A tract of woods in Gentilly remains a wild Eden in the middle of the city

By Richard Campanella

The Accidental Forest

This 27-acre woodland is by no means virgin old-growth. Its oldest trees today appear to be at most a century old.

A geographer’s view of the New Orleans area

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Some of history’s toughest questions are those that ask “why not?” Many features in our cityscapes, for example, can only be explained by understanding why certain decisions were not made and why things did not happen.

A case in point is a remark — that is, forested wetland “swamp, that vast, damp, dense forest which has long since been felled by axes, drained by pumps and populated by us.”

This 27-acre woodland is by no means virgin old-growth. Aerial photographs attest that it was a second-growth thicket in the 1940s, and its oldest oak today appear to be at most a century old.

So it is still truly “swamp” — that is, forested wetland — although one section, at 4 feet below sea level, appears to impound rainwater during heavy downpours.

Gentilly, lies a last fragment of the storied New Orleans back-swamp, that vast, damp, dense forest which has long since been felled by axes, drained by pumps and populated by us.

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