

*Cityscapes: A Geographer's View of the New Orleans Area*

## Addressing New Orleans East's Core Problem

By Richard Campanella

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Consider Eastern New Orleans.

Or is it New Orleans East? Or "The East"?

Or Plum Orchard, Kenilworth, Eastover and Versailles?

The lack of an agreed-upon name is emblematic of the challenges faced by this section of Orleans Parish.

Residents express frustration that they must continually make an argument for their region's existence, let alone for political attention and private investment. Indeed, they struggle just to get on the map. Flung outwardly from the metropolitan heart like the feathers of a shuttlecock, Eastern New Orleans often gets clipped from maps of the city proper, depriving it of cartographic attention — and everything that goes with it. That which literally lies on the margins often gets figuratively marginalized.

While its geographical position works against Eastern New Orleans' argument, so does its internal geography. It lacks an identifiable core — no central plaza, no historic quarter, no walkable business or entertainment district, no famous landscaped park.

Neighborhoods, I've long held, are defined more by their cores than their peripheries. When you hear the words "Lower Garden District," for example, you probably think of its central focal point, Coliseum Square, before any secondary streets come to mind. Likewise, Jackson Square, Audubon Park, Harrison Avenue and Oretha Castle Haley Boulevard mark the psychological nuclei or axes of the French Quarter, Uptown, Lakeview and Central City, and impart to those neighborhoods iconography and character.

Eastern New Orleans, on the other hand, comes across as an undifferentiated expanse of subdivisions without a distinctive nucleus. As a result, Eastern New Orleans lacks a sense of place, and finds itself excluded from the popular perception of classic New Orleans.

It's a geographical problem with historical roots.

Whereas historic New Orleans grew outwardly from an original core settlement starting in the 1700s, Eastern New Orleans was the exact opposite: it grew inwardly from a peripheral framework of transportation arteries, mostly in the 1900s.

Prior, this area comprised two vast basins: Bayou Bienvenue on the south side, and, on the north, an expanse of shrubby marshes (the French called them *Petit Bois* or Little Woods) extending to the shores of brackish Lake Pontchartrain. Separating the two basins was a narrow topographic ridge formed by a former channel of the Mississippi River and later by its Bayou Metairie-Bayou Gentilly-Bayou Sauvage tributary.



*This detail from an 1863 lithograph by J. Wells shows downtown New Orleans in the foreground and the eastern marshes, including Bayou Sauvage and Bayou Bienvenue, in the periphery. Courtesy Library of Congress.*

Historically, this high ground, today's Old Gentilly Road and Chef Menteur Highway, represented the only terrestrial access to the interior. All other ingress and egress required a boat sailing around lakes Pontchartrain and St. Catherine, through the Rigolets and Chef Menteur passes, or up Bayou Bienvenue. Thus, most of the swampy, marshy interior of present-day Eastern New Orleans remained wild into the late 1800s.

Railroads began to change this. In the 1870s, tracks were laid for the Louisville and Nashville Railroad along the shoulder of the topographic ridge to connect New Orleans with Biloxi and Mobile. In the 1880s, another line was laid for the New Orleans and North Eastern Railroad along the lakeshore, to connect the city with Slidell. For the first time, New Orleanians could now conveniently access the eastern marshes. Tiny communities formed along the tracks, joining the truck farms and dairies that had long lined Old Gentilly Road.

Access brought to light the area's economic potential, which motivated the city to install drainage canals and pumps. By the 1910s, the former marsh and swamp became "reclaimed." Investors followed suit, chief among them the New Orleans Lake Shore Land Company, whose president, cotton merchant Frank B. Hayne, came to own 7,500 acres of the now-drained basin. He proceeded to sell hundreds of five-acre tracts, not for residential development, but for citrus groves. Americans by this time had developed a taste for tropical fruits, and Louisiana oranges grown in Eastern New Orleans could be readily shipped to regional markets via rail and ship lines.

Shell roads were established across the drained basin in the form of a "superblock" grid that would be recognizable to motorists today. Mature orange trees were sent in from Florida and planted, and thousands of acres of orange groves arose.

The company's plans for industrial-scale orange production were frustrated by bad weather, blight and world war. What remained by the 1940s were scores of smaller individual orchards and truck farms supplying municipal markets via, on the south, the recently paved State Highway 90, which passed through enclaves named Lee, Micheaud (Michoud) and Chef Menteur (near Fort Macomb), and on the north, a lakeshore boulevard named after Hayne, which paralleled the tracks to Slidell. A ride on that railroad would have taken passengers past tiny hamlets named Seabrook, Citrus, Edge Lake, Little Woods, and, the farthest out, South Point.

Residents of these coastal outposts lived in raised wooden camps and tended to groves and market gardens, fished and hunted, or maintained the railroad and tended the locomotives. Many middle-class New Orleanians owned camps built on the lake, and something of a weekend recreational economy, complete with bathing facilities and hotels, developed here and elsewhere in Eastern New Orleans.

By this time, another peripheral transportation artery came into the picture, and it was a big one: the Inner Harbor Navigation Canal, which had been excavated during 1918-1923 to connect the Mississippi River with Lake Pontchartrain. A boon to barge traffic, the waterway created so many jobs, along Downman Road and elsewhere, that it became known colloquially as the Industrial Canal. But the waterway also severed the east from the heart of the metropolis, while introducing salt water into the city even as soils began to subside below sea level because of drainage.

Then, during World War II, the Intracoastal Waterway was dug along the area's southern tier, essentially rendering Eastern New Orleans an island. By mid-century, the area was ringed with railroads, roads and canals, each lined with limited industrial or residential development. But it was still largely undeveloped at its core.

The Eastern New Orleans we know today is largely a product of five events of the late 1960s: Hurricane Betsy, which flooded parts of the area but also served as an impetus to erect hurricane-protection levees; NASA's Michoud Assembly Plant, which brought hundreds of well-paying jobs to the area; the movement of the white middle class out of the central city; the Mississippi River-Gulf Outlet Canal, which brought ocean-going ships into the area even as it accelerated coastal erosion and salt-water intrusion; and, last but not least, Interstate 10, which, for the first time, brought accessibility to the core of Eastern New Orleans.

Each of these transformations, particularly I-10, instigated waves of housing development, and by the 1970s, subdivisions with names like Plum Orchard, Kenilworth and Versailles were built where stood citrus groves 50 years earlier, and wilderness a century prior.

Development would have extended further eastward — ramps had been built on I-10 to anticipate it — had not the petroleum market crashed in the early 1980s. Lands belonging to New Orleans East Inc., which had been poised to urbanize over 20,000 acres of wetlands in far eastern Orleans Parish, instead became Bayou Sauvage National Wildlife Refuge. As part of its ambitious project, the company erected along I-10 a massive concrete sign emblazoned with NEW ORLEANS EAST, branding the area with that corporate moniker despite its demise. The name stuck.



*An aerial of Morrison Road and New Orleans East, photographed on April 21, 2010.*

At first, New Orleans East drew mostly white middle-class populations fleeing the inner city for what was billed as a “suburb within the city.” But when African Americans gained political power in City Hall in the late 1970s, many of those white families departed New Orleans altogether and resettled in adjacent parishes.

In their stead came black families, among them substantial numbers of the upwardly mobile middle and upper classes, who later bought into posh subdivisions such as Eastover. Vietnamese refugees, meanwhile, settled in the Versailles area starting in 1975, and, their numbers later supplemented by immigrants, have since prospered and bought into surrounding subdivisions. Multi-family housing and Section 8 vouchers, meanwhile, brought in large numbers of working-class and poor households, and with them came the social challenges affiliated with poverty.

By century’s end, geophysical problems increasingly came to light. Surrounded by salt water, bowl-shaped in its elevation, detached from the metropolitan core, adjacent to eroded marshes and ungated surge-prone canals, and ill-protected by what proved to be flimsy levees, New Orleans East lay both physically and socially vulnerable to catastrophe.

It suffered terribly when Hurricane Katrina struck in 2005, and, to add insult to injury, saw relatively little media and volunteer attention as it struggled to recover, in large part for its lack of a compelling historical narrative and picturesque cityscape.

How might New Orleans East address its geography problem?

One obvious suggestion would be to establish some sort of iconic core — a walkable mixed-use district with a distinctive architectural profile, where it's great to work, shop, recreate and live. But forcing an urban form on a suburban space may be exactly that—forced—and I am all too familiar with the propensity of such grand plans to collapse under their own weight.

Instead, I might suggest we simply accept that New Orleans East is fundamentally non-nucleated, and build upon its historical-geographical strength: peripheral assets.

New Orleans East's gorgeous lakeshore and eastern wetlands are among the most underutilized natural resources in the region. The picturesque hamlets and fishing camps that once lined Hayne Boulevard, the citrus groves, bathhouses and recreational parks such as Lincoln Beach (an integral memory of thousands of African Americans during the last years of segregation) lay unmarked and unremembered today, yet abound with potential.

Along its western and southern flanks, New Orleans East boasts the city's premier inventory of industrial sites, all accessible by interstate, rail and canal. Chief among them is Michoud, which has unmatched opportunities for everything from building fuel tanks to developing drones to making movies.

New Orleans East could also improve its interior infrastructure by beautifying below-grade outfall canals with trees and landscaping, as recommended by experts involved in architect David Waggoner's "Dutch Dialogues" project.

The region's open drainage system, with its runoff-storing lakes and lakefront pumps, is the envy of other parts of the city, and may be aestheticized into something truly distinctive.

Yes, these are costly undertakings. But they are also scalable, and may be pursued incrementally with minimal disruption to everyday life. Tens of thousands of full-canopy shade trees, meanwhile, would do wonders for giving sun-drenched streets an appealing garden-suburb character.

And that is what New Orleans East needs most — a distinctive character, a sense of place, an embrace of what it is — and an acceptance of what it is not.



*Contributing writer Richard Campanella, a geographer with the Tulane School of Architecture, is the author of "Bienville's Dilemma," "Geographies of New Orleans," and other books, as well as the forthcoming "Bourbon Street: A History" (2014). He may be reached through <http://richcampanella.com> , [rcampane@tulane.edu](mailto:rcampane@tulane.edu) , or @nolacampanella on Twitter.*