

## *Times-Picayune Review of New Orleans Then and Now*, by Richard and Marina Campanella, 1999

### TALE OF TWO CITIES

By Peggy Scott Laborde

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The architecture of New Orleans' older neighborhoods tells a story that continues to unfold. In "New Orleans Then and Now," by Richard and Marina Campanella, we are given an opportunity to compare sites from the past and present over a period of 150 years. Although there are many images of what has been lost in New Orleans, a word like "ouch" comes to mind less often than it would for people in most American cities, which are less intact. (Of course many residents might scoff at New Orleans being referred to as an American city.)

**Richard Campanella** works in the field of satellite imaging and Computer Mapping at Mississippi's Stennis Space Center. He and his wife Marina, who live in Waveland, Miss., began collecting old street scenes of New Orleans and spent weekends taking photographs to document a present-day view. What began as a hobby has evolved into an important and well-researched book that includes almost 400 photographs, some from as early as 1858 and never before published. There are also maps and satellite images.

An excellent introduction called "The Geographical City" explains and depicts how New Orleans' location has helped to determine its history. Here's an excerpt:

"The Crescent City is situated as a nexus between the two great 'spheres': the open seas beyond the nearby Gulf of Mexico, and the North American interior drained by the Mississippi River. One water body exposed the locale to the explorers, exiles, settlers and investors of France, Spain, Germany and the states of the Atlantic seaboard, plus Caribbean islanders, Latin American colonizers, enslaved Africans and immigrants from the world over. The other water body ushered in frontier explorers, Kaintuck flatboatsmen, Yankee traders, and the barons of the South's economy."

The authors add, "This concentration of cultural and economic activity from vast and varied geographical regions into a single subtropical riverbend explains New Orleans' famous signature of character: its architecture, cuisine, accents, customs, place names and -- above all -- its atmosphere and personality. New Orleans was and is the gatekeeper city of the North American Continent's southern flank, and as in any place inhabited by humans, things tend to happen around the entrance."

'New Orleans Then and Now' is an ambitious project for Pelican Publishing, the Gretna, -based publisher whose catalog includes both national and local titles, including the series of books by Mary Lou Widmer looking back at decades of New Orleans' history from the '20s to the '50s which have brought back

memories for many locals. The Campanellas' book will do the same. The extensive captions below each picture are filled with useful details.

The reproduction of the images from the past are mostly sharp. In many instances though, the present-day photos are not as crisp as they should be. However, the views of both what remains and what is lost ultimately are so compelling that the lack of clarity is pretty much forgiven.

The scenes depicted in "New Orleans Then and Now" are laid out geographically by neighborhood, and often are laced with amazing aerial photos that help to provide an essential overview. The reader is directed to important buildings in these bird's-eye views, and trying to locate the structures mentioned can be a challenge, but a satisfying one.

Because there is such a wealth of informative text and images, the absence of an index is a drawback. After completing the book, I wanted to show a friend an incredible scene of the historic New Basin Canal that for over 100 years connected downtown New Orleans with Lake Pontchartrain. It took more time than it should have to locate it. And readers unfamiliar with geographic locations will have to thumb through the book a lot to find specific images.

The Campanellas have, however, included a bibliography, which not only indicates the depth of their research but also serves as a useful compendium. Overall, the design of the book itself is handsome and the quality of the paper, so crucial for a book of images, is high.

The many photographs that come from the archives of the Historic New Orleans Collection only underscore the significance of that institution as a research center.

"New Orleans Then and Now" is a must for local history buffs and preservationists, who are so often one and the same. If only those who are neither would read it too, they might better appreciate the city's architectural history. This book almost makes the adage "a picture is worth a thousand words" seem like an understatement.

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Peggy Scott Laborde has produced numerous documentaries on the history and culture of New Orleans. Her most recent, a one-hour program called "The French Quarter That Was," airs on WYES-TV in November.

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