

Where y'at in New Orleans is shifting around, post-Katrina

Guest editorial by Richard Campanella, *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, August 27, 2009

Next year's federal census will solve many of the population mysteries of post-Katrina New Orleans. Until then, we look to households receiving mail as an indicator of our emerging human geography.

As of June, 154,579 households were receiving mail in Orleans Parish. That's 24 percent fewer than in June 2005, but nearly 6 percent more than in June 2008 -- a slight uptick in the otherwise stabilizing population recovery curve. "Households receiving mail" do not correspond neatly to population, because a single-person household counts the same as a large family.

Determining our current population depends on methodology; most agree it is between 320,000-340,000, roughly 75 percent of our 2005.

How have we shifted our occupancy of the cityscape? One way to answer this question is by determining our "population centroid" -- the theoretical center of balance around which residents are evenly distributed. For example, the population centroid of the United States in 1790 was in Maryland; two centuries of westward migration moved it to southern Missouri.

Throughout the 1800s, New Orleans' population centroid edged slightly upriver from its original location in the central French Quarter, as the city spread predominantly uptown. In the 1900s, it shifted lakeward, as drainage allowed urbanization into the lakeside swamps. Later in the 1900s, the centroid edged eastward, as people moved across the Industrial Canal into eastern Orleans Parish.

By 2005, the centroid of households receiving mail throughout the east bank of Orleans Parish was located around the North Miro-Kerlerec intersection, just off Esplanade Avenue in the Seventh Ward.

Four years after Katrina, that lakeward/eastward trend has reversed for the first time in the city's history. The 2009 centroid moved six blocks closer to the river and three blocks westward, to the North Miro/Dumaine intersection in Treme. That's not a huge shift, considering the post-storm visions of a smaller urban footprint. But the reversed direction is nevertheless notable.

The reason behind it: lower-lying areas to the north and east (closer to surge-prone canals and the storm path) flooded deeply during Katrina and have struggled to regain population, while higher neighborhoods toward the river returned faster and in higher numbers. The fact that the eastern half of the city has long been less affluent than the western half further beleaguers recovery in that zone.

These same factors explain why we straddle the Industrial Canal differently today. In June 2005, 24 percent of east bank Orleans Parish households lay east of the Industrial Canal. That figure dropped to 16 percent by June 2008, but rose to 18

percent over the past year, as more housing units in eastern New Orleans became available.

The parish population also has slightly shifted with respect to the Mississippi River. In June 2005, 11 percent of Orleans Parish households lay on the west bank. That rose to 15 percent by June 2008, but dropped to 14 percent this year as more flooded east-bank homes came back on the market.

How has our human geography shifted with regard to sea level? In 1900, nearly all New Orleanians lived above sea level, because most homes were located on the higher ground close to the river -- and because the backswamp had not yet subsided below sea level. After two generations of drainage, subsidence and urban expansion, 48 percent of the population lived above sea level in 1960. By 2005, only 38 percent (and 43 percent of households receiving mail) lived above sea level.

The flood reversed the century-long migration into lower areas. By March 2008, 54 percent of households receiving mail were located above sea level. As flooded neighborhoods recovered, however, that percentage dropped this June to 51 percent living above sea level. Like the city itself, New Orleanians now roughly straddle the level of the sea -- half above, half below.

How have our demographics changed? This will be answered by next year's census. Recent surveys indicate that New Orleans remains majority African-American, but the percentage has dropped from 68-70 percent before the storm to around 60-62 percent today. The electorate is closer to 50/50, probably slightly majority-black. The Latino population has increased markedly, although this population is difficult to estimate. A small but high-profile group of young professionals also has arrived; combined with the departure of many native-born citizens, we can expect a decline in New Orleans' highest-in-the-nation nativity rate (77.4 according to 2000 Census).

Surveys also indicate that the poor, seniors, and other vulnerable groups returned in disproportionately lower numbers. The same may be said of renters, particularly those in the public housing projects now undergoing reconstruction. The displacements have made post-Katrina New Orleans seem like a wealthier city; its median household income has increased from \$27,000 to nearly \$39,000 per year, while the percentage of people in extreme poverty has dropped markedly. But it is "wealthier" for the wrong reasons.

New Orleans' rank among American cities in terms of population suffered its most precipitous drop ever after Katrina. Once the third-largest city in America in 1840, New Orleans dropped to around the 10th-largest in the late 1800s, then stabilized around the 15th-largest between 1910 and 1960. Suburban exodus lowered it to the 31st position in 2000; now we are around the 60th-largest city in the nation.

This latest chapter in this city's 300-year history of shifting human geographies has been a traumatic one. But now we are stabilizing. Next year's census will establish a new statistical benchmark to measure future progress.

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