in 1848-1849. “The irony of its appearance in New Orleans, home to the largest
slave market in North America,” wrote local art historian Cybèle T. Gontar,
“seems unlikely to have been lost on Robb.” Indeed, it might have signaled the
transplanted Northerner’s discomfort with slavery and dismay over the mounting
sectional tensions of the day. Nevertheless, Robb also found time to participate in
the city’s stridently pro-slavery government, serving in several elected capacities
for the Anglo-dominated Second Municipality and for the entire city after New
Orleans reconsolidated in 1852.

That was the same year when the Jefferson Parish City of Lafayette (today’s Irish
Channel, Garden District and Central City) merged with New Orleans to become
the city’s Fourth Municipal District. Robb decided to build a home in the heart of
this prosperous suburb. He acquired an entire block abutting Washington Avenue,
and aimed to make it the city’s most prestigious address.

Robb wanted more than a home, more than even a city mansion. He wanted
a manor with picture-like qualities, complete with statues and landscaping like
those in Romanticist paintings of the Italian countryside. That aesthetic had helped
launch the “Picturesque Movement” (from pittoresco, “like a painting”) in English
gardening, and brought into vogue the ornate buildings of the Italian provinces.
Architects began designing Roman- and Tuscan-style villas in the British Isles,
then in places like New Jersey, and starting in 1850, in New Orleans, where a
“magnificent Italian villa,” as the Daily Picayune put it, had been built on Prytania
Street near Jackson for local esquire Duncan Hennen. Costing $22,000, Hennen’s
mansion featured a gallery and veranda amid an abundance of marble. Known as
“Italianate,” the fancy fashion reflected what architectural historian Joan Caldwell
described as “sheer aesthetic enjoyment,” and it appealed to the nouveau riche
who, unlike previous generations of elites who favored the staid Greek Revival
idiom, had no qualms about showcasing their wealth.

Once again, James Robb fit the bill. In 1852 he commissioned Gallier, Turpin &
Company to design an opulent palazzo on a terraced site surrounded by gardens,
spanning from Washington to Sixth, and Camp to Chestnut. Neighbors called it
“Robb’s Folly,” in part because the landscaping was completed before the edifice,
and perhaps because of the ostentatious interior details.

Completed in 1854, the Robb Mansion ranked among the city’s most splendid
homes; its style helped popularize Italianate architecture locally, while its park-
lke setting helped inspire the nickname “Garden District,” which first started
circulating in the mid-1850s. “The building,” commented the Daily Picayune in
1856, “two stories high, eighty feet square, [on a] gently elevated terrace…had

STROLL DOWN WASHINGTON AVENUE amid Garden District grandeur
and you’ll come across, in the 1200 block, a group of homes looking more like
those of Lake Vista or Old Metairie and dating nearly a hundred years younger
than their neighbors.

They mark the space where once stood one of the most striking architectural
displays of wealth from New Orleans’ heady late-antebellum era: the extravagant
palazzo and gardens of a debonair and somewhat eccentric magnate by the name
of James Robb.

James Robb epitomized that generation of ambitious Anglo-Americans who, as
a bemused Pierre Clément de Laussat once put it, “swarm[ed] in from the northern
states” in the decades after the Louisiana Purchase, “each one turn[ing] over in
his mind a little plan of speculation…” Robb’s origins belied his destiny: born of
humble stock in Pennsylvania in 1814 and left to his own devices at age 13, young
Robb learned about banking as a clerk in Morgantown on the Monongahela River in
present-day West Virginia. That river flowed north to Pittsburgh on the Ohio, which
joined the Mississippi and led down to New Orleans, a city routinely predicted in
this era to become among the most important and affluent in the hemisphere.

This was the Age of Jackson, and the nation was changing. Americans were moving
westward; frontier individualism became a creed; and the genteel aristocracy of the
founding fathers increasingly ceded power to the so-called “Jacksonian Man,” that
“hardworking ambitious person,” according to historian Richard Hofstadter, “for
whom enterprise was a kind of religion.” Everywhere he went, wrote Hofstadter,
the Jacksonian Man “found conditions that encouraged him to extend himself.”
Chief among such places was New Orleans, where opportunity abounded — for
empowered white males, that is. Vast sums of money changed hands, and fortunes
were won and lost regularly. It was the sort of time and place that beckoned to smart
and savvy characters, and James Robb was as ambitious as any.

Robb arrived at New Orleans in 1837, and over the next two decades, would
create a sprawling trans-Atlantic empire that would dazzle a modern-day global
capitalist. He opened financial institutions (“The Bank of James Robb”) in cities
ranging from San Francisco to Liverpool, and from New York to New Orleans.
He formed private utilities to deliver the gas extracted from super-heated coal for
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“Robb’s Folly”
Lost Palazzo of the Garden District

BY RICHARD CAMPANELLA
TULANE SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE

ABOVE: An 1858 photograph of the Robb Mansion by Jay Dearborne Edwards. Photo
courtesy the Southeastern Architectural Archive, Special Collections Division, Tulane
University Libraries.
about it an air of quiet beauty, refined taste and substantial comfort…. No expense
was spared on finishing[,] its fresco paining was particularly superb, [as are the]
marble steps, with massive railings, [leading] to a spacious hall…."

Alas, Robb would find little happiness on Washington Avenue. The economic
crisis of 1857, the death of his wife, and complications regarding her estate forced
him to liquidate assets. His art, which the Daily Picayune described as a "large
and choice collection of oil paintings, water colors, engravings, bronzes, marble
statuary, vases, and other articles of vertu," was auctioned off the walls, and the
entire property was sold to merchant John Burnside for $55,000. Robb eventually
departed for Chicago in 1859, sparing him the additional unrest of secession
(which he opposed) and the outbreak of Civil War and the occupation of New
Orleans (which likely would have derailed his ventures anyway).

Robb dabbled in banking and railroads in the 1860s and even returned to New
Orleans for a spell, but never reclaimed his empire. His demise, coupled with the
turmoil of the postbellum era, took the shine off his former mansion on Washington
Avenue. John Burnside died in 1881, leaving the house empty and its future in question.

In 1886, local philanthropist Josephine Louise Newcomb set about to establish
an institution for higher learning for women dedicated to her late daughter. What
resulted was H. Sophie Newcomb Memorial College, the first degree-granting
women's coordinate college in the United States, operating under the auspices of
the recently endowed Tulane University. Given the conventions of the day, it
was understood that academic facilities for men and women ought to be kept on
separate campuses. Whereas Tulane (for men) was outgrowing its Common Street
address and would move uptown starting in 1894, Sophie Newcomb College had
already outgrown its original home near Lee Circle and, in 1891, found a perfect
new campus in the Robb-Burnside Mansion on Washington Avenue.

Administrators had an annex built in 1894, and added another story onto the
original house in 1900. A chapel and art department were also built, and in 1902
Ellsworth Woodward collaborated with architect Rathbone de Buys in designing the
Newcomb Pottery Building across Camp Street. For years to come, the block bustling
with intellectual energy, as hundreds of young ladies earned college degrees in the
middle of the Garden District, and Newcomb pottery would become internationally
famous. Sophie Newcomb College would become a fixture of uptown society.

By the late 1910s, Newcomb College, its space limited within the confines of a
residential neighborhood, found itself unable to accommodate the needs of modern
institutions of higher learning. Standards by this time had changed, and now
men and women were increasingly sharing college campuses. Administrators
agreed to move Newcomb College to more spacious grounds adjoining Tulane's
main uptown campus, and sold off the old Washington Avenue property to the
Southern Baptist Convention. Seminary classes began on October 1, 1918, only to
close the next week for the influenza epidemic. Over the next 35 years, the Baptists
saw their student body grow nearly tenfold, for which they added a $200,000
dormitory in 1947. But it soon became apparent that, like Newcomb, the seminary
had outgrown its 19th-century home, and in 1953 the Baptists moved to a new
campus in Gentilly, where they remain today.

What to do with their Garden District complex? No institutional tenant came
to inquire, and the campus could hardly revert to a private residence. "As far the
seminary was concerned," explained a real estate agent interviewed in 1956, "it
received more for the vacant ground…than it would have with the buildings on
it." The complex was demolished in 1954; a new segment of Conery Street was laid
down the middle of the now-empty block, and the two squares were subdivided
into 17 parcels. Roughly $340,000 changed hands ($3 million today) for the land
alone, and within a few years, pricey modern houses arose in the core of the
historic Garden District.

As for Robb, his fortunes declined amid financial and legal troubles. Some say
he died broke and broken, but Robb would have pointedly disagreed. He declared
stoically in his last days, "My signature is not outstanding for a penny; the remnant
of fortune left is equal to my wants[,] my life one of tranquility, and my daily
companions…instruct me in wisdom and impart consolation more precious than
riches…." He died in Cincinnati in 1881.

Two clues survive of Robb's mansion and the college that later occupied it:
granite steps at 1230 Washington Ave., which were once the main gated entrance to
the compound, and the circa-1902 Newcomb Pottery Building at Camp and Conery,
now a residence.