TRAUMA MOTIVATES. Unlike incremental setbacks, which can pass unnoticed, losses that are sudden and dramatic have the power to draw attention and galvanize response.

A century ago, three traumatic losses in the French Quarter caught the attention of civically engaged New Orleanians, and, in time, would spur them into action. What resulted was the articulation of the preservationist argument, followed by the organization of policy action. It would take the better part of the next half-century for the local preservation movement to gain citywide momentum, but it probably would have started later and taken longer were it not for the loss of over four acres of some of the city’s very best historical architecture.

The first episode began as a well-intended initiative to reinvest in the urban core, by erecting a new state courthouse and a federal post office on either side of Canal Street. The aging Cabildo has been serving unsatisfactorily as a court-house up to this point, and in 1895, the city proposed razing the old Spanish-era building, as well as the Presbytère, and replacing them with modern court facilities. In an early preservationist expression, a public outcry arose; the city relented, and the two landmarks were later converted to museums. Instead, a new courthouse as well as the post office would be built in a new location. Par- tisans for the Second District (the French Quarter) and First District (today’s CBD) advocated to land either project — or both — on their side of Canal Street. The aging Cabildo has been serving unsatisfactorily as a court-house up to this point, and in 1895, the city proposed razing the old Spanish-era building, as well as the Presbytère, and replacing them with modern court facilities. In an early preservationist expression, a public outcry arose; the city relented, and the two landmarks were later converted to museums. Instead, a new courthouse as well as the post office would be built in a new location. Partisans for the Second District (the French Quarter) and First District (today’s CBD) advocated to land either project — or both — on their side of Canal Street, and two commissions were formed to decide.

The Courthouse Commission eventually selected 400 Royal for the state su- premecourthouse, but it probably would have started later and taken longer were it not for the loss of four acres of some of the city’s very best historical architecture.

The Louisiana State Supreme Court Building, a Beaux Arts behemoth out- lump era. Originally designed by J. N. De Poligny and opened in 1838, the St. Louis would become, according to the Daily Picayune, “the pride of New Or- leans[,] the wonder and admiration of strangers, the most gorgeous edifice in the Union.” A fire in February 1840 completely destroyed the hotel, but owners speedily rebuilt, this time with a fire-resistant lightweight rotunda. “We rejoice in seeing its lofty dome soaring again to the sky,” beamed the Picayune in May 1841, “once more a proud architectural boast of New Orleans.” For the next 20 years, the St. Louis would form the nucleus of Creole society and commerce — as well as a busy auction site, including of slaves, beneath the 80-foot-high dome surrounded by towering Tuscan columns.

The hotel closed during the Civil War, after which the state purchased the building for use as the Louisiana State Capitol. In the 1890s it reopened as the Hotel Royal, but lacking the panache of earlier times, patronage declined and the lodge fell. The building soon found itself, according to a 1920s retrospective, in a state of “silence, neglect, emptiness and gloom,” occupied only by vagrants and the occasional stray horse. After further damage in 1915, the building was sold to the Samuel House Wrecking Company, which proceeded to dismantle it by early 1916. The site would remain a weedy salvage yard for decades.

Three years later, on December 4, 1919, a fire broke out in one of the most be- loved. The Italian Renaissance-style complex opened in 1913, and today it is home to the U.S. Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals.

Lost souls, the “Cityscapes of New Orleans,” “Bourbon Street: A History,” “Bienville’s Dilemma,” and other books. He may be reached through richcampanella.com, rcampanel@tulane.edu, or @nolacampanella on Twitter.