression of the reality of bondage—were in fact, like Justin the mattress-maker, toiling for their owner's profit.⁹⁴ Slaves working as drivers of drays, coaches, cabriolets, and other vehicles might appear well-employed—until they broke a traffic law, in which case they were whipped twenty-five times.⁹⁵ Other bondmen hired out as dockworkers, loaders, screwmen, or to do other overfront jobs requiring physical liberty could easily be confused with free people, particularly since free blacks

90. "Notice," *New Orleans Argus*, May 30, 1828, p. 2, c. 6 (emphasis in original).

91. Schafer, "Slavery as Seen in Advertisements," 35 and 42.

92. See, for example, *New Orleans Argus*, Tuesday, June 3, 1828, p. 1, c. 2–3, which dated Lincoln's first visit.

93. "An Ordinance concerning slaves employed as hirelings by the day," November 10, 1817, *Ordinances and Regulations of New Orleans*, 139.

94. "For Sale or to Hire," *New Orleans Argus*, May 28, 1828, p. 1, c. 1.

95. See, for example, *Conseil de Ville*, Session of July 10, 1824, p. 22 of microfilm #90-223, AB301, NOPL-LC.

96. *Conseil de Ville*, Session of August 18, 1824, p. 49 of microfilm #90-223, AB301, NOPL-LC.

worked among them. (One slave named Jacques made the best of this confusion. While working on the levee a few weeks before Lincoln's first arrival and only a few blocks from where he landed, Jacques changed his name to William, claimed freedom, and escaped. His flustered owner offered ten dollars to whomever returned his admittedly "very intelligent" [*sic*] property.⁹⁷) Still other slaves worked as hotel staff, waiters, and store clerks, imparting even more incongruity to the outward appearance of the institution. An auctioneered that ran during Lincoln's 1828 visit proclaimed that "Charles, aged about 17 years . . . is very intelligent, and fit for a retail store."⁹⁸ A guest at the Planters and Merchants Hotel in spring 1829 observed that

the waiters [were] all slaves, hired from their masters, many of them very fine-looking men. Their masters receive from twenty to twenty-five dollars a month for their work, and board and washing are all furnished [by] the hotel. The value of a slave is prodigiously increased when he is instructed as a waiter[;] his value rises from 500 dollars to 1800 dollars [and sometimes to 2000 dollars]. The highest value attaches to such slaves . . . who can read and write. But a slave is not now allowed to be taught to read or to write in the State of Louisiana. . . .⁹⁹

Slaves were often hired out to private or public projects and assembled into work groups. Such "chain gangs" were less likely to garner the institution of slavery a generous judgment from visitors. "The cleaning of the streets," wrote the same 1830 visitor quoted above, "is performed . . . by slaves. [e]ven females . . . chained together, and with hardly any clothes on the backs, sent [by] their masters, as a punishment for some delinquency, [to] about one shilling Sterling per day."¹⁰⁰ Jailed slaves—the fate of any undocumented bondman unable to account for his owner—were by law "put to the chain [and] employed in the work of the city," else whipped.¹⁰¹ City-controlled chain gangs were led by two white overseers, who six days a week, marched the bondman to the work site at dawn and worked them until sunset, save for a two-hour noon break. Bondwomen cleaned gut-

97. "Runaway," *Louisiana Courier*, November 13, 1828, p. 3, c. 5.

98. "By Bauduc & Domingo," *New Orleans Argus*, May 24, 1827, p. 2, c. 6.

99. Stuart, *Three Years in North Louisiana*, 2:228–229 (emphasis added).

100. *Ibid.*, 235.

101. "An Ordinance Concerning the Police Jail for the Detention of Slaves," October 8, 1817, *Ordinances and Resolutions of New Orleans*, 127–127.

ters, streets, and *balconettes*.¹⁰² Council proceedings from the antebellum era are replete with official city actions deploying enslaved chain gangs for every conceivable municipal project: building levees, repairing wharves, paving streets, digging graves, fighting fires, and constructing Charity Hospital.¹⁰³ Corporate ownership of slaves was unusual but not rare: the firms behind New Orleans's two biggest internal improvements around the time of Lincoln's visit—the New Orleans Canal and Banking Company and the Bonchartrain Railroad Company—both counted scores of slaves among their corporate assets.¹⁰⁴

Field hands, who accounted for the vast majority of enslaved persons in Louisiana, tended beyond the view of most city visitors, but they ventured to the sugar fields (some within an hour walk from downtown New Orleans). Most visitors did, however, gain antiseptic long-distance views of plantation slavery as they steamed on the Mississippi from the comfort of the upper deck of a steamboat; they viewed the “pleasing” and “quiet” landscape of the sugar coast, where

plantations, orange groves, white slave villas [lay] amid the green fields [and] extensive views beneath the mild heavens. . . .¹⁰⁵

The public assemblage of slaves commanded particular attention from visitors. Enslaved persons gathered every Sunday at such rendezvous as Congo (Circus) Square for music, dance, and social interaction. The exotic spectacle endured for decades and grew popular with tourists, ranking alongside the French Market, quadrille balls, and aboveground cemeteries as must-see sights. Convening slaves always made whites nervous, but because the outright banning of assemblage might inadvertently investigate the very insurrection whites feared, a compromise emerged. Authorities in 1817 prohibited slaves from meeting together “in any street, public square, the meat-market, or in any house, building, tavern, or lot,” but allowed assemblage for divine services, funerals, sports, dances, and “merriment”—on Sundays only, before sunset, and at approved sites. Any

102. “An Ordinance to regulate the service of slaves employed in the works of the city,” November 10, 1817, *Ordinances and Resolutions of New-Orleans*, 141–143.

103. *Conseil de Ville*, Session of December 31, 1824, p. 160; Session of March 22, 1825, p. 211; Session of July 6, 1825, p. 317; Session of November 4, 1825, p. 279; Session of July 14, 1827, p. 27 of microfilm #95-223, AB301, NOPL-LC.

104. Wade, *Slavery in the Cities*, 23, 37.

105. Fredrika Bremer, *The Homes of the New World: Impressions of America* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1853), 2:193–194.

white person was legally deputized to apprehend violators, who thence faced the standard punishment of jail, lash, and fine. “[W]hopping,” “hallooing,” or “singing aloud any indecent song”—even walking with a cane or stick, which could be construed as a weapon—earned slaves that same legal response. And should they “be guilty of disrespect towards any white person” or “insult any free person,” more lashes awaited them.¹⁰⁶ “A friend told me,” wrote one visitor around 1820, “that while walking on the levee at New Orleans, he had distinctly heard the successive lashes on the back of a poor slave on the other side of the Mississippi, which is half a mile across.”¹⁰⁷

Black numerical superiority stoked the omnipresent white fear of slave insurrection, which motivated the formation of a ubiquitous police presence. “There is a corps of mounted *gens d’armes*,” reported one visitor around the time of Lincoln’s visit. “In this respect . . . Charleston and New Orleans do not resemble the free cities of America; but the great number of the black population, and the way in which they are treated by the whites, render this precaution . . . indispensably necessary.”¹⁰⁸ Police also regularly patrolled the levee in two nightly shifts.¹⁰⁹ For the enslaved residents, New Orleans in this era was nothing short of an oppressive police state, and it looked the part.

While slaves assembling in the city vexed the white establishment, so did those traveling alone in the swamps around the city. Bondmen who ventured off to fish on Lake Pontchartrain were suspected of attempting to escape, or considered vulnerable to be “carried off” by white abductors. An 1813 city law curtailed swamp and lake visits for all African Americans, including free people of color.¹¹⁰ The backswamp indeed provided immediate refuge for slaves fleeing New Orleans; most other terrestrial areas were either cultivated or populated. One man suspected his escaped slave was “no doubt lurking”—his favorite verb—“in the rear of the city.”¹¹¹ During Lincoln’s 1828 visit, the *Louisiana Courier* alerted its readers to watch for its “young negro named Charles, who carries the *Courier* . . .

106. “An ordinance in relation to slaves in the city and suburbs of New Orleans,” October 15, 1817, *Ordinances and Resolutions of New-Orleans*, 135–137.

107. Hodgson, *Journey Through North America*, 174–175.

108. Stuart, *Three Years in North America*, 2:236.

109. *Conseil de Ville*, Session of March 1, 1817, p. 129 of minutes #90–221, AB301, NOPL-LC.

110. “An Ordinance concerning persons navigating to lake Pontchartrain,” August 20, 1813, *Ordinances and Resolutions of New-Orleans*, 247–249.

111. As quoted by Schafer, “Slavery as Seen in Advertisements,” 49 (emphasis added).

seen yesterday morning at the levee, leading some horses. . . .”¹¹² A large maroon enclave is said to have existed in the swamps behind Algiers.

The backswamp was but one refuge for the runaway. Urbanized New Orleans, replete with sanctories and daily waterborne intercourse with the rest of the world, also attracted runaways in great numbers.” As the mayor lamented in 1830, they “crowd in the city, hide, and make of our City a den.”¹¹³ Announcements of runaway slaves in the newspaper often warned visiting ship captains not to “harbour” on board or hire a slave in question.¹¹⁴

It is in the trading of slaves—their catching, escorting, jailing, preparing, marketing, presenting, auctioning, and purchasing—that the “peculiar institution” made the greatest impression on visitors. An album travel narratives abounded in detailed descriptions of the city’s rum in chattel industry. Those written by Europeans or Northerners (the non-slaveholders usually expressed compassion for the slave, dismay at the institution, and outright loathing for the trader. Southern sympathizers, ever fond of pointing out paternalistic master–slave relations and anecdotes of slave contentedness, either remained silent on the grim spectacle of the auction block, or effectively scapegoated the trader so as to exonerate the matter and institution.

In fact, traders formed but one cog in slave commerce. They interacted (and oftentimes played roles) with shipbrokers, lawyers, auctioneers, pen-keepers, and others who profited in transferring the ownership of a slave. Such players proliferated; new ones entered the market constantly, proclaiming their openings with collegial solemnity. “Newman & Mortimer,” read one such announcement in 1828, “have formed a partnership [of] Brokers, offer[ing] their services to their friends and public in the buying and selling of real property, slaves and all kinds of produce. . . .” Located on the Creole side of town, Newman and Mortimer accommodated their multilingual clientele by promising that “translations in the French, English and Spanish languages will be done at [their] office, No. 7, Conti Street.”¹¹⁵ Nearly all New Orleans’ professional firms, banks, and

112. *Louisiana Courier*, June 2, 1828, p. 3, c. 3.

113. As quoted in Wade, *Slavery in the Cities*, 214–215.

114. See, for example, announcements in the *New Orleans Bee*, May 9, 1828, p. 4, c. 3.

115. “Notice—The undersigned having formed a partnership. . . .” *Louisiana Courier*, October 20, 1828, p. 3, c. 6.

insurance companies had their hands in the slave trade to one degree or another.

Despite the grotesque public image of the commerce of slavery, city leaders in both the public and private sectors made little attempt to hide or disguise it. The two major slave-commerce environments—private pens run by dealers, brokers, or traders, who bought and displayed numerous slaves and sold them to walk-in customers, and public auctions, in which auctioneers coordinated transactions between current and prospective masters—were located in prominent places, open to all free classes and advertised aggressively. Because of their public nature and ritualistic spectacle, auctions attracted much more attention from visitors than the private one-on-one retail transactions that occurred at the pens.

Since the early American years, auctions usually occurred in “exchange” meeting houses that offered a variety of business and social functions. Among the first, the Exchange Coffee House on Conti Street (1806), so grew in popularity as a saloon that it attracted commercial transactions, including the auctioning of ships, houses, land, and, inevitably, slaves. It soon earned competition from a new operation erected in 1810–11 at the corner of Chartres and St. Louis streets. Originally called Tremoulet’s Commercial (or New Exchange) Coffee House, this business became Maspero’s Exchange in 1814, Elkin’s Exchange after Pierre Maspero’s death in 1822, and by 1826, Hewlett’s Exchange, named for new owner John Hewlett. Because of the place’s popularity and frequent management changes, newspapers and directories ascribed a variety of names to the business at 129 (to 501) Chartres: the “Exchange Coffee House,” “New Exchange Coffee House,” “Hewlett’s Coffee House,” or “La Bourse de Hewlett.”¹¹⁶

To call Hewlett’s enterprise a coffee house is an understatement bordering on the ironic. “Coffee house” was a euphemism for saloon, and “exchange” by the 1820s, implied a full-service business-networking center, where white men could congregate, discuss, negotiate, socialize, recreate, gamble, dine, drink, and brawl. The two-story, fifty-five-by-sixty-two-foot edifice boasted behind its gaudy, Venetian screens a ninety-foot-high ceiling, four twelve-lamp glass chandeliers, framed maps and oil paintings

116. Unpaginated entry for John Hewlett in *New-Orleans Directory & Register* (New Orleans: John Adams Paxton, 1830); Samuel Wilson, Jr., “Maspero’s Exchange: Its Predecessors and Successors,” *Louisiana History* 30, no. 2 (Spring 1989): 192–219. Some secondary sources claim Hewlett’s first name was James, but city directories of the era consistently list him as John.

(described by one Northerner as “licentious”), wood- and marble finishing, and an enormous stock of French glassware. Like many of New Orleans’ “coffee houses,” the upper floor contained billiards and gambling tables. Throughout the mid-antebellum years, Hewlett’s Exchange buzzed with trilingual auctioning activity, in which everything from ships to houses to land to horses to sugar kettles to people legally changed hands.¹¹⁷ The city’s seven auctioneers worked the block on a rotating schedule, every day except Sunday, ofentimes maintaining other jobs elsewhere. Joseph Le Carpentier handled Mondays, Wednesdays, and Saturdays; Toussaint Massy (president of the New Orleans Architect Company) worked Tuesdays and Fridays; H. J. Domingon, George Boyd, and Joseph Baude got Thursdays, Saturdays, and Sundays; and the busy Isaac McCoy, Francois Dumont worked six days a week.¹¹⁸ At the time of Lincoln’s visit, Hewlett’s Exchange was the New Orleans business community’s single most important public meeting space for networking, news-gathering, and dealing.

In the decades after Lincoln’s visits, slave auctioning added two illustrious new venues to the New Orleans business scene. In 1837, the magnificent St. Charles Exchange arose in Faubourg St. Marie, followed the next year by the imposing City Exchange on 97 Louis Street in the Old City (for which Hewlett’s Exchange and adjacent structures were demolished). Both edifices, occupying entire city blocks, rising over four stories, and topped with landmark domes, ranked among the nation’s most splendid hotels. Both became famous, and infamous, for their auction blocks.

Not all slave owners subjected their human property to the slave pens and auction houses. Some masters, particularly residents of the city proper, opted to handle sales themselves by inviting prospective buyers to their houses. Urban domestic slaves, with whom white families frequently developed ostensibly warm relations, often changed hands in this manner. For-sale-by-owner ads appeared in local newspapers at a rate around one or two per day:

For Sale—A NEGRO WOMAN 16 years of age: guaranteed against the diseases and vices prescribed by law . . . speaks English and French—understands cooking either in the French or English stile [*sic*], something of a washer, and a good nurse.

117. Gleaned from the “Sales at Auction” sections of the *Louisiana Courier*, 1828–29; Henry C. Castellanos, *New Orleans as It Was: Episodes of Louisiana Life* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006 republication of 1895 original), 148–149.

118. “Auctioneers,” *New-Orleans Directory & Register*, undated.

Prospective buyers of this teenaged girl were directed to visit master J. Montamat at his house on Elysian Fields Avenue. Another announcement, posted during Lincoln's 1828 visit, advertised "a young and likely Negro fellow [and] several other of both sexes, for sale by the subscriber [David C. McClure] at No. 116, Bienville street." (One of McClure's slaves escaped, prompting the perturbed master to post a ten dollar reward for thirty-three-year-old John . . . very stout built, black complected, [with] rather a frown on his countenance.")¹¹⁹

Comparative measurements of the nation's various urban slave marketplace are difficult to make, because each Southern city documented the trafficking in differing and erratic ways. Yet nearly all qualified observers, in both historical times and today, agree that New Orleans' slave trading enterprise trumped that of all other American cities for most of the antebellum era, usually by a wide margin. The reason stemmed from some economic and geographical factors making New Orleans' overall commercial success: the metropolis was positioned perfectly as a transshipment point along the watery intercourse between the slave-supply regions of the Upper South and the labor-demanding plantations of the Mississippi Valley. As the largest city in the South, serving the nation's highest regional concentration of millionaires, New Orleans also demanded thousands of slaves for its own needs, and eagerly developed the physical, financial, and administrative infrastructure to handle the commerce.

The size of that commerce may be estimated through various metrics. City directories from the era of Lincoln's visits did not enumerate traders specifically, but evidence from the 1840s indicates that two to three hundred professionals dealt directly in the city's slave trade, handling at least a few thousand sales per year. Journal accounts provide some idea of the ever-rotating population of the city's slave holding pens. Wrote one visitor, "There were about 1000 slaves for sale at New Orleans when I was there" in March 1830.¹²⁰ "I cannot say as to the number of negroes in the [New Orleans] market," wrote a trader in 1834, "though am of the opinion there is 12-1500 and upwards, and small lots constantly coming in." Other eyewitnesses estimated 3,000 slaves for sale at a particular moment later in the antebellum era, equating to roughly one marketed slave for every

119. "For Sale—A Negro Woman," *Louisiana Courier*, November 13, 1828, p. 3, c. 6; "For Sale," *New Orleans Argus*, May 30, 1828, p. 2, c. 5; "50 Reward," *New Orleans Argus*, June 2, 1828, p. 2, c. 6.

120. Stuart, *Three Years in North America*, 2:241.

five resident slaves in the city.¹²¹

Official documents provide further insights into the size of New Orleans' slave trade. Conveyance records of real property transactions (Louisiana's civil law tradition viewed slaves as real estate, thus requiring title) show that 4,435 slave purchases occurred in the city in 1830.¹²² That same cohort was also tracked through the National Archives' collection of Certificates of Good Character, the document required by law from 1829 to 1831 to prevent "undesirable" Upper South slaves from entering Louisiana. Economic historians Herman Freudenberger and Jonathan B. Pritchett tabulated 2,289 such slaves arriving into the New Orleans market in 1830. Their findings show that this group came mainly from the Old South states along the Eastern Seaboard. They were proportionally almost entirely male by roughly a sixty-forty ratio, probably reflecting the needs of the sugar cane plantations. Over 90 percent ranged from eleven to thirty years old, with healthy young adult males typically selling for around five hundred dollars. Those who embarked at the major export cities of Richmond, Norfolk, and Charleston endured coastwise journeys lasting about three weeks. Those who were marched overland in caravans suffered awkward and tortuous experiences that could easily take two months. Whether delivered by sea, river, or land, Virginia supplied the largest share (44 percent) of slaves to the Deep South, followed by North Carolina (19 percent) and Maryland (15 percent), with the Southern states ranging between .0 and 5 percent. The buyers, on the other hand, were mostly from Louisiana (71 percent). Scores of Virginians, Tennesseans, Georgians, and others also bought members of this cohort of 2,289, but it is likely these out-of-state planters had Louisiana ties.¹²³

Slave sales were not evenly distributed throughout the year. They rose steadily in late autumn and peaked in the winter and early spring with the approaching planting season, then declined as temperatures rose and bottomed-out with the high heat of the epidemic months of late summer and early fall. First-person accounts as well as numerical data point to January, February, and March as being particularly busy times in the New Orleans

121. As quoted by Tadman, *Speculators and Slaves*, 95–96. The estimate of three thousand slaves on the market dates from 1825; a year later, the census enumerated 14,484 slaves residing in the city.

122. Everett, "Free Persons of Color in New Orleans," 209. Five percent of those slave purchases were made by free people of color. Special thanks to Jonathan B. Pritchett of Tulane University for his insights on this topic.

123. Freudenberger and Pritchett, "Domestic Slave Trade," 450–472.

slave trade¹²⁴—the same period when shipping activity, flatboat arrivals, and most other economic and social activity peaked. Slaves were thus imported and traded here in greater frequency and in wider view precisely as visitors circulated throughout the city in greater numbers. Because slaves typically endured an average of forty days in limbo—that is, after arriving but before being sold¹²⁵—they accumulated in various holding pens and camps in downtown New Orleans, creating yet another jaw-dropping spectacle for the uninitiated. New Orleans not only boasted the nation's busiest slave market, but its trafficking of human beings, wrote one historian, had a peculiar dash: it rejoiced in its display and prosperity; it felt unashamed, almost proud.¹²⁶ A typical newcomer like Lincoln, strolling the levee or peering into a coffee house, would thus encounter the realities of human chattel business constantly, unavoidably.

Citizens sometimes launched efforts to curtail the flagrancy of the commerce, perhaps because it was a unsettling appearance played into the hands of visiting abolitionists, but more likely because concentrations of slaves in transit were thought to constitute a public health nuisance. During the time of Lincoln's first visit, "several inhabitants of this City" signed a petition "to ask the Council . . . to prevent exposing negroes for sale on the sidewalks." Leery officials wavered on the request, procrastinated, read a report on the matter, and finally rejected it.¹²⁷ The issue came up a few months later, when citizens asked "if it would not be proper to fix places for storing negroes for sale outside the body of the city,"¹²⁸ fearing the risk of an epidemic. Others complained of the odors emanating from the unsanitary conditions in the pens, or from the cooking of cheap barrel pork used to feed the captives. Finally, in the year between Lincoln's visits, the City Council passed laws prohibiting public exposition of slaves for sale, as well as their nighttime lodging, in the area bounded by Girod Street, Esplanade Avenue, Levee Street along the riverfront, and Tremé Street behind the city. Even then, the law did little to conceal the spectacle. Protests from slave traders below Esplanade Avenue led the

124. Ladman, *Speculators and Slaves*, 76.

125. Freudenberger and Pitchett, "Domestic Slave Trade," 463–62.

126. Bancroft, *Slave Trading in the Old South*, 312. A survey of newspaper ads revealed that at least 3,500 slave sales occurred in the year 1850 alone, not including unadvertised transactions. Schafer, "Slavery as Seen in Advertisements," 35.

127. *Conseil de Ville*, Session of March 1, 1828, pp. 201–202, 212, 222 of microfilm #90-223, AB301, NOPL-LC.

128. *Conseil de Ville*, Session of May 24, 1828, p. 252 of microfilm #90-223, AB301, NOPL-LC.

Council to clarify, in 1830, that “all negroe traders may keep and expose for sale their negroes within the whole extent of the limits of the suburb Marigny, all resolutions to the contrary notwithstanding.”¹²⁹ At least one trader above Elysian Fields Avenue, where public exposition was supposedly banned, nevertheless openly inaugurated a private slave-trading operation during Lincoln’s second visit:

R. Slaun, Broker and Exchange Broker, Royale, between Hospital and Barracks streets, has the honor of informing his friends and the public, that he attends to the sales and purchases of slaves and real estate. Persons, who may feel inclined to leave their slaves with him, for sale, can be assured that no exertion will be neglected to have them disposed of on the best terms and shortest delay. He offers for sale, at present, laundresses and plaiters [braiders], seamstresses, cooks, carpenters, painters and blacksmiths.

In 1825 the law against public exposure of “negroes for sale” was expanded to the entire city, but once again was promptly amended to permit such activity in the faubourgs above Gaienné Street and anywhere in the Faubourg Marigny, provided the slaves were lodged in brick buildings at least two stories high.¹³¹

These and later laws show that city officials actively grappled with slave dealing, but mostly out of concern for their own health, comfort, profit, and public image. (Other Southern cities did the same for similar reasons: Natchez, for example, passed laws in 1833 relocating its downtown slave pens to the infamous “Forks in the Road” beyond city limits.¹³²) Rarely did authorities fret over the slaves’ trauma or degradation, and never did they question the underlying institution. Lincoln arrived while this debate raged, and if the laws were enforced as they were written, he may have witnessed slave trading in the cityscape to a greater extent during his 1828 visit than in 1831. Had he returned twenty-five years later, he would have seen an even broader and deeper manifestation of the controversial commerce: by the late 1850s, around twenty-five slave depots, yards, pens, or

129. Resolutions of March 30, April 17, and April 21, 1829, and November 12, 1830, *Ordonnances and Resolutions of New Orleans*, 147–149.

130. *New Orleans Bee*, May 31, 1831, 2, c. 4.

131. Resolutions of November 27, 1834, and January 27 and April 10, 1835, *Digeste des Ordonnances, Resolutions et Reglemens de la Corporation de la Nouvelle-Orleans* (New Orleans: Gaston Brusle, 1836), 139–141.

132. Gudmestad, *Troublesome Commerce*, 24–25.

booths operated in the heart of Faubourg St. Mary, with a dozen on Gravier Street, a half dozen on Dauphine, and others on Common and Magazine. Another dozen functioned in the Old City, on Exchange Place, St. Louis Street, Esplanade des Chartres, and elsewhere.¹³³

A visitor to New Orleans arriving anytime prior to the Civil War could not help but witness an entire cityscape of slavery. If the written record is any indication, the sight left searing impressions.

On the unseasonably warm afternoon of February 25, 1827, two thousand New Orleanians gathered by the levee to witness a breathtaking aeronautical spectacle. A “hardy aeronaut” named Mr. Robinson mounted a basket attached to a balloon, and, tethered to the ground, floated above the gaping spectators. Waving a flag dedicated to the Marquis de Lafayette and George Washington—a Frenchman and an American—Mr. Robinson then cut loose and soared high over the Franco-American city, to a hundred feet, then a thousand, then six thousand. Southwesterly winds swept him “into the regions of the upper air” and out of sight. The anxious crowd remained in the streets for hours, pondering the daredevil’s fate. Rumors of his demise circulated. Then, early that evening shouts from a thousand voices proclaimed his arrival in the city.” The hero landed safely if awkwardly, waist-deep in mud and water on Madame Coriocoourt’s Gentilly Road plantation eight miles away. A newspaper described the day’s events as “wonderful, glorious and sublime beyond expression.”¹³⁴

Wonderful indeed might have been the spectacle of manned flight. An equally sublime sight awaited Mr. Robinson as he peered down from his lofty perch onto the largest city of the South, beside the greatest river on the continent. Below him lay eight thousand houses, four thousand commercial buildings, and sixty public edifices squeezed into roughly three square miles—a panoply of jagged rooftops, steep and double-roofed in that West Indian style, complicated by chimneys and dormers punctuated by domes and spires, enveloped in smoke and dust.¹³⁵ Structural density

¹³³ Bancroft, *Slave Trading in the Old South*, 319–320.

¹³⁴ *Louisiana Advertiser*, February 26, 1827.

¹³⁵ These figures are interpolated from the 1822 *New-Orleans Directory and Register* (page 13), which stated that the city and suburbs contained “143 brick, and 4401 wooden dwellings; 1258 brick and 1567 wooden warehouses, workshops, &c.; 28 brick and 15 wooden public buildings, making in the whole 8,705 buildings of every description.” Population having increased by about 35 percent between 1822 and 1827, I increased the above figures accordingly.

peaked in the crux of the arc-shaped metropolis (the nickname “Crescent City” would not be coined until eight years later), while adjacent faubourgs had a more village-like appearance. They gave way to an agrarian landscape of sugar cane plantations, laid out in elongated parcels radiating from the river like the ribs of a sinuous snake.

To Mr. Robinson’s north extended a vast ramp, “level as the ocean, with the oak woods growing gray in the distance, then blue, and farther blue, as they vanish over the rim of the world.”¹³⁶ To his south swept grandly the graceful meanders of the Mississippi, “gray, turbid, and broad,”¹³⁷ with villages, forests, and coastal marsh disappearing into the curvature of the earth. An occasional navigation canal, drainage ditch, road, or bayou branched outwardly from the metropolis and splayed into distant bays.

The most traveling spectacle of all, however, lay directly below Mr. Robinson’s feet. There, hundreds of different vessels—the most extraordinary medley of . . . [c]raft of every possible variety—lined up along the riverfront.¹³⁸ Port authorities employed a specialized nautical lexicon, some of it borrowed from their French predecessors, to classify vessel typology: Ships. Barks. Barges. Hermaprodite Barges. Schooners. Sloops. Barges. Keelboats. Flatboats. Feluccas. Galliot. Betchers. Luggers. Petticoat. Brigantines. Battouat. Steamboats. Steamships. Steamers. Steam Ferries. Steam Propellers. Steam Tugs. Steam Schooners. Schooner Yachts. Yachts.¹³⁹ Masts, stacks, spider-weblike rigging, and plumes of smoke and steam darkened the riverfront around its Canal Street focal point, while smaller craft clustered along the upper and lower fringes. The great fleet fronted a hazy cargo and arrival like “bustle and confusion”¹⁴⁰ circulating upon the spacious wood-planked levee. What Mr. Robinson saw, by one estimation, would soon be “rated . . . as the fourth port in point of commerce in the world, exceeded only by London, Liverpool, and New York.” By another, it represented the leading export city of the United

136. “John Mitchell in New Orleans,” *Sunday Delta* (New Orleans), April 8, 1858, p. 7, c. 1. These words are Mitchell’s, not Robinson’s.

137. Bremer, *Homes of the New World*, 2.

138. S. A. Ferrall, *A Ramble of Six Thousand Miles Through the United States of America* (London: Effingham Wilson, Royal Exchange, 1832), 190.

139. This nomenclature is gleaned from the records of vessels officially registered or enrolled at the Port of New Orleans from 1804 to 1870. Survey of Federal Archives in Louisiana, Division of Community Service Programs-Works Projects Administration, *Ship Registers and Enrollments of New Orleans, Louisiana*, 2 vols. (Monroe: Louisiana State University, 1941).

140. Ferrall, *Ramble of Six Thousand Miles*, 190.

States and one of the leading ports of the world.”¹⁴¹ Only from such a remote standpoint, Mr. Robinson’s balloon could in man eyes truly appreciate the existential relationship between antebellum New Orleans and its riverfront port.

Maps of the era show scores of docks protruding into the river every hundred feet or so, spaced evenly from the lower reaches of Faubourg Marigny to around Felicite Street three miles up river. The docks perpendicularly adjoined the wharf—a plank-covered platform “40 yards wide generally, thousands of feet long and open to the sky. The wharf overlaid the artificial levee, the earthen riverfront dike erected in colonial times and reinforced constantly to keep out springtime floods. The artificial levee, in turn, topped the crest of the natural levee, the deposition of coarse alluvium deposited by the river over the past five to seven millennia, forming the highest natural land on the deltaic plain. On the city side of the wharf ran a board—Levee and New Levee streets, now Ecatur and North and South Peters streets, among others. Its river side

serves not only for a wharf where vast quantities of merchandise and *up country* productions are landed from blibs and boats, but also for a market, and a sort of exchange or place where extensive sales, transfers, &c. of commodities are constantly taking place.¹⁴²

The entire feature, known variously as the levee, “the quay,” “the wharf,” “the landing,” or “the riverfront,” formed the busiest and most important place in New Orleans, indeed in the entire Southwest. Here, the Queen City of the South commercially interacted with its vast hinterland and foreland. Nearly every educated person in the Western world knew about the New Orleans levee; it ranked as famous, and as notorious, a (in the city’s ethnic diversity and moral depravity).

Crews moored vessels to the dock and arranged “flying bridges” against their flanks to discharge cargo. Additional ships tied up to already docked vessels in parallel “rows” or “tiers,” two, four, sometimes six

141. Winston, “Economic History of New Orleans,” 203; Frank Haigh Dixon, “A Traffic History of the Mississippi River System,” Document No. 11, National Waterways Commission (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, December 1909), 15.

142. “New-Orleans,” *New-Bedford Courier*, August 16, 1831, p. 1 (emphasis in original).

deep. Awaiting vessels anchored sixty fathoms (360 feet) away, fighting currents and evading traffic. Dock length, wharf width, facility quality, and vessel congestion generally increased with proximity to the urban core—the Old City and St. Mary riverfront—and diminished toward the lower and upper *banlieues*. The curving river dealt different hydrological challenges to various sections of the riverfront: those above the Place d'Armes plagued with alluvial deposition and batture formation on account of the slack river velocity there; those below the city, being in a cutbank, constantly battling bank erosion. The expanding batture along the Faubourg St. Mary riverfront, the subject of constant legal discord throughout the antebellum era, created such a shallow-water beach that the city in 1819 had to invest in “flying-bridges [for] unloading of commodities aboard the flat-boats.”¹⁴³ Riverfront problems, accidents, and conflicts of one sort or another occurred almost daily; planning, managing, and maintaining the facility formed a constant source of citizen rapping and fist-shaking against local authorities. Why were some agents allowed to hog wharf space with sloppily arranged deposits? Why were certain captains permitted to impede others by mooring inconveniently? Why were some wharves rotting unplanked, insufficiently extended, or not properly numbered? How can those flatboats get away with remain[ing] permanently on the beach as fruit stores and haunts for villains of every cast and color[?]? Why doesn't the city impose a *per diem* wharfage fee, to motivate vessels to do their business and scurry? The committee of the city council on levees,” solemnly concluded one editorialist in 1835, “appear[s] to be very negligent.”¹⁴⁵

Everyday grievances aside, port activity—a chief source of government revenue—was carefully regulated by federal and local officials. The Collector of Customs, a prestigious presidential appointment confirmed by the Senate, represented the federal government in all port matters. He oversaw the duties owed by foreign importers, controlled inbound ves-

143. *Conseil de Ville*, Session of April 8, 1817, p. 138 of microfilm #90-221, AB301, and session of March 23, 1824, p. 350 of microfilm #90-222, AB301, NOPL-LC.

144. *Conseil de Ville*, Session of May 1, 1819, p. 63 of microfilm #90-221, AB301, NOPL-LC.

145. “The Levee,” *New Orleans Bee*, June 22, 1835, p. 2, c. 1.

146. New Orleans surpassed New York as the nation's chief importer in 1836. Its imports, however, lagged by at best one-half its exports. T. R. Folsom, *Louisiana in the Age of Jackson*, 17–18.

sels, and policed against smugglers, pirates, filibusters, illegal slave traders, rumrunners, and other lawbreakers.¹⁴⁷ Locally, the City Council and the Governor of Louisiana (who was based in New Orleans, this being the state's capital for all but two years between statehood and 1849, when Baton Rouge gained the honor) enacted regulations and appointed officials. The governor appointed a Harbor Master and his subordinates enforced those regulations and oversaw day-to-day operations. Among their charges were skilled ship pilots who boarded incoming sea vessels at Port Town and guided them to the navigationally challenging lower Mississippi—a practice that continues today.¹⁴⁸ Also beneath the Harbor Master were the Wharfinger, who collected duties from ocean-going sailing ships, and a Wharfmaster, who did the same for steamboats, keelboats, and flatboats. Both officials had to submit “a list of all ships, barges, and other craft subject to levee tax which [enter] the port of New Orleans” weekly to the mayor and thence to the City Council.¹⁴⁹ The Master Warden and his assistants enforced rules and ensured duties were paid.

Abundant regulations, and a rotating horde of transient sailors willing to test them, kept the wardens busy. Every ship had to have at least one capable hand—by law, a white man—on board at all times. No ballast, waste water, pitch, or tar could be discharged along the riverfront. On-board kitchen fires were closely regulated for fear of a riverfront blaze, as were cargoes of hay, gunpowder, and other inflammables and combustibles. Excessively heavy cargo like granite pillars or lead balls could not be piled upon the wooden wharf, lest they “break down the same” and damage the levee. Discharging of cannons and firearms was forbidden. The Master Warden, cognizant that time meant money, also ensured that port calls were quick and efficient. *Moor, unload, load, and depart. No dillydallying. No vending. No upkeep, repairs, or tinkering. Lift mantle and remove broken-down craft immediately. Unload merchandise swiftly and arrange it neatly and unobtrusively, and carry it off after no more than five days. Abandoned craft become the property after twenty-four hours to be auctioned off with recompense.* Penalties included steep fines, seizure, or banishment of the offending vessel to the rural fringes.¹⁵⁰

147. Wilds, *Collectors of Customs*, 5.

148. Redard, “Port of New Orleans,” 33.

149. *Conseil de Ville*, Session of April 26, 1817, p. 147 of microfilm #90-221, AB301, NOPL-LC.

150. *Conseil de Ville*, Session of March 23, 1824, pp. 327-28 of microfilm #90-222, AB301, NOPL-LC; “An Ordinance supplementary to the ordinance concerning the police of the Port of New-Orleans,” June 23, 1831, *Ordinances and Resolutions of New-*

Behind the wardens were teams of inspectors for flour, beef and pork, tobacco, and other perishables. Inspectors seized damaged goods to prevent them from entering the market unlabeled, and then auctioned them off identified as such. “By order and under the inspection of the port wardens,” read the ad around the time of Lincoln’s first visit, “will be sold . . . 375 barrels of superfine flour, damaged on board of a flatboat . . . from Louisville, Kentucky.” Inspectors also examined vessels and verified weights and measures—important, because duties were based on tonnage. Around the time of Lincoln’s visits, a sea vessel would pay a twelve-dollar wharfage fee for a hundred tons of cargo, and up to sixty dollars for over 450 tons. Steamboats owed six to twelve dollars for eighty to 160 tons. A loaded flatboat, regardless of weight, paid six dollars.¹⁵²

Beyond the cadre of port officials toiled a much larger professional workforce of agents, factors, brokers, slave traders, merchants, lawyers, bankers, and others stewarding (and skimming their share of) the wealth transshipping at their doorstep. When things went awry—when vessels sunk, crews were robbed, cargo went bad, or livestock died—shippers trekked over to any one of the city’s fourteen notaries public to document their loss by filing a Ship Captain’s Protest.¹⁵³ This document evidenced the legitimacy of the loss to the captain’s clients, insulating him from legal action and empowering the client to file a claim from his insurance agent. Thousands of Ship Captain’s Protests remain filed in the New Orleans Notarial Archives, each written in the graceful cursive and staid boilerplate of nineteenth-century bureaucracy.

The port never closed. While late summer to early autumn activity paled in comparison to winter and spring, vessels nevertheless arrived year-round, seven days a week. Wharf action slowed down on Sundays to about one-third normal levels.¹⁵⁴ Nightfall precluded much activity, but lanterns, torches, gaslights, and moonlight allowed shipmen to squeeze additional hours out of their port call.

Building traffic, limited space, and cargo of varying value meant officials had to regulate where certain vessels were allowed to dock. “A par-

Orleans, 339.

151. *New Orleans Argus*, May 13, 1828, p. 2, c. 6.

152. “Port Officers” and “Wharfage and Tonnage Duty” *New-Orleans Directory & Register*, unpaginated.

153. Fourteen notaries served in 1822; their offices were mostly on Chartres Street, with some on St. Louis and Royal. “Notaries Public for N. Orleans,” *New-Orleans Directory & Register*, unpaginated.

154. Hodgson, *Journey Through North America*, 79.

particular part of the quay is appropriated to each description of craft," wrote one visitor, "and a penalty is enforced for any deviation from port regulations." Each vessel "one along the quay was referred to as a "station."¹⁵⁵ Ocean-going sailing ships arriving from the Gulf were assigned to the downriver stations, while interior vessels exporting bulk commodities from upcountry docked in upriver stations. Gov. William C. C. Claiborne codified this hydrologically sensible colonial-era rule with many of the American takeover, as one of his twenty articles regulating the Port of New Orleans:

All rafts or flatboats descending the river and destined for this port, shall [dock along] the levee above the upper gate [present-day Tchoupitoulas/Commerce intersection], as the harbor master shall appoint.¹⁵⁶

The advent of the steamboat brought a major new player to the waterfront stage, starting with the celebrated arrival of the *New Orleans* in January 1812. Only six steamboats had called in 1816 (compared to 594 barges and 1,287 flatboats), but two years later the City Council found it necessary to "enlarge the space reserved in the upper part of the Port of New Orleans, for the use of the steamboats, [whose numbers] increase daily. . . ." They rose high enough by July 1818 for the Collector of Levee Dues to start enumerating their arrivals, which the next year totaled 128. By early spring 1830, steamboats arrived at a pace of one per hour, with fifty docked at the levee at one time. Throughout the antebellum era, steamboat calls would run into the low thousands annually. Their numbers matched those of flatboats during the busy winter-spring season and outdid them during the low-water autumn months, when the weak current handicapped flatboat navigability.¹⁵⁷

Where should the steamboats dock? Piecemeal adjustments in traffic management proved inadequate vis-à-vis increasing numbers and varieties of craft, arriving from all directions and bearing a broader array of

155. Joseph Holt Ingraham, *The South-Sea by a Yankee* (New York, 1833), 1:105.

156. William C. C. Claiborne, "Port Regulations," decreed on January 1, 1804, and published in numerous documents, including *The Reporter* (Brattleboro, VT); February 18, 1804, p. 2.

157. Stuart, *Three Years in North America*, 2:232; Wharfinger Reports, Microfilm #75-109 QN420 New Orleans Collector of Levee Dues-Registers of Flatboats, Barges, Rafts, and Steamboats in the Port of New Orleans, 1818; *Conseil du Peuple*, Session of June 16, 1818, p. 185 of microfilm #90-221, AB301, NOPL-LC. See also Winston, "Economic History of New Orleans," 202.

cargo. The City Council debated at length what to do, and on March 23, 1824, adopted a sweeping new ordinance “concerning the Port and the Levee of New Orleans.” First came clear declaration of jurisdiction: the Port officially ran from Faubourg Decloué to the Rousseau plantation (present-day Desire Street in Bywater to Felicity Street in the Lower Garden District) on the “left [east] bank,” and from the Duverger plantation to the McDono plantation on the right bank (present-day Orret to Hamilton Street on the West Bank). Jurisdiction also included “the whole width of the said river between.”¹⁵⁸ The vast majority of activity, of course, occurred on the left bank. Divvying up stations for various vessels and thus laying claim to the attendant jobs and economic activity, drew upon ethnic settlement patterns and political tensions. The American market predominating in Faubourg St. Mary and upriver Faubourg, and the Creoles of the Old City and Faubourg Marigny each wanted a share of each type of vessel traffic, even though hydrology dictated that upcountry rivercraft ought to dock uptown and sea vessels downtown.

The resultant ordinance represents something of a compromise between contested human geography and an uncontested physical geography. On the American side, ocean-going vessels were stationed at and below the foot of Common Street, while steamboats controlled the docks from Common up to Poydras Street. “Flatboats, barges, keel-boats, and other smaller vessels” came next, from Poydras up to St. Joseph Street.¹⁵⁹ On the Creole side, steamboats controlled from Elysian Fields Avenue down to Mandeville Street, but, with permission, could also dock along the flatboat landing measuring 460 feet above Conti Street. Usually, however, only flatboats docked here. A stretch of 100 feet along the Meat Market (St. Ann downriver) allowed for “smaller vessels doing the coasting trade” to deliver foodstuffs to the stalls, while an 80-foot stretch at the foot of Conti Street was reserved for the landing of the Ferry Steamboat. Ocean-going sailing ships controlled most other sections of the Old City riverfront, creating an amazing sight visitors often described as “forest of masts.”¹⁶⁰ They also docked along the semi-rural stretch below Enghien Street (present-day Franklin Avenue).¹⁶¹ Another source from 1834 placed

158. *Conseil de Ville*, Session of March 23, 1824, pp. 327–336 of microfilm #90-222, AB301, NOPL-LC.

159. Joseph Holt Ingraham estimated about two hundred flatboats in this area during his December 1833 visit. Ingraham, *Up-Down-Down-Up by a Yankee*, 1:105.

160. Stuart, *Three Years in North America*, 2:231.

161. *Conseil de Ville*, Session of March 23, 1824, pp. 327–336 of microfilm #90-222, AB301, NOPL-LC.

the official “Lower Line of the Port of Orleans” at present-day Alabo Street in the Lower Ninth Ward.¹⁶²

One of the best sketches of moored flatboats dates from a few months before Lincoln first arrived. Its foreground depicts the Conti Street flatboat landing, where hulling, low-profile vessels with slightly domed cabin roofs docked two deep, so close that a network of planks unified their roofs into a contiguous loading surface. The provincial vessels and their ant-like crew contrast dramatically with the spectacular “forest of masts” marking the ocean-going sailing ships immediately downriver, which disappear into the Faubourg Marigny background. Sketched by Capt. Basil Hall through the *camera lucida* process (in which the artist peers down into an optical device that imposes a reflection of the subject over a canvas, allowing him to trace out the dimensions and details), this drawing may be the closest thing we have to a photograph of the Lincoln-era flatboat wharves. Unfortunately, it does not show the main uptown flatboat wharf where Lincoln likely landed, but rather the smaller downtown station around Conti Street. We know this because of the appearance of St. Louis Church in the extreme left of the drawing, the tell-tale angle in the space between St. Louis and Conti streets, and the absence of steamboats between the flatboat zone and the sailing ship zone.¹⁶³ Other reliable illustrations of the flatboat wharves are few and far between. Artists apparently found little reason to capture the slow and lumbering flatboat, particularly when the majestic verticality of the great sailing ships and seething emanations of the raucous steamboats commanded so much more attention.

Flatboats, the notorious bearers of nuisance-emitting cargo, required special handling from port managers. Those carrying “horses, hogs, oxen, or other animals” or rotting or damaged cargo “emitting disagreeable odors, or vapors injurious to the salubrity of the air,” were exiled beyond St. Joseph Street up to the De Hart property, uptown, or below Pughien Street downtown.¹⁶⁴ Offensive odors could indeed overwhelm a newcomer to the New Orleans wharf. Citizens regularly dumped “filth in the current . . . of the [Mississippi] in front of the City” using ramps built of flatboat

162. Charles F. Zimpel, *Topographic Map of New Orleans and Its Vicinity, 1834*, Southeastern Architectural Archive, Tulane University Special Collections.

163. Capt. Basil Hall, “The Mississippi at New Orleans” (1827) engraved by W. H. Lizars, The Historic New Orleans Collection, Accession Number 1974.25.30.576 P.C. 30-11-A.

164. *Conseil de Ville*, Session of March 23, 1824, p. 329 of microfilm #90-222, AB301, NOPL-LC.

timber. The city acknowledged that “the banks of the river from Faubourg Ste. Marie to the river boundary of Faubourg Maigny are in a most unsanitary condition,” replete with “dead animals and an accumulation of filth whose pestilential effluvia may be prejudicial to public health.” Its solution: task “the negroes of the city work shop to empty and clean said river bank.”¹⁶⁵

Other changing conditions warranted constant modifications in laws and regulations. In 1836, for example, increasing flatboat traffic forced the relocation of the upper edge of the Salviary flatboat station up to the lower line of the De Hart property. In 1837, the Mayor gained authorization to charge the Wharfinger to redress flatboats to new stations “on account of the fall and rise of the River.”¹⁶⁶ Later that year, increasing steamboat traffic motivated the rezoning of Canal Street up to Notre Dame, and subsequently Canal down to Conti, as exclusively for steamboats.¹⁶⁷ A few years later, the City Council further allocated wharf space by cargo: flatboats bearing wood and bricks could only land at the foot of Elysian Fields and Julia, while those hauling corn, oats, hay, and other fodder had to set up between Giro and Julia.¹⁶⁸ Levee repairs, sediment deposition, river conditions, and dock damage also reshaped the wharfscape. This dynamism, not to mention widespread non-compliance with the law, complicates attempts to try to identify precisely where a particular vessel, like Lincoln’s, might have landed in a particular year.

Eyewitness descriptions bring some level of order to the seemingly convoluted zoning. “The upper part is occupied with flat-boats, arks, peerogues, rafts, hel-boats, canoes, and steam boats,” wrote one ca-1830 visitor of the riverfront roughly from Felicite Street to Common Street—“and below these are stationed schooners, cutters, brigs, ships, &c, in regular succession,” meaning along the riverfront of the Old City.¹⁶⁹ Charles Joseph Latrobe, viewing the spectacle from the roof of the Bishop’s Hotel on New Year’s 1834, estimated “ships and boats of every size [extended] upwards of two miles . . .”

165. *Conseil de Ville*, Session of February 11, 1817, p. 127 and Session of June 19, 1819, p. 56, microfilm #90-221, AB301, NOPL-LC.

166. *Conseil de Ville*, Session of April 7, 1826, pp. 142–143, and Session of April 14, 1827, pp. 372–373, of microfilm #90-221, AB301, NOPL-LC.

167. *Conseil de Ville*, Session of August 11, 1827, p. 39, and January 12, 1828, p. 167, of microfilm #90-223, AB301, NOPL-LC.

168. Resolutions of November 24 and December 11, 1835. *Comptes, Resolutions et Reglemens de la Nouvelle-Orleans*, 215–217.

169. Ferrall, *Ramble of Six Thousand Miles*, 190.

Highest up the stream lie the flats, arks, and barges, and below them the tiers of steam-boats, fifty . . . at one time. Then come the brigs ranged in rows, with their bows against the breast of the levee; these are succeeded by the three-masted, lying in tiers of two or three deep, with their broadside to the shore. . . . [W]hen the sails of the whole are exposed to the air, and their signal or national flags abroad, [it] is one of the most singularly beautiful [sights] you can conceive.¹⁷⁰

Another visitor described the distribution of vessels as he approached New Orleans from up stream. First he cast his eyes along the riverfront of what is today called the Lower Garden District:

The first object that presents itself is the dirty and south-backwoods flat boat. . . . Close by are the rather more decent keel-boats, with cotton, fine whiskey, flour. . . .

Around Julia Street the sights and sounds changed:

[N]ext the elegant steam-boat, which by its passing and repeated sounds, announces either its arrival or departure, and sends forth immense columns of black smoke, that form into long clouds above the city.

After around Toulouse Street came the eastwise and international traffic:

Farther on are the smaller merchant vessels, the sloops and schooners from the Havannah, Vera Cruz, Tampico; then the brigs; and lastly the elegant ships, appearing like a forest of masts.¹⁷¹

Hydrology and port management caused a cultural and linguistic sorting of incoming watercraft that serendipitously aligned with, and perhaps reinforced, the ethnic geography of the city. Upcountry craft bringing in cotton, tobacco, corn, flour, pork, and other interior commodities usually bore English-speaking Anglo-American crews, who landed in the predominantly English-speaking Anglo-American Faubourg St. Mary (dubbed “the American quarter” or “the American section”). Sea vessels

170. Charles Joseph La Trobe, *The Rambler in North America* (New York, 1835), 2:244–245.

171. Charles Sealsfield, *The Americans As They Are; Described in A Tour Through the Valley of the Mississippi* (London: Hurst, Chance, and Co., 1838), 146.

importing goods and merchandise from Europe, the West Indies, Mexico, and Latin America generally, were in the predominantly Francophone Creole lower city (the “French” or “Creole quarter”), which looked, sounded, and smelled much like the ports of origin of its sellers. Slaves imported domestically disembarked into the vast New Orleans humanity market depending on their point of origin and vessel of arrival: the roughly 10 percent who came downriver from Kentucky, Missouri, Arkansas, Tennessee, and Louisiana, and Mississippi arrived at the uptown steamboat or flatboat wharves. The 90 percent who came from Virginia, Maryland, the Carolinas, or Gulf Coast landed at the downtown wharves reserved for coastwise ocean-going vessels. They arrived not on the specially designed slave ships associated with the trans-Atlantic slave trade (prohibited in the U.S. since 1808 but still occurring illegally off Louisiana’s coast), but rather on the same fleet of vessels bringing in merchandise to New Orleans’ levee. Local traders met the human cargo in the wharf and marched the coffle unceremoniously to the holding pens to be auctioned for sale. The importer by law had to report the number and demographics of the shipment to the mayor.¹⁷² “[S]eventy three Virginia Slaves, selected principally for the Planters,” proclaimed one 1808 announcement, are “now at the Levee . . . and will be for sale as soon as they are landed.”¹⁷³

Activity along the waterfront played out through daily dynamics among buyers and sellers, transients and local shipmen, of various vessels and sponsors, competing laborer castes and classes, and between all of the above and the dues-collecting, rules-enforcing officials.

The interactions sometimes yielded inefficiencies. Faubourg St. Mary businessmen in 1820, for example, built their own wharf and donated their riverfront rights to the city, in the hope of luring steamboats and their attendant business. But the facility silted up when the city failed to maintain it, allowing only lowly flatboats to monopolize the wharf. Even when steamboats could dock physically, regulations prevented them from doing so.

The interactions also produced conflicts and tension. One ongoing

172. “Additional Ordinances—Slaves,” October 20, 1831, *Ordinances and Resolutions of New-Orleans*, 410–411. The figures for states of origin of slaves arriving to the New Orleans market in 1830 are based on the research of Freudenberger and Pritchett, “Domestic Slave Trade,” 460.

173. “Slaves,” *Louisiana Courier*, October 20, 1828, p. 3, c. 3 (emphasis in original).

discord involved “retailing flatboats,” in which boatmen exploited their port call by vending their cargo like floating shopkeepers.

The practice enraged local merchants, who paid high rent and taxes only to lose business to the lowly short-timing quitters.¹⁷⁴ City officials responded by imposing a five-dollar-a-day fine on boatmen retailing eight days after their initial landing; the next year they banished retailing flatboats to the De Haro property, the same zone reserved for the nuisance flatboats or face a steep twenty-dollar fine.¹⁷⁵ The practice nevertheless persisted, because it was lucrative: retailing boatmen minimized costs by paying no rent, no taxes, and no board (they slept on board), while gaining a competitive advantage by cutting out the middlemen and selling directly to consumers (who benefited from wholesale prices). A decade after the law went into effect, flatboats basically operated as fruit stores, supporting illegal food stands in the nearby Place d’Armes. While others sold directly to city dwellers. Just a week’s worth of incoming flatboats bore enough cargo to affect commodity supply, demand, and price citywide. One 1825 report inventoried 28,671 barrels of coal; 5,246 of flour; 3,762 of corn; 1,912 of oats; 400 of pork; 153 of whiskey; 175 of molasses; 22 of beef; and 14 of potatoes. Additionally there were 2,500 gallon-sized stoneware jugs; 1,380 kegs of lard; and 42 casks of ham. Piled near the barrels and jars were 2,563 sacks of oats and 174 of corn, 19 bales of hay and 64 bales of cotton. More than 1,800 pumpkins, plus cider, apples, apple brandy, and kebab, filled every remaining nook. All this arrived on only thirty-nine flatboats during a single week in late November—hardly the busiest time of year.¹⁷⁶

After flatboatmen sold the last of their cargo, they proceeded to dismantle their vessels. This noisy task cluttered valuable wharf space for extensive periods of time, at the expense of incoming dues-paying vessels. It represented yet another flashpoint between local businessmen and boatmen. So annoyed did councilman Bernard Marigny get over this activity in the Faubourg Marigny that he led the City Council in 1819 to prohibit “the demolishing of flat boats [subject to] a fine of twenty dollars.”¹⁷⁷

174. *Louisiana Advertiser*, December 2, 1826, p. 2, c. 3; *New Orleans Bee*, June 22, 1835, p. 2, c. 1.

175. *Conseil de Ville*, Session of March 2, 1823, p. 150 of microfilm #90-222, AB301 and Session of March 23, 1824, p. 32 of microfilm #90-222, AB301, NOPL-LC.

176. “New-Orleans, Dec. 1,” *Macon Weekly Telegraph (Georgia Telegraph)*, December 17, 1835, p. 2.

177. *Conseil de Ville*, Session of May 8, 1819, p. 59 of microfilm #90-221, AB301, NOPL-LC. See also June 2, 1819, p. 75 for a later amendment.

Upriver, where far more flatboats docked, the problem forced the City Council to intervene again in 1822. It decreed,

Whereas the number of the flatboats . . . augments daily, on account of the great increase of produce from the Western Country, and as it is necessary to facilitate the unloading of the same, which cannot be accomplished without taking effectual measures to prevent the breaking up of flatboats in [those places] destined for the unloading of the said produce. . . . It is [thus] forbidden . . . to break up any flatboat, barge, keelboat, or other rivercraft between Esplanade Street in the lower section of the City and the Steam Mill of Mr. Weathers in the upper part of the City; no flatboat, keelboat, or other craft shall remain the limits above prescribed more than 48 hours after having effected its discharge.¹⁷⁸

Such odious practices continued, in part because flatboatmen (particularly amateurs) were often ill-informed of local law, but mostly because they were inclined to make the most of their trip to New Orleans. Multiply this inclination by the thousands of other transients “on the make” in the Great Southern Emporium, and a portrait of one contentious place emerges.

For the most part, however, order prevailed on the riverfront; there was too much money at stake to allow chaos to reign. Challenges abounded, not the least of which was the sheer technical difficulty of sailing safely into the port. Negotiating the Mississippi’s tricky currents amid heavy traffic, shifting winds, sandy bottoms, and primitive steam engines tested the very best captains as they identified their berth, waited their turn, docked and tied up, paid their dues, unloaded, conducted their business, serviced their vessel, loaded, and departed—all while avoiding danger, vice, and virus. Vessel overcrowding presented another problem: on the very week that Lincoln departed New Orleans for the last time, an editorials called on authorities “to look to widening the . . . wharfage and the landing of articles, both from the shipping and steamboats, [to handle] immense additional tonnage The evil, of want of room and convenience, is felt sufficiently at this moment.” Flatboats were pointedly excluded from the recommendation. They usually ended up sacrificing space to the steamboats.

178. *Conseil de Ville*, Session of June 1, 1822, pp. 87–88 of microfilm #90-222, AB301, NOPL-LC.

179. “The Shipping,” *Mercantile Advertiser*, June 13, 1831, p. 2, c. 4.

When New Orleans separated into three semi-autonomous municipalities (1836 to 1852), port management and nearly all other city functions grew more complicated. The quantity of officials, records, rates, and bureaucracy in general all tripled. Each municipality sought its piece of the riverfront section, and renegotiated the geography of vessel stations accordingly. One of the best maps of this era, Hirt's *Plan of New Orleans* (1841), shows that each municipality numbered its riverfront docks and assigned vessels to them differently. The First Municipality (the Old City, or French Quarter) hosted steamboats from Canal Street to Toulouse, schooners to St. Ann, flatboats and "planters' pirogues" to Delphine, and ships to its lowermost limit at Esplanade Avenue. The Second Municipality (Faubourg St. Mary) directed steamboats from Canal Street up to Julia, flatboats up to Delord (present-day Howard Avenue), ships to Lechin, flatboats again to Orange, and ships to the city limit at Felicitee Street. The Third Municipality—Faubourg Magnin, the poorest and farthest downriver—reserved most of its space for ships, as it was too inconvenient for upcountry steamboats and flatboats. Not shown on Hirt's map are wharves in adjacent Jefferson Parish (established in 1825), which at the time lay above Felicitee Street; there, flatboats docked almost exclusively, and in large numbers.¹⁸⁰ An 1850 map of the Jefferson Parish city of Lafayette shows that wharves—presumably mostly for flatboats—extended well upriver by that year, almost to Louisiana Avenue.¹⁸¹ Other communities above and below New Orleans, plus hundreds of plantations (many of which effectively operated as self-sufficient villages), hosted their own riverfront landings and docking vessels.

For all its strategic advantages, the New Orleans riverfront was ironically ill positioned to handle certain resources needed by city dwellers for everyday life. Firewood, lumber, pitch, tar, and wild game abounded in the pine woods of the Florida Parishes across Lake Pontchartrain, while the lake itself, plus the adjacent tidal lagoons that communicated with the Mississippi Sound and productive saline marshes, yielded seemingly

180. L. Hirt, *Plan of New Orleans with Perspective and Geometrical Views of the principal Buildings of the City*, The Historic New Orleans Collection, Accession Number 1952.4. See also Winston, "Economic History of New Orleans," 204.

181. J. T. Hammond, *Map of New Orleans and Environs, Engraved Expressly for Cohen's Directory-1850*, The Historic New Orleans Collection, Accession Number 1974.25.18.111.

limitless finfish, shellfish, and fowl. But suppliers from these regions required multiple days and considerable risk to reach New Orleans via the Mississippi River. The alternative, practiced since prehistoric times, was to ship across Lake Pontchartrain and up Bayou St. John, then discharge at Bayou Road and walk the remaining two miles to the “back door” of the city. Spanish colonials complained the terrestrial leg of that awkward journey in 1763 by excavating the Carondelet Canal, but even after the canal’s widening and the addition of a shell road the back-door route was much to be desired. A visitor from Mobile in 1826 made this clear:

We landed at a place called, I think, the Piquets [probably Spanish Fort, where Bayou St. John adjoins Lake Pontchartrain] about six or seven miles from New Orleans. . . . This short distance we passed over on a road skirting a sluggish stream [Bayou St. John] running in the midst of a swamp covered with cypress and other thirsty trees rising out of a thick, rank underwood.¹⁸²

Increasing demand for swift passenger and freight service to coastwise cities motivated entrepreneurs to propose additional city-to-lake connections. The two projects that succeeded both culminated around the time of Lincoln’s visits.

During the year of Lincoln’s first trip, businessmen in the predominantly Creole lower city endeavored to solve the lake access problem with an exciting new transportation technology imported from the Northeast: the railroad. They formed a company in 1829, won a state charter in 1830, gained rights to an unobstructed five-mile beeline connecting river and lake, and commenced clearing the bed and building the track. Noting how the “loudly expressed . . . doubts of many [had] vanished,” the company proudly inaugurated its horse-drawn Pontchartrain Railroad on April 25, 1831, the first railroad west of the Appalachians and first in the nation with a completed track system.¹⁸³ Seventeen months later, the company introduced steam rail locomotion to the city, taking to the lake five cars and four hundred passengers, “accompanied by a band of music, moving off in a grand style beneath streaming banners and an admiring multitude.”¹⁸⁴ By early 1835, more than nine hundred vessels (nearly

182. Basil Hall, *Travels in North America in the Years 1827 and 1828* (Edinburgh and London, 1830), 3:318.

183. *Mercantile Advertiser*, April 20, 1831, p. 2, c. 4 and “Forward,” April 26, 1831, p. 2, c. 4.

184. *Louisiana Advertiser*, September 18, 1832, p. 2, c. 4.

one-third of them steamboats) called monthly at the railroad's lakefront Port Pontchartrain, bearing approximately 500 passengers, 2,200 bales of cotton, and voluminous coastwise cargo.¹⁸⁵ Thousands of subsequent visitors to New Orleans stole not up the Mississippi to the city's world-famous riverfront, but instead through the Rigolets channel and across the lake to Port Pontchartrain, where, sometimes confused and disoriented, they boarded the Pontchartrain Railroad and rode down Elysian Fields Avenue to the city.

The Pontchartrain Railroad proved a success. It fueled a real estate boom in the Faubourg Marigny and in the Milneburg community that arose around Port Pontchartrain. It also piqued the interest of Anglo-American businessmen, who envisioned an even better city-to-lake connection for the upper part of town. Word of the impending competition from uptown inspired lower-town businessmen to propose yet another canal to connect their neighborhood with Lake Borgne, the same water body their peers in nearby St. Bernard Parish planned to access with a new railroad.¹⁸⁶

Many visions, however, outpaced action on the ground, and of the three projects, only the uptown canal came to fruition—in 1831, when the New Orleans Canal and Banking Company invested four million dollars to excavate a waterway directly connecting the Faubourg St. Mary with Lake Pontchartrain. Designed to open up the distant Carondelet Canal, the waterway would measure sixty feet wide, accommodate six-foot-draft vessels, join a paved toll road, and terminate in a spacious turning basin (located near the present-day intersection of Howard and Loyola avenues). The Company recruited unskilled Irish laborers locally, nationally, and internationally to serve as “ditchers” for the six-mile-long excavation. The grueling toil commenced in 1832, a few months after Lincoln's final departure, and immediately took a terrible toll on the immigrants. Many died in a cholera and yellow fever epidemic that claimed one of every six New Orleanians that year. Thousands more would perish by the time the New Orleans Canal was completed in 1838. Renamed the New Basin Canal to distinguish it from the Carondelet (“Old Basin”) Canal, the waterway succeeded commercially, bringing to the American seaboard a steady stream of sand, gravel, and shell for fill; lumber, firewood, and charcoal; fruits, vegetables, cotton, and seafood; and other cargo from

185. Merl E. Reed, *New Orleans and the Railroads: The Struggle for Commercial Empire, 1830–1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1966), 33–36.

186. *Ibid.*, 33–38.

the lake and Gulf. The navigable canals, their adjacent shells roads, and the Pontchartrain railroad all circumvented the tedious and difficult river route, and helped connect New Orleans more efficiently with its neighbors. “The citizens seem *determined* to avoid the one hundred and ten miles of river navigation,” wrote one visitor in 1832 regarding the new infrastructure.¹⁸⁷

The next year, urban investors, aiming to create valuable real estate between New Orleans and Carrollton, won a charter for the city’s second railroad. Gaining access to a 120-foot-wide easement, they set to work in 1834 laying 4.5 miles of track through a number of sugar cane plantations, running parallel to the river and halfway between the waterfront and backswamp. The New Orleans and Carrollton Rail Road commenced scheduled service on September 2, 1835. “The route passes through a level and beautiful country,” reported the *Bee* on opening day,

very high, dry and arable land; and affording one of the most pleasant drives in the southern states. It passes through the remains of an ancient forest of live oaks . . . one of the very few of its kind now remaining in the south.¹⁸⁸

The railroad’s right-of-way aligned with Noyale’s Street and formed a corridor that would later be renamed St. Charles Avenue. In short time, the new conveyance affected the city’s human geography, allowing wealthy city dwellers to establish domiciles in the bucolic upper suburbs, helping form today’s Garden District and positioning St. Charles Avenue to become the city’s grand uptown avenue. The very term “uptown” started to be heard (1820s–30s) in the local English vernacular, coined in Manhattan and brought down by transplanted New Yorkers. The city grew in the shape of an arc, inspiring Northern visitor Joseph Holt Ingraham to nickname it in 1835, “the crescent city[,] for its being built around . . . a graceful curve of the river. . . .”¹⁸⁹ Most former sugar plantations along the St. Charles Rail Road were subdivided by 1855; subsequent decades saw those lots built up with houses, the streets lined with oaks, and their addresses change to Orleans Parish as the City of New Orleans annexed the former Jefferson Parish cities of Lafayette in 1852, Jefferson in 1870,

187. J. E. Alexander, *Transatlantic Sketches, Comprising Views of the Most Interesting Scenes in North and South America, and the West Indies* (London, 1833), 2:32 (emphasis added).

188. *New Orleans Bee*, September 25 and September 28, 1835, p. 2, c. 1.

189. Ingraham, *South-West by a Yankee*, 1:91.

and Carrollton in 1834. The municipal expansion traced its provenance to the investments of the 1820s–30s—an era that also saw extensive street paving and illumination, the construction of the nationally famous St. Charles and St. Louis exchange hotels, the formation of private gas and water companies, the extension of Esplanade Avenue to Bayou St. John, the quadrupling of the municipal market system, the erection of the New Orleans Barracks (later Jackson Barracks), the launch of three ferry lines crossing the river, and the modernization of the city's architectural aesthetic from colonial-era French Creole and Spanish styles to imposing new Greek Revival fashions.

New Orleans found the time of Lincoln's visits increasingly woven itself into regional, national, and world economic systems by manipulating its environment, building infrastructure, peopling its neighborhoods, and handling its shipping traffic to the utmost commercial advantage. The Great Southern Emporium of the 1820s–30s approached the zenith of its geo-economic significance, dominating Mississippi Valley commerce, growing dramatically in population, and developing a distinctive and spectacular urban character. New Orleans' crisscrossing crested in comfort and leisure to the extent that their wherewithal allowed—and for many, that was a lot. New Orleans' Latin Catholic peoples rendered the city more foreign; its black population, more Afro-Caribbean; its immigrant population, more multicultural; and its transient population, more rowdy and raffish than most if not all other American cities. The city's environmental hazards, public-health atrocities, vice, crime, and rampant bondage also made this place an object of dread and denouncement. To a wide-eyed young flatboat hand arriving from the rural upcountry, New Orleans in 1828–31 must have seemed one dazzling, dangerous, colorful, contentious, splendid, polluted, liberating, oppressive, promising, and utterly exciting place.