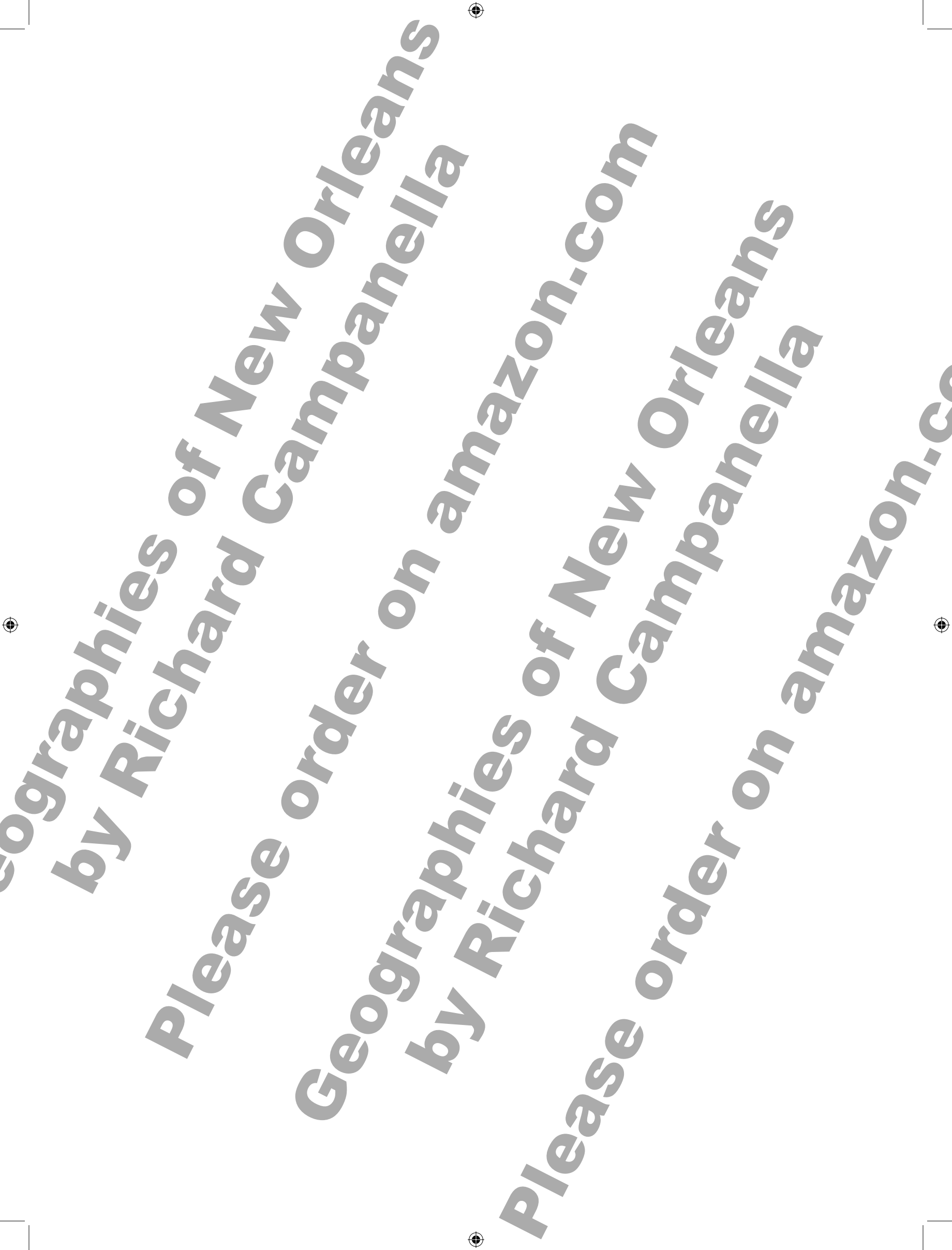




# URBAN GEOGRAPHIES

# PART II





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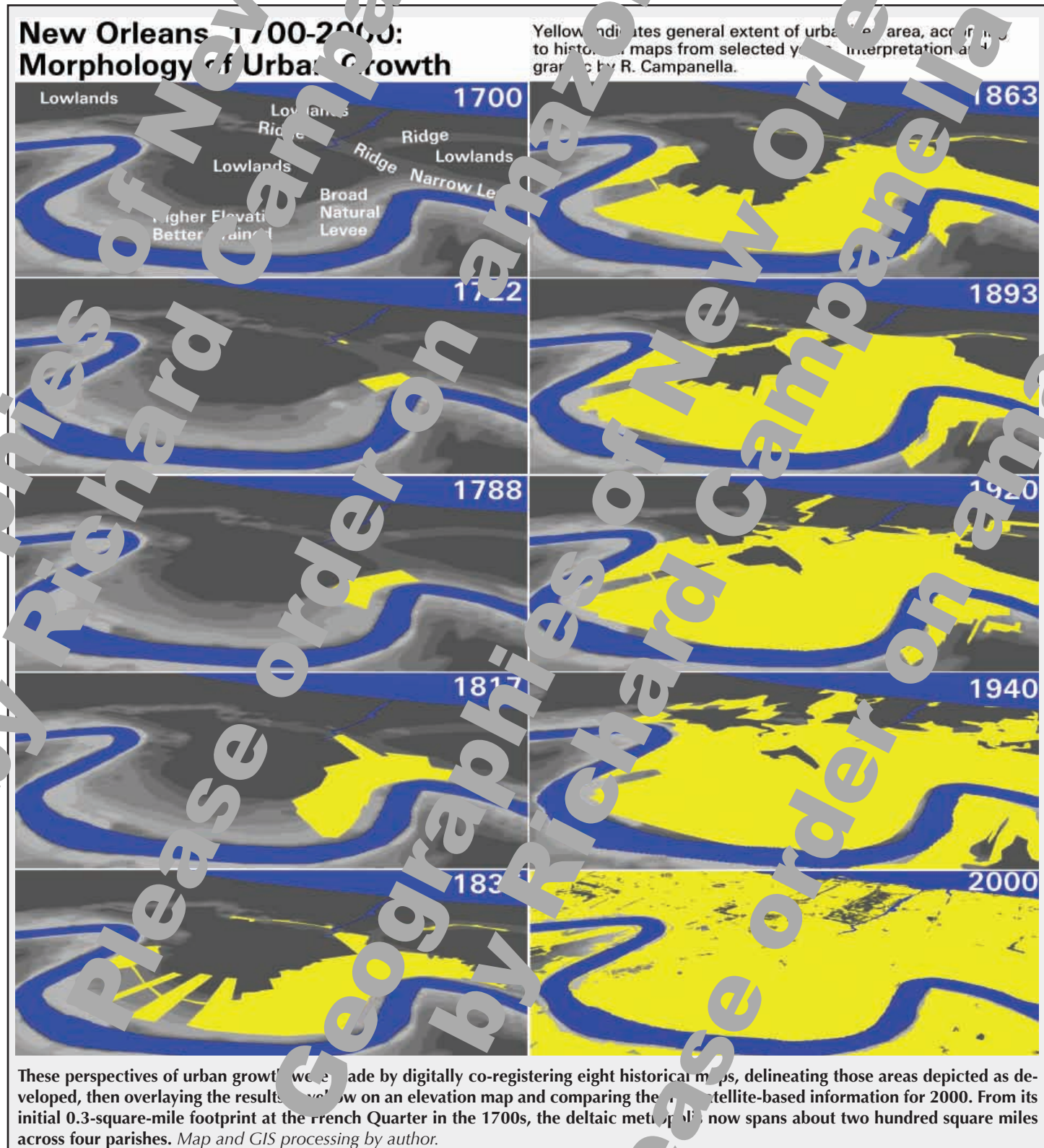
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## MORPHOLOGY OF A METROPOLIS

Analyses of urban morphology—the shape, form, structure, and growth of a city—often start with a distinction between planned and unplanned towns. Planned towns are premeditated visions executed in a top-down fashion by a centralized authority with the aid of engineers and surveyors, who lay out networks of streets and blocks. In historical times, planned towns represented the imposition of order and rationality in a remote and threatening wilderness. Unplanned towns, on the other hand, derive from the bot-

tom up, forming spontaneously by the aggregation of people at river confluences, road intersections, resource-extraction sites, forts and outposts, and other convenient locales. They expand in irregular, piecemeal patterns, and only when permanency seems assured do they come under governmental authority—and planning.

Most French settlements in North America were planned, but because France's New World endeavors were more commercial than colonial or imperial in their objectives, carried out by individuals or companies granted trading rights, no standard urban design was consistently executed throughout



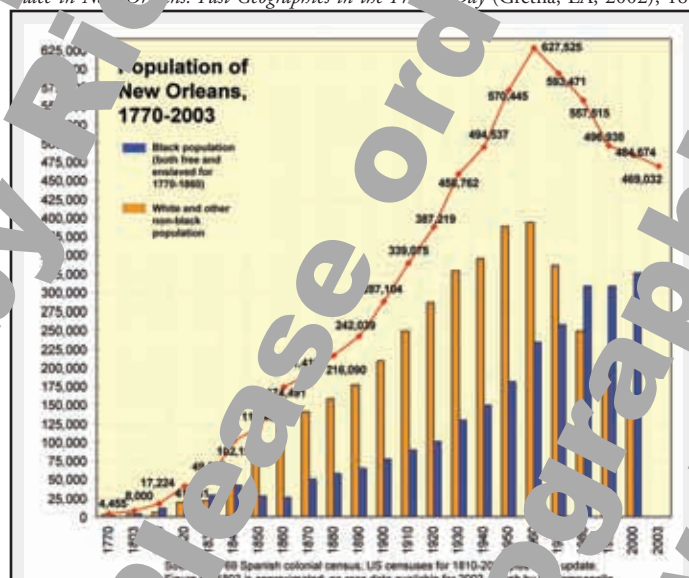
the French possessions of Canada, the Great Lakes, the Mississippi Valley, and the Gulf Coast. This contrasts with the Spanish towns and cities established to the southwest, which were developed under a strict and consistent colonial policy toward urban design, “under the careful supervision of the monarch.”<sup>1</sup> As a result, towns of New France featured a diversity of city plats reflecting the physical geography of the sites and the capacities of the founders, unified by certain common traits of French design. Quebec, Louisbourg, Montreal, Detroit, Mobile, New Orleans, St. Louis, and other French frontier communities all exhibited generalized grid patterns with centralized churches and *places*, situated along waterfronts and protected by fortifications, but no two were identical: some were elongated; some were perfectly orthogonal in their arrangement of blocks while others comprised a series of rather haphazard sub-grids; some were behind forts, aside forts, or within forts. “Because of their variety,” wrote urbanist John W. Reps, “French colonial towns have somewhat more charm and interest than can be found in the Spanish settlements. Indeed, in such cities as Quebec and New Orleans, where the original French character has not been entirely obliterated, the quality of the urban scene or townscape surpasses virtually anything else of its kind in North America.”

New Orleans was the epitome of a planned town, conceived in 1717, initiated in 1718 by Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne, sieur de Bienville, and designed and surveyed in 1721-1722 by Le Blond de La Tour and Adrien de Pauger.<sup>3</sup> It represented

John W. Reps, *Shaping of Urban America: A History of City Planning in the United States* (Princeton, NJ, 1965), 56.

Ibid., 56, 64-87.

<sup>3</sup> For an account of the siting of New Orleans, see Richard Campanella, *Time and Place in New Orleans: Past Geographies in the Present Day* (Gretna, LA, 2002), 18-



New Orleans' population rose steadily from the city's founding to around 1960. It was slightly majority black for most of its first century, until Irish and German immigration in the 1840s made whites predominant. The black population regained the majority around 1976 and now comprise over two-thirds the population. Declining steadily since its 1960 peak, the city's total population is now at Depression-era levels. Graph and analysis by author based on censuses, 1770-2003.

the more rigid and orderly end of the urban-planning spectrum of New France, featuring a symmetrical grid pattern with a central *place* housing the institutions of church and state, dramatically perched upon a cusp of the Mississippi River. Surrounding the eleven-by-six-block grid were four forts and three courtyards (some not actually built until years later) inspired by the French military engineer Sebastien le Pietre de Launay. Even though a commercial enterprise brought New Orleans to fruition, Bienville and his men instilled in New Orleans a strong sense of central authority and military presence, quite contrary to the laid-back atmosphere for which this city would later gain fame. The remote colonial outpost remained within the great plan until 1788, after a catastrophic conflagration and growing pressure for more space triggered New Orleans' first expansion beyond its original confines. Suburban growth started with the layout of the Faubourg St. Mary that year and would continue within the parish for roughly the next two hundred years, and well beyond parish lines. After 1788, the dynamics of New Orleans' urban morphology became a bit more complicated: it expanded in a fashion planned at the block-subdivision scale, but unplanned at the macroscopic, citywide scale, guided invisibly by the factors of proximity, topography, economics, infrastructure, demographics, opportunity, and circumstances. The goal of this chapter is not to recount the stage-by-stage history of this expansion,<sup>4</sup> but rather to identify the unwritten “rules” that explain the *why* behind the *where* of New Orleans' expansion, and that original sixty-six-block grid known today as the French Quarter.

## “RULES” OF URBAN EXPANSION,

### 1788-CIRCA 1900

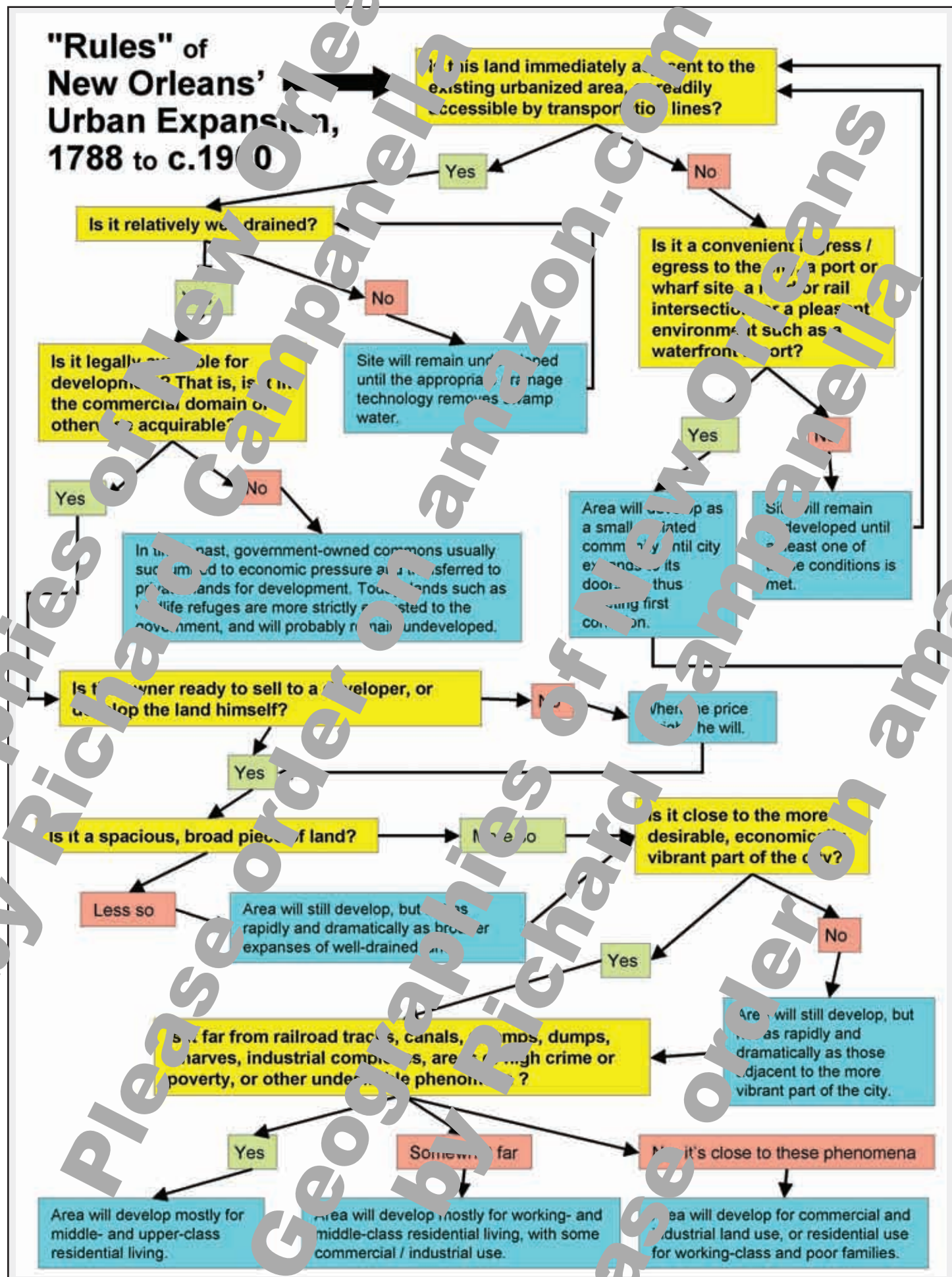
The first condition in the expansion of *bourg* to *faubourg* (literally “the town,” or inner suburb) was *immediate adjacency to an existing urbanized area*. Faubourg St. Mary (1788), for example, was laid out immediately upriver from the original city (save for a narrow commons unavailable at the time for development), while the Faubourg Marigny was founded in 1805-1806 immediately below the city. The four new faubourgs—Duplantier, Soleil, La Course, and Annunciation—laid out in an imaginative classical form by Barthélemy Lafon in 1806-1810, were located immediately upriver from the Faubourg St. Mary, the first case of faubourgs adjoining faubourgs.<sup>5</sup> The Faubourg Tremé, founded in 1810, was again immediately adjacent to an established urbanized area, at the rear of the original city. Existing development, then, was a strong predictor of the location of future development—until new transportation systems, in the form of canals and railroads, altered spatial relationships. These new transportation options diminished the need for immediate

36.

<sup>4</sup> See the eight volumes of the Friends of the Cabildo's *New Orleans Architecture* (Gretna, LA, 1971-1981) for a detailed account of early city growth.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., vol. 1, *Lower Garden District* (1971, reprint 1991), 7-12.







adjacency (read: minimized walking distance) to the expansion of the city, broadening the rule to *accessibility*. The tiny agricultural community at Bayou St. John, which dated to 1708, exploited the natural Bayou St. John Bayou Road for a stage from the Mississippi River to Lake Pontchartrain, but when the man-made Carondelet Canal increased accessibility to the bayou in the 1790s, it was subdivided into Faubourg St. John (1810). Canals, namely the New Faubourg and the Carondelet/Bayou St. John, made West End and Spanish Fort into lakefront ports and resorts, and the road following the Metairie/Gentilly Ridge encouraged the development of farmhouses and the Faubourg Darcantel in many years before New Orleans proper would envelope these areas. Ferries of various forms have long connected Algiers with the original city, and still do. The Pontchartrain Railroad (1830) made another otherwise inaccessible lakefront spot, Milneburg, into a booming resort and port, while the New Orleans & Carrollton Rail Road (1835) led directly to the establishment of Faubourg Bouigny and Carrollton, and indirectly to many other untown faubourgs. With these new conveyances, New Orleansians could now live farther from the city, but still partake of its advantages, and real estate developers were more than eager to accommodate this expanding market. In time, the outlying settlements would be subsumed into the metropolis; some would completely lose their identities, but others would maintain old street networks, names, and some early buildings. Algiers and Carrollton in particular resonate with a lingering sense of being separate cities, as does the Garden District (formerly Lafayette), which grew after the present-day St. Charles Avenue Streetcar Line made it accessible to the city proper. An 1847 description alludes to the conditions of geographical adjacency: topography, spaciousness, and social desirability that guided growth in this area:

Immediately [outside] the corporate limits of New Orleans...Lafayette is most beautifully situated for dwelling-houses. The ground is high and dry and vegetation flourishes on it with amazing luxuriance. Here are collected many of our wealthy citizens, who have built some villas, with gardens and large yards.... Here they have elbow-room—fine green plats, for the little ones to scamper and roll upon—trees, to shade and enliven the scene.... In large commodious one story houses, full of windows on all sides, and without those horrible, knee-cracking stairs....<sup>6</sup>

After accessibility, land in New Orleans needed to be, as suggested above, “high and dry” before urban development could occur. This important topographic rule restricted the city to the natural levee of the Mississippi River (and the smaller Esplanade and Metairie/Gentilly ridges) from 1713 to the early 1900s, when the municipal drainage system removed runoff and pollution from the backswamp, allowing the city to expand toward Lake Pontchartrain. The river’s natural levees crested at about ten feet above sea level at the riverfront and sloped downward to (and below) level, where either cypress swamp, deforested wetland, or marsh prevailed. Hu-

man habitation of this backswamp mostly comprised raised fishing camps and summer shanties. So correlated was topography to urban development in nineteenth-century New Orleans than, at quick glance, city maps of the era resemble elevation maps. The appellation “Crescent City,” which dates from the 1830s, described not just the shape of the river in New Orleans but the shape of urbanized New Orleans,<sup>7</sup> indicating the historical one-to-one relationship between the river’s natural levee and the city’s expansion zone.

If land were conveniently accessible and well-drained, it qualified as a strong candidate for urban expansion. But it also had to be legally acquirable for subdivision. In most cases, attractive lands near New Orleans functioned as sugar plantations in the years prior to their subdivision. A pressure to develop increased, plantation owners eventually had to decide between continuing in agriculture, with all its unpredictable risks and rewards, or subdividing the land for development, either by hiring a surveyor or overseeing the process personally, or by selling the entire lot to a developer. There were some hold-outs—the strange story of the Foucher tract is one such case<sup>8</sup>—but plantation owners generally recognized when the benefits of subdivision outweighed the costs of cultivation, and acted accordingly. Occasionally, however, government ownership interrupted the inexorable march of prime real estate toward urbanization. The best example was the commons between the original city and the Faubourg St. Mary, a wedge-shaped expanse bounded by present-day Iberville Street and the eponymous Common Street. Spanish-era fortification and the need for unobstructed firing lines forced Spanish surveyor General Carlos Laveau Trudeau to lay out Faubourg St. Mary (1783) not immediately adjacent to the old city, but across this fortified commons. After Americanization, with ownership of the commons in dispute between the city and the federal government, pressure mounted to develop this land, especially in light of the deterioration and obsolescence of the colonial forts. By an act of Congress on March 3, 1807, the federal government recognized the city’s claim to the commons, but stipulated that it establish a sixty-foot right-of-way on both sides of a canal planned to connect the river with the Carondelet Canal. Starting in 1810, the commons minus the right-of-way was subdivided into lots and appended to the footprint of urbanized New Orleans. The canal was never excavated, but the idea lives on in Canal Street, whose extra-wide neutral ground may be regarded as the last remnant of the old commons. Parts of the area between the Carondelet Canal (near Orleans Avenue) to pres-

<sup>7</sup> “I have termed New-Orleans the crescent city..., from its being built around the segment of a circle formed by the graceful curve of the river...” Joseph Holt Ingraham, *The South-West by a Yankee* (2 vols.) (New York, 1835), 1:91.

<sup>8</sup> The Foucher tract avoided potential subdivision because of many years of absentee ownership and neglect. It turned out to be a blessing: this last major plantation in the crescent eventually became Audubon Park and the campuses of Loyola and Tulane universities. Friend of the Cabildo, *New Orleans Architecture*, vol. 8, *The University Section* (New Orleans, LA, 1997), 39–46.

<sup>9</sup> U.S. Congress, *An Act Respecting Claims to Land in the Territories of Orleans and Louisiana*, March 3, 1807, as recorded on pages 1283–86 of *The Debates and Proceedings in the Congress of the United States*, printed 1852.

<sup>6</sup> J.D.B. De Bow, *The Commercial Review of the South and West*, 8 vols. (New Orleans, LA, 1847), 4:262.



ent-day Common Street/Tulane Avenue were also held as public commons, and were eventually developed as the faubourgs Hagan and Tremé.<sup>10</sup> Government agencies today, of course, are far more constrained in relinquishing public lands to private interests.

If issues of accessibility, drainage, and ownership all favored certain areas for urban expansion, two additional criteria prioritized exactly which would be developed first and more aggressively: the size and spaciousness of the terrain, and its adjacency to the more prosperous, amenity-rich, desirable section of town. Neither of these criteria was “binary” in nature; that is, small parcels disconnected from favored areas did not necessarily preclude development, but rather only delayed or restrained it. Because of the broad meander of the Mississippi in uptown, natural levees there are wider (over a mile from riverfront to back-of-town) than below the French Quarter, where the river straightens out and its natural levee spanned barely a half-mile. Topographically, New Orleans was shaped like a sickle, with the wide, curving blade representing the uptown natural levees and the narrow, straight handle depicting those downtown.

Developers thus had more former plantation land uptown to subdivide into faubourgs than in the lower city. Fortunately for them, these same areas were also physically adjacent to the economically vibrant and socially fashionable part of New Orleans. This was the American section, where English was spoken, Protestantism was practiced, business and industry prevailed, and eyes looked toward the great cities of the Northeast for cultural affinity and inspiration. Here arose affluent garden suburbs, with homes in architectural styles that were decidedly external. A short trolley ride took residents to their offices and stores in the Faubourg St. Mary, the city's economic and professional heart. Downtown, by contrast, looked more to the European past than the American future. This predominantly Creole and immigrant section spoke French, practiced a religion that differed from the American norm, and referenced the fading colonial worlds of France and Spain for cultural enlightenment. There were few of the professional districts, great hotels, theaters, and other amenities (particularly in the “Poor Third” District below Esplanade Avenue) to match those of Faubourg St. Mary. The faubourgs carved from lower-city plantations and, accordingly, were developed with humble cottages, densely arranged and deeply reflective of local designs and ambience. To this day, the riverside neighborhoods of the Seventh, Eighth, and Ninth wards (Faubourg Marigny, Bywater, Poydras, and Holy Cross) contain ten to twenty working-class houses for every one elegant structure, and of those, very few can be called mansions. For over one hundred years, real estate developers and home-builders had every economic and geographic

cultural reason to focus more effort on uptown than downtown, a fact reflected in the expansion of Orleans Parish's official borders. The upper parish line moved constantly and sometimes dramatically, from present-day Iberville Street eight-and-a-half miles up to Monticello Street, between 1797 and 1874. The lower parish line, on the other hand, has been fixed at Jackson Barracks, three miles below the French Quarter, since 1805—the oldest terrestrial parish line of the city.<sup>11</sup>

One final criterion sorted the destiny of Orleans Parish lands for urban development, and this also involved proximity to existing conditions. Areas closer to noisy, smelly, unsightly or otherwise offensive “nuisances” (food zones, railroad tracks, canals, dumps, wharves, industrial complexes, red-light districts—tended to develop for lower-class residential living mixed with industrial and commercial land use, while areas further from such sites attracted higher-end development for a more moneyed class. Housing for the city's poorest residents, usually African-American, was such a low priority for developers that other urbanization rules, particularly for drainage and accessibility, carried more weight, leaving the poor to settle in socially and geographically isolated in the low-amenity, high-nuisance “back-of-town.”

## TWENTIETH-CENTURY RULES

Twentieth-century technological and social changes antiquated most of the rules that guided eighteenth- and nineteenth-century growth of New Orleans. The automobile and modern infrastructure and bridges neutralized the need for proximity and even inverted it: why live near the congested inner city when peaceful suburbs await a short drive away? The municipal drainage system built in the early 1900s opened up new backswamp for urban development and eliminated the age-old topographic restriction. Development decisions no longer lay in the hands of sugar planters looking to sell their plantations, but professional real estate developers working hand-in-hand with government planning authorities. Economic opportunities in places other than the Central Business District of New Orleans drew development to outer suburbs with names like Metairie and Greewood, rather than inner suburbs with names like *Faubourg St. Mary* and *Faubourg Marigny*. Complex social phenomena involving race, class, crime, gentrification, lifestyle, and public education played new and deeply influential roles in determining the *why* behind the *where* of urban expansion. Taxation, high costs of

<sup>10</sup> Kathryn T. Abbey, “The Land Ventures of General Lafayette in the Territory of Orleans and State of Louisiana,” *The Louisiana Historical Quarterly* 16 (July 1933): 359-73; and Charles F. Zimpel, *Topographical Map of New Orleans and Its Vicinity, 1834*, Southeastern Architectural Archive, Special Collections, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA.

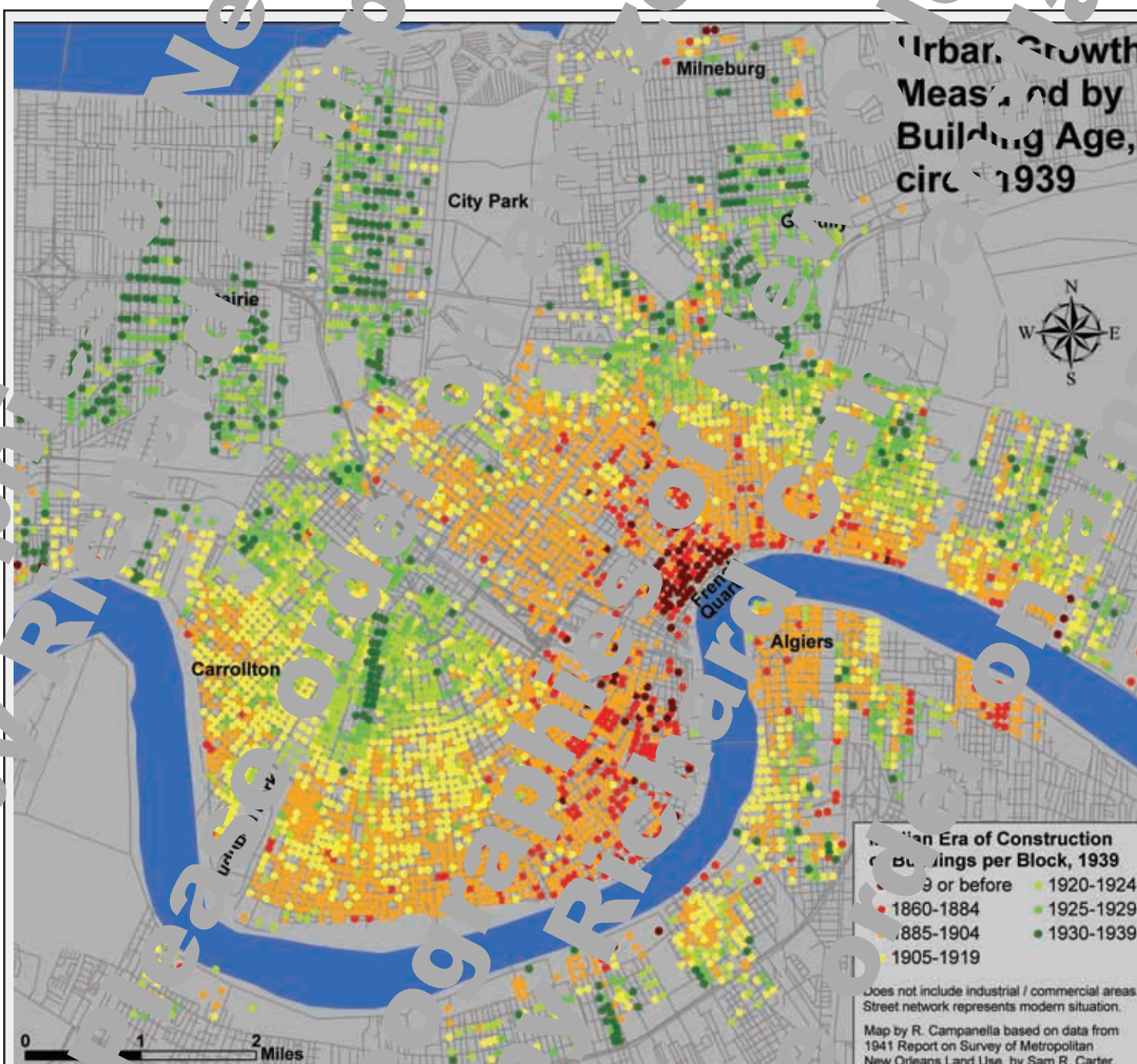
<sup>11</sup> The present-day Orleans/Jefferson parish line at Monticello Street also dates back to 1805, but had been changed to Felicite Street in 1812 and thence relocated throughout present-day uptown for the next six decades. Former upper boundaries of New Orleans include an old plantation line near St. Joseph Street (1797), Monticello Street (1805), Felicite Street (1812), an old plantation line between Foucher and Antonine streets (1818), Felicite Street again in 1833, Toledano Street (1852), Lowerline Street in 1876, and finally Monticello Street in 1874, where it remains today. The city's lower boundary was relocated from Barracks Street to Jackson Barracks in 1805 and remained there for two hundred years. Algiers was annexed in 1870. Sam R. Walker, *A Report on Survey of Metropolitan New Orleans Land Use, Real Property, and Low Income Housing Area* (New Orleans, 1941), “Growth in Area: New Orleans, Louisiana” fold-out map.



living, and exasperation with city life played crucial roles in driving out middle-class residents from the city to new suburban subdivisions. Finally, new physical restrictions such as hurricane-protection levees, wetlands preservation, coastal erosion, and subsidence have stalled urban development in many fringes of the two hundred-square-mile greater New Orleans metropolitan area. Urban development in the twenty-first century is now often driven by the desire of young families to raise their children in safe neighborhoods with decent public schools. Today, St. Tammany Parish and the North Shore of Lake Pontchartrain—"greater New Orleans" only by very recent definition—rank as the only rapidly growing areas of the region, and not coincidentally, boast

the region's lowest crime rates and best public schools. New development in Jefferson, St. Bernard, and Plaquemines parishes is less common, and new subdivisions in New Orleans proper now occur only on the Lower Coast of Algiers. The last great wave of urban expansion within the boundaries of Orleans Parish occurred east of the Industrial Canal, along the new I-10 corridor, during the 1960s and 1970s; since then, only small expansions such as the affluent gated community of English Turn in Algiers have appeared.

Ironically, the rising stars of modern-day real estate development in New Orleans are, once again, the historic faubourgs adjacent to the original city. Here, tourism has led investors to renovate historic structures into fashionable bou-

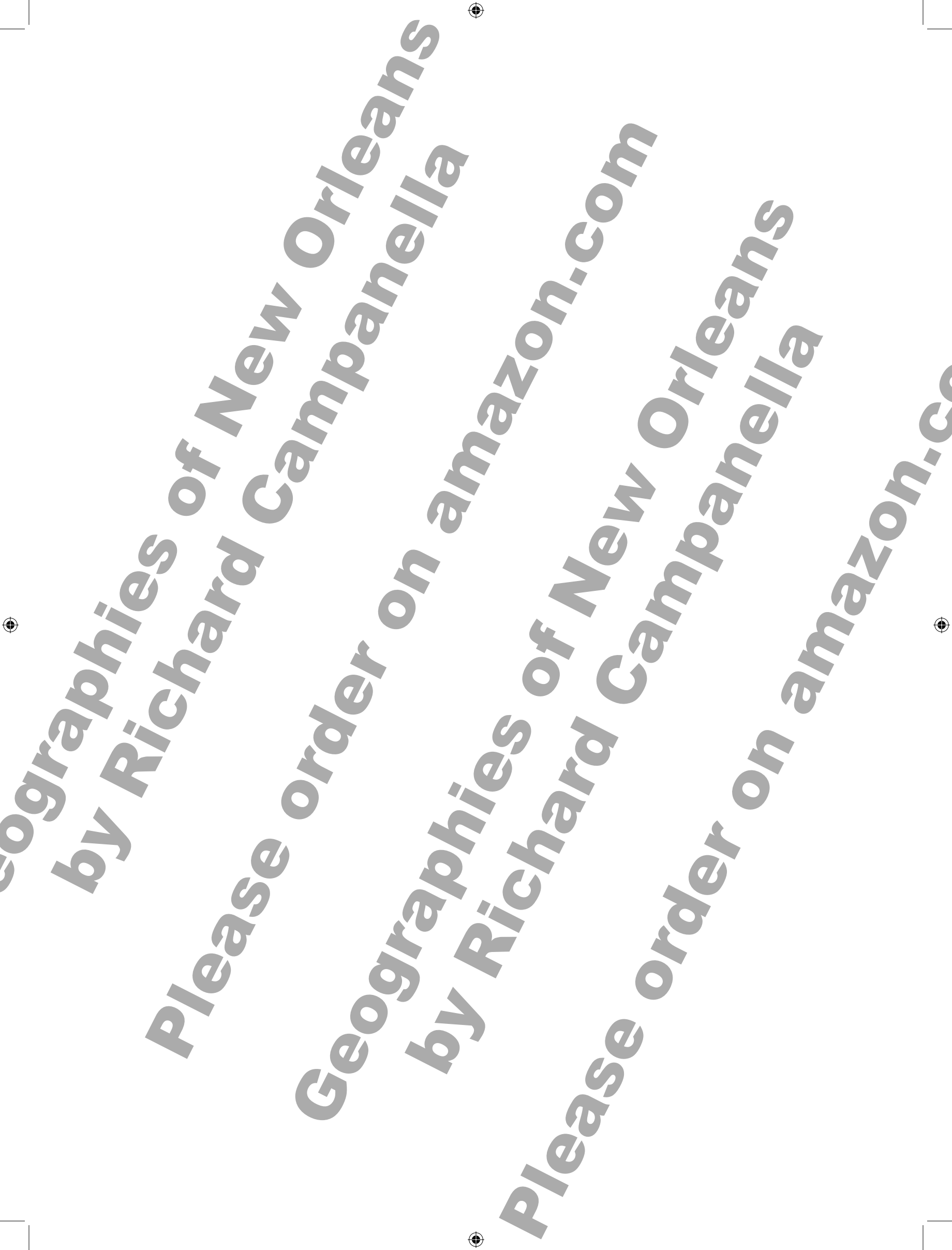


Another way to track historical urban growth is by mapping the average age of structures per block. These data, originally collected by the WPA in the late 1930s, were transferred to a digital format, block by block, to produce this map. New Orleans at the time counted 91,026 structures, of which 92 percent were entirely or partially residential, 4 percent were commercial, 2 percent industrial, and 1 percent public or institutional. Of the residential structures standing in 1939, 3 percent were built before 1860; two-thirds arose between the Civil War and World War I, a quarter dated from the 1920s, and the remainder were built in the 1930s. New Orleans probably retains around 2,000 antebellum structures today. Map and analysis by author based on Carter/WPA, 1939.

tique hotels, and gentrification draws speculation to restore old houses and “bring back” decaying neighborhoods. Where restoration and gentrification occurs is driven first and foremost, by a modern variation of the initial logic behind development at the turn of the nineteenth century: *physical adjacency to already gentrified areas*. The pattern of neighborhood revitalization, starting first in the French Quarter and later in the Faubourg Marigny, Lower Garden District, CBD, Bywater, and now Tremé, loosely mirrors the sequence in which these areas were originally developed two centuries ago.

*Epilogue: After Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans will likely gain new appreciation for the “rules” that drove the morphology of the metropolis two centuries earlier, primarily flood protection provided by the relatively high natural levee. To an extent, the future morphology of the city may contract from the vast “spread eagle” configuration of recent times, and reconstitute the shape of the “crescent” from historical times.*





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## AN ARCHITECTURAL GEOGRAPHY OF THE FRENCH QUARTER

Preservationists use the French phrase *tout ensemble* to describe both the object of their interest and the objective of their endeavors. The “total impression” (or, literally, “everything together”) created by hundreds of adjacent historical structures, more so than any one historic building, is what captures the ambience of the past; preservationists thus strive to save entire streetscapes—elaborate panoplies of rooftops and dormers, shutters and balconies, lamp posts and hitching posts—while guarding vigilantly against modern intrusions. *Tout ensemble* has been a guiding principle for the preservation of the French Quarter, resulting in one of the most outstanding historic districts in the nation.

Belying the ordered heterogeneity of *tout ensemble* are cryptic trends through historical clues and patterns in geographical space. What appears to be a random mix of structures and structural characteristics all yoked under the adjective “historical,” is actually anything but random. Revealing order in this apparent chaos is well worth the effort: the patterns divulge both national and local history, the architectural styles of distant and indigenous influences, and the complex economics and politics of a city once predicted to become one of the world’s greatest. They reflect events as accidental as a ferocious blaze of a long-ago night, and as momentous as the transition of New Orleans from its European past to its American present. And above all, they track the centuries-old evolution of distinctive house types and styles found almost nowhere else in such concentrations.

But how to detect these patterns? Luckily, New Orleans is home to one of the oldest and most dedicated preservationist communities in America, producing some of the nation’s largest historic districts and utilizing some of the best historical documentation. The main source of primary records is the city’s unique and priceless Notarial Archives, storing original documents relating to real estate transactions and the parties involved, from the 1730s to modern times. Chains of property title and the history and architecture of old buildings have been researched most thoroughly for the French Quarter, this being New Orleans’ oldest and most famous neighborhood, and the second-oldest legally protected historic district in the nation (1936-1937, after Charleston, South Carolina).<sup>12</sup> The Rosetta Stone of the French Quarter’s property history is the Vieux Carré Survey, a massive research effort envisioned by the Louisiana Landmarks Society, funded by the Edward G. Schlieder Foundation, and

coordinated by the Tulane University School of Architecture between 1961 and 1966. The survey compiles “an index of every property, square by square, together with all available documentary evidence of the history, especially architectural modifications, of each building and a brief indication of [its] present historic or architectural interest,”<sup>13</sup> and has been updated sporadically in the following decades. It takes one or two three-inch-thick binders per block to store all this information, which, in its entirety, fills a wall of bookshelves in The Historic New Orleans Collection’s Williams Research Center. Some of the sole original copy. The opening pages of each binder typically contain:

- a map of the Quarter showing the block’s location;
- sketches of the four street elevations (building profiles) surrounding the block;
- three to four pages of summary descriptions of each building, including its general type and title, construction date or era, and a color-coded assessment of its value, ranging from the lowly brown (of questionable or no architectural importance) to the regal purple (of national historical or architectural importance); and
- a series of historical maps of the block, including rudimentary lot delineations from the 1720s and 1730s, Notarial Archives sketches from the nineteenth century, turn-of-the-century Sanborn fire-insurance maps, parcel maps, color-coded architectural evaluation maps, and others if available.<sup>14</sup>

The remaining 95 percent of the binder presents textual and graphical data for every lot on the block, even vacant ones. Historical and recent photographs, newspaper clippings, brochures, and ephemera are integrated with the documentary essence of the survey: the chain of title of the lot, starting with recent transactions and going back as far as evidence permits, like climbing down the rungs of a ladder into the past.<sup>15</sup> Documented in amazing detail, sometimes back to colonial times, are the transaction data, a reference to the Conveyance Office Book in the Civil District Court Building which documented the transaction, the parties involved, the overseeing notary, and whenever possible, building contracts and structural details. It should be noted, however, that these data primarily describe the property and only secondarily the building, if at all. Information on structures is sometimes surprisingly scant, and one is sometimes uncertain whether a particular fact refers to an extant structure or a long-demolished one. The original Vieux Carré Survey also contains photographs and other updates from the 1970s to 1990s, but microfilm copies available at other archives do not include these recent addenda. A New Orleans aficionado can spend many hours perusing the binders of “The Survey,” fascinated as much by the centuries of history behind familiar sights as by the intriguing black-and-white photographs of Quarter street scenes in the ragged 1960s.

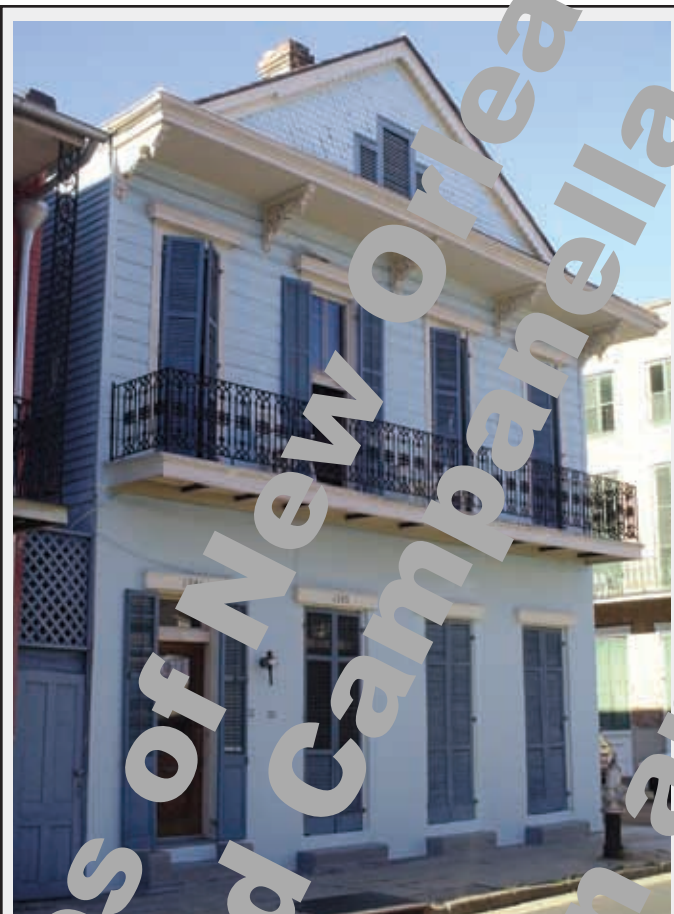
<sup>12</sup> Lemann, *The Vieux Carré—A General Statement*, 5.

<sup>13</sup> Jumonville, *A Guide to the Vieux Carré Survey*, 3-13.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>15</sup> The legal protection of the French Quarter stems from Article XIV, Section 1, Act 139 of the 1901 Louisiana Constitution, which authorized the city to create a commission for “the preservation of such buildings in the Vieux Carré [that] shall be deemed to have architectural and historic value and should be preserved....” It was followed by a municipal ordinance (No. 1536, C.S., March 3, 1937), which protected the Quarter’s “quaint and distinctive character” and particularly “those buildings having architectural or historic worth,” as quoted by Florence M. Jumonville, *A Guide to the Vieux Carré Survey* (New Orleans, 1990), 14; and Bernard Lemann, *The Vieux Carré—A General Statement* (New Orleans, 1966), 5.





Cottages from the colonial and antebellum eras were often razed for postbellum frame and shotgun houses. In other cases, the aged cottages were simply appended. 1201 Carbon is a good example: the lower floor was once a circa-1840 Creole corner cottage with Greek Revival details, to which Victorian-style upper floors were added in the late 1860s. Photograph by author, 2004.

With the goal of mapping out the structural characteristics of the French Quarter, I reviewed the entire Vieux Carré Survey and recorded the address, construction date, architectural features, structure type, original use, and quantity of iron-lace ornament for every extant structure. Conducted during autumn-winter 2001-2002, the process took eighty hours, followed by a roughly equal amount of time to verify and update the data in the streets (much has changed in the Quarter since 1966, despite its protected status), assure consistency and accuracy, and map the addresses to correct geographic locations. Only when all these steps were completed successfully did the interpretation of temporal and spatial patterns begin.

In conducting a study like this, certain problems arise. The first involved construction dates: by this count, only 72 percent of the Quarter's structures' construction dates are known within a margin of two years (for example, 1828-1832); just over half (53 percent) are known within one year; and only 15 percent are known to the year. Among eighteenth- and nineteenth-century structures, only one out of every eleven may be nailed down to a particular year. This uncertainty is explained in part by the fact that construction, renovation, and remodeling often span long periods of time,

and by lack of documentation, particularly for older, humbler abodes, which forced researchers to "age" buildings by their characteristics in the task of mapping and quantifying necessities that decisions be made about these "fuzzy" data, so the earliest possible construction date, the latest, and the most probable date were all recorded. When the survey researchers could do no more than estimate that a particular Creole cottage dated from the 1830s, for example, I recorded 1830 for the "earliest" date, 1839 for the "latest," and 1835 for the "most probable" construction date. It is this last category that appears in the maps and graphs that follow, but readers should be aware that a certain range surrounds most of these dates.

A special problem arose regarding building alteration. About 8 percent of Quarter edifices were noted as having undergone radical remodeling, such as floor additions, large-scale extensions, new facades, and reconstruction. Does an 1820s Creole cottage still have that classification if it was expanded with a second floor and encased with Victorian ornamentation in the 1890s? Or is it now a Victorian storehouse? If a storehouse dating from the 1890s was completely dismantled and rebuilt in the 1980s, can it still be honestly recorded as a structure dating from the Spanish colonial era? "How do you pin down a building that grew like Topsy, with newer walls on old foundations, up-dated fronts, and re-oriented rear?" wondered Edith Scott Long while confronting the same dilemma for her "Along the Banquette" columns in the 1967 *Vieux Carré Courier*. "The picture is clouded, too, by a mishmash of old legends and oft-told tales."<sup>16</sup> My decision: in the case of minor remodeling, the earlier date would

<sup>16</sup> Edith Scott Long, "Cottages Bloom Under Scott Touch," *Vieux Carré Courier*, March 17, 1967, 2.



The Vieux Carré Survey described 1028 St. Philip as follows: "Originally this c. 1839 single, long brick cottage was approximately 3' lower in height [than] it is today. A massive c. 1880 renovation, which included a roof change and a possible raising in height transformed the early cottage into a late 19th c. single shotgun." Thus there are two construction dates (1839 and 1880), two styles (arguably Creole and Victorian), and two structural types (cottage and shotgun) manifest in a single building. Note the quarters in the rear, a rarity for shotguns. Photograph by author, 2004.



Roofscapes of the French Quarter. Photographs by author and Ronnie Cardwell, 2003-2004.





be used. For cases of drastic remodeling (such as the oft-encountered Victorianized-cottage example above), the building would be “aged” according to the overall present-day impression it casts upon the streetscape. The above example would thus be recorded with a most-probable date in the 1890s. In the case of rebuilt structures, the reconstruction date would be recorded as the most-probable date. Analyses of building age appear in the chapter, “Curious Old Houses ‘Les’: Patterns of Construction Date in the French Quarter.”

Another challenge was even more fundamental: what exactly comprises a single structural entity? Should twin common-wall townhouses on St. Peter Street be considered one structure, or two? Is it reasonable to count both a tiny shotgun house and a block-long three-story hotel as single structural units? What about dependencies and outbuildings? I decided to restrict the identification to curbside edifices with addresses, plus school buildings which had addresses and were recorded in the Vieux Carré Survey. I felt that it would be perfectly fair to count small and larger structures (for example, a tiny cottage and a large townhouse) each as single structural units, but balked at counting these entities on the same scale or, for example, the block-long Royal Orleans Hotel. I decided that when a single structure spanned many adjacent parcels in the form of a row, it would be depicted as a series of structures (represented cartographically as points) lining the block. This seemed like a reasonable compromise between the relevance of structural unity and the significance of unit size. Thus the Royal Orleans Hotel is shown on the maps as nine points, because it occupies roughly nine parcels wrapping around Royal, St. Louis, and Charles streets, and is counted as nine structures in the graphs and tabulations, even though architecturally speaking it is a single edifice. Only a handful of sites were affected by this issue; nevertheless, it should be kept in mind when viewing the maps and comparing larger structures that did not form rows, such as the St. Louis Cathedral, U.S. Mint, and the Civil Courts Building,

were depicted as single points, because of their prominent nature and salient positions in the streetscapes.

How many structures, then, are in the French Quarter? Using the above criteria, this tabulation of the Vieux Carré Survey enumerated 2,244 structures in the area bounded by Iberville Street, North Rampart Street, Esplanade Avenue, and the Mississippi River. (This count does not include the “100 blocks” between Canal and Iberville, which are technically not in the Vieux Carré but are in the Vieux Carré Survey.) In 1982, researcher Ann Barnes counted 1,843 structures in the French Quarter, including the Canal-Iberville blocks and considering rows and larger units as single structures.<sup>17</sup> Barnes’s figure may be considered a conservative estimate. The Orleans Parish Assessment Rolls record slightly over 2,700 separately owned parcels in the French Quarter, regardless of structural status. If one were to include every servants’ quarters, shed, and outbuilding, there are probably close to 3,000 structures in the Quarter today. Indeed, counting buildings in the French Quarter is like counting trees in a forest: one must agree on reasonable and robust criteria of what exactly constitutes a single entity and enforce them consistently, and even then, ten counts will arrive at ten different counts. All data presented here use 2,244 as the total.

*Architectural style* presented a more predictable problem—expected, because classifying buildings’ architectural styles is notoriously debatable. What is Spanish Colonial to one person is Creole to another; what is Victorian to another is Victorian Italianate to a third. I relied on the judgments of the Vieux Carré Survey researchers for this assessment; if they confidently described a building as a Creole townhouse with no other stylistic influences, I recorded “Creole” as its primary style, with no secondary style. If a shotgun house was described as Victorian Italianate, “Victorian” was entered as its primary style and Italianate as its secondary style, though some may argue that “Victorian” connotes an era while “Italianate” a style. In those few cases where I, a non-architect, had to make a judgement, I relied on venerable sources such as Malcolm Heard’s *French Quarter Manual* (1997), Lloyd Voss’s *New Orleans Houses* (1985), and the Friends of the Cabildo’s *New Orleans Architecture* series for guidance. There is one important exception: all post-World War II construction, which by law must stylistically maintain the *tout ensemble*, were recorded as “French Quarter Revival,” despite their current style. The reasoning: although a 1960s hotel may have been designed faithfully in the Greek Revival style, or a 1970s house as a Creole cottage, the architect probably intended primarily to emulate the ambience of the French Quarter, rather than to extol those particular historical styles. The late Malcolm Heard described this resulting style as “Vieux Carré Revival,” arising from a feeling that new construction should be essentially scenographic and that it should fill in gaps in the French Quarter fabric as inconspicuously as pos-



Bourbon Street example of arched openings, typical of pre-1830s Creole style, renovated into arched openings and a “keyhole” entrance, typical of circa-1840s Greek Revival style. Photograph by author, 2004.

<sup>17</sup> Ann Barnes, *The Vieux Carré Survey—Listing of Buildings By Block and Date*, unpublished report July 1982, Miscellaneous binder, Williams Research Center, The Historic New Orleans Collection.

sible, leaving the limelight for older buildings. Analysis of styles appears in the chapter, "A Draping of Dimensions: Patterns of Architectural Style in the French Quarter."

Probably the most straightforward characteristic recorded in this study is one of the least appreciated: *structural type*, or typology, the functional body and shape of a structure, based on culture, economics, use, and geography. *Type* is distinguished from *style*, the outward fashion used in the building's construction and embellishment, deriving mostly from cultural factors. Extending the dichotomy to apparel, *type* is to *style* what *shirt* is to *button-down*, *pants* is to *jeans*, or *shoes* is to *wingtips*. Styles vary widely (I counted almost thirty) in the French Quarter, from Spanish Colonial to Spanish Revival, from Creole to Greek Revival, but 81 percent of French Quarter structures fall into just five primary types: cottages, shotgun houses, row houses, and storehouses. Analysis of typology appears in the chapter, "A Philosophy of Space: Patterns of Structural Type in the French Quarter."

*Structural type* was deceptively simple: residential, residential/commercial, commercial, or institutional were the major categories, based on an assessment of the structure's original purpose. A gray zone emerged for structures that may or may not have once housed a business on its ground floor and residences above. When there was a doubt (which was often), the use was recorded as residential/commercial.

The final category was an assessment of the *iron-lace balconies or galleries* on the structures' façades. While some architectural purists consider these features (particularly galleries) as gaudy blemishes marring beautiful façades, most people view them as the quintessential signature of the French Quarter, and one of the first mental images evoked when the words "New Orleans" are spoken. Balconies, and especially large galleries, dominate the French Quarter streetscape and truly distinguish it from other American downtowns. Iron ornamentation was ranked on a relative scale, mapped out,

and analyzed by the structural type to which they were attached. The analysis appears in the chapter, "Signature of the City: Patterns of Iron-Lace Galleries and Balconies in the French Quarter."

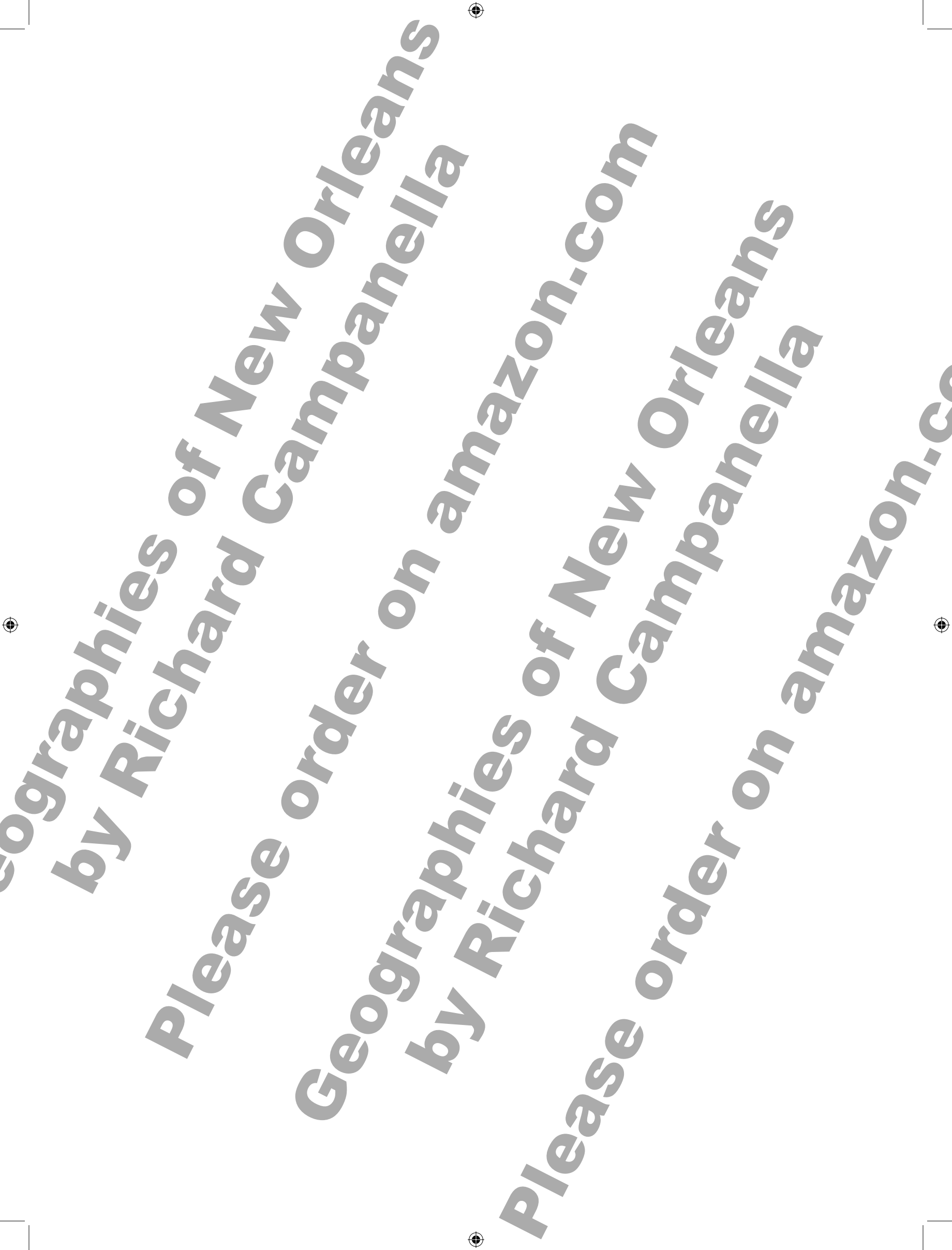
A word about the mapping of the data: Using Geographic Information Systems (GIS) technology, the addresses for the 2,244 entries were mapped to U.S. Census Bureau digital street files containing beginning and ending house addresses for every block in an associated tabular database. This process, called address-matching or geocoding, is billed as "automatic" but is really semi-automatic because nuances and generalizations in the files usually necessitate that the operator intervene. In this case, the Census Bureau cartographic depiction of the streets and the house number on them needed substantial editing and updating. Of the corrections made, nearly 100 percent of the entries mapped out accurately (the remainder were geocoded manually), but still needed to be adjusted to the correct start of the street. The points on the maps appearing in the next four chapters are sufficiently close to their actual locations for the purposes of this study, but may be one or two meters from absolute locations. Readers seeking for information on a particular house should be aware that the goal of these maps is not to depict all details of every structure in its exact location, but rather to reveal overriding historical and geographical patterns and trends.

Or, rather, to find order in the *tout ensemble*.

*Epilogue.* Although Hurricane Katrina's winds caused moderate damage to rooftops and felled a few walls in the French Quarter, the *tout ensemble* of the district survived intact largely because the relatively high elevation of the natural levee kept the waters at bay by a block or so. The grand dame of the Quarter, the 200-year-old Ursuline Convent, saw its massive chimney collapse into the steep hip roof, but otherwise withstood the storm exceedingly well.

<sup>18</sup> Malcolm Heard, *French Quarter Manual: An Architectural Guide to New Orleans' Vieux Carré* (New Orleans, 1977), 138.





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## “CURIOUS OLD HOUSES THESE” PATTERNS OF CONSTRUCTION DATE IN THE FRENCH QUARTER

How old is the French Quarter? There are a number of reasonable responses. The underlying terrain is about 3,000 years old; its use by Indians as a terminus in the river-to-lake portage is perhaps 500 years old, possibly much older. Europeans under the command of Bienville first cleared its timber in March–April 1718, the time generally recognized as the foundation of New Orleans. The Quarter’s street network, which survives today almost in its entirety, was laid out in 1722. Perhaps this last date is a fair benchmark for marking time in the French Quarter. But it is not the street grid that imparts the strong sense of historical place to this space; it is the streetscape—the *tout ensemble* of tightly clustered buildings crowding narrow streets, enveloped by iron lace, gas lamps, crumbling stucco, weathered brick walls, and steep roofs. How old is *this* French Quarter, the historical built environment we know today? This chapter addresses this question by discerning historical and geographical patterns in the construction dates of extant French Quarter buildings, based on the *Vieux Carré Survey* analysis described in the previous chapter. But before exploring these trends, it is worth while to point out some similarities among them.

### SOME SURVIVING FRENCH COLONIAL ERA STRUCTURE

Only one complete building survives from the first French colonial era: the Old Ursuline Convent at 1112 Chartres Street, designed in 1745 and built in 1745–1753 by Claude Joseph Villars Dubreuil according to plans by Ignace Brouette. The Ursuline Convent is the oldest documented structure still standing in the Mississippi Valley and deltaic plain, and the most aged in the city by a margin of about thirty years.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, a few French colonial era walls remain scattered throughout the Quarter, long since incorporated into later constructions, and plenty of early eighteenth-century building materials (bricks, cypress beams) have been recycled into extant buildings. Remains of the French colonial *Corps Garde* are “encased in the walls of the Cabildo,”<sup>20</sup> leading some researchers to count it as another French colonial survivor. The photogenic Petite’s Blacksmith Shop at 61 Bourbon Street is reputed to date from the early 1700s, but is more likely a product of the 1770s or 1780s. Some claimed that the storehouse at 722 Toulouse was erected in the extraordinarily early year of 1720—before the streets were laid out!—but evidence suggests a more likely date of around 1808.<sup>21</sup> With the



The Old Ursuline Convent (center) is the only prior structural remnant of New Orleans’ French colonial era. Designed in 1745 and built between 1749 and 1753, the convent ranks as the best documented structure still standing in the Mississippi Valley and deltaic plain, and the most aged in the city by about thirty years. Photograph by Anne Cardwell, author, 2004.

lack of French colonial era structures? The fires of 1788 and 1794 destroyed over a thousand of them, others, built of materials and by methods considered flimsy by later standards, where demolished for the more robust constructions of the Spanish colonial era and afterwards. The nearly two-and-a-half centuries that have passed since the end of the French regime have increased the likelihood that fire, storm, demolition, or decay would claim any structural vestiges. A second French colonial era transpired secretly starting in 1800 (the city ostensibly remained in Spanish control) and officially in November 1803, only to conclude permanently a month later, when the Louisiana Purchase was made official and New Orleans transferred to American hands. About twelve extant structures arose during this brief transitional era, but they are conventionally recognized as Spanish colonial era structures, not French.

There also exist a handful of French colonial *style* structures that, while post-dating France’s primary administrative era, nevertheless reflect the old French (and West Indian) ways, for the city retained its Francophone culture for many years afterwards. The most prominent example is the house at 632 Poydras Street known as “Madame John’s Legacy,” built immediately after the 1788 fire with classic French colonial traits: pavilion-shaped with a steep double-pitched roof, corner chimneys, and colonnades upholding an airy gallery, raised high on brick piers. The house’s foundation as well as some of its hardware may date as far back as 1730, having survived the 1788 fire. One can visualize French colonial New Orleans by picturing scores of structures like Madame John’s Legacy, of various sizes, setbacks, and orientations, lining the streets.

<sup>19</sup> A dependency of the convent dating from the same time is counted as a second structure in the graphs.

<sup>20</sup> Edith Elliott Long, “Creole Cottage Blooms Under Scott Touch,” *Vieux Carré Courier*, March 17, 1967, p. 2.

<sup>21</sup> *The Vieux Carré Survey: A Pictorial Record and a Survey of the Land and Buildings in the Vieux Carré*, 130 binders (Williams Research Center, The Historic New Orleans Collection), Binder 61.



## RARE SPANISH COLONIAL ERA STRUCTURES

Like “French colonial,” the term “Spanish colonial” in New Orleans can imply an architectural style or an historical era. The Spanish colonial style appeared locally in the later years of Spain’s dominion (1762–1803), particularly after the 1794 fire, but persisted for a few years after the departure of the Dons, and for decades hence as an influence in related styles. Only thirty-eight of the 2,244 extant French Quarter structures were built during the Spanish colonial era, and of those, twenty-two exhibit Spanish colonial style. Another three structures have this style and postdate the era by a few years. Edith Elliott Long, architectural historian and keen French Quarter observer for the circa-1960s *Vieux Carré Courier*, wrote:

out of some 3,000 buildings in the Vieux Carre probably only a score, but the most, actually descend from [the Spanish Colonial era]. Fires and some hurricanes were known to have leveled others. And the great prosperity and business drive that emerged after the American purchase of the Territory accounts for the destruction of the rest.<sup>22</sup>

Some secondary sources simply that eighteenth-century buildings abound in the French Quarter, even suggesting that the neighborhood might be more accurately described as the “Spanish Quarter.” Yet many notable Spanish architectural traits were indeed carried on in subsequent Creole styles,

<sup>22</sup> Edith Elliott Long, “Houses of Spanish Period,” *Vieux Carré Courier*, October 1, 1966, “Along the Banquette” column, p. 1. Differences between Long’s count and those presented here attest to the “fuzzy” nature of judging the construction date, style, and frequency of historical structures in a district of the kinds. See previous chapter for methodological information.



This Chartres street scene possesses the city’s largest assemblage of Spanish colonial structures. At the corner is the c. 1795 Reynes House, built as a townhouse with traits of the Caribbean and Latin America. It adjoins 625–627 Chartres, built contemporaneously. Next is the 1795 Bayou townhouse with its wrought-iron balcony and Spanish courtyard. (The fires of 1794 and 1794 started near this site, which explains why these buildings generally date to 1794 or thereafter.) 625–627 Chartres is a *porte cochère* building with a wooden balcony, built during the last years of Spanish rule. Three other Spanish colonials occupy this same block. In the background is the Cabildo (1799), the city’s best-known Spanish colonial structure. Photograph by author, 2002.



The oldest extant structure in the rear of the Quarter is the remarkable Ossorno House. A plantation house by design, origin, and function, it was apparently dismantled from Bayou St. John around 1781 and reassembled at present-day 913 Gov. Nicholls by 1784. Although its original West Indian-style hip roof had been remodeled to a gable by the 1800s, the house is still distinctly rural in appearance, orientation, and setback. It is an amazing exception in the French Quarter cityscape, like an old Dutch farmhouse in New York City or a Spanish mission in Los Angeles. Photograph by author, 2002.

structures built in pure Spanish colonial styles and/or during the Spanish colonial era are, in fact, quite rare in the French Quarter today and extremely rare in the rest of the city.<sup>23</sup>

## OLDEST STRUCTURE IN REAR OF QUARTER

The oldest extant structure in the rear of the original city—near Dauphine, Burgundy, and Rampart—is the last areas to be built up—is the remarkable Ossorno House at 913 Gov. Nicholls. It is over twenty-five years older than any building in the surrounding sixteen blocks, eighty years older than the area’s average age, and possibly the only structure ever to occupy its parcel. The Ossorno House is a “pure Bayou St. John plantation house”<sup>24</sup> in its design and probably in origin and function as well: primary documents indicate that it was dismantled from the rural plantation country near Bayou St. John around 1781 and reassembled by 1784 (some secondary sources date the move to 1787). Although its original West Indian plantation-like hip roof had been remodeled to a gable by the 1800s, the house is still distinctly rural in its appearance, orientation, and setback distance. It is an amazing exception in the French Quarter streetscape, like an old Dutch farmhouse in New York City or an aged Spanish mission in modern Los Angeles. While the Ossorno House dates from the Spanish colonial era, it definitely does not represent the Spanish colonial style; rather, it is a French Creole style plantation house that postdates French colonial times. It is one of two plantation-style structures in

<sup>23</sup> A few French Creole homes built during the Spanish colonial era still stand in the Bayou St. John/Bayou Road area.

<sup>24</sup> Edith Elliott Long, “Discovery: One of Our Oldest Buildings,” *Vieux Carré Courier*, “Along the Banquette” column, May 27, 1966, p. 2.

the French Quarter, the other being Madam T. J. O'Sullivan's Legacy, but unlike that much more famous building, the Ossorno House once actually stood on a plantation. This structure also boasts an interesting human history, having been the home of prominent New Orleanians and in the possession of only three families from 1795 to recent decades. That the Ossorno House may have literally come from Bayou Road from the Bayou St. John plantation country and ended on Gov. Nicholls Street, where Bayou Road entered the city, is also of great significance. One may view it as a structural monument to the historic flow of materials and peoples traveling this route from city to bayou. Edith Elliot Long observed in 1966 that this outstanding building had somehow eluded the attention of tourists, artists, and even scholars, who devoted their research to the better-known structures in the heart of the Quarter. That observation remains true today: the Ossorno House almost never appears in popular photographic books or walking tours of the Quarter. Even Malcolm Heard's thorough *French Quarter Manual* missed it.

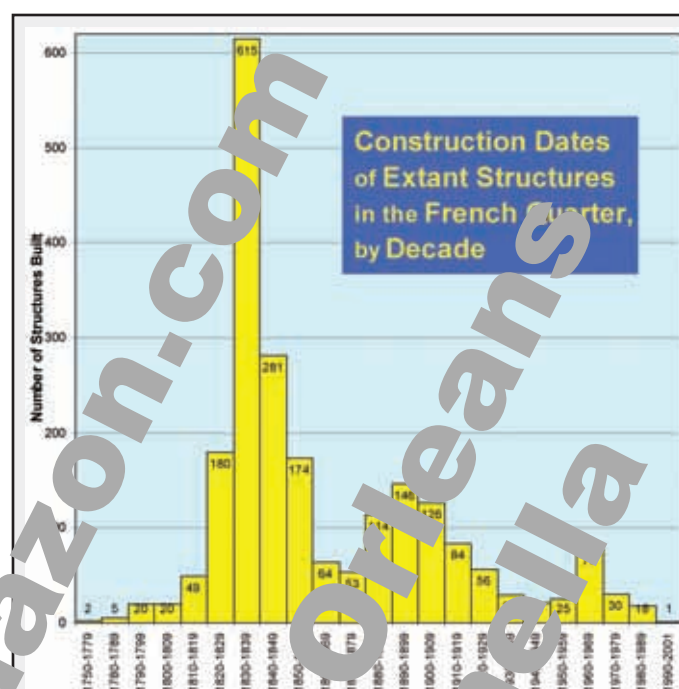
## HISTORICAL PATTERNS OF CONSTRUCTION DATES

The histogram *Construction Dates of Extant Structures in the French Quarter, by Decade*, and the pie chart *Percent of Extant Structures in the French Quarter Built During Historical Eras* show that, structurally speaking, today's French Quarter is a decidedly nineteenth-century neighborhood. About one out of every hundred structures (1.2 percent) dates to the eighteenth century, while about three of four (75 percent) were built between 1800 and 1899 and one-fifth (21 percent) date from the twentieth century.<sup>25</sup> Viewed closer, the histogram shows that 61 percent of the extant present-day Quarter arose between the Battle of New Orleans (1815) and the onset of the Civil War (1861), especially between the 1820s and 1830s and in particular the 1830s. The histogram limns four "valleys" (before 1820, 1860-1880, 1930-1960, and after 1980) interspersed among three "peaks" (1820-1860, 1880-1920, and in the 1960s and 1970s) in the construction date of the French Quarter's extant structures.

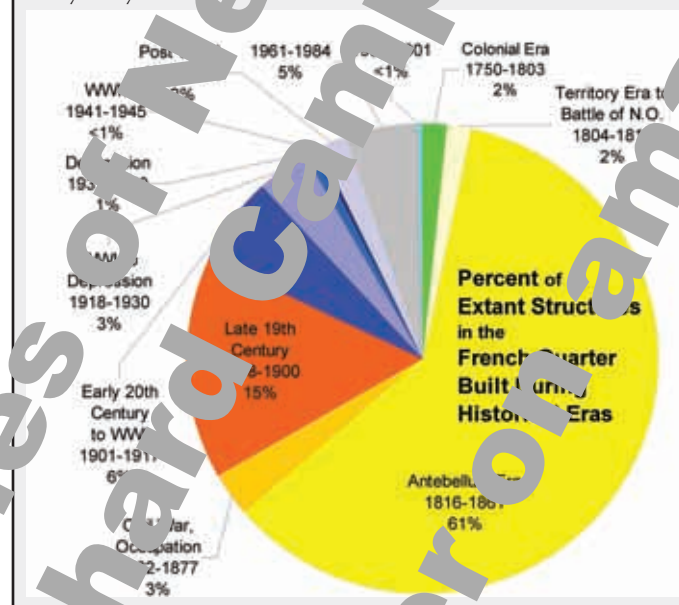
### FIRST VALLEY, BEFORE 1820

The relatively few (twenty-six) surviving structures predating 1820 do not, of course, represent low levels of construction prior to that year. On the contrary, the Quarter was entirely developed by 1820, so much so that it had spread into a number of adjacent *faubourgs*. Rather, the "valley" reflects the toll of time on centuries-old buildings in a busy, semitropical port city. Parcels opened up by the disappearance of the ancient edifices were usually reoccupied during later "peaks" in construction, which bring up an interesting

<sup>25</sup> Since these figures were computed, the Quarter's first twenty-first-century structure—a townhouse controversial among some neighbors for its above-average height—was constructed on Ursuline Street. It is not included in these maps and graphs.



These graphs show that 61 percent of present-day French Quarter structures arose between the Battle of New Orleans (1815) and the Civil War (1861). About one of every hundred Quarter structures date to the 1700s; three of four were built in the 1800s; and one of five dates from the 1900s. Graphs and analysis by author.



subject to the maps and graphs in this section: they depict not only the patterns of extant buildings, but also patterns of demolition of previous ones.

### FIRST PEAK, CIRCA 1820-1861

The rise of sugar and cotton, the arrival of Northern emigrants and foreign immigrants, the development of the steamboat, and the city's monopoly on Mississippi Valley trade ushered great wealth to New Orleans during this antebellum "golden age." Hundreds of multistory edifices arose to meet the demand, especially in the 1830s, when New Orleans ranked among the wealthiest cities in the nation. Illustrating the prosperity of this era is the fact that, of the 1,294 extant structures built during 1820-1862, over half



(52 percent) were sumptuous townhouses. The French Quarter in these times was an affluent residential neighborhood, as well as a business district (in its upper blocks) and home to a substantial working-class immigrant community (particularly in its lower and rear flanks). These patterns, too, are evident in the data: 21 percent of structures built in this era were storehouses, with commercial space on the ground floor and residences above, and another 20 percent were cottages, where the working class citizens were more likely to dwell. The drop-off in construction in the 1840s and 1850s may be explained by a number of factors: full development of the city's parcels; increasing popularity of uptown and Esplanade Ridge sites for new construction; repercussions of the Panic of 1837; and increasing trade competition in the form of Northern canal and railroad construction.

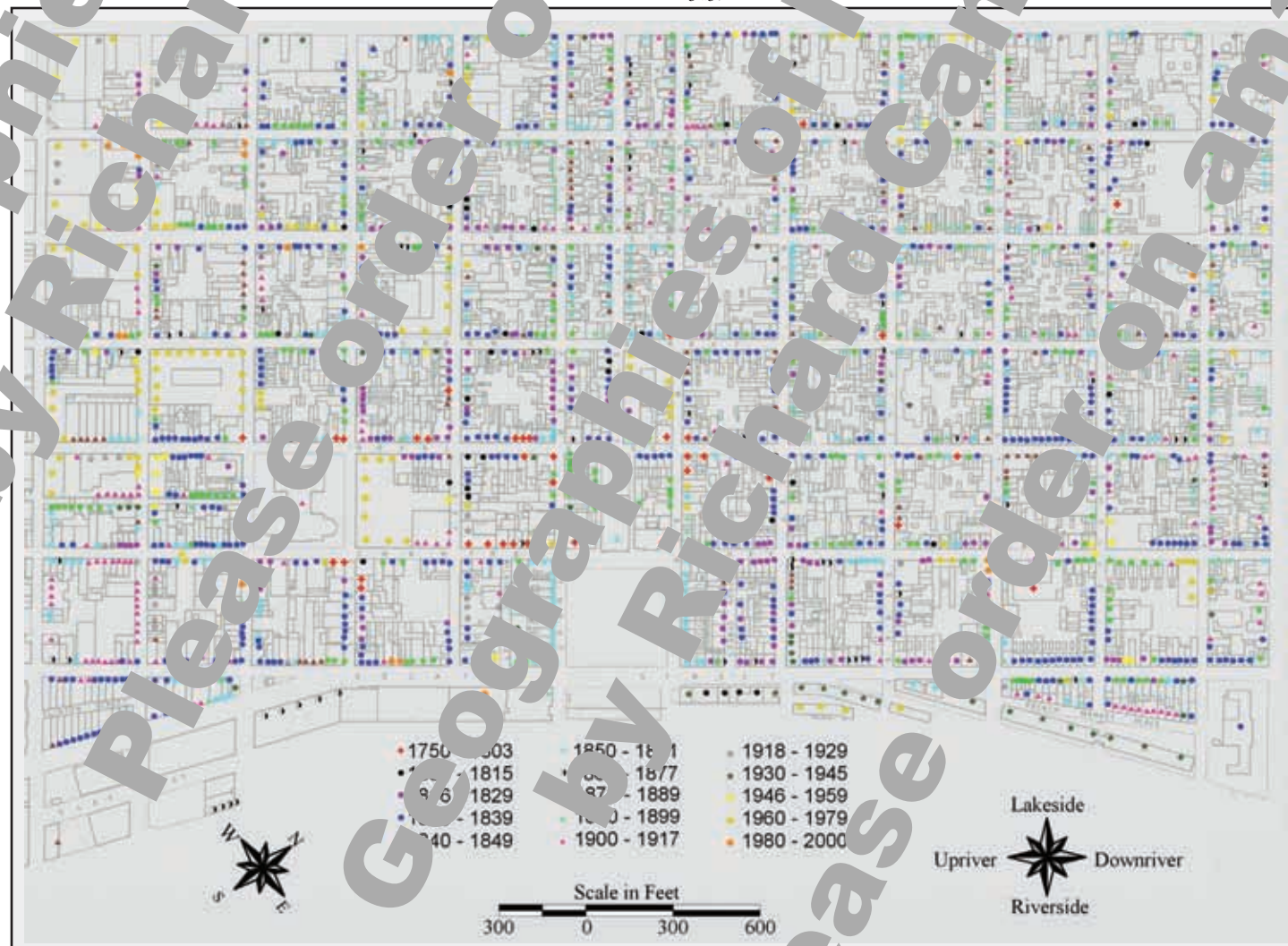
### SECOND VALLEY, 1862-1877

The dearth of structures dating from these fifteen years directly reflects tumultuous historical events, not just subsequent demolitions. The Civil War, the blockade of the port, federal occupation, and reconstruction interrupted the city's economic life from New Orleans' quick surrender in 1862 until 1877. Many local and regional businesses (namely plantations) folded, investment dollars were limited, and few buildings went up. Only 3 percent of today's buildings date from this era.

### SECOND PEAK, 1880-1920s

New Orleans enjoyed its second (though much more modest) "golden age" in the turn-of-the-century era, which coincided with a minor construction boom in the French Quarter. But while a number of impressive Italianate townhouses and storehouses were built in this "second peak," the new construction consisted mostly of humble wooden abodes for families of modest means. The upper class had by this time departed for uptown or Esplanade Avenue, leaving the French Quarter to the working class, including thousands of indigent immigrants from Sicily and elsewhere in southern Europe, who were accommodated in old mansions subdivided into cheap flats. It was a phenomenon seen in many big cities in this era: "Vacated houses were converted into tenements and rooming houses," observed geographer David Ward regarding national trends, "while vacant lots and rear yards were filled with cheap new structures."<sup>26</sup> In New Orleans, those "cheap new structures" were shotgun houses and bungalows. Of the 196 shotguns and eighteen bungalows now standing in the French Quarter, fully 80 percent were built during 1880s to 1920s. And of the 52 total extant buildings erected during

<sup>26</sup> David Ward, "The Emergence of Central Immigrant Ghettos in American Cities: 1840-1820," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 58 (June 1968): 343.





these four decades, only 8 percent were upscale townhouses for the affluent.

### THIRD VALLEY, 1930-1950s

A number of factors contributed to the decline in construction in these years. Depression and World War II diverted attention and funds away from real estate investment, while in the midst of that era designation of the French Quarter as a protected historic district (1936-1937) regulated demolition and new construction. Tourism and conventions during this era were at levels low enough not to encourage new hotel construction. Countering these trends were the extensive renovations of the Works Progress Administration and Public Works Administration in the 1930s, especially in the French Market area, and the gerrymandering of the Vieux Carré Commission's jurisdiction from 1946 to 1964. During that eighteen-year period, certain edges of the Quarter (the Rampart Street frontage, the area westside of upper North Peters, and the 100 block of Royal) lost their protected status allowing for a number of demolitions and modern constructions.

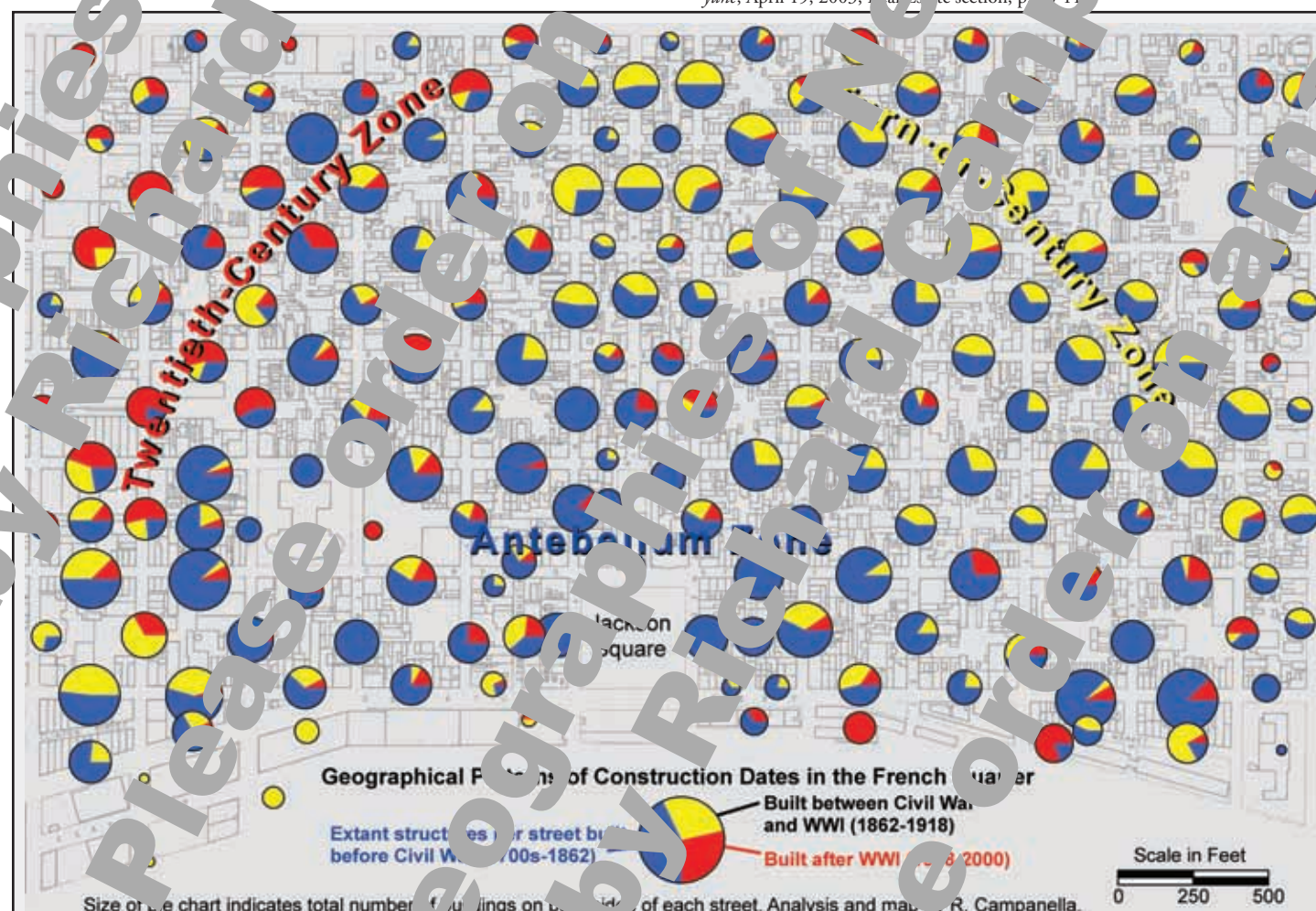
### THIRD PEAK, 1950s-1970s

The late 1950s to mid-1970s saw the final (to date) boom in French Quarter construction. These new structures tended to be large hotels and affiliated structures such as parking garages, built in response to the growth of the tourism economy. Some of these new hotels succeeded in recollecting historic precedents, such as the Royal Orleans on St. Louis Street, designed after the famous St. Louis Hotel and City Exchange. Others were flagrantly ersatz.

### PRESENT DAY VALLEY, 1970s TO PRESENT

Since the late 1970s, new construction has tailed off in the French Quarter, a result of prohibition on new quarter hotels (banned since 1969) and a long, deliberative approval process for new construction. One fine example of new construction according to traditional styles is on St. Louis Street, built in 1999 on what was long an empty lot and now blending into the *tout ensemble*. Inside, however, is one dramatic difference: aluminum beams have replaced traditional wood, a response to the very serious threat of Formosan termite infestation.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Mary Foster, "History in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Corner in Quarter Home," *Times-Picayune*, April 19, 2003, Real Estate section, p. D-11.



When the era of construction of extant French Quarter structures is mapped at the building level (left), the overriding pattern is one of small-scale "clumps" of similarly aged buildings interspersed with structures that may be much older or younger. It is only when we aggregate them at the street level (right) that patterns emerge: antebellum structures prevail in the center of the district, turn-of-the-century buildings predominate in the lower/lakeside section, and twentieth-century edifices are often found in the upper/lakeside area. Maps and analysis by author.



## THE FUTURE

Does another building boom loom in the French Quarter's foreseeable future? Barring fires or natural disasters, the only possible site for significant new construction are the "batture blocks" between North Peters and the levee from Iberville to Toulouse. This terrain has been forming decades after the city's founding, when the shifting river deposited sediment along the bank and augmented the downtown land base. The French Quarter batture was home, from the 1870s to the 1930s, to the city's Sugar District, consisting of sheds, refineries, warehouses, offices, and an ornate exchange.<sup>28</sup> This charmless industrial landscape was demolished or burned piecemeal during the 1940s through 1970s, leaving almost nothing but parking lots today. Ambitious plans to develop the area for mixed residential and commercial use have come and gone over the years, though a proposed rezoning of the area in 2004 may eventually lead to extensive new hotel construction.<sup>29</sup>

## GEOGRAPHICAL PATTERNS OF CONSTRUCTION DATES

While historical patterns of construction dates clearly reflect local and national events, geographical patterns of age in the French Quarter are a bit more complex to unravel. There are no expansive sections occupied entirely by structures of a single era; rather, the overriding pattern is one of small-scale "clumps" of similarly aged buildings interspersed liberally with structures that may be much older or younger. One often sees a row of townhouses built simultaneously, a line of cottages constructed within the same decade, or a series of shotgun cottages dating from the 1890s. But along or near them may be a Federal-style mansion, a massive Commercial style warehouse from the 1910s, or a modern hotel. This pattern of spatial intermixing by age itself is old: "There are still, here and there, the old houses, sandwiched in between those of a later generation—quaint, dilapidated, and picturesque," stated one observer in 1885. Some French Quarter buildings are "rickety, wooden structures, with overhanging porticoes and with windows and doors all out of perpendicular.... Others are massive stone or brick structures, with great arched doorways, and paved floors...."<sup>30</sup>

This spatial complexity is apparent in the first of the two accompanying maps, which shows construction dates categorized by fifteen historical eras for each and every building. This level of detail obscures overriding patterns. The second map, *Geographical Patterns of Construction Dates in the French Quarter*, resolves this problem by aggregating the information into only three eras (antebellum times, between the Civil War and World War I, and to the present), and thus simplifies

it at the street level. That is, all buildings on both sides of each street were summed together by their construction era, which is depicted in the pie charts. The size of the pie chart represents the number of buildings on that street. Amid an abundance of exceptions, three overriding "age zones" emerge in this map.

**Antebellum Zone** — Older extant buildings tend to cluster in the central heart of the Quarter. The preponderance of antebellum structures on Chartres, Royal, and Bourbon streets, within a few blocks of St. Louis Cathedral, is explained by the wealthy residents who once lived there. Well-off families before the Civil War were more likely to erect townhouses, which, because of their sturdiness, elegance, and value, had better odds of evading the forces of demolition and survive into the preservation era (and thereby show up in our data). The rich tended to live here because other areas were less desirable: those blocks near Canal Street were more commercial, those toward Esplanade and Rampart seemed to be overly plebeian and old-world oriented, and those closer to the river were too noisy, smelly, and bustling with port and market activity.

Numerical data bear out the geographic patterns. The Quarter street with the earliest average construction date for its structures is, as expected, Royal Street (1850), followed by Nicholls (1854) and St. Peter and St. Philip (1855). Three of these four streets penetrate the heart of the Quarter. Those with the latest average structural construction dates are Bienville (1928), Iberville (1890), and North Rampart (1882), all three of which are outside the district's heart. Pedestrian-level observations also bear this out: a walk down Royal Street is an experience of antebellum splendor; a walk down Iberville is a raffish encounter with architectural hodgepodge.

The densest cluster of *very* old buildings lies in the inner heart of this core, within one block of Royal Street from Conti to Duval (especially around the Royal/St. Peter intersection). Of the ninety-six Quarter structures which pre-date 1820, over half occupy this relatively small area. Incorporated in this highly historic area is the 600 block of Chartres (lake side), home to the Quarter's highest concentration of Spanish colonial era structures. Very old buildings have managed to survive around this stretch of Royal because of its distance from demolition-prone peripheral areas, and because of the magnificence and significance of the buildings themselves. This was also the area incinerated by the fires 1788 and 1794, clearing the parcels for the more sturdy constructions mandated by new Spanish colonial building codes.

**Turn-of-the-Century Zone** — Turn-of-the-century structures, defined generously here as those built between 1862-1918, are more likely to be found in the Quarter's lower/lakeside quadrant. This area, which once abutted the poor Third District (across Esplanade) and Tremé and the

<sup>28</sup> Richard Campanella, *Times and Place in New Orleans: Past Geographies in the Present Day* (Gretna, LA, 2002), 133-46.

<sup>29</sup> Bruce Egger, "Council Clears Way for Quarter Hotel," *Times-Picayune*, October 23, 2004, A1.

<sup>30</sup> Captain Willard Glazier, *Peculiarities of American Cities* (Philadelphia, PA, 1885), 273.

swamp (across Rampart), was home to working-class families often residing in cottages, which were often torn down after the Civil War and replaced by inexpensive shotgun houses. Demolition and replacement by shotgun houses was less likely in high-density commercial areas (toward Canal Street) or in blocks already occupied by spacious townhouses subdivided into apartments.

**Twentieth-Century Zone** — Buildings post-dating World War I are more common in the upper and lake-side section of the French Quarter. The modern tourism industry, responsible for most Quarter construction in recent decades, explains this pattern, as hoteliers were limited by both economic and legal factors to the commercial upper Quarter. The lower Quarter remains more residential. The French Market also registers some twentieth-century construction because of the Public Works Administration renovation work there during the Depression.

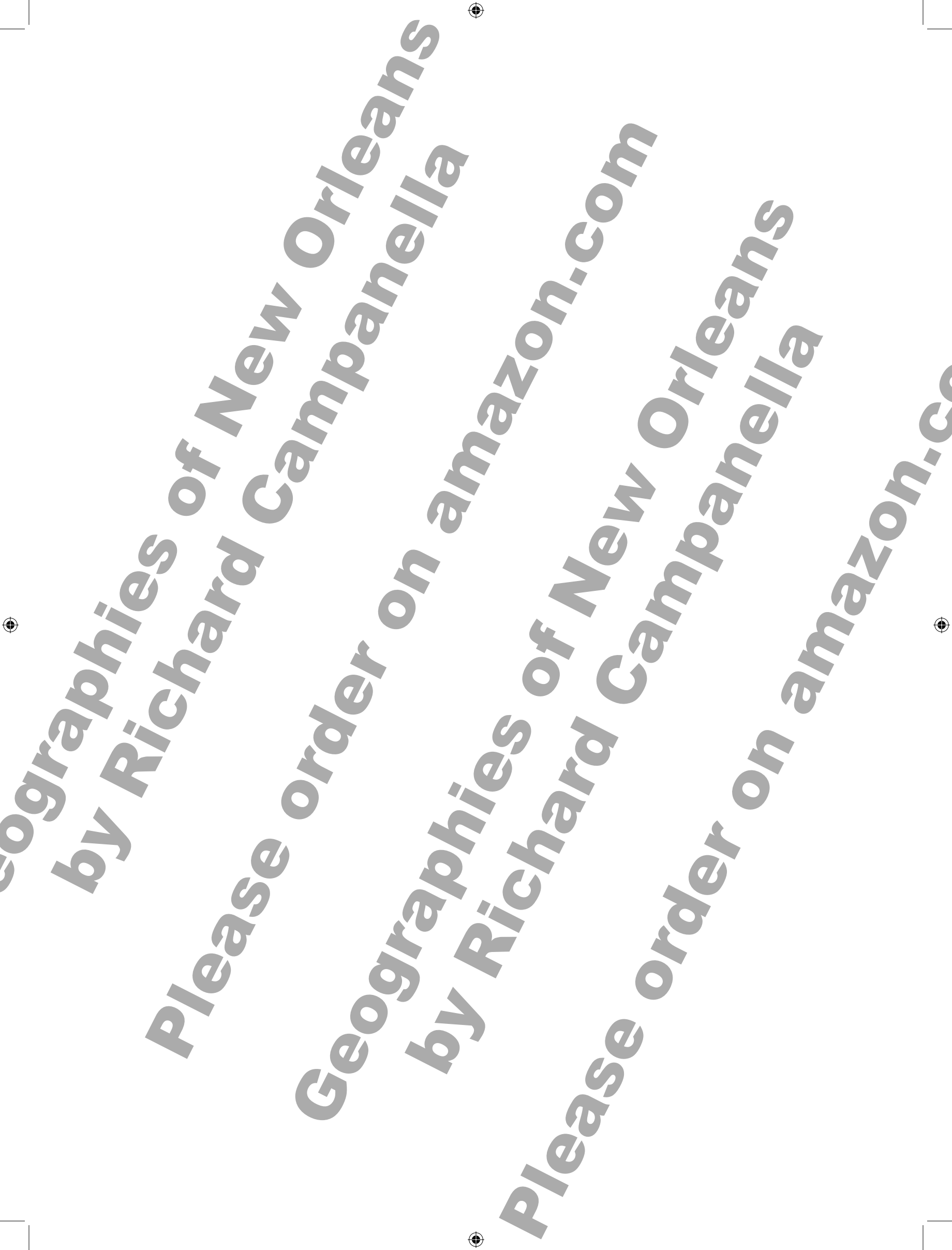
How old, then, is the French Quarter? From a structural standpoint, it seems reasonable to date the prototypi-

cal French Quarter streetscape to the second quarter of the nineteenth century, with a few streetscapes pre-dating this era and a fair number post-dating it. But, as these maps indicate, exceptions to the rule—and gloriously so. The spatial heterogeneity of the French Quarter makes it a Rosetta Stone of local, regional, and national history: a walk down any given street is a rich and rewarding tour of the past and of the processes of change. Wrote the New Orleans Press on transformations in the French Quarter circa 1885,

...the roofs have begun to disappear, the little cottage tenements...are fast changing into the new style of corniced residences.... On all sides, one, who is at all observant, can see how that fickle old fellow, Time, is rushing back the roof to take away for the present.... Some of the old Creole houses whose roofs have sparkled and glistened in the sun for more than one hundred years still remain, but they are fast fading away. Curious old houses these.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>31</sup> William H. Coleman, *Historical Sketch Book and Guide to New Orleans and Environs, with Map* (New York, 1885), 65.





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## “A DRAPING OF FASHIONS” PATTERNS OF ARCHITECTURAL STYLE IN THE FRENCH QUARTER

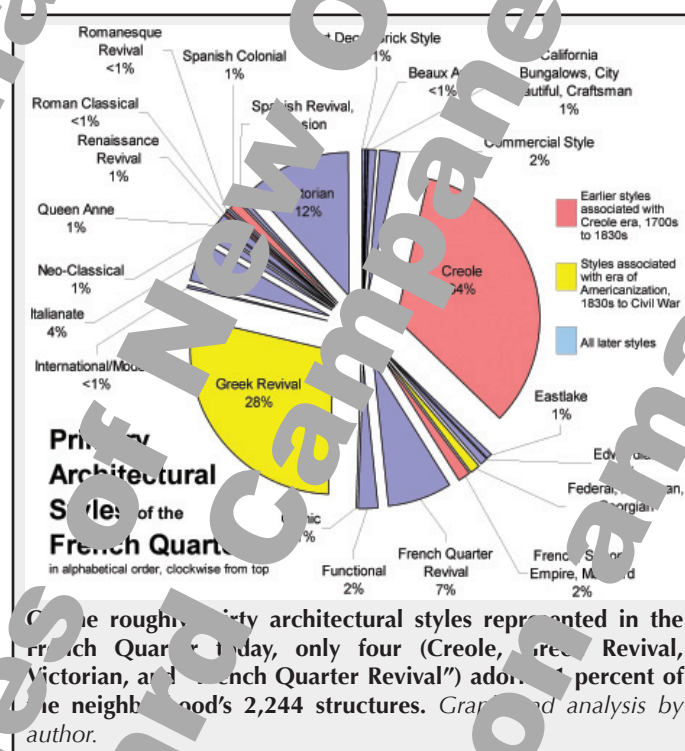
“Architectural styles arrived by ship to this port city, rather like fashions in clothing, to be successively draped on the same persisting and evolving [structural] bodies,” wrote the late Malcolm Heard in his 1997 architectural guide *French Quarter Manual*. While Heard contended that Quarter buildings are more distinguished by their structural typologies (next chapter) than for their architectural styles, these fashion statements are nevertheless historically significant and richly catalogued in the French Quarter. This chapter seeks historical and geographical patterns behind the 150 years of styles represented in the Quarter today.

Styles phased in and out gradually, through the adoption of some earlier traits, the modification of others, and the introduction of new ones. Denoting this continuous phenomenon into discrete eras is therefore about as debatable as classifying the styles themselves. In Bernard Lemann’s *The Vieux Carré—A General Statement* (1966), historic architectural phases in the French Quarter were identified as Colonial Period (1720-1800), Early Federal Period (1800-1825), Antebellum (1825-1850), Paleotechnic (early industrial age architecture, 1850-1900), and Modern.<sup>33</sup> The architectural historians behind the influential *Plan and Program for the Preservation of the Vieux Carré* (1968) delineated the major stylistic eras as French and Spanish Colonial; Transitional Styles (1803-1825); Greek Revival (1835-1850); Antebellum Period (1850-1862); Later Victorian Period (1862-1900); and Twentieth Century.<sup>34</sup> The late Lloyd Vogt, architect and author of *New Orleans Houses: A House-Watcher’s Guide* (1985) identified styles popular throughout New Orleans (not just the French Quarter) by the following periods:

- Colonial Period (1718-1800): French Colonial style
- Postcolonial Period (1800-1830): Creole style
- Antebellum Period (1830-1862): Greek Revival
- Victorian Period (1862-1900): Gothic Revival, Italianate, Second Empire, Eastlake, Bracket, Queen Anne, and Richardson Romanesque styles
- Early Twentieth Century (1900-1940): Georgian Colonial Revival, Neoclassical Revival, Tudor Revival, English style, and Spanish Colonial Revival
- Modern Period (1940-Present): International and Suburban Ranch styles<sup>35</sup>

The analysis presented here adds a quantitative perspective to the architectural phases, based on the primary styles

of extant French Quarter structures as identified by Vieux Carré Survey research.<sup>36</sup> Roughly thirty architectural styles are represented among the 2,244 extant units in the Quarter today, some very similar and others quite rare, others ubiquitous throughout the district but found hardly anywhere else in the nation. The pie chart *Primary Architectural Styles of the French Quarter* shows their relative proportions, colored by the general historical eras in which they were most popular. Note that only four styles are found in substantial numbers: Creole, Greek Revival, Victorian, and “French Quarter Revival,” the name given for all structures built after the official protection of the French Quarter, when all new construction was mandated to mimic historical style. These four stylistic categories, which may be “draped on cottages, townhouses, framehouses, or other structure types, account for 81 percent of all Quarter structures.



Of the roughly thirty architectural styles represented in the French Quarter today, only four (Creole, Greek Revival, Victorian, and “French Quarter Revival”) add up to 81 percent of the neighborhood’s 2,244 structures. Graph and analysis by author.

### COLONIAL-ERA STYLES

In the most of the colonial era, the vast majority of structures in New Orleans exhibited “French Colonial,” or “French Creole” styles of architecture. The literature of architectural historians, anthropologists, and cultural geographers records inconsistent use of the terms *French Colonial* and *French Creole* to describe this eighteenth-century style; some save the term *French Colonial* for institutions of state and church, and *French Creole* or simply *Creole* for residences and vernacular structures. This being architecture and not biological taxonomy, one should expect and embrace a certain level of fluidity in terminology. For the purposes of this discussion, we may think of these eighteenth-century Francophone-influenced

<sup>33</sup> Malcolm Heard, *French Quarter Manual: An Architectural Guide to New Orleans Vieux Carré* (New Orleans, 1997), 119.

<sup>34</sup> Bernard Lemann, *The Vieux Carré—A General Statement* (New Orleans, 1966), 11-30.

<sup>35</sup> Bureau of Government Research, City of New Orleans, *Plan and Program for the Preservation of the Vieux Carré* (New Orleans, 1968), 19-35.

<sup>36</sup> Lloyd Vogt, *New Orleans Houses: A House-Watcher’s Guide* (Gretna, LA, 1985), 25-26.



styles as “first-generation Creole.” While the nomenclature is debatable, the appearance of these structures is unmistakable. Main house characteristics include a single principal story raised upon piers, large double-pitched pavilion-like roof of broad wooden galleries supported with delicate colonnades and balustrades, exterior staircases, and walls made of brick or mud mixed with moss (*bousillage*) set within a load-bearing skeleton of timbers. Center chimneys, French doors and shutters, and a lack of hallways and closets characterized interiors.<sup>37</sup> It was a style more suited to rural or semi-rural conditions, and specimens may still be found scattered throughout former colonial Louisiana, in Missouri and Illinois, in the Natchitoches, Opelousas, and Pointe Coupee regions and on the River Road, Bayou St. John, and Bayou Road. That it also prevailed in the French Quarter attests to the early city’s village-like state.

“The connotation [of Creole],” wrote anthropologist Jay Dearborn Edwards, “is of someone or something from tropical (plantation) America—the Caribbean and eastern Brazil. Southern Louisiana is popularly considered the only Creole region in the United States because of its strong cultural ties to the West Indies” (though the region extends historically all along the coast, from the Texas to the Carolinas). Vernacular Creole architecture, then, may be described as “an architectural tradition generally descended from a synthesized tropical colonial form.”<sup>38</sup> Four interrelated hypotheses have been offered on the genesis of Louisiana’s Creole architectural heritage:<sup>39</sup>

Jonathan Fricker, “Origins of the Creole Raised Plantation House,” *Louisiana History* 25 (Spring 1984): 138.

Jay D. Edwards, “The Origins of Creole Architecture,” *Winterthur Portfolio: A Journal of American Material Culture* 29 (Summer/Autumn 1994): 157.

Jay D. Edwards, “The Origins of the Louisiana Creole Cottage,” in *French and German in the Mississippi Valley: Landscape and Cultural Traditions*, ed. Michael Roush (Cape Girardeau, MO, 1988), 20-25; and Jay D. Edwards, *Louisiana’s French*



**“Mada John’s Legacy” (632 Dumaine).** Built immediately after the 1804 fire, exhibits classic traits of “first-generation” Creole architecture: an oversized double-pitched hip roof, center chimney, colonnades supporting airy gallery, outdoor staircases and no internal hallways. All raised high on brick piers. One can visualize colonial New Orleans by picturing scores of similar structures, in various sizes, setbacks, and orientations. Photograph by author, 2004.

One commonly held proposition is that Creole architecture was essentially “invented” here as a series of rational adaptations to the environment. Houses built in the Creole tradition, wrote one researcher, are “perfectly adapted to the climate, the topography, the taste, and the times of the people who built them. . . . [They are uniquely original] [evolving] out of need. . . as complete and honest an expression as the log cabin of the mountaineer, the great Dutch barn of the Pennsylvania Dutchman, the sod house of the prairie pioneer, and the adobe dwelling of the southwesterner.”<sup>40</sup> This environmental-determinism hypothesis, embraced by many for its clear and causative explanation, “Heavy rains explain steep roofs. Waterlogged soils caused raised construction. Hot weather leads to breezy galleries.” Undoubtedly, there is some truth to these relationships, but evidence indicates that, in general, cultural antecedents have weighed more heavily than independent invention in the diffusion of architectural traits. Only later are they modified locally according to environmental and practical limitations. Notes, for instance, the counterintuitive presence of galleried houses in frigid French Canada, or the Spanish use of flat roofs in rainy New Orleans. “That full-blown Creole galleried houses . . . were being built only a dozen or so years after colonization began”<sup>42</sup> also casts doubt on the proposition that the style was invented here. Unless we learn intricate construction techniques from native pioneering settlers in a frontier environment generally do not experiment with risky new housing designs. They are more likely to adapt on what their forebears taught them, modifying those traditions to new conditions and taste only in subsequent years.

Another hypothesis views Louisiana Creole architecture as a descendent of Canadian houses derived from the Normandy region of France, modified in the West Indies and Louisiana to reflect local needs. Edwards summarizes the research of a champion of this hypothesis, Charles Peterson, as viewing the Creole house as “a frontier innovation in which a traditional northern houseform was tropicalized to better suit the needs of Canadians in their southward migration.”<sup>43</sup> This proposition suggests that Creole architecture diffused down the Mississippi Valley.

A related hypothesis emphasizes the derivation of Louisiana Creole houses directly from France, particularly Normandy, ascribing less importance to the modifications made by Canadians and West Indians as the tradition reached Louisiana, and even less to environmental determinism. One researcher, Jonathan Fricker, identified key Creole architectural features—raised construction, steep hip roofs, galleries, exterior staircases, *bousillage*-like material—among centuries-

*Vernacular Architecture: A Historical and Social Bibliography* (Monticello, IL, 1986), 1-9, and other sources.

<sup>40</sup> Edith Elliott Long, “The Small Creole Town House in Full Flavor,” *Vieux Carré Courier*, May 19-25, 1962, p. 1.

<sup>41</sup> See Fricker, “Origins of Creole Raised Plantation,” 142-44, for further discussion of “climatic determinism.”

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

<sup>43</sup> Edwards, “The Origins of the Louisiana Creole Cottage,” 20-21.

old farmhouses in the countryside of France. He concluded that Creole features derived from "the folk building tradition of medieval France. None was invented on this side of the Atlantic; hence, none originated as a response to the climate either of the West Indies or of the Deep South." Indeed, many other architectural styles found in America, including English, Spanish, Dutch, and Flemish, were once thought to have been invented here as environmental adaptations, and only later were acknowledged as derived largely from European traditions.<sup>44</sup>

A fourth and favored hypothesis sees Creole architecture (particularly its signature gallery) as an extraction from a West Indian cultural milieu, influenced by a wide range of European, African, and indigenous traditions, particularly the Arawak Indian *Bombé* hut. The appearance of galleried houses throughout the Caribbean—not solely in French colonies but in Spanish and British ones as well, as early as 1685—leads advocates of this hypothesis to de-emphasize the French role in the origin of Creole architecture. While underlying French and French-Canadian house types were brought to the New Orleans region by former Canadian founders and early settlers, also brought with them were significant West Indian contributions and modifications, which were later altered to taste and need by later generations. This hypothesis suggests that Creole architecture diffused up the Mississippi Valley from the Caribbean, rather than down from Canada or directly from France. Edwards viewed this West Indian/Creole influence consequential enough to warrant the inclusion of the Caribbean region as "another major cultural link for the domestic architecture of eastern North America," along with England, France, Spain, Germany, Holland, and Scandinavian countries.<sup>45</sup>

French Colonial or French Creole styles prevailed in New Orleans even after Spain took control in 1769, because the inhabitants remained deeply Francophone in their culture and the new Spanish rulers did not aggressively seek to change this. But population growth and urban development increasingly rendered these structures inadequate, wasteful of space—and dangerous. Over a thousand were destroyed by the great conflagrations of 1738 and 1794, and almost all others were lost over the years to decay, demolition, street widening, and fire. Only one institutional example survives to a large degree the French colonial style (the Old Ursuline Convent, designed 1745, completed 1752) while perhaps the best example of a French Colonial-style residential structure (Madame John's Legacy, built in 1783, after the French domination, remains at 632 Dumaine Street. The remarkable circa 1780s Ossorn House (900 Gov. Nicholls, see previous chapter) would have been an equally fine example were it not for the modification of its hip roof to a gable. A paucity of extant structures prevents the graphing of the rise and fall of this style in the



The 600 block of Royal Street possesses fine examples of Spanish-influenced "second generation" Creole architecture. At right is the Ducros-Ducate house and its additions (1825-1825), exhibiting a stucco-plastered facade with moldings, steep hip roof (not visible here), rear porch balcony, arched openings on ground floor (later square), and a dependency with wooden railings and colonnades. Next door is 610-614 Royal, a pink three-story townhouse in the "high Creole" style of the 1830s, with a central *porte cochère* and unadorned double hung windows topped with stucco-covered jack arches. The adjacent building at 616-618 Royal were built in the same era and style. Graceful, smooth simplicity uninterrupted by fussy detail typifies these Creole styles. Photograph by author, 2004.

French Quarter, but if one were to approximate the trend, it would start in the 1720s, peak in the 1750s and 1760s, decline slightly in the 1770s and 1780s, then drop off sharply in the 1790s and all but disappear by the nineteenth century. Geographically, French Colonial style structures were found everywhere in the city into the 1780s, but not leave for the aforementioned exceptions, form only the pattern of absence.

After the 1794 fire, the Spanish colonial administration decreed new building codes to prevent another catastrophe, and looked to their own traditions to foster the development of a sturdier urban environment. Wood was discouraged in favor of brick; steep roofs went out in favor of flat or gently sloping ones; brick between-post walls were covered with stucco; wooden shingles were replaced with clay tiles. Other Spanish features unrelated to fire safety came with the new style, such as arched openings on the ground floor, pilasters, balconies, and courtyards. The fenced gardens and wooden galleries of a rural village gave way to the stuccoed walls and

<sup>44</sup> Fricker, "Origins of Creole Raised Plantation," 45-51. See Edwards' review of this hypothesis in his "The Origins of the Louisiana Creole Cottage," 24-25.

<sup>45</sup> Edwards, "The Origins of Creole Architecture," 156; and Edwards, "The Origins of the Louisiana Creole Cottage," 21-22.



wrought-iron balconies of a Spanish city. “As styles proliferated, the physical character of the Quarter evolved accordingly—the influence of northern French building conditions, transmitted to some degree through the cold Canadian provinces, waned in favor of the more Mediterranean forms of the Spanish.”<sup>46</sup> Derivation of those forms are replete throughout the Quarter today, but surviving examples of pure Spanish Colonial Style are not common. Twenty-five edifices—about one of every hundred buildings in the Quarter—exhibit this style, of which twenty-two were built in the Spanish colonial era (all after 1789). Of the three that postdate the Spanish years, two are quite famous: the Old Absinthe House at 240 Bourbon, built in 1806, and the Girard (Napoleon) House at 600 Chartres, built in 1814, with a wing dating to 1797.

The Spanish Colonial style in its pure form rose in the French Quarter probably during the 1780s, peaked in the 1790s, and fell off steadily in the decade after Americanization. Geographically, these twenty-five surviving historical gems are loosely clustered within two blocks of the intersection of Toulouse and Royal streets. The lake side of the 600 block of Chartres Street possesses the largest concentration of Spanish Colonial structures (both in era and style), and may well be the city’s oldest surviving street scene, despite numerous facade alterations in the past two centuries. At the corner (609-607 Chartres) is the circa-1795 Reynes House, originally a townhouse highly evocative of Spanish architecture in the Caribbean and Latin America, converted to a storehouse in the 1830s, used as Victor’s Grocery from 1896 to 1962, and now vacant. It is attached to 609-615 Chartres, built at the same time as the corner building and now stripped of its details, but still retaining a Spanish appearance.<sup>47</sup> Next is the famous Bosque House at 617-619 Chartres, a 1795 townhouse with exemplary Spanish traits such as a courtyard and wrought-iron balcony, though its main arched openings and flat-tiled terrace roof were later modeled in a non-Spanish fashion. (The Good Friday fire of March 21, 1788, began at this site, and the December 8, 1794, fire started just behind it, which explains why the buildings mostly tend to date from 1795.) At 625-627 Chartres is a *porte cochère* (carriage-way) building with a wooden balcony (reminiscent of Old San Juan, Puerto Rico), also later modified into a storehouse, erected during the last years of Spanish rule. Until 1900 the Spanish streetscape of 600 Chartres climaxed with the Orue-Pontalba Building at the corner of St. Peter, probably designed by Gilbert Guillemard and built between 1789 and 1796. But structural decay, including old damage inflicted by the 1794 fire, led to its condemnation and controversial demolition in May 1962. Architects Keith and Wilson re-

signed a fine reproduction of this beautiful building in its original 1789 form, which was constructed in 1963 and now houses Le Petit Théâtre. Three other Spanish colonials occupy this same square bounded by Chartres, St. Peter, Royal, and Toulouse.<sup>48</sup> Continuing downriver on Chartres are the city’s twin jewels of the Spanish Colonial Style, the Cabildo (1799), seat of the Spanish government, and the Presbytère (1791-1813), originally designed as a rectory. Without their mid-nineteenth century Mansard roofs, the Cabildo and Presbytère appear lifted out of an old Mexican *zócalo* or an Andean *plaza central*.

Spain would control New Orleans for less than a decade after its architectural style finally gained a local stronghold. After Spanish officials departed in 1803 but before Anglo-American culture came to predominate, New Orleansians found themselves with an amalgam of architectural traditions and buildings skills, some by way of France, some by way of Spain, others by Canada, the West Indies, Latin America, Africa, and elsewhere. From this admixture emerged what may be called “second-generation” Creole style.

## EMERGENCE OF CREOLE STYLE

While only five or three specimens of eighteenth-century “first-generation” Creole” structures survive in the French Quarter, hundreds—740 by one count, about one of every three structures—exhibit architectural styles that are also called Creole. This style was “shaped” on cottages, townhouses, or warehouses built mainly between 1800 and 1840, the period when once-prevalent colonial influences waned and once-potent American culture waxed. These were structures with an indigenous New Orleans look and design, one which harks back to colonial (particularly Spanish) antecedents, but with local modifications and variations that may be thought of, for the purpose of this discussion, as “second-generation” Creole. What is the ancestral origin of these Creole buildings?

Edwards states that while the pure eighteenth-century Creole tradition survived intact through the Spanish era in both rural and urban areas, it was diluted by new European and Anglo-American influences infiltrating the Gulf Coast around the dawn of the nineteenth century. The result was not a replacement of Creole tradition that would take another half century—but a fusion with new ones. Hence, the Creole cottages we know in today’s French Quarter bear a resemblance in structure and orientation to the raised, pitched-roof, gallery houses found in the eighteenth century, but usually lack the galleries, have a less-inclined roof, and are only a foot or so raised above the ground. By the 1830s, “Creole architecture had undergone a profound syncretism with Anglo forms. Georgian geometry, with its emphasis on symmetry and axuality, was substituted for the Creole love of asymmetry

<sup>46</sup> Heard, *French Quarter Manual*, 4.

<sup>47</sup> In 2003, the Vieux Carré Commission permitted the construction of a large Victorian gingerbread gallery on the façade of this otherwise plain building. While the gallery *per se* is perfectly appealing, and a similar one had existed there a century ago, it distracts from what could have been enhanced into the Quarter’s best example of a Spanish colonial streetscape.

<sup>48</sup> *The Vieux Carré: A Pictorial Record and a Study of the Land and Buildings in the Vieux Carré*, 130 (ed. by Williams Research Center, The Historic New Orleans Collection), Plate 42.

and hierarchy."<sup>49</sup> So too did roofs, façades, and room arrangement change from old Creole ways, though enough remained the same to warrant the continued use of the term "Creole architecture"—only here, *Creole* primarily implies *native to New Orleans*, and secondarily "*descended from a synthesized tropical colonial form*."<sup>50</sup> Most of the Creole cottages and Creole townhouses in the French Quarter today (and mapped and graphed as such in these pages) manifest this early nineteenth-century variation of Creole style, rather than the pure eighteenth-century tradition that is rare today both in the French Quarter and throughout former New France. These second-generation Creole structures were modified again in the 1830s and 1840s ("transitionals," described later) and were finally replaced, once and for all, by the Anglo Americans' favored Greek Revival and Italianate styles. By the 1850s and certainly by the Civil War, the Creole architectural tradition—derived from Medieval France, diffused and altered

via Canada and especially the West Indies, and modified for local needs on the plantations of the lower Mississippi Valley and in the streets of New Orleans—was dead. "The truly significant period of New Orleans architecture was brought into jeopardy by the [Louisiana] Purchase and brought to an end by the Civil War," wrote James Marston Fitch in his outstanding article on the rise and fall of the Creole tradition. "The Americanization of the Crescent City has long been completed, at least architecturally; and the whole nation is the poorer for it."<sup>51</sup> We are fortunate indeed and deeply indebted to pioneer preservationists, to keep within our stewardship the nation's largest concentration of this unique and beautiful tradition.

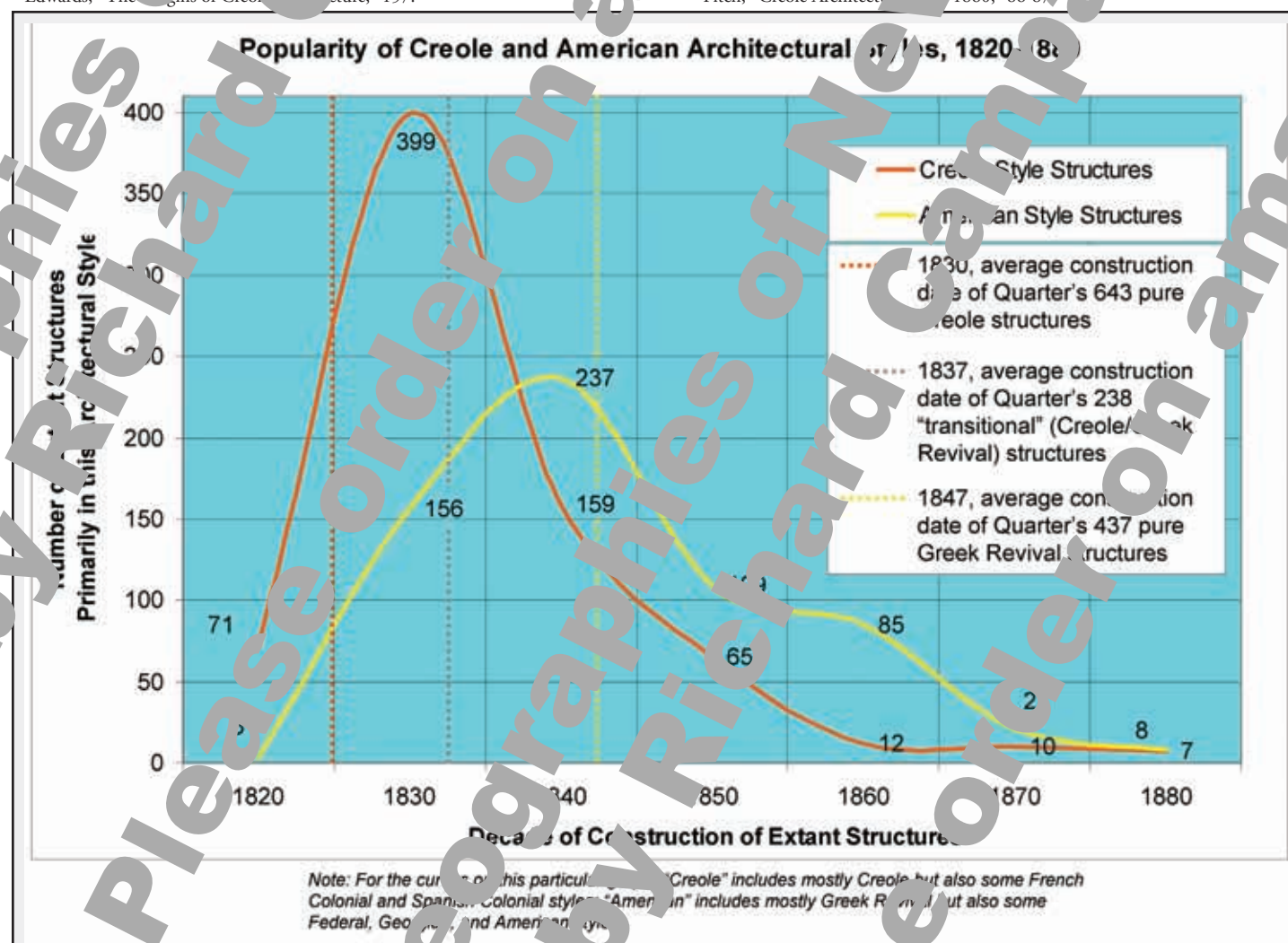
### EMERGENCE OF AMERICAN STYLE

The Anglo Americans flocking into New Orleans after the Louisiana Purchase at first conformed to these local architectural traditions, having little choice but to move into existing structures or hire local builders to build what they knew. Some adjusted and modified these structures, as de-

<sup>49</sup> Edwards, "The Origins of the Louisiana Creole Cottage," 9-10. See also James Marston Fitch, "Creole Architecture 1718-1860: The Rise and Fall of a Great Tradition," in *The Past as Prelude: New Orleans, 1718-1968*, ed. Hodding Carter (New Orleans, 1968), 79-80, and Edwards, "The Origins of Creole Architecture," 157.

<sup>50</sup> Edwards, "The Origins of Creole Architecture," 157.

<sup>51</sup> Fitch, "Creole Architecture 1718-1860," 86-87.



The architectural transition from Creole to American (primarily Greek Revival) styles corresponds to the 1830s-1840s shift of cultural and political power in the city from Creole to American elements. The stylistic change transpired gradually, as evidenced by those "transitional" structures exhibiting both Creole and Greek Revival traits. When we note the average age of Creole, "transitional," and Greek Revival structures, we see the historic shift of New Orleans society in even more detail. After the 1830s, momentum swung permanently toward the Americans, and as it did, the old colonial-inspired Creole styles faded away. *Graph and analysis by author.*





This row of “transitional”—structures with both Creole and Greek Revival traits—at 335–341 Chartres dates from the 1830s, when political power shifted from Creoles to Anglos. Creole traits include the narrow balcony, jack arches above windows, and narrow passages between adjoining units; Greek Revival characteristics include the denticulated cornice, squared openings, and massive granite pillars. Photograph by author, 2006.

scribed above. But when the trickle grew to a torrent in the years after the Battle of New Orleans (1815), the Americans increasingly brushed aside local architectural traits in favor of their own imported concepts—and their own architects. Had they arrived a generation or so earlier, they might have brought with them the classical styles that were all the rage in the North and Upper South in the 1700s, such as Georgian, Federal, and what is now called Jeffersonian Classicism.<sup>52</sup> But arriving as they did in the early 1800s, the Americans imported primarily the latest architectural modes sweeping the North: not those of ancient Greece.

The earliest known surviving structure in Louisiana with prominent Greek Revival traits is the Thierry House at 721 Gov. Nicholls Street, designed by Henry Latrobe (the young brother of the famed architect Benjamin Latrobe, designer of the U.S. Capitol and an emissary of Greek Revival style) and Armand Lacarrière Latour. Built in 1814, the Thierry House is notable for its unusual section, distance, shape, and Greek Revival portico. The Doric columns and graceful curves of the porch were hidden for decades until their re-discovery by

<sup>52</sup> Vogt, *New Orleans Houses*, 6.



No clear spatial pattern appears in the map above, where architectural styles are plotted at the building level. But when we look at only Creole and Greek Revival styles aggregated at the street level (right), we see that Greek Revival specimens outnumber Creole examples in the “Americanized” upper block, while the reverse is true in the more Francophone lower city. This architectural pattern reflects the ethnic geography of nineteenth-century New Orleans, when Anglo Americans predominated in the upper city and Creoles in the lower area. Maps and analysis by author.



Richard Koch and Samuel Wilson, who resided in the house in 1940. Architectural historians trace Greek Revival architecture in the lower Mississippi Valley—to the house that would make it famous through its iconic plantation mansion—to this unpretentious little home.<sup>53</sup> Within a few years, the Greek Revival style spread in the city and region, in plantation houses, townhouses, storehouses, and cottages. Informed the first major American architectural contribution to New Orleans, one that may be seen today by the hundreds in the French Quarter and by the thousands throughout the city.<sup>54</sup> Georgian, Federal, and Jeffersonian Classicism, on the other hand, are rare in the Quarter and citywide, as are Gothic and other Northeastern styles that "missed" the major wave of Anglo settlement in Louisiana. Only a few extant struc-

tures in the Quarter exhibit Federal, Georgian, or Gothic styles. The Greek Revival style, on the other hand, adorns 614 structures, more than one in every four Quarter buildings. American history and Louisiana's place in it, is written into these patterns.

History is also inscribed in the patterns of Creole versus American styles. The graph entitled *Popularity of Creole and American Architectural Styles, 1820-1880*<sup>55</sup> shows that Creole styles peaked in the 1830s then fell off precipitously, while Greek Revival peaked a decade later and fell off more gradually. The architectural transition from Creole to Greek Revival corresponds to the 1830s and 1840s shift of cultural and political power in the city from Creole to American elements.<sup>56</sup> The trend was noticed by a visitor as early as 1828:

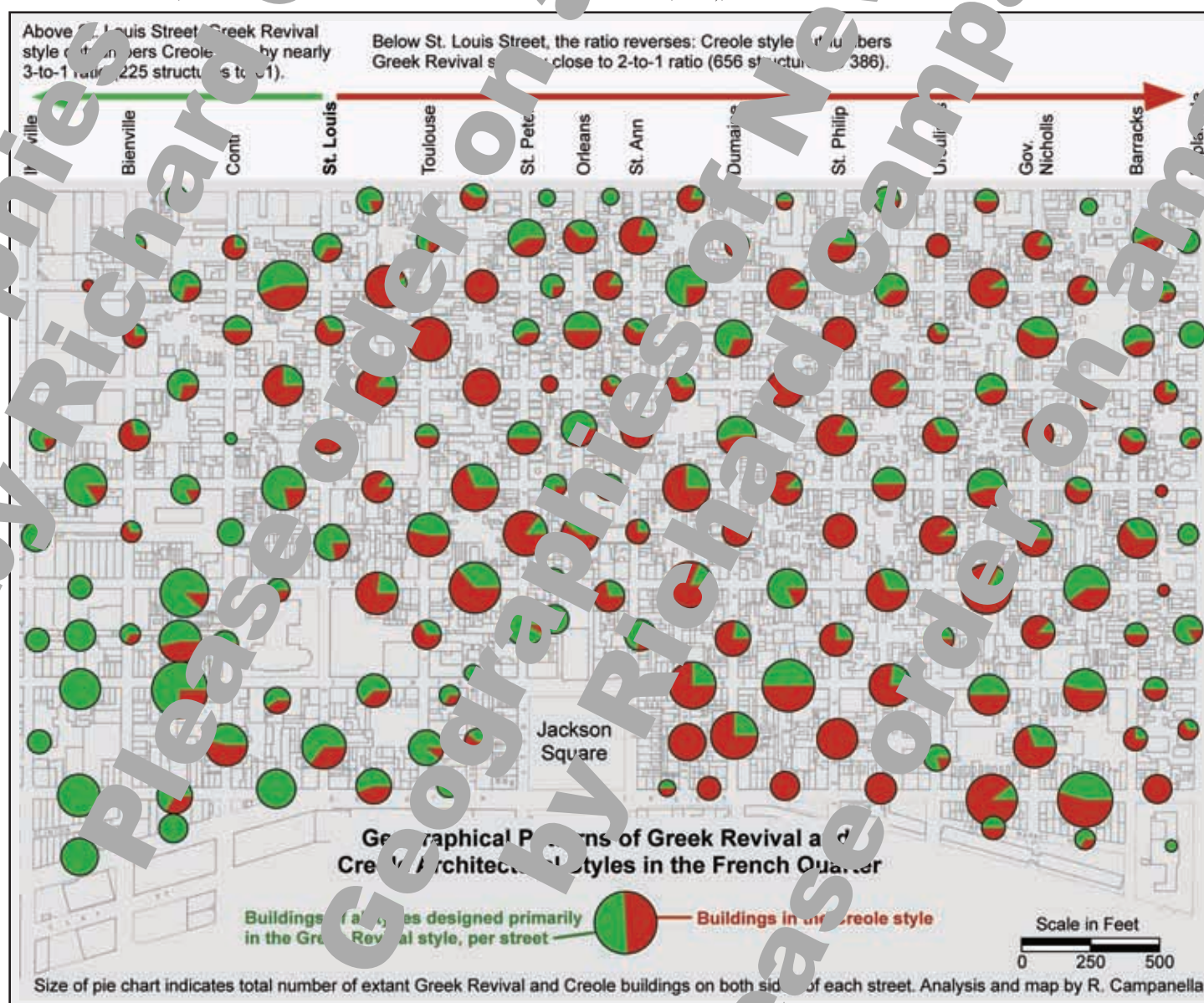
The houses are rapidly changing from the South Spanish style, to more elegant forms. The new houses are mostly three stories high, with large columns and a summer room with

<sup>53</sup> Edith Elliott Long, "Rare in the Quarter, Classical House with a Porch," *Vieux Carré Courier*, May 12-18, 1940, p. 1-4.

<sup>54</sup> Observed James Marston Fitch, "The architectural language [of the American nouveaux riches in the New Orleans region] was of Graeco-Roman origin, most convenient ideologically because it reflected their identification with Imperial Rome [and] Periclean Greece.... This idiosyncratic use of the Classic idiom... regarded human slavery as the basis of Classical culture instead of being merely a blemish." While Fitch was referring primarily to Classical-style plantation mansions, his characterization also applies to affluent new urban dwellings. Fitch, "Creole Architecture 1718-1860," 82.

<sup>55</sup> In this graph, "Creole" includes French Colonial and Spanish Colonial styles, and "American" implies Greek Revival, Federal, Georgian, and American styles, as recorded by the Vieux Carré Survey. Recall that only extant structures are included in this analysis, not all structures that ever existed in the Quarter.

<sup>56</sup> Joseph G. Tregle, Jr., "Creole Americans," in *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization*, eds. Arnold R. Hirsch and Joseph Rothenberg (Baton Rouge and London, 1992), 152-57.







Contrasting nineteenth-century styles at 911–15 Decatur: at left is a circa-1830s Creole-style storehouse; at right is a Roman Revival-style facade dating from the 1890s. Photograph by author, 2002.

blinds. In the lower suburbs, frame houses, with Spanish roofs, are still prevalent.<sup>57</sup>

The stylistic change transpired not as a drastic, sudden switch but as a gradual, piecemeal transformation. The Vieux Carré Survey refers to those structures (usually townhouses) exhibiting both Creole and Greek Revival attributes as “transitional.” When we plot separately the average age of Creole, “transitional,” and Greek Revival structures, we see the historic shift of New Orleans society in even more detail: the “transitional” style appeared almost exactly when the Creole and American rivalry was at its peak (late 1820s). Afterwards, momentum swung permanently toward the Americans, and as it did, the colonial-inspired Creole styles declined and Greek Revival and other new American styles caught on. These data seem to corroborate architect Malcolm Heard’s

<sup>57</sup> Charles C. Field, *The Americans As They Are: Related in a Tour Through the Valley of the Mississippi* (London, 1828), 154. In this quotation, “Spanish” probably refers to what I am calling Spanish Colonial or second-generation Creole. The reference to “elegant forms” of “three stories” probably means American-style townhouses, and “frame houses, with Spanish roofs” likely describes Creole cottages.



Another contrasting pair at 1027–1035 Decatur: at left is a Creole-style structure in a row of three built around 1829; at right is a Victorian Italianate commercial building built in 1883. Note the simple, clean lines of the earlier, indigenous style compared to the fancy traits of the late nineteenth-century imported style. Photograph by author, 2002.

observation that “[t]he conflicted process by which Creoles assimilated American influence became architecturally manifest in the large number of Creole townhouses built in the French Quarter during the 1830s.”<sup>58</sup>

The geography of Creoles and Americans is also written in brick. As described in the chapter “Creole New Orleans: The Geography of a Controversial Ethnicity,” Creole culture in antebellum times was by no means strictly limited to the confines of the French Quarter, nor did Anglo Americans reside exclusively above Canal Street, as legend has it. In fact, both ethnic groups (plus many others) could be found throughout the Quarter, with Creoles predominating in the lower area and Anglos in the upper blocks, close to Canal Street. The pattern was observed by a number of nineteenth-century travelers to the city, among them Frederick Law Olmsted, who in 1854 described the cityscape during a cab ride on Decatur Street from the foot of Elysian Fields Avenue to



The Greek Revival style, as manifested in these circa-1840s townhouses at 308–314 North Rampart, arrived in the French Quarter from the Northeast in the 1810s, peaked in popularity in the 1840s, and declined steadily over the next half-century to forty years. About 20 percent of the extant structures in the French Quarter exhibit Greek Revival as their primary architectural style. Photograph by author, 2003.

the St. Charles Hotel. In the lower area, Olmsted witnessed “narrow city streets, among grimy distuccoed walls; high arched windows and doors, balconies and entresols, and French noises and French smells, with signs, ten to one of English.” In the upper streets, “still within the Quarter, he wrote “now the signs became English, and the new brick buildings American.” Upon crossing Canal and heading up St. Charles Avenue, he saw “French, Spanish, and English signs, the latter predominating.”<sup>59</sup> Architectural styles to this day bear out this historical pattern: while Creole (which Olmsted would call “French”) and Greek Revival (“American”) styles may be found today on practically any selected block, the map entitled *Geographical Patterns of Greek Revival and Creole Architectural Styles in the French Quarter* shows that

<sup>58</sup> Heard, *French Quarter Manual*, 41.

<sup>59</sup> Frederick Law Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom: A Traveler's Observations on Cotton and Slavery in the American Slave States*, 2 vols. (New York and London, 1861), 1:291–92.





Almost 800 townhouses line the streets of the Quarter, but only a few bear wooden veranda galleries. These Greek Revival examples on Chartres Street, built mostly in 1846 according to designs by J.N.B. de Pouilly, form a street scene more typical of the Lower Garden District than the French Quarter. Photograph by author, 2002.



This townhouse at 1025 St. Louis Street is one of the few examples of the Greek Revival style in the Quarter. Built in 1840-1842 for two free men of color, this 7,600-square-foot mansion's Greek key doorway, square-headed openings, heavy lintels, attic windows, and dentils are classic traits of this antebellum style. Photo by author, 2002.

while the reverse is true in the "French" blocks below Chartres Street. St. Louis Street is significant because, in 1829, the famous Creole aristocrat Bernard Marigny identified it as a *de facto* dividing line between American and Creole interests.<sup>60</sup> Broken down to the block-by-block level, the trend is even more dramatic. In the heavily Americanized blocks between Iberville and Bienville streets, which recall Manhattan or Boston more so than the lower Quarter, Greek Revival buildings outnumber Creoles by an eleven-to-one ratio. But from St. Ann to Gov. Nicholls Street, an area that resembles a southern European or Caribbean village, Creole structures outnumber Greek Revivals by more than a two-and-a-half-to-one ratio. This architectural geography, though subtle and not overwhelming numerically, is a direct descendent of the ethnic geographies of nineteenth-century New Orleans, when the city underwent its heaviest and sometimes painful transition to an American future.

### TRENDS THROUGH MODERN TIMES

Architectural styles continue to reflect New Orleans history when we extend the timeline out to 1750 to 2000 (see graph, *Historical Architectural Eras Represented in Today's French Quarter*). Absent from this graph (because they are absent from the streetscape) are most colonial-style buildings, which spanned most of the eighteenth century. We start to see the previously described rise and fall of Creole styles in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, followed by

<sup>60</sup> Tregle, "Creoles and Americans," 155.



the peaking of American styles, namely Greek Revival, in the 1840s. Both Creole and Greek Revival fell almost completely out of fashion during the Civil War and Reconstruction years, when new construction in the French Quarter came almost to a halt. The turn-of-the-century preference for exotic new styles—Italianate, Victorian, Queen Anne, Edwardian, Neo-Classical, and others—is captured with a modest peak around 1900, which petered out by the Depression and World War II. Finally, the “French Quarter Revival” style, mandated by preservation laws to maintain French Quarter scenography, peaked during the hotel construction boom of the 1960s. Prohibition on new hotels and more stringent preservationist oversight led to a drop-off in new construction during the 1980s–2000. The few new buildings that have arisen in those years continue to revive the French Quarter “look.”

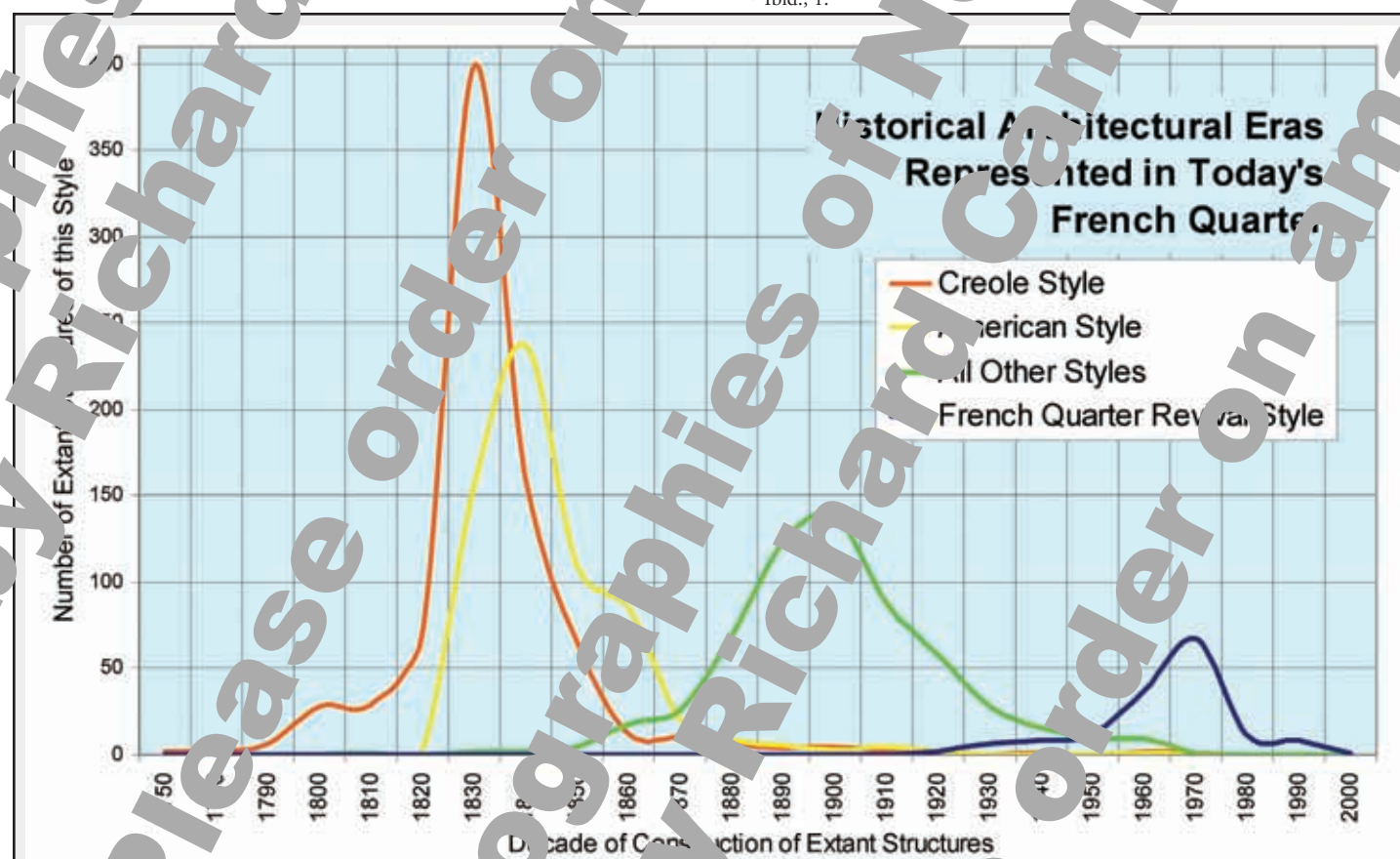
A closer look reveals New Orleans’ adoption and abandonment of other Western architectural trends. Note the gradual introduction of the Italianate style just before the Civil War, and its modest popularity (see graph, *Rise and Fall of Two Major Postbellum Styles*) afterwards. An outgrowth of the “Picturesque” movement and a nineteenth-century fascination with the Renaissance, the Italianate style was introduced to America by way of England in 1839–1841, addressing an increasing American interest in the “aesthetic

of luxury” and “artistic values,”<sup>61</sup> particularly in the urban South. Fanciful Italianate features such as decorative parapets, segmented arches, columns, and cornices supported by paired brackets were “applied like an overlay to traditional building types within the quarter, effectively replacing the more staid Greek Revival style while maintaining the underlying town-house/storehouse structural typology. According to art historian Joan G. Caldwell, “the Italianate style [was] the dominant taste in domestic architecture in New Orleans from 1850 to 1880,” a citywide assessment that agrees perfectly with this numerical analysis of the French Quarter. Caldwell also notes that Italianate fashions in New Orleans “form a small part of a larger picture of Victorian architecture,” which developed from them, as illustrated in the graph. Many of the Victorian structures classified here are more accurately described as “Victorian Italianate,” which boomed primarily in the 1890s. Epitaphologically, most of the ninety-seven Victorian structures dating from this vibrant decade are shotgun houses, joined by thousands others in adjacent neighborhoods in the Seventh, Eighth, and Ninth wards.

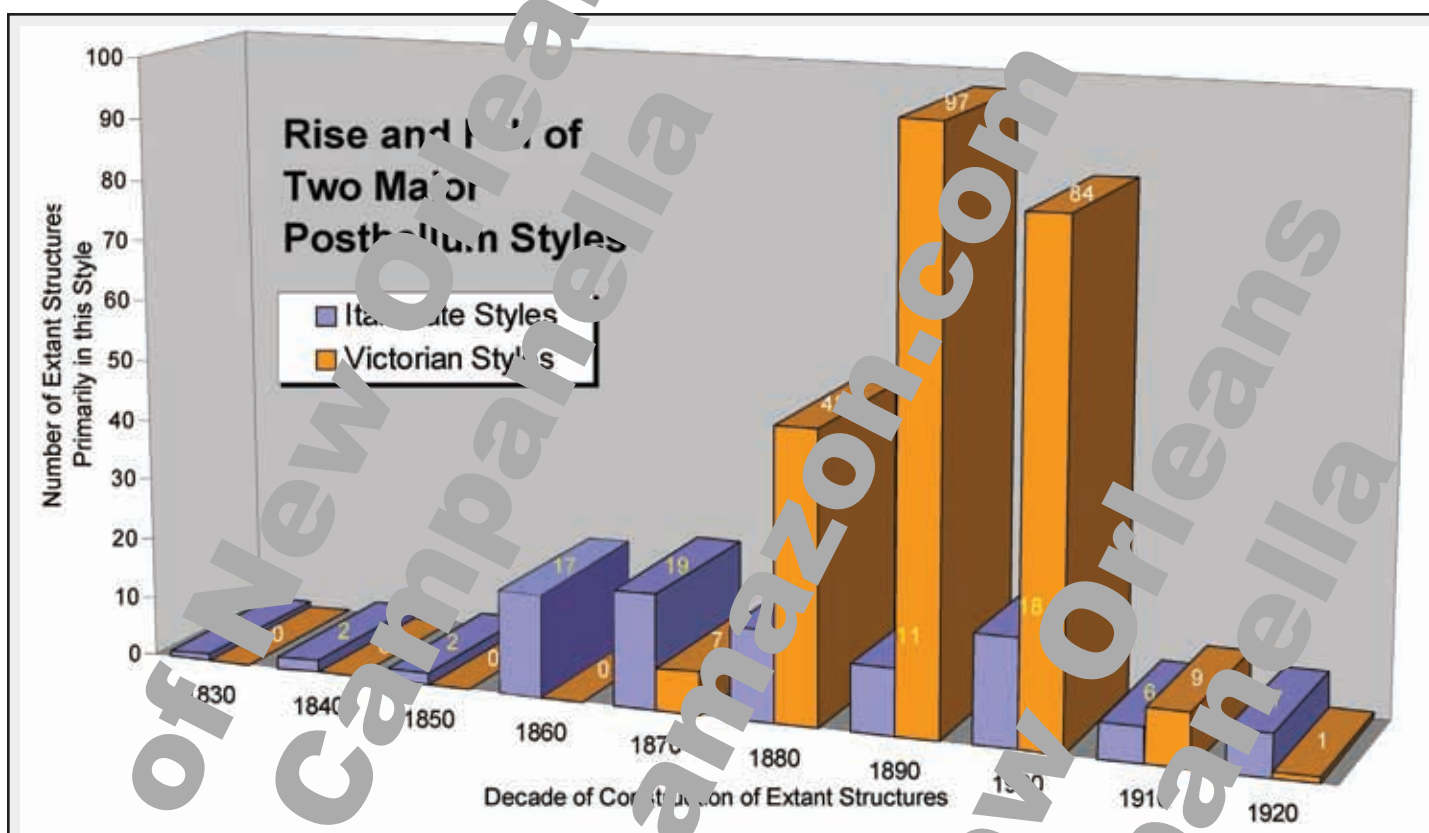
The graph *Popularity of Later Architectural Style in the French Quarter*, by Caldwell, tracks the rise and fall of some less

<sup>61</sup> Joan G. Caldwell, “Italianate Domestic Architecture in New Orleans 1850–1880” (Ph.D. dissertation, Tulane University, 1975), 10.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 1.



Plotting the construction dates of extant Quarter structures shows the rise and fall of Creole style, followed by the peaking of American styles, namely Greek Revival. Both Creole and Greek Revival fell out of fashion around the Civil War, when new construction all but halted. The turn-of-the-century preference for exotic new styles—Victorian Italianate, Queen Anne, Edwardian, Neo-Classical, and others—is captured with a modest peak around 1900, which petered out by the Depression and World War II. “French Quarter Revival,” mandated by preservation laws, peaked during the tourism-driven construction boom of the 1960s and 1970s. Prohibition on new hotels and more stringent preservationist oversight led to a drop-off in new construction at the end of the century. *Graph and analysis by author.*



The Italianate style grew out of the "Picturesque" movement, introduced to America from England around 1840. It arrived to the French Quarter prior to the Civil War and achieved modest popularity after the conflict, replacing the antebellum Greek Revival style. Victorian styles came into vogue at the century's end, mostly adopted for shotgun houses built primarily in the lower Quarter as working-class homes. These styles are often described as Victorian Italianate. (The term *Victorian* denotes an era as well as a style.) Graph and analysis by author.

common styles represented in extant French Quarter structures. Note that:

- turn-of-the-century preference for European styles such as Renaissance Revival, Queen Anne, Neo-Classical, and Beaux Arts;
- early twentieth century popularity of Edwardian and Spanish Revival (not to be confused with Spanish Colonial styles);
- surge in Commercial styles around 1900, reflecting the conversion of some blocks in the upper Quarter and French Market area from retail and profession to industrial and warehousing;
- post-Victorian emergence of City Beautiful and Craftsman-style bungalows;
- frequency of "functional" structures (sheds, garages, etc.) built in the decades prior to legal protection when the Quarter was a run-down neighborhood prone to demolition and functional usage;
- rarity of International or Modern styles, which came in vogue after the preservation era and are all but forbidden in the Quarter today.

Many representatives of these late nineteenth and early twentieth-century styles occur in the lower, lakeside quadrant of the Quarter, for reasons that are related to patterns of structure age (previous chapter) and structure typology (next chapter). This area was historically more residential and less



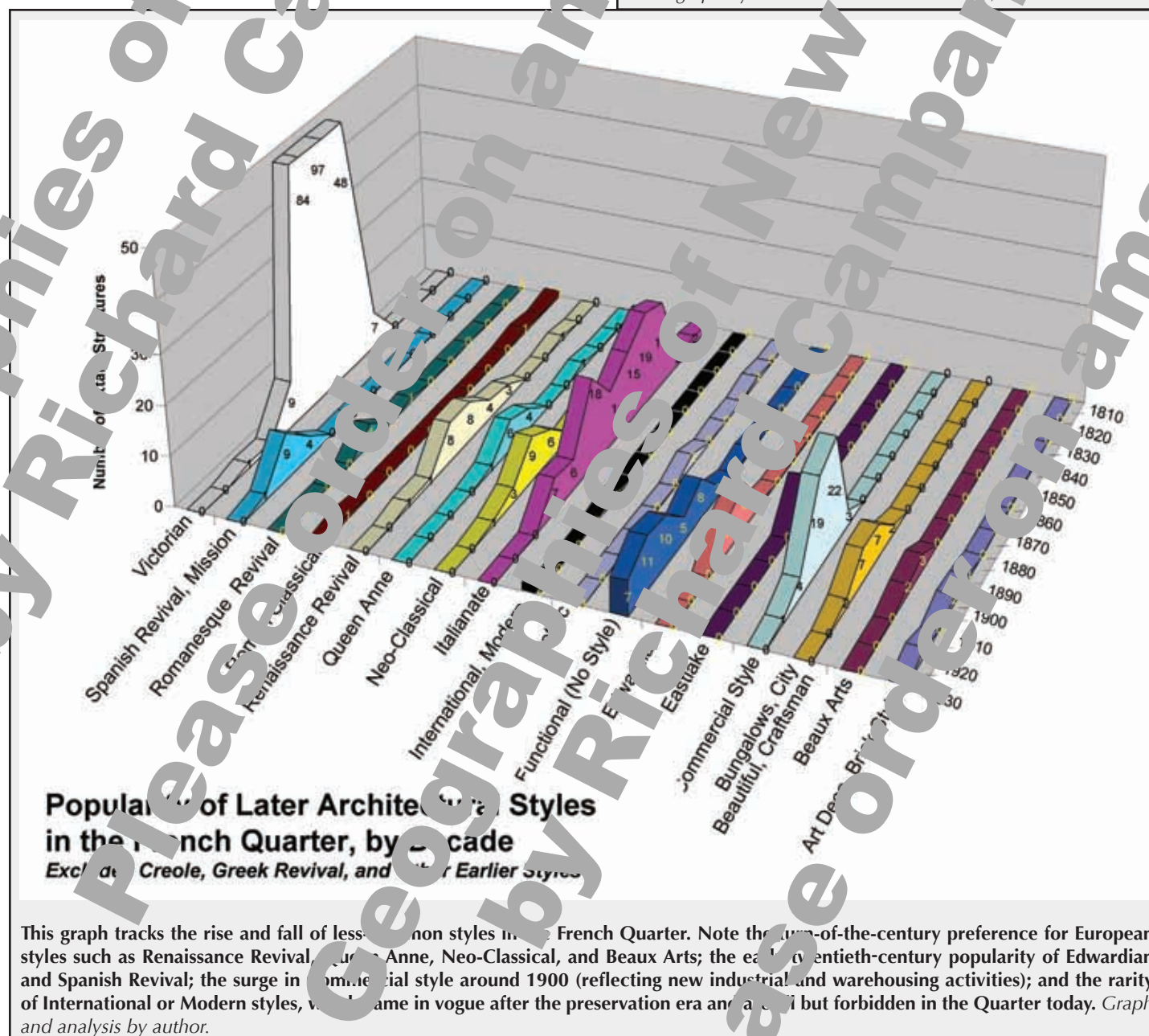
This late-1850s townhouse at 934 Royal illustrates the transition from Greek Revival to Italianate. The heavy lintels above the side windows are Greek Revival traits, while the decorative parapet and segmented arches on the façade are Italianate. Photograph by author, 2004.



affluent than the Quarter's central heart, and was more likely to host cottages occupied by the working class. Cottages, which did not efficiently utilize parcel space, were more likely to be razed in the postbellum era (unlike large townhouses and storehouses, which were often subdivided into apartments). The demolished cottages were usually replaced by shotgun houses or bungalows, and, with their elongated shapes, made better use of parcel dimensions. Because this transformation occurred at a time when Victorian-Italianate style was fashionable, we see this and other circa-1900 styles predominating through the lower the Quarter. But exceptions are the rule, and, just as one may find eighteenth-century and twenty-one-century buildings practically on the same block in this veritable outdoor museum of architecture, one may also encounter a Spanish Colonial style home or a Spanish Revival style, or a building in the style of ancient Greece near a bungalow fashionable like those in California.



Religious institutions in the Quarter exhibit almost as wide a range of styles as commercial and residential edifices. The Our Lady of the Most Holy Annunciation Convent is French Colonial, while the St. Louis Cathedral reflects Greek Revival influences. Further, on the North Rampart edge of the Quarter, is a rare example of Gothic style in the Center for Jesus the Lord Church (center), and Spanish Revival style in St. Marks' Methodist Church at right. Photograph by Ronnie Cardwell with author, 2004.



## “A PHILOSOPHY OF SPACE” PATTERNS OF STRUCTURE TYPE IN THE FRENCH QUARTER

Structural typology, more so than architectural style, shapes the French Quarter’s built environment and distinguishes it from the urban American form. *Type*, or *type* is the underlying form, shape, orientation, and layout of a building. While styles are informed by ever-changing tastes and draped upon structures rather interchangeably, type reflects the needs, wants, and means of its builders and owners, representing “a philosophy of space, a culturally-determined sense of dimension.”<sup>63</sup> Cultures that value privacy would probably not build their houses without hallways, such that rooms can be accessed only from other rooms, while gregarious societies may be more inclined to embrace such an arrangement. Individuals with abundant means, and a desire to display it, may opt for a townhouse; those with limited means may have no choice but settle for a cottage or shotgun. Style in these scenarios is not inconsequential, but it is secondary.

Structure types, like styles, sometimes resist easy categorization. The line between type and function for entities such as banks and hotels can be blurry, as is distinguishing between two related types, such as shotguns and certain bungalows. It is also debatable whether a “Creole cottage” is *per se*, or a Creole *style* applied to the cottage *type* (as I have handled them).<sup>64</sup> But the major distinctions are the important ones,

<sup>63</sup> John Michael Hens, “Sources of the Shotgun House: African and Caribbean Antecedents for Afro-American Architecture” (Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University, 1975), 164.

<sup>64</sup> Not all cottages in the Quarter are Creole cottages. Some are “dressed” in the Greek Revival, Queen Anne, or Italianate styles, and there is even one rare Spanish

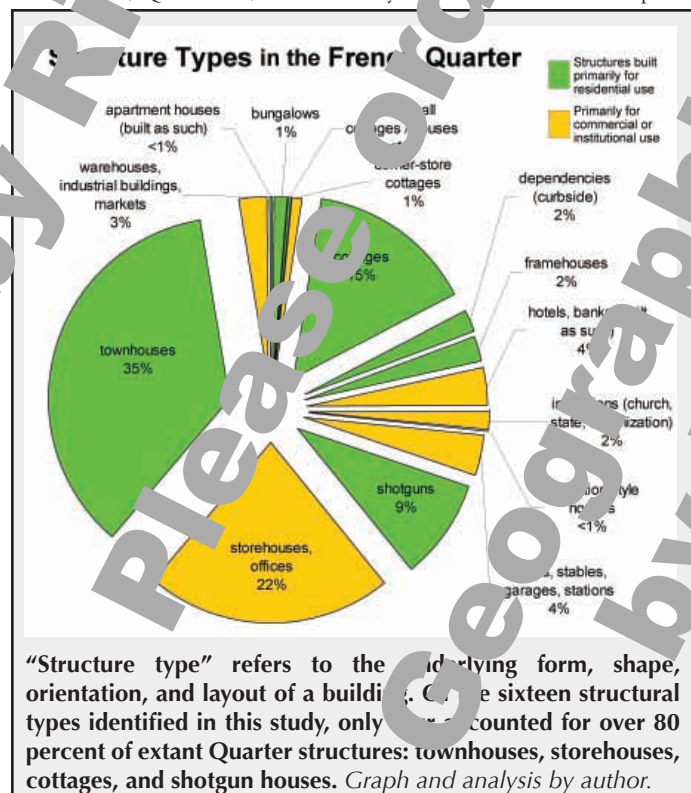
and of the sixteen types identified in this study (see pie chart *Structure Types in the French Quarter*),<sup>65</sup> only four accounted for 81 percent of the 2,244 buildings in the Quarter: the townhouse (35 percent), the mixed commercial/residential-use storehouse (22 percent), the cottage (15 percent), and the shotgun (9 percent).

A townhouse is a multi-story brick structure set in a row, often with shared walls, designed originally for the residential occupancy of its affluent owners. Townhouses in the French Quarter were usually mansions. A storehouse is outwardly similar but serves a commercial purpose on the ground floor, and may afford either residential or commercial (including storehouse) use on the upper floors. Both townhouse and storehouses in the Quarter were usually built with three bays on each of two to three floors. Conversion over the years between townhouses and storehouses, and from mixed-use to solely commercial use, accounts for some gray zones between these two types. But there is no confusing them with cottages and shotguns. Cottages are rectangular or square residential structures (unless they sit on corners, where they often serve retail functions as well), usually one-and-a-half stories plus an attic, with a roofline is parallel with the abutting street. Shotgun houses are elongated linear structures oriented perpendicular to the street, described in detail below. Variations abound within the prevailing types: townhouses and storehouses may have steep or flat roofs, balconies or galleries, or arched or square openings; cottages and shotguns may have hip or gable roofs, brick or wooden walls, or single or double doors.

## HISTORICAL TRENDS OF STRUCTURE TYPE

The graph *Historical Trends in Structure Type Represented in Today’s French Quarter*, shows that cottages, townhouses, and storehouses were all popular during the building boom of the second quarter of the nineteenth century. Townhouses were especially popular, but because these data represent *extant* buildings, this peak may reflect the greater likelihood that the best and architecturally significant townhouses were more likely to survive to the present day. Shotguns, on the other hand, were extremely scarce in the early 1800s, though not entirely absent. Construction of all types came to near-total halt during the Civil War, and returned at minimal levels during federal occupation.

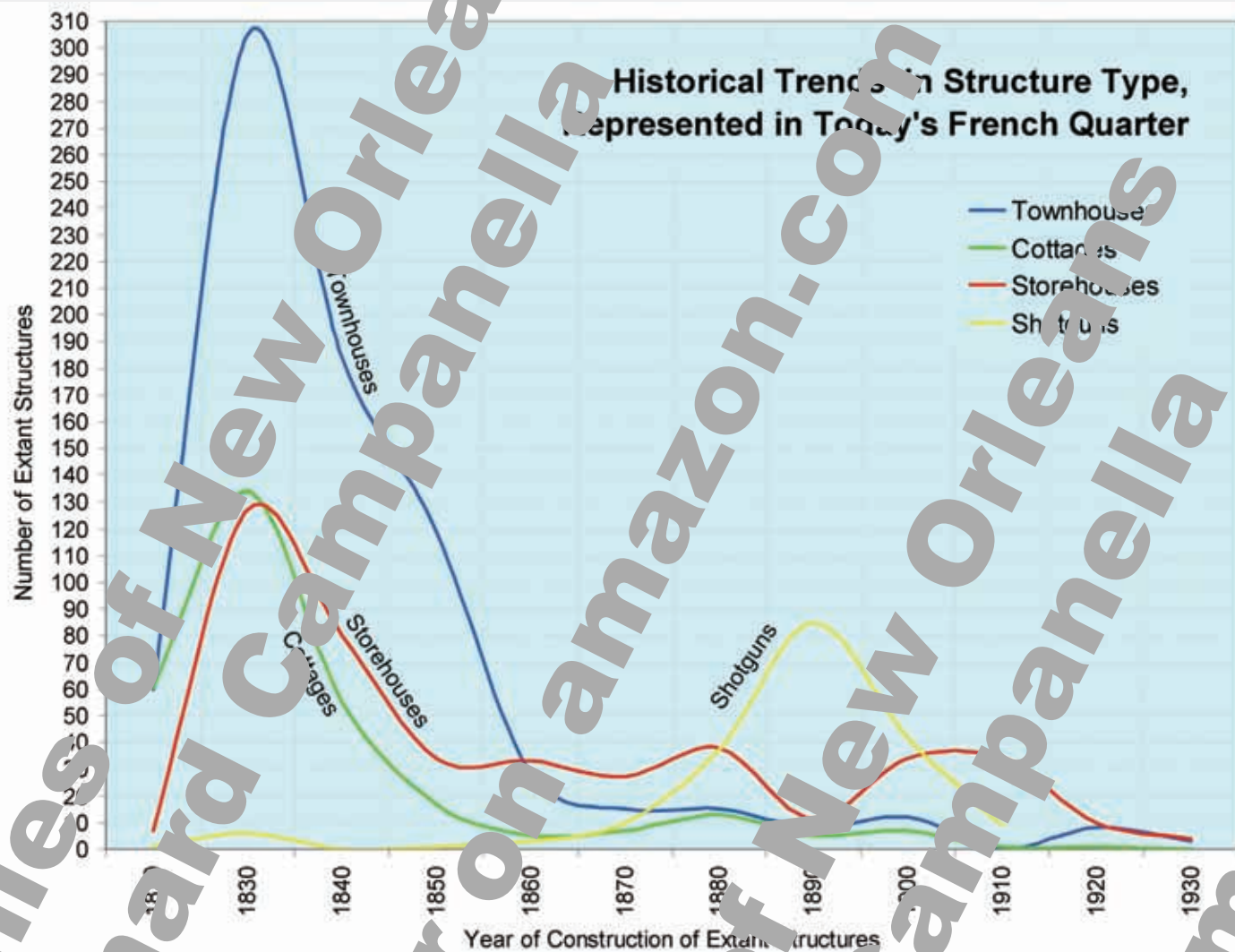
Once the city got back on its feet in the late 1870s and 1880s, a new built environment arose in the French Quarter. Gone, with few exceptions, was new townhouse construction: the wealthy by this time had departed the no-longer-fashionable old city for uptown and Esplanade Avenue, a trend that had actually started before the Civil War. Others had lost their fortunes to the conflict. Storehouses also overtook town-



colonial cottage, but in style and era of construction.

<sup>65</sup> Based on an analysis of the Vieux Carré Survey. See the chapter, “An Architectural Geography of the French Quarter” for methodological details.





Cottages, townhouses, and storehouses were all popular during antebellum times. After the Civil War, the French Quarter changed. New townhouse construction declined as the wealthy departed for uptown and Esplanade Avenue. Storehouses overtook townhouses, further indicating that what was once a commercial/residential neighborhood with both affluent and working-class populations had transformed to a gritty district for the working-class and poor. Most significantly, shotgun houses surged in popularity, at the expense of cottages, which had declined steadily after their 1830s peak and never really returned. *Graph in analysis by author.*



Most of these houses, which exhibit Greek Revival or Creole styles draped on the cottage typology, date from the 1830s and 1840s. The 500 block of Burgundy provides a view of rear-Quarter residential streetscapes from the mid-nineteenth century, prior to the boom in shotgun house construction a half-century later. *Photograph by author, 2004.*



This rare flat-roof Spanish colonial cottage at 707 Dumaine, circa 1799, demonstrates that cultural tradition often trumps environmental consideration in housing: a flat roof works better in arid Spain than in humid New Orleans, yet colonists nevertheless combined this and other traditions in their new environs, adapting them to local factors only afterwards. Until around 1890, a similar cottage stood to the left of this one; as was often the case, it was razed for a Victorian Italianate shotgun double, visible here. *Photograph by author, 2003.*



This handsome house at 111 St. Louis is a large type adorned in the Queen Anne style popular in the turn-of-the-century era, particularly up town. There are only eleven representatives of the Queen Anne style in the French Quarter. Photograph by author, 2002.

houses, a reversal of the antebellum trend, further indicating that what was once a common residential neighborhood with both affluent and working-class populations had transformed to primarily industrial/commercial/residential district with only a working-class population. Note, however, the change in storehouse construction in the 1890s, possibly caused by the big city industrial buildings and warehouses erected in the river and riverside blocks in that decade.

Perhaps the most fascinating postbellum trend is the resurgence in popularity of the shotgun house, at the expense of the cottage, which had declined steadily in the Quarter after its 1830s peak and never really came back. What explains this switch? First, some background on the famous shotgun house.



These spectacular Greek Revival-style townhouses at 532-542 North Rampart date from around 1850. Townhouses, originally built as elite homes for wealthy families, are the most common structure type in the French Quarter, reflecting its mid-19th-century prosperity. When the Quarter declined, they were subdivided into cheap apartments. Today, after decades of gentrification, many old townhouses have been subdivided again, this time as condominiums, though some still retain their antique interiors. These particular units have seen better days. Photograph by author, 2003.

## ORIGINS OF THE SHOTGUN HOUSE

The shotgun house is the most ubiquitous traditional vernacular house type in the South and particularly in New Orleans. Its simple, distinctive appearance, conspicuous name, and association with poverty make the shotgun a quintessential component of the Southern landscape, one that outsiders revel in discovering, for it seems to fulfill expectations of rough-edged Southern authenticity. Folklore holds that the utterly non-euphemistic name derives from the ability to fire a shotgun through the front door and out the rear without touching a wall. Another story claims that the house's shape recalls a single-barrel shotgun, a double thus resembling a double-barrel shotgun. The name, at least in New Orleans, seems to have been applied retroactively: architect Robert Carvelosi has found the term *shotgun house* in print only after 1910, a decade or two after the shotguns' peak popularity; earlier references described them as box houses, tenements, or cottages.<sup>66</sup> The name makes one thing clear: rooms in a shotgun house are adjoined consecutively, forming a long, narrow structure. Folklorist John Michael Vlach defined the typology of the shotgun as "a one-room wide, one-story high building with two or more rooms oriented perpendicularly to the road with its front door in the gable end," but added that "other aspects such as size, proportion, roofing, porches, appendages, foundations, trim, and decoration have been so variable that the shotgun is sometimes difficult to identify."<sup>67</sup> Its outstanding exterior characteristic is its elongated shape, sometimes in length-to-width ratios approaching ten-to-one. Inside, what is salient is the lack of hallways: residents and visitors need to pass through rooms—including private bedrooms—to get to other rooms.

Scholarly interest in the shotgun house dates from geographer Fred B. Kniffen's research in the 1930s on Louisiana folk housing, which explored structure typology as a means to delineate cultural regions.<sup>68</sup> Debate has since continued among cultural geographers, architectural historians, and anthropologists as to the shotgun's origins, form and function, and definition. New Orleans shotguns present a special problem, for nowhere else are they so common and so varied. A number of hypotheses on the origin of the shotgun house have been offered:

**Native American Origins** — Geographer William B. Kippmeyer saw parallels between the shotgun house and the Native Louisianian "palmetto house," pointing out its rectangular shape and "high pitched gable roof...oriented with its

<sup>66</sup> As quoted by Judy Walker, "Shotgun Appreciation," *Times-Picayune*, March 1, 2002, Living section, p. 1. A computer-based search of nearly one million pages of books and journals from 1800-1900 revealed not a single use of the term "shotgun house" or its variations, "Creole cottage," on the other hand, yielded eight usages, mostly by well-known "local color" writers such as George Washington Cable and Lafcadio Hearn. Search on Cornell University's "Making of America" database (<http://cdl.library.cornell.edu/moa/index.html>) conducted on August 25, 2004.

<sup>67</sup> Vlach, "Source of the Shotgun House," 29.

<sup>68</sup> Fred B. Kniffen, "Louisiana House Types," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 23 (December 1936): 186-91.



greatest length perpendicular to the bayou, rather than road."<sup>69</sup> Knipmeyer traced a lineage from the structural form of pre-European Choctaw huts to indigenous earth-and-house wooden frame camps and eventually to the shotgun, which he viewed as a fairly late development enabled by lumbering of the late 1800s.<sup>70</sup> But another scholar argued that indigenous building types and techniques in North America, unlike those of other continents, proved "totally inadequate for even the lowest levels of European requirements," and were largely ignored by colonizers beyond the most rudimentary settlements.<sup>71</sup>

**Haitian/African Origins** John Michael Vlach also disagreed with the Native American hypothesis in his 1975 dissertation on shotgun houses, noting the abundance of shotgun-like houses throughout present-day Haiti. Vlach traced the essential shotgun typology to the eighteenth-century enslaved populations of Haiti, formerly Saint-Domingue, who had been recruited by slavers from the coastal and forested peri-coastal areas of the western and central African region known at the time as Guinea and Angola. Vlach described a gable-roofed housing stock indigenous to the western coastal regions of modern sub-Saharan Africa, specifically those of the Yoruba peoples, and linked them to similar structures in modern Haiti, with comparable characteristics such as rectangular shape, room juxtaposition, and ceiling height (although perpendicular orientation varied). In many cases, all that is

<sup>69</sup> William Bernard Knipmeyer, "Settlement Succession in Eastern French Louisiana" (Ph.D. dissertation, Louisiana State University, 1956), 75.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 81-87. Knipmeyer's dissertation primarily addresses settlement succession, rather than the origin of house types.

<sup>71</sup> James Marston Folsom, "Creole Architecture 1718-1800: The Rise and Fall of a Great Tradition," in *The Past as Prelude: New Orleans, 1718-1968*, ed. Hodding Carter (New Orleans, 1968), 72.



Some researchers have hypothesized Haitian, African, and Native American origins of the shotgun house; others suggest it was "invented" based on practical constraints, such as narrow lots. Shotguns are found throughout the lower Mississippi River region, particularly in areas with high black populations. These shotguns "on the wrong side of the tracks" in Vicksburg, Mississippi, illustrate that this house type is still closely associated with Southern poverty. Note the "Vicksburg pierced columns," an architectural trait unique to this river city. Photograph by author, 2003.

required to convert the Yoruba hut into a morphologically completed shotgun is a shift of doorway.... [T]he Haitian shotgun may be considered a product of a continuing process of African architectural modification."<sup>72</sup> Vlach concentrated on tracing Haitian shotguns to their possible African antecedents more so than connecting either to New Orleans, but his general premise is that the exodus of Haitians to New Orleans after the insurrection of 1791-1804 brought this vernacular house type to the banks of the lower Mississippi. "Haitian migrants had only to continue in Louisiana the same life they had known in St. Domingue.... The shotgun house of Port-au-Prince became, quite directly, the shotgun house of New Orleans."<sup>73</sup> The Vieux Carré survey, which estimates construction dates of 1810 to 1823 for three extant shotgun-like houses, seems to support Vlach's timeline, since the main wave of Haitian refugees arrived in New Orleans in 1809. But this may be tautological: the researchers may have presumed that Haitians built these houses and approximated their construction dates accordingly. The circa-1810 shotgun-like house at 819 Burgundy Street—the oldest according to the survey—in fact probably dates to 1840. Other early shotgun-like "longhouses" appeared in the residential blocks of the Quarter, according to National Archives documents, in the 1830s, of which six, according to the survey, still exist.<sup>74</sup> Despite the apparent absence of very early shotguns, the Haitian/African origin hypothesis for New Orleans shotguns is favored by many scholars. One strand of indirect support comes from the distribution of shotgun houses throughout Louisiana, as mapped by geographer Fred Kniffen in the 1930s. Kniffen showed that this house type was generally found along the waterways and bayous of southeastern Louisiana as well as the Red, Ouachita, and Mississippi riverine regions in the northern part of the state.<sup>75</sup> These areas tended to be, and remain, more Francophone in their culture, higher in their proportions of people of African and Creole ancestry, and older in their historical development. Beyond state boundaries, shotguns are found throughout the riverine areas of the lower Mississippi Valley, spatially correlated with antebellum plantation regions and with areas that, historically and currently, host large black populations.<sup>76</sup> If in fact the shotgun diffused from Africa, to Haiti, through New Orleans and up the Mississippi Valley, then the North American distribution we would expect to see. But there are economic variables at play here as well, and they may trump cultural factors in explaining the spatial distribution of the shotgun.

<sup>72</sup> Vlach, "Sources of the Shotgun House," 80-155; quotes from 154-55.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 80-155; quote from 189.

<sup>74</sup> Some architectural historians question whether any true shotgun house predates 1840. But a simple shotgun-like structure appears in the lower right corner of John L. Boqueta de Woiseri's 1804 painting, *A View of New Orleans Taken from the Plantation of Marigny*, suggesting that this basic form was not unknown to the city in the late colonial era. A detail of this painting appears in the chapter on Elysian Fields Avenue.

<sup>75</sup> Kniffen, "Louisiana House Types," 191-92. See Vlach's response on 38-41 of Vlach's dissertation.

<sup>76</sup> Among cities, Louisville, Kentucky, has been described as second only to New Orleans in its number of shotguns.

**Independent Invention Based on Practical Constraints** — Others speculate that while the shotgun resembles house types of other cultures, its manifestation in New Orleans and the South is related to them only because of ease of construction and conservation of resources (building materials, labor, space) made it equally attractive in many areas. One may reason that, given a mild climate, a builder need not rely on the wisdom of ancestors to design a rudimentary edifice that accommodates a narrow street-side or bayou-side lot while minimizing materials and labor. A shotgun, according to this theory, is simply a least-cost solution that any rational individual would invent independently, given certain limited resources. (Only a lean-to is simpler, and, alas, there are some very old shotgun in the Quarter with "leaning" roofs.) Advocates of this theory point to the traditionally narrow building parcels on New Orleans blocks and the slender *allotments* following waterways in Louisiana as other causative agents for construction of elongated struc-



The working-class rear Quarter possesses numerous "long houses" in the early nineteenth century. Only a handful still stand, possibly representing the nation's oldest surviving precedents to the shotgun house. The one above, built in 1823 for free woman of color Helen Le Page, is located at 1024 Gov. Nicholls Street. Note the lack of roof covered with flat tiles, masonry construction, and staid exterior of banded stucco. Another is the so-called Baker Cottage at 819 Burgundy (yellow structure below), once thought to date to around 1810 but more likely 1840. Both were nearly in ruins in the 1960s but have since been beautifully restored. Photographs by author, 2004.



The "Spirit House" sculpture on St. Bernard Avenue in the Creole-associated Seventh Ward commemorates the shotgun house as an African contribution to American architecture, of way of the Caribbean and New Orleans. The flying buttress pay homage to the Catholic French and Spanish influences in early Louisiana history, and in the Creole legacy. Photograph by author, 2003.

tures. "The reason there are shotguns," stated a *Times-Picayune* article, is because "they were a efficient way to house a lot of people on limited land in skinny 30-by-120-foot lots," like New York City "railroad flats" or Philadelphia's "trinity" houses.<sup>77</sup> Lending some apparent support for the invention hypothesis is the activity of Roberts & Company, a New Orleans sash and door fabricator formed in 1856 that developed prefabricated shotgun-like houses in the 1860s and 1870s and even won awards for them at international expositions, where they were billed as the *Maison Portative de la Louisiane*. Whether Robert & Company truly invented the design or simply "capitalized on a local traditional form"<sup>78</sup> is the key question. Others have suggested that shotguns were invented in response to the real estate tax code which pegged taxation to street frontage rather than total area (though no one seems to be able to identify the exact code). But the invention hypothesis does not explain why the shotgun is not always found where ever narrow lots or frontage-based taxes exist, yet *is* found when these conditions do not exist, such as along the wide-open roadsides of the Mississippi Delta plantation country or the woodlands of the Carolinas. Nor does it explain why the shotgun failed to catch on until many years after the delineation of narrow lots. Additionally, it could be argued that common-wall rowingements utilize space more effectively than shotguns of urban blocks, yet we rarely see these structures in New Orleans. Could cultural factors outweigh local invention in the development of the shotgun? Jay Dearborn Edwards points out, "anthropologists have long realized that independent invention is rare in human cultural development. People are far better at borrowing the ideas of their neighbors than they are at inventing their own out of whole cloth."<sup>79</sup>

<sup>77</sup> Judy Walker, "Shotgun House Appreciation," *Times-Picayune*, March 1, 2002, Living section, p. 1.

<sup>78</sup> Vlach, "Sources of the Shotgun House," 60-63.

<sup>79</sup> Jay Dearborn Edwards, "The Origins of Creole Architecture," *Winterthur Portfolio*.



Some scholars note the presence of linear house types with interconnecting rooms in eighteenth-century France, raising the possibility of a European link, while others suggest that this vernacular house type may simply represent a modification of the Creole cottage (which also had interconnecting rooms with no hallways) to narrow lots.<sup>80</sup> Empirical evidence shows that, in the Quarter and citywide, the shotgun indeed filled the niche left open by the demise of the cottage. Shotgun singles and doubles came to dominate the turn-of-the-century rental-housing stock of New Orleans' working-class and poor neighborhoods, yet they were also erected as owned-occupied homes in middle- and upper-middle-class areas. New Orleans shotguns exhibited numerous locally inspired variations: with hipped, gabled, or "apron" roofs; with "camel humps" to increase living space; with hall-

ways for privacy; with grand Greek Revival and Neo-Classical porticos; with elaborate Victorian gingerbread; and, finally, as "bungalows," arguably the final variation of the shotgun.<sup>81</sup> Their relative numbers by neighborhood reflect when that area was developed: shotguns comprise only 9 percent of French Quarter structures, because the district was entirely developed by the time shotguns came into fashion. Mid-City, on the other hand, developed precisely during the shotgun's turn-of-the-century heyday, and its housing stock is nearly 50 percent shotgun.<sup>82</sup> Though some predate the Civil War by a number of years, and others postdate World War I, most local shotguns were built within a decade of the 1890s, when they were erected to standardized designs and decorated with jigsaw ornamentation sold through such sources as the Roberts Company catalog. The fanciful gingerbread encasing the cheerful pastel-colored facade of a typical New Orleans shotgun house masked the fact that the structure and the family life behind it were usually poor, frugal, and cramped.

*lio: A Journal of American Material Culture* 29 (summer/Autumn 1994): 155.

<sup>80</sup> Ellen Weiss, "City and Country, 1880-1915: New Impulses and New Tastes," in *Louisiana Buildings 1720-1940*, eds. Jessie French and Barbara SoRelle Bacot (Baton Rouge and London, 1997), 281-82; and Robert Caldwell, "Urban Growth, 1815-1880: Diverse Tastes—Greek, gothic, and Italianate," in *Louisiana Buildings 1720-1940*, eds. Jessie French and Barbara SoRelle Bacot (Baton Rouge and London, 1997), 178. Note that cited researchers mentioned these characteristics in passing and did not offer them as hypotheses of the origin of the shotgun.

<sup>81</sup> Vlach, "Sources of the Shotgun House," 190-92.

<sup>82</sup> According to Robert Cangelosi, shotguns comprise 46 percent of the housing stock in Mid-City, while side-hall shotguns make up another 3 percent. As quoted by Judy Walker, "Shotgun Appreciation," *Times-Picayune*, March 1, 2002, Living section, p. 1.



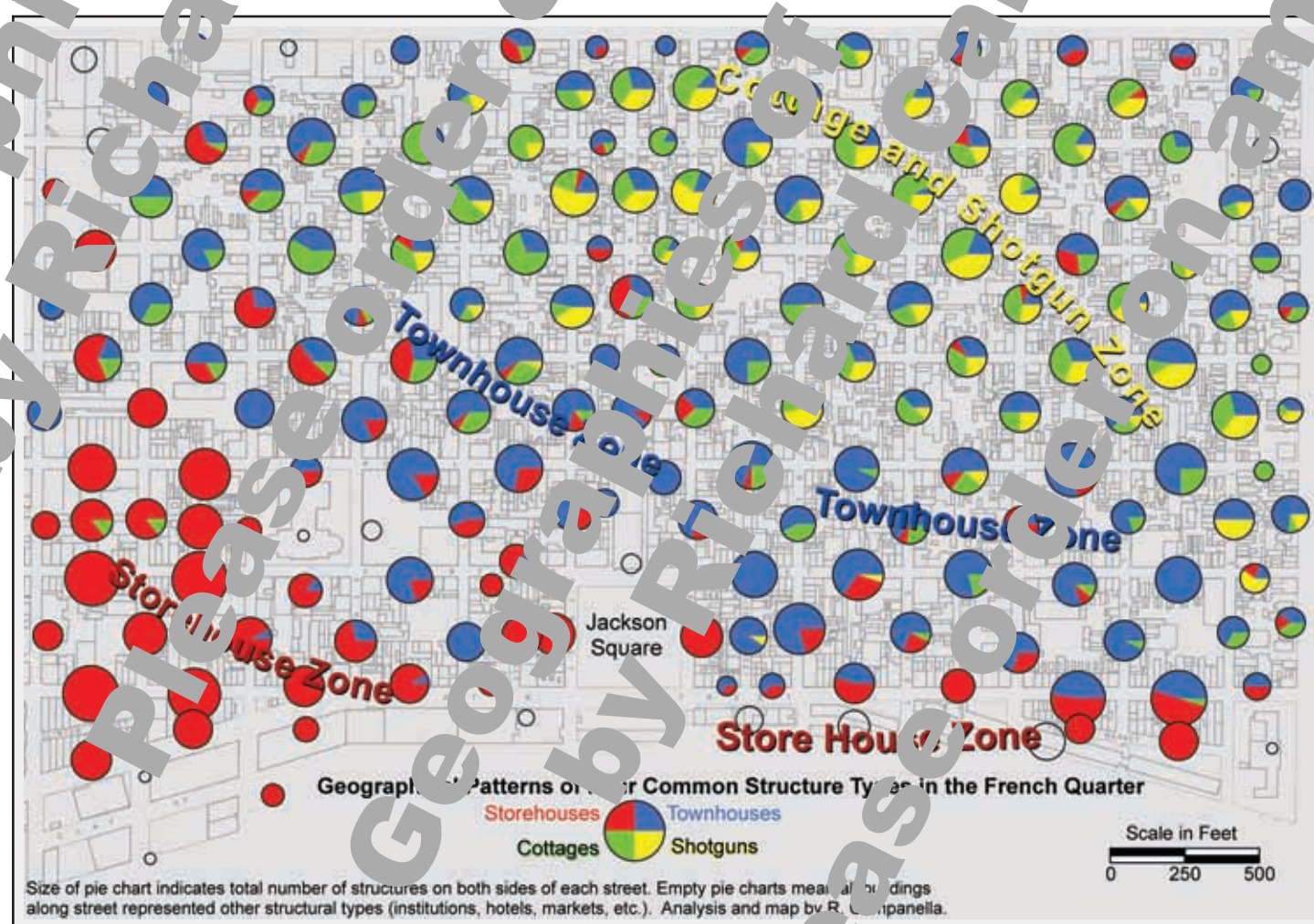
When structural types are mapped at the building level (above), and aggregated at the street level (right), three patterns emerge: a zone of cottages and shotguns in the east and lower Quarter; townhouses clustered in the district's heart; and storehouses prevailing in the upper Quarter. These patterns reflect centuries of history and help drive modern-day commercial and residential use of the French Quarter. Maps and analysis by author.



Shotguns were replaced citywide by the California bungalow in the 1920s and 1930s and, after World War II, by the ranch house, as the "default" house type for new construction in the city. For years, architectural historians fixed their eyes at the run-of-the-mill 1890s Victorian antebellum shotgun houses lining street after street, and did not protest their demolition, even in the French Quarter, as late as the 1960s. In recent decades, however, many New Orleanians have come to appreciate the sturdy construction and exuberant embellishments of the classic shotgun, and today they are a cherished part of New Orleans culture and a favorite target for historical restoration. The Preservation Resource Center of New Orleans dedicates an entire month (March) to the shotgun, during which tours, restoration workshops, art displays, lectures, and even a "shotgun summit" are held to survey and encourage the many ways in which New Orleanians treasure their oddly sized, oddly named abodes.<sup>83</sup> Throughout the rural South, shotguns remain a symbol of poverty and are hardly cherished by those who reside in them. When lined up along bare, paved streets on the wrong side of towns like Donaldsonville, St. Francisville, Natchez, and Vicksburg, they form both picturesque vistas of Southern life and poignant reminders of a troubled past.

Why, then, explain the rise of shotguns in the postbellum Quarter, at the expense of cottages? One hypothesis of my own—is that emancipation and postwar economic

decline rendered obsolete the servants' quarters that were traditionally appended to the rear of city structures. We see far fewer of these slant-roofed dependencies built after the war, because slaves had been freed and the luxury of a live-in servant became less affordable. Many antebellum cottages had such quarters or other dependencies (such as kitchens and outhouses) behind them, overlooking a courtyard that occupied the rest of the parcel. With such external quarters no longer necessary, the logical adjustment would be to fill the entire rectangular lot with rentable structural space, rather than squandering it on obsolete dependencies and vacant courtyards. Technology by this time allowed kitchens and, later, toilets, to come inside the house, again meaning less need for courtyard space and greater need for interior space. The idea of a long, linear house type had already been introduced to New Orleans decades earlier, but remained fairly dormant. Now it offered the perfect solution: a more efficient utilization of limited parcel space: the demolition of a typical cottage availed space for two shotgun singles or one shotgun double. Add to this the cost efficiency of mechanized mass-production that went into turn-of-the-century shotguns, versus the slower, individualized construction of a traditional cottage, and the logic of switching from cottages to shotguns seems compelling. If this hypothesis is correct, then the cottage-to-shotgun shift in the late nineteenth-century French Quarter may represent a structural response to the





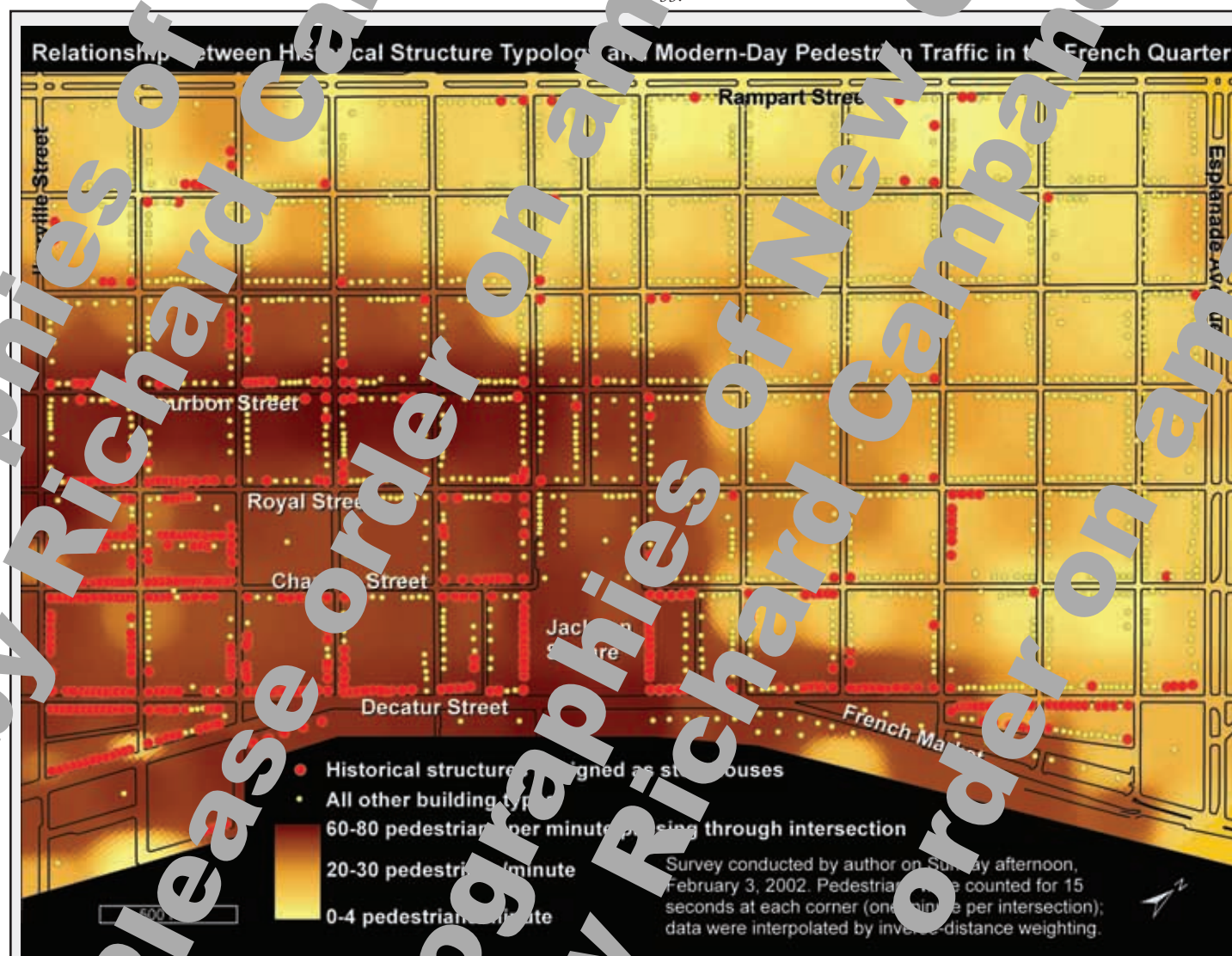
momentous historical and economic transformations occasioned by the Civil War.

## GEOGRAPHICAL PATTERNS OF STRUCTURAL TYPE

The spatial distributions for all sixteen structural types are shown at the building level in the accompanying map, and for the four most common types at the street level (*Geographical Patterns of Four Common Structural Types in the French Quarter*). We see that cottages and shotguns both predominate in the lower, lakeside quadrant of the Quarter. Of the 565 cottages (of all styles) and shotguns (including bungalows) in the French Quarter, almost 90 percent occur north of a diagonal line drawn across the Quarter, from the Canal/Rampart intersection to the foot of Esplanade. Shotguns in particular are extremely scarce south of this line. Reasons for this preponderance relate to economics and land use: the

lower, lakeside (northern) section of the Quarter was, from the mid-eighteenth to mid-twentieth centuries, the working-class section of the neighborhood, hence the relative scarcity of townhouses and abundance of humbler abodes. Additionally, this was, and remains, the more residential section of the district, thus the preponderance of residential structures over commercial ones (shotguns are all but incompatible with commercial use). That cottages and shotguns both prevail in the same area lends some credence to the hypothesis suggested above. The pattern seems to corroborate the *Plan and Program for the Preservation of the Vieux Carré*'s observation that shotguns "replaced numerous earlier cottages, mostly in the prime areas of the Quarter and the crowded corner narrow lots with narrow walkways on either side."<sup>84</sup>

<sup>84</sup> Bureau of Governmental Research, New Orleans, *Plan and Program for the Preservation of the Vieux Carré: Historic District Demonstration Study* (New Orleans, 1968), 55.



As this map indicates, most pedestrian traffic in the Quarter flows in a dogleg-shaped pattern: up upper Bourbon, Royal, Chartres, and Decatur streets, through Jackson Square, down French Market, and back. The reason is simple: this is where tourist-friendly restaurants, galleries, bars, hotels, and shops predominate. But why are they here? One reason is the concentration of storehouses in this area (red points), a historical structural typology that today best accommodates tourism-related businesses. Townhouses, cottages, and even shotgun houses are also used for commercial purposes, but none are as suited for commerce as storehouses. The circumstances that led to their construction in this area in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries thus help explain the French Quarter experience of millions of tourists in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Pedestrian survey conducted by author on February 3, 2002 (Super Bowl Sunday afternoon) by counting pedestrians for fifteen seconds at every corner (one minute per intersection). Analysis and map by author.

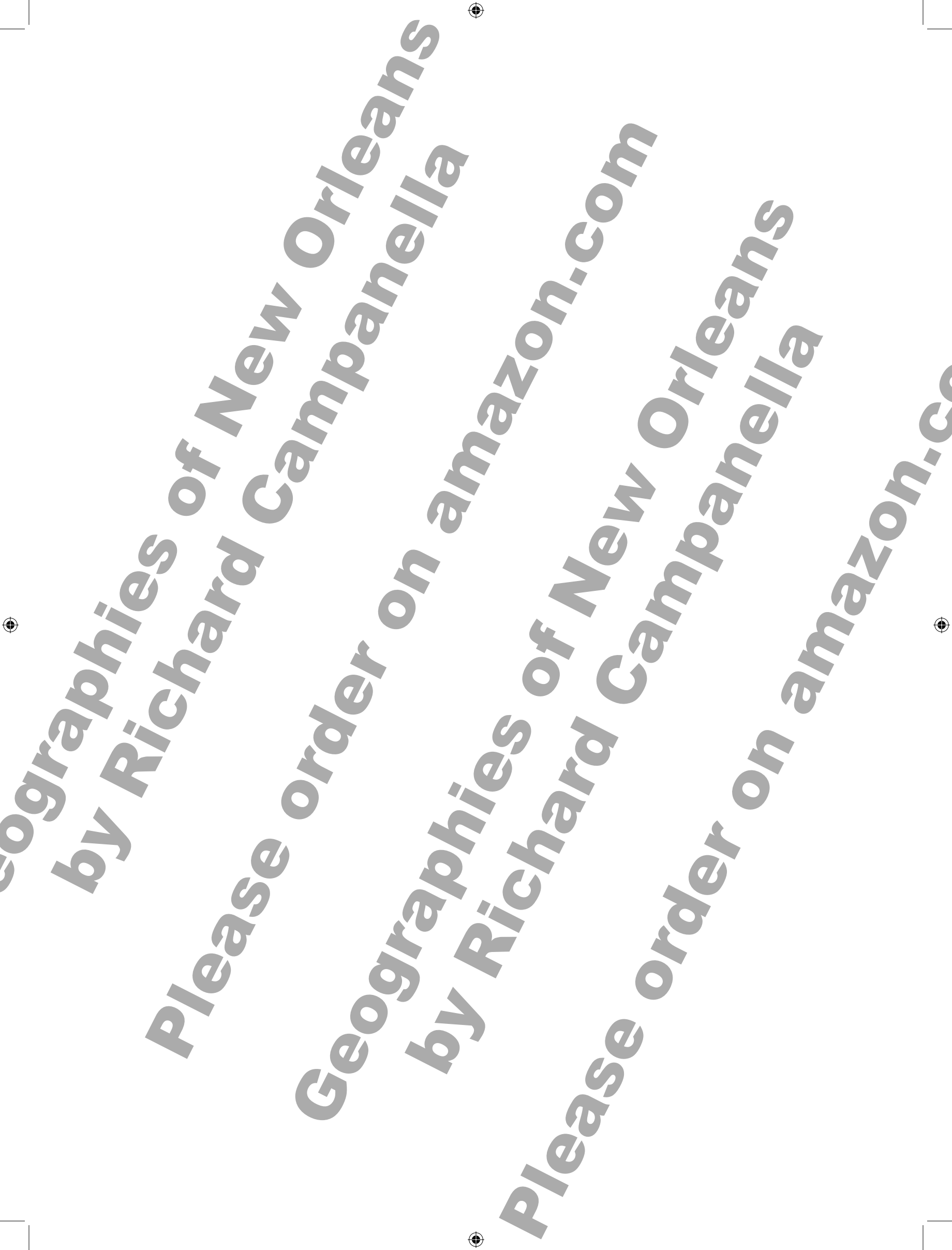
The "townhouse zone" is situated in the central heart of the Quarter, where mansions were built in large numbers in the antebellum era for wealthy families. Both townhouses and storehouses are more likely than other structural types to dominate entire streets, because, as row buildings, they were often constructed in multiple units.

The upper and riverside rim of the Quarter, labeled "storehouse zone" in the map, have for centuries hosted the lion's share of commercial activity in the Quarter, and continue to do so today. Most tourists experience the French Quarter by strolling the upper blocks of Bourbon, Royal, Chartres, and Decatur, funnelling through Jackson Square, then heading to the French Market and back. Why this dog-legged swath? Because it is where scores of old storehouses have enabled the establishment of businesses, restaurants, and clubs to sell the visitor the "New Orleans experience." True, many residential townhouses and cottages have been converted to tourist shops, and many businesses simply followed the tourists, rather than vice versa. But, in general, millions

of tourists spend most of their time here simply because this is where the structural type needed to serve them is found in the largest concentrations.

A street-level view of the French Quarter bestows many rare and striking sights to the observant pedestrian: buildings older than entire American cities; architectural styles drawn from the world over; ironwork exhibiting the best hammerblows of eighteenth-century artisans. But the weightiest factor in forming these streetscapes—structural typologies—can be missed at the pedestrian level, as forms are missed for the trees. To appreciate fully the panoply of forms assembled here, a lofty perch from a nearby high-rise is recommended. In the complex angular, jagged, multifaceted glistening cityscape that unfurls below, cottages intermingle with townhouses, mansions iterate parallel lines, storehouses intermix with industrial buildings, oversized government institutions loom ironically, and church steeples and cupolas punctuate the skyline. It is a rare sight in modern America.





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## SIGNATURE OF THE CITY PATTERNS OF IRON-LACE GALLERIES AND BALCONIES IN THE FRENCH QUARTER

Few images evoke *New Orleans* in the mental lexicon of the world like the city's iron-lace galleries and balconies. Countless iconic references to the city—photographs in generic “American the Beautiful” calendars, destination ads in airport waiting rooms, casino motifs in the seedier sections of Las Vegas—depict the frilly swirls of iron lace crowding narrow French Quarter streets. Television commercials wield wide-angle shots of iron lace to associate the product with a New Orleans they invariably portray as “funky,” yet authentic. Movies pan down the city railings to set the location and mood of a scene. Tourists’ expectations are fulfilled when they see for themselves that the classic iron-lace streetscapes, complete with awnings spilling from hanging gardens and aloof eccentrics leaning in French doorways, do indeed exist, and in great numbers.



The filly designs of cast-iron galleries form internationally recognized iconic imagery for New Orleans in general, and the French Quarter in particular. This specimen adorns the eponymous photographed Labranche House on the corner of Royal and St. Peter. Photograph by author, 2003.

While architectural ironwork is intimately associated with New Orleans in general and the French Quarter in particular, the iconic image of the calendar photograph was a late addition to the street scene. Ironwork “wrought” by hand may be traced back to the earliest days of the colony, attributed to black artisans and French and British influences. Wrought iron, containing about 0.04 to 0.07 percent carbon, formed a “malleable substance which may be shaped by hammering, stretching, or rolling”<sup>85</sup> into “geometric or curvilinear designs,”<sup>86</sup> producing a strong, durable, relatively flexible finished product with a distinctively austere texture.

<sup>85</sup> Ann M. Masson and Lydia H. Schmalz, *Cast Iron and the Crescent City* (New Orleans, 1995), 5.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 5, and Marcus Christian, *Negro Ironworkers of Louisiana, 1718-1900* (Gretna, LA, 1972), 3.

It was costly in terms of labor and material, and therefore did not dominate the streetscape. Elegant but simple wrought-iron balconies, spanning half the width of the banquette (sidewalk) and supported not by columns but cantilevers, were traditional to Spanish colonial-era structures, and may be seen today on eighteen of the twenty-five such structures that remain. Another two Spanish colonial buildings, the Cabildo (1799) and Presbytère (1791-1813), retain their simple wrought-iron railings. Even as these surviving specimens were being installed two hundred years ago, the craft was about to be rendered obsolete by the Industrial Age and the economies of mass production.

Cast iron, a technology developed over centuries and refined in the early 1800s, was first produced in New Orleans by the Leeds Iron Foundry in 1825.<sup>87</sup> Cast iron contained from ten to 150 times more carbon than wrought iron, making it brittle, weaker, rougher, and more prone to rust, but also conducive to pouring delicate, detailed molds. The end result: a fancier (though not necessarily superior) product, available faster and cheaper. Soon, balconies with a mix of wrought- and cast-iron railings were confronting the hundreds of townhouses that arose in the 1830s, a “transitional” decade in New Orleans ironwork as well as in society and in architectural styles.<sup>88</sup> Wrote Marcus Christian, “the Victorian taste for the ornate; the increasing demand created by the sugar, cotton, and business wealth; and the advent of the foundry system coupled with the heavy influx of white ironworkers that made cheap ironwork possible accounted for the change from wrought to cast-iron ornamentation that overcame New Orleans after the 1830s.”<sup>89</sup> Reflecting the increased demand for iron by casting, nationwide iron produc-

<sup>87</sup> Masson and Schmalz, *Cast Iron and the Crescent City*, 3.

<sup>88</sup> See chapter, “A Dictionary of Fashions: Patterns of Architectural Style” for details on the transitional era of the 1830s.

<sup>89</sup> Christian, *Negro Ironworkers of Louisiana*, 31.



This Dumaine street scene presents three ways in which New Orleanians have buffered the private space of the house with the public space of the street: with a narrow balcony (early nineteenth century foreground); with a spacious wooden gallery under a oversized roof (center, late eighteenth century), and with a three-story cast-iron gallery as wide as the sidewalk (mid-nineteenth century). Photograph by author, 2004.



tion rose from about 20,000 tons in 1820, to 100,000 tons in 1840, to 1,000,000 tons by 1855.<sup>90</sup>

Multi-story cast iron galleries, supported with columns and covering the entire banquette, started to appear in the wealthier blocks of the French Quarter and Faubourg around 1850. "One who has not seen New Orleans since ten years ago," wrote the *Daily Picayune* in 1852, "could not fail to be impressed with the extent and importance of the improvements during that time,"<sup>91</sup> among them the new penchant for ornamental iron. Unlike balconies, which were designed for little more than a perch and breath of fresh air, these new galleries were spacious, shaded platforms halfway between public and private space, the perfect re-articulation of a porch or front yard in an urban environment too congested for either. Conceptually, galleries were nothing new in Louisiana buildings: in function, they were typical to eighteenth-century French Creole architecture, though the earlier versions differed greatly in form (usually a wrap-around front porch unified under a single roof) and in material (exclusively wood with colonnades for supports and balustrades for railing). Madame John's legacy at 632 Poydras Street is the last

<sup>90</sup> J.B. Wickersham, *Victorian Ironwork: A Catalogue* (Philadelphia, PA, 1977), 4.

<sup>91</sup> *Daily Picayune*, July 7, 1852, "City Intelligence" column (article cited by Masson and Schmalzer).



New Orleans is the only American city where iron-lace galleries dominate extensive streetscapes and much of the character of entire neighborhoods. Why? Perhaps the city had just the right mix of population density, climate, cultural heritage, wealth, port accessibility, and appropriate housing stock, plus a "golden age" that coincided with the age of cast-iron ornamentation. This "galleriescape" on Royal Street is among the most spectacular. Photograph by author, 2004.

example of an original French Creole gallery in the French Quarter. One wonder of the circa-1850 popularity of iron-lace galleries may be linked to the cultural predilection for semi-private outdoor space among eighteenth-century New Orleanians, which had been forced into the patio (literally) by Spanish building codes and urban densification, only to return years later when technology (iron casting) offered a new and affordable way.

Many sources credit the Baroness Michel Almonester de Pontalba and her twin rows of elegant apartments and stores (1849–1851) bordering Jackson Square, for introducing full-blown iron-lace galleries to the city. Every unit of both the Baroness' buildings is lined with full-width canopied verandah—"probably the earliest in the city"<sup>92</sup>—and an equally striking third-floor balcony with graceful cast-iron finialled patterns, not to mention window grilles and sturdy iron columns. Such a notable residence and such an ambitious, centrally located project may have popularized large iron-lace galleries among wealthy peers.<sup>93</sup> Madame Pontalba's effort was joined by that of another prominent New Orleanian, businessman and philanthropist Judah Touro. Just beyond the French Quarter, Touro helped popularize ornamental iron with his six-unit "Touro Row" (1851) on the 300 block of St. Charles and twelve-unit "Touro Row" occupying the entire Canal Street block between Royal and Bourbon (built in increments between 1852 and 1856). While the St. Charles row had (and still retains) a canopy-canopied balcony of iron, the Touro Row on Canal Street boasted a magnificent two-level covered iron-lace gallery spanning the entire block. Another row of business buildings at Carondelet and Common, built by H.C. Carondelet in 1851, had similar ironwork. A *Daily Picayune* column on July 7, 1852, praised the increasing popularity of these features on the new building stock of the booming city:

Each month witnesses the commencement or completion of some handsome family residences or stores, and every new building that has been lately erected, shows that our property holders are not unmindful of ornament.... One of the most admirable innovations upon the old system of building tall, sturdy structures for business purposes, is the plan which we are about to see is generally coming into vogue, of erecting galleries and verandahs of ornamental iron work.... [Instances include] the new row of houses erected on St. Charles street for Judah Touro, and several others of a similar kind on Carondelet street, in the vicinity of Common.<sup>94</sup>

Two wealthy, distinguished citizens thus seemed to play important roles in transforming the New Orleans streetscape in the late antebellum years, by erecting massive iron galleries at two prominent locations at roughly the same time. Others copied them, and city streets changed forever. Architect Malcolm Heard of the French Quarter wrote, after Pontalba's instal-

<sup>92</sup> Masson and Schmalzer, *Cast Iron and the Crescent City*, 17.

<sup>93</sup> One observer was not particularly impressed with the new feature, stating that the upper Pontalba building, completed by November 1850, presented "a much more striking and massive appearance" before "the heavy roofed balconies were erected." "Pontalba Buildings," *Daily Picayune*, November 2, 1850.

<sup>94</sup> *Daily Picayune*, July 7, 1852, "City Intelligence" column.

lation of ornamental iron in 1850, “building owners replaced their wooden and wrought-iron railings with new cast iron, frequently enlarging their balconies into overhanging galleries extending the full width of the sidewalk. The transformation of Quarter streets with filigree in the decade after 1850 must have been dramatic.”<sup>95</sup> Descriptions of street scenes from before the 1850s show mostly “tall, bare”<sup>96</sup> building façades with little more than the occasional balcony. But those dating from the late 1850s and afterwards, including sketches made by correspondents during the Civil War and occupation<sup>97</sup> and the 1866–1867 photographs of Theodore Lilienthal, are replete with the same filigreed iron-lace galleries portrayed today in the calendar photographs and postcards.

For all their fame, some intriguing questions about New Orleans’ iron-lace galleries remain unanswered. Where is ornamental iron distributed within the French Quarter, and why there? When were iron-adorned edifices erected, and

how does this compare with the previously cited historical evidence? And why do New Orleans and not other American cities exhibit this distinguishing characteristic?

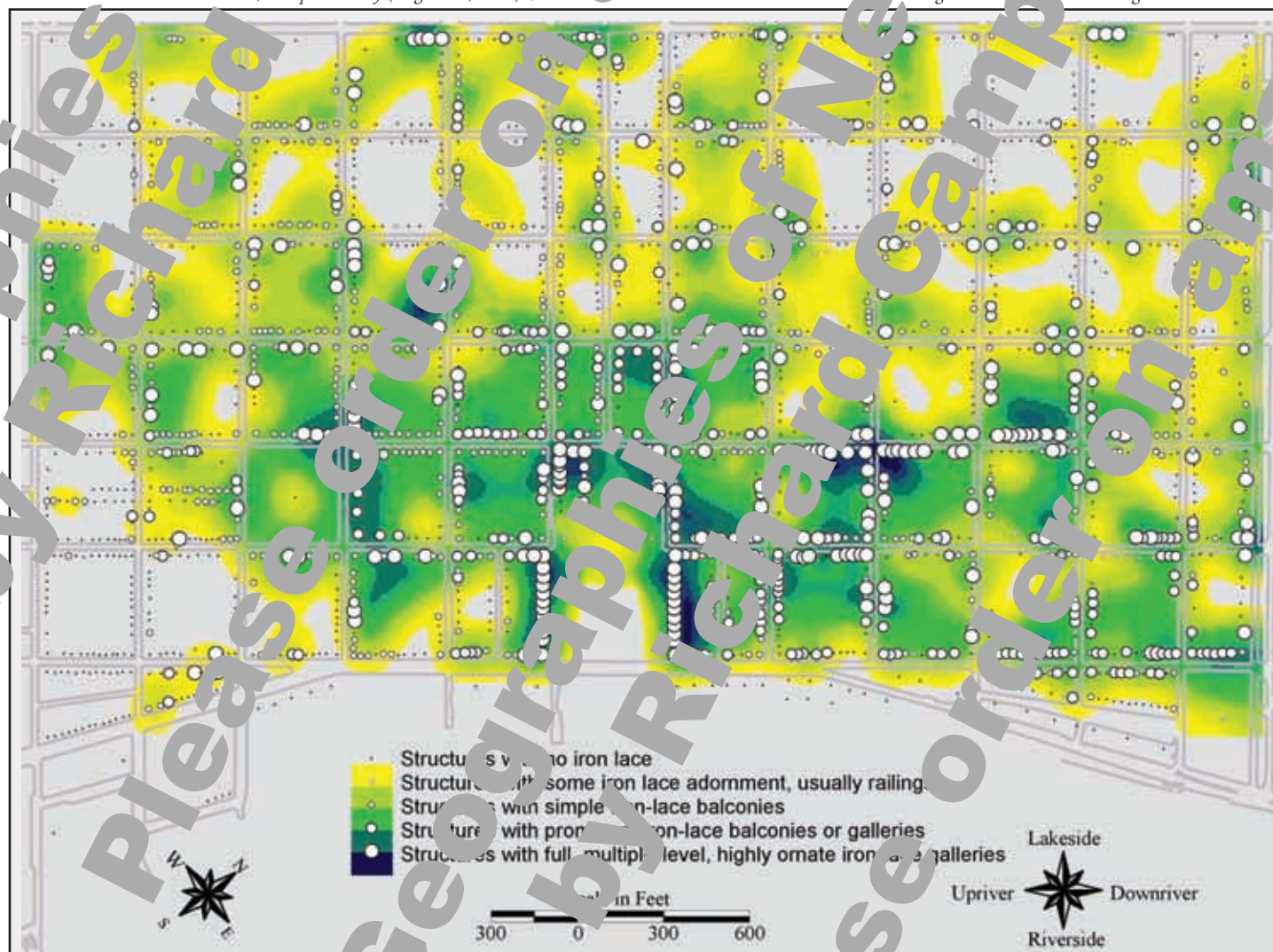
To address these questions, photographs of every building in the circa-1860s Vieux Carré Survey were reviewed, verified, and updated in the streets during late 2001, to quantify levels of iron-lace adornment. Each structure was ranked on an ordinal zero-to-four scale, where “0” indicated no iron whatsoever; “1” meant a minimal amount, usually a simple window grille; “2” implied simple, cantilevered balconies; “3” meant sizable galleries or multi-level balconies; and “4” was reserved for full-blown, highly ornate, multi-level, iron-lace galleries. The results were mapped out for every building in the Quarter, according to the methodology described in the chapter, “An Architectural Geography of the French Quarter.” To accentuate the underlying patterns, the building-level data were interpolated into a continuous surface and color-coded from yellow (little iron) to green, to blue (classic iron-lace streetscapes), which appears in the accompanying map.

<sup>95</sup> Malcolm Heard, *French Quarter Manual: An Architectural Guide to New Orleans’ Vieux Carré* (New Orleans, 1977): 6.

<sup>96</sup> *Daily Picayune*, July 1, 1852, “City Intelligence” column.

<sup>97</sup> For example, see Alfred R. Waud’s sketch, “The Excitement in New Orleans—View on St. Charles Street,” *Harper’s Weekly* (August 18, 1866): 516.

<sup>98</sup> I did not distinguish between wrought and cast iron (most wrought-iron balconies fell in the “2” category), and I eliminate recently installed galleries, from the tabulation. Wooden balconies and galleries were included altogether.



Iron-lace galleries and balconies tend to be concentrated in the Quarter’s geographic heart, an area that also hosts the greatest concentration of antebellum townhouses. In its core are the Pontalba Buildings of Jackson Square, where the circa-1850 fashion is said to have originated. Map and analysis by author.



The map shows that ornamental iron may be found at varying levels on almost every block of the French Quarter. But the distribution is not random: it tends to be concentrated in the district's geographical heart—those dozen or so blocks layered two deep around Jackson Square—then tapers out toward the edges of the Quarter. Among the most magnificent iron-lace streetscapes are Royal from St. Peter to Gov. Nicholls, St. Peter and St. Ann from Royal to Decatur, and the blocks around the Charles/Dumaine intersection. This pattern seems to correlate spatially to the hypothesis that the Pontalba galleries instigated the fashion, as they are located in the crux of this cluster. But while the Pontalba Buildings probably explain the stylistic trend, do they explain the cluster? In other words, did neighbors “keep up with the Pontalbas” and adopt the fashion because of spatial proximity? There might have been some element of neighborly competition, if not more than in nearby blocks, where mismatched galleries may be seen on adjacent separate buildings. More likely, the pattern simply reflects economic geography: this central area formed the wealthy residential blocks of the French Quarter, where scores of magnificent residential townhouses arose during the 1830s through 1850s. It is a pattern reiterated in terms of structural age, style, and type, visible in the maps of the previous three chapters. Of the 803 townhouses counted in the Vieux Carré Survey for this analysis, 51 percent had substantial or full-blown galleries, while only 11 percent had no iron galleries or balconies at all. Wealthy townhouse owners may have been impressed with Pontalba's bold new fashion statement, saw its aesthetic and utilitarian value, had the financial wherewithal to copy it, and did so either by adding them to existing buildings or including them with new ones. When the Pontalba Buildings were completed in 1851, the *Daily Delta* lauded “that spirited and patriotic lady, Madam Pontalba,” commenting, “seldom do we see members, however rich of our community, tax their fortunes to such a degree for the...place of their nativity, and when such generosity is evinced, it is worth noting, as an encouragement to other wealthy individuals.”<sup>99</sup> Encouragement there was: the appearance of iron-lace galleries on prosperous Esplanade Avenue, in the Garden District, and in other noncontiguous wealthy areas in the 1850s indicate that the trend diffused hierarchically, wherever affluent New Orleanians resided, rather than contagiously outward from a point of origin. The sparse iron concentrations in the lower, lake-side (northern) quadrant of the Quarter can be explained by the historically lower per capita income of that area, which produced a rougher housing stock (cottages and shotgun houses) that was not conducive to such adornment anyway. The dearth of iron in the upper Quarter is also explained by economic geography: this was the more commercial end of the district, where storehouses and commercial structures outnumber domestic buildings. Galleries and balconies being primarily for the leisurely use of people and not the storage

or sale of merchandise, we would expect to see less of them in commercial areas. The Vieux Carré Survey data support this premise: of the 402 storehouses counted, 53 percent had no iron galleries or balconies at all; 26 percent had simple balconies, and only 17 percent had full, multi-story, ornate iron galleries.

The Vieux Carré Survey data also shed light on when iron galleries arose, though they fall short of answering the question directly. Since ornamental iron is often added to extant buildings—a trend that continues to this day—the construction date (which is recorded in the survey) is often not the best guide to the gallery date (which is not recorded.) The average construction date of the structures with no or little iron lace was computed as 1875, reflecting the many nineteenth-century shotgun houses and other later buildings unsuitable for such adornment. But for all other levels of iron lace the mean construction date of the host structures were 1853 (“2”), 1855 (“3”), and 1855 (“4”). These figures generally substantiate the historical evidence for a circa-1850s origin to this feature, and concur with Adam M. Masson's and Lydia H. Schmalz's survey of prominent ornamental ironworkers and iron business, whose operations often dated from the 1850s.<sup>100</sup>

This leaves with perhaps the most intriguing question about New Orleans' iron-lace galleries: why here? Why is New Orleans alone among American cities in its association with this feature? It is certainly not the only city with iron-lace galleries. Other coastal and river cities that experienced nineteenth-century economic booms expressed their wealth through flamboyant ornamental iron, sometimes executed exactly like a New Orleans-style gallery. Examples may be found in Charleston, Savannah, Mobile, Baton Rouge, Natchitoches, Vicksburg, St. Louis, Natchitoches, and Galveston, to name a few. But New Orleans is the only American city where iron-lace galleries fill streetscapes, dominate extensive vistas, and alter the character of entire neighborhoods. Explaining why is a challenge. The popular hypothesis views galleries as a airy, spacious response to a dense and crowded urban environment in a hot, humid, rainy climate. Indeed, galleries are not usually seen in rural towns in frigid climates, but the hypothesis fails to explain why we do not see galleries throughout all crowded cities in warm climates. Cultural factors may be at work as well. Perhaps those semitropical or tropical cities imbued with French and Spanish influences are more likely to exhibit the trait. (The semi-public domestic space afforded by galleries is more in line with southern European notions of privacy than with those of northern Anglo-Saxons.) Perhaps the presence of skilled African, Spanish, French, and Creole craftsmen enabled the tradition to take root. Economic factors may be involved: iron may have been cheaper in certain areas—port cities, for example—and the upper class may have had to be sufficiently large and moneyed before a city's style of iron-lace developed. The cities' build-

<sup>99</sup> “The Place D’Armes,” *Daily Delta*, January 3, 1851, p. 2 (emphasis added).

<sup>100</sup> Masson and Schmalz, *Cast Iron and the Crescent City*, 45–50.



Balconies span half the width of the banquette (sidewalk) and are usually supported by cantilevered brackets. Earlier examples in the French Quarter incorporated wrought iron and tend to be simple and strong. Galleries cover the entire banquette, are supported by cast-iron columns and lace and form semi-enclosed, semi-private space. They became popular around 1850, permanently transforming the New Orleans cityscape. In these photographs, balconies appear in the foreground, and galleries in the background. Photographs by author, 2014.





ing stock would have to harbor a certain structural typology, namely brick townhouses, to host the features. "Probably the durability and permanence of the material in an atmosphere where wood is often quickly destroyed, had something to do with it."<sup>101</sup> Finally, cities would have had to manifest all the relevant variables precisely at the time when cast iron became cheap, available, and in national vogue, to become salient in this regard. Perhaps New Orleans had just the right mix of density, climate, cultural heritage, wealth, port accessibility, and housing stock, plus a "golden age" that coincided with an age of cast-iron ornamentation, to produce these splendid streetscapes. The question warrants further investigation.

That iron-lace galleries have become the iconic signature of New Orleans, then, may derive from a genuinely unique abundance. It may also arise from the worldwide mytholog-

ization of New Orleans, to foster a nostalgic and romantic ambience for the sale of products and experiences, for which pictographic reference to iron lace offer convenient imagery. There are probably no Milwaukee-style restaurants in Japan or Atlanta-theme casinos in Las Vegas, hence no need to lift attributes from those cities to "brand" the offerings. New Orleans, on the other hand, is used incessantly to diffuse allure to commercial products and services, from roads to cars to alcohol to music to gambling, not to mention to sell the city itself. A truly distinguishing aspect of New Orleans' material culture thus provides an opportune symbol to help consumers connect the city's mystique with a product at hand. The aesthetic appeal of the swirling pattern of iron lace, and its easy adaptation to restaurant décor, menu borders, jambalaya mix cartons, CD labels, television studio sets, theatrical stages, and "A Night in New Orleans" theme parties, cinches the arrangement. Madam Pontalba would marvel at how far her fashion has spread.

<sup>101</sup> Nathaniel Cortlandt Cress, *New Orleans: Its Old Houses, Shops, and Public Buildings* (Philadelphia and London, 1933), 144. Yet, see plenty of wooden balconies in steamy San Juan, Puerto Rico.

## ELYSIAN FIELDS AVENUE BAROMETER OF URBAN GROWTH

A map of greater New Orleans shows a crescent-shaped inner city embedded in a larger spread eagle-shaped metropolis. Street networks therein vary from crooked grids to radiating lattices to seemingly haphazard subdivisions, nestled densely between and beyond the meandering Mississippi and the arc of the Lake Pontchartrain shore. Rare are the streets that connect river and lake with a single, straight line; rarer still are north-south-oriented thoroughfares. And only one avenue in all of New Orleans connects the Mississippi River and Lake Pontchartrain with a single, straight, north-south line: Elysian Fields Avenue.

The corridor bestowed with the evocative name deserves special attention from those interested in the history, geography, urban development, and architecture of New Orleans, because it tells illustrative stories about the city's experiences in all four realms. It started at the compass of the original city, only steps from the Mississippi River at its most prominent and deepest bend, born with the plantation of one of its most famous citizens. It exploited the river's natural levee, upon which New Orleans sat in its entirety until a century ago, then penetrated the obstructive swamps lying behind it—the first permanent man-made feature to do so in the city's history. It crossed tributaries of the critically important Bayou St. John, transected the Gentilly Ridge, scored the marshes of the Lake Pontchartrain shore, and terminated at the brackish waters of a lake that communicates with the Gulf of Mexico. From the antebellum era to the automobile age, a steady stream of cars and passengers entered and exited the city by means of Elysian Fields Avenue. Along with the New and Old



Only one New Orleans thoroughfare connects the Mississippi River and Lake Pontchartrain with a single, straight line. Elysian Fields Avenue deserves special attention from those interested in the history, geography, urban development, and architecture of New Orleans, because it tells interesting stories in all four realms. This satellite perspective shows the avenue from its riverside “foot” (foreground) to its distant “head,” five miles north. At lower left is the French Quarter; at lower right is the Faubourg Marigny. *Ikonos image processing by author.*

Basin canals and the Mississippi River, it formed a principal ingress and egress to a city practically founded on the notion of expedient passage. It exhibits the full range of Crescent City architectural styles and types, from Creole, Greek Revival, and Victorian to Spanish Revival, California, and Modern; from townhouses, cottages, and shotgun bungalows, ranch houses, and office parks. And it is the grandfather of the street network of most of the Seventh and Eighth wards, dictating the orientation of the urban grid used by countless residents and motorists into the twenty-first century.

Except for new mansions and canopies of oaks, no clanging streetcars, and not a single Mardi Gras parade; St. Charles Avenue has the lock on those world-famous symbols. Elysian Fields' only claim to fame is its cameo in Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* and Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer*, named more for its metaphorical implications than as a real place. But as a microcosm and barometer of two centuries of urban growth, Elysian Fields Avenue stands alone.

### ORIGINS OF ELYSIAN FIELDS AVENUE: DUBREUIL'S CANAL

Elysian Fields Avenue is a product of the early nineteenth century, but its antecedent trajectory dates back to the French colonial era. In the early 1740s, the commons immediately below New Orleans, extending from an angled line between present-day Barracks Street and Esplanade Avenue downriver to Franklin Avenue, came into the possession of the wealthy and influential colonial contractor Claude Joseph Villars Dubreuil. As a builder, Dubreuil required a steady supply of brick, lumber, fire, and other construction materials. Sometime before 1753, he directed his slaves to excavate a canal to power a *moulin à planches* (sawmill) by diverting water from the river during high stages through a waterwheel about two hundred feet in diameter.<sup>102</sup> Dubreuil's canal passed through the center of his wedge-shaped plantation, positioned at a sharp bend in the river such that its velocity and flow direction were fully exploited.<sup>103</sup> With that project, Dubreuil (builder of the Old Ursuline Convent still standing on Chartres Street) unwittingly established the trajectory for future Elysian Fields Avenue, and much of the urbanization aligned to it over the next two centuries. This came to pass because the canal was maintained in the landscape, even when the property was sold to Jacques Delachaise in 1758, demolished upon by the belated construction of city fortifications in 1760, sold again to Marie Gauvrit de Monleon in 1774, to Gilbert Antoine de St. Maxent in 1776, to Laurent Legur in 1789, and finally traded to Pierre Philippe de Mangny in 1798 for a plantation in

<sup>102</sup> Friends of the Cabildo, *New Orleans Architecture*, 8 vols. (Gretna, LA, 1974), vol. 4, *The Creole Faubourgs*, 4.

<sup>103</sup> According to Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, Dubreuil owed some of his success to his “African slaves’ technological knowledge—how to dam and control the waters of the rivers and bayous and how to work metal. If so, the engineering of the canal and the construction of the sawmill, which turned out to be so influential in the design layout of subsequent street systems, may be partially accredited to Dubreuil’s African slaves. Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge and London, 1992), 137.





This detail from John L. Boqueta de Woiseri's *A View of New Orleans Taken from the Plantation of Marigny* (1803) shows the Marigny (formerly Dubreuil) canal and sawmill in the lower city. Two years later the canal was incorporated into the design of the Faubourg Marigny as the subdivision's main avenue (Elysian Fields), establishing a trajectory that would influence the layout of much of eastern New Orleans. Notice the shot tower structure at lower right. Courtesy: Library of Congress.

present-day Chalmette.<sup>104</sup> In that year, the Spanish colonial surveyor Carlos Trudeau recorded the Marigny plantation in his *Plano de la Ciudad de Nueva Orleans*, complete with the fifty-year-old canal jutting out from the bend in the river. Labeled as the *Canal del Molino de Don Pedro de Marigny*, the ditch was cradled by a *molino de tablas* (board mill) through which passed the diverted river water, down the back slope of the natural levee to the low-lying *cypriera* behind.<sup>105</sup> The Marigny clan would later augment the canal into a semi-navigable waterway sufficiently wide and deep for the mule-drawn passage of timber-bearing rafts (and even schooners and sloops, at least during high water). At the intersection of Elysian Fields and present-day Decatur Street, “massive walls, built of brick masonry...used as supports to the sluice gates or locks that admitted the waters of the river.”<sup>106</sup> The canal was part of the early Faubourg Marigny neighborhood scene: along the banks near Washington Square, young Creole boys would hunt for large bullfrogs, called *lourararons*.<sup>107</sup> Marigny’s canal and sawmill provided an ideal symbol of bucolic industry for John L. Boqueta de Woiseri’s *A View of New Orleans Taken from the Plantation of Marigny* (“Under My Wings Every Thing Prospers”), painted in 1803 on the eve of classic Americanization. Lumber milled at this site, and bricks fired here, remain in the walls and attics of some old French Quarter structures, possibly including the Old Ursuline Convent.

## THE FAUBOURG MARIGNY

The elder Marigny died in 1800 and passed the plantation to his fifteen-year-old son, Bernard Xavier Philippe de Marigny de Mandeville. After the Louisiana Purchase, rapid

population growth in New Orleans convinced Marigny to subdivide his converted plantation for urban development, for which he hired the French engineer Nicholas de Finiels in 1805. Finiels’ design, according to architectural historian Samuel Wilson, Jr., “skillfully planned to tie the [streets] of the old city into the new area. The old sawmill canal determined the direction of the new streets, the canal itself becoming the center of the principal street to which was given the name *Champs Elysées* (Elysian Fields) or *Promenade Publique*.”<sup>108</sup> Inspired by the grand Parisian avenue of the same name (and perhaps by the mythological reference to paradise, Marigny planned for Elysian Fields “a beautiful landscape, with trees and lawns and shrubbery, and a winding lake on which swan boats were to float gracefully.”<sup>109</sup> Finiel’s design for the Faubourg Marigny, driven by the geography of the Marigny Canal, was then passed to Barthélemy Lafon to survey and lay out streets, in 1806-1807. The Faubourg Marigny soon developed as a working-class residential suburb of New Orleans, home to a large population of mostly “Europeans of Latin extraction and of Creoles, white and black,”<sup>110</sup> and classic nineteenth-century New Orleans architecture—the quintessential Creole and immigrant faubourg. Thus Finiel’s plan for the Faubourg Marigny transformed Dubreuil’s circa-1740s sawmill canal into Elysian Fields Avenue and moored its trajectory as a straight line (there was no reason whatsoever to incorporate a bend) from the river to the backswamp. By pure happenstance, it extended perfectly northward and pointed toward a section of the Lake Pontchartrain shore that lay closest to the Mississippi. The advantages of the trajectory did not go unnoticed.

<sup>104</sup> Friends of the Cabildo, *New Orleans Architecture*, 4:8.

<sup>105</sup> Charles Trudeau, *Plan of the City of New Orleans and Adjacent Plantations, Compiled in Accordance with and Ordinance of the Spanish Ministry and Royal Charter, December 24, 1798* (s.l., 1798).

<sup>106</sup> Henry C. Castellanos, *New Orleans As It Was: Episodes of Louisiana Life* (New Orleans, 1895), 154-55, 332.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>108</sup> Friends of the Cabildo, *New Orleans Architecture*, 4:8.

<sup>109</sup> Meigs O. Frost, “Strange Stories Behind New Orleans Street Names,” *Times-Picayune-New Orleans State Magazine*, August 30, 1936, p. 5.

<sup>110</sup> Castellanos, *New Orleans As It Was*, 155.







more and an enthusiastic protégé of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad. Hoffman trekked across the swamp to the lake, map in hand, scouting the terrain for the best route and the challenges that lay ahead. After the team formed the New Orleans Railroad Company in August 1829, Hoffman traveled to the Northeast to research the state of the main railroading, even purchasing materials to set up a demonstration in New Orleans.

The breakthrough came in January 1830, when the state granted the men's request for a charter to form the Pontchartrain Railroad Company, capitalized at \$150,000. The charter stipulated that the company would obtain a ninety-foot-wide right-of-way for the tracks, the power of eminent domain to attain necessary land, exclusive privileges over the route for twenty-five years, and the right to develop a harbor, pier, and warehouses at Lake Pontchartrain. So empowered, the executive committee decided that the optimal route would be a direct line extending from the foot of Elysian Fields Avenue (a point known as "Pontchartrain Junction"), paralleling the three-and-a-half-mile Marigny Canal, and continuing straight north another one-and-a-half miles to Lake Pontchartrain.<sup>115</sup> Reasons were twofold: this route minimized the distance from river to lake (4.96 miles of track were needed), and maximized the use of well-drained high ground, which came in the form of a natural levee of the Mississippi, the raised banks of the Marigny Canal, and the Gentilly Ridge. Thus, with this decision, the route of the Pontchartrain Railroad was pegged to Elysian Fields, just as the avenue's route was established by Finiel's subdivision, and which in turn was linked to the Marigny Canal and Dubreuil's colonial-era canal before it, which hitherto was sited to exploit the sharp bend of the Mississippi River. The 150-foot-wide right-of-way ensured that the railroad would have plenty of room for growth. All that remained to make permanent the river-to-lake south-to-north rectitude of the *Champs Élysées* was the land acquisition and actual construction of the railroad.

The route spanned five plantations. Most owners, sensing the eventual spread of New Orleans into their lands, willingly, even eagerly, sold portions of their properties to the company. The Marigny Canal proved to be the most expensive purchase (\$25,000) because of its length and criticality to the project. The only holdout was the Darcantel estate, situated on the Gentilly Ridge at the present-day intersection of Gentilly Boulevard and Elysian Fields. The company ended up paying dearly for this land, preferring court litigation, but made good use of the upland's soil for grain and its timber for rail. The Darcantel plantation house later proved useful as a house and waystation for employees. The Scottish philanthropist Alexander Milne owned the land at the front end of the route, and, sensing a boom readily seen in the right-of-way and profited handsomely when he subdivided the adjacent area for the future community of Milneburg,

New Orleans' first lakefront faubourg.<sup>116</sup> Clearing of the path commenced on March 10, 1830, and by June 8, the company reported

that the unobstructed path has progressed with great rapidity[.] that the whole of the Route has been opened through the Swamps to the Lake. A considerable extent of ditching has been executed, various Buildings erected; That most of the Timber wanted has been contracted for & is in course of delivery[.] That the whole of the upper swamps from the Elbow of Marigny Canal [present-day Elysian Fields] to the high ground of Gentilly [Gentilly Boulevard] has been filled as is believed sufficiently high for the Road appears solid and firm[.] That of the Road over the lower Swamp from the high ground of the Gentilly to the Lake—the distance of which is about 2,500 yards,—800 yards have been filled at the upper end, and 450 at the end next the Lake....<sup>117</sup>

The large quantities of soil needed for the embankment through the lowlands came from the Gentilly Ridge, the lake shore, and from the road as the canal excavated simultaneously. The company allowed the public to run their carriages upon the roadbed to tamp it down, then raised it higher until it surpassed the high-water mark on nearby trees. In this manner, future Elysian Fields Avenue emerged from the swamps.

As the bed was nearing completion in the autumn of 1830, three one-hundred-ton shipments of wrought iron rail arrived from England, while regional lumber for ties came from Mexico. Track was laid at a pace of about 250 feet per day. Meanwhile, work progressed slowly on the station and a loading dock ("Port Pontchartrain") extending into the lake from Milneburg, which Congress had designated as a "official point of delivery and departure, on par with the port of New Orleans."<sup>118</sup>

The tracks were completed by early spring 1831, and on Saturday, April 23, 1831, the horse-drawn Pontchartrain Railroad made its inaugural run. Six stagecoach-like cars carrying state and local dignitaries, a band, and company stockholders

moved in the most imposing manner to the sound of music, amidst a large concourse of admiring spectators, who lined both sides of the road, and reached the lake by happy coincidence at the moment the Mobile steamboat arrived for the first mail at Port Pontchartrain with the mail. The mail and passengers were immediately forwarded to the city in a car dispatched for the purpose, and reached the head of the road in half an hour.<sup>119</sup>

With that river-to-lake connection, the Pontchartrain became the first railroad west of the Appalachians and first in the nation to complete a rail system. Seventeen months later, it introduced steam locomotion to the city, "to the great admiration and wonder of a vast concourse of our citizens, who were assembled...to witness this novel and interesting

<sup>116</sup> This suburb and the railroad Port Pontchartrain were located near the present-day intersection of Leonce Simon and Elysian Fields Avenue. The neighborhood immediately east of this intersection still bears the name *Milneburg* today. Ibid., 113-19.

<sup>117</sup> Pontchartrain Railroad Company, Minutes, vol. 1, June 8, 1830, Special Collections, Tulane University.

<sup>118</sup> Reed, "New Orleans and the Railroads," 35.

<sup>119</sup> "Opening of the Rail Road," *Louisiana Advertiser*, April 25, 1831, p. 2, col. 4.

<sup>115</sup> Reed, "Louisiana's Transportation Revolution," 110-16.

sight.”<sup>120</sup> Rickety and primitive as the line was, A. Oakey Hall called it in 1847 a “relic from the infantile days of the art of steam propulsion” and its locomotive “in thousand horsepower”<sup>121</sup>—it had a significant impact on the economics and geography of the lower city. The railroad put the old sawmill out of business in 1832, thus rendering obsolete the Marigny Canal, which was then used for drainage and filled in incrementally. It increased nearly ten-fold steamboat traffic on lakes Pontchartrain and Borgne, creating a busy port where there was once only marsh grass and initiating the widespread construction of raised “camps” and cottages along the shoreline.<sup>122</sup> At its river end, the railroad was one of the valued assets of the otherwise poor and isolated Third Municipality (later the First District) helping incorporate it into the city’s critical functions as a transportation hub. If New Orleans’ reach for the offshore could be compared to America’s “Manifest Destiny” of expanding to the Pacific, then the Pontchartrain Railroad may be viewed as the local equivalent of the first transcontinental railroad, thirty-eight years before its time. The five-mile-long line would endure vast changes in technology, sweeping urban expansion, and intense business competition—the ambitious New Basin Canal was already under construction by 1832—to serve New Orleans for 101 years, the nation’s longest-lived railroad operating under its original charter. The crowds of passengers arriving in New Orleans in the nineteenth century from lakeside and coastal cities first set foot in Milneburg, then rode the Pontchartrain Railroad down Elysian Fields to the city proper, this route being the fastest and most comfortable ingress from points east. Among these visitors were presidents, dignitaries, illustrious names of the day—and travel memoirists, usually from the Northeast or England, who took the nation’s major cities with pen in hand, waxing eloquently about their charms, pontificating about their sins, and leaving behind travel descriptions of the cityscapes they encountered. A great many described their trip from Mobile on steamboat to Milneburg, then down Elysian Fields Avenue on the Pontchartrain Railroad to the Faubourg Marigny, where, more often than not, a cabman would transport them to the St. Charles Hotel.

## THE ELYSIAN FIELDS LANDSCAPE IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

One of the first visitors to describe the Pontchartrain Railroad and the Elysian Fields landscape was John Holt Ingraham, around 1833 or 1834. “Its advantages to New Orleans are incalculable,” he wrote; the line was “an avenue of wealth on which ‘a great trade is carried on with Mobile and other places along the Florida coast...with ease

and rapidity.”<sup>124</sup> He paid six bits passage for the round-trip passage to Milneburg and boarded the eight-to-ten car train (which, incidentally, had already been segregated by race) at an elongated station at the foot of Elysian Fields. With the clanging of a bell, “our fiery leader moved forward, smoking like a race-horse, slowly and steadily at first—then faster and faster, till we flew along the track with breath-taking rapidity.” (Locomotive used on the Pontchartrain Railroad would be nicknamed “Smoky Mary” into the 1930s.) Ingraham then took note of the physical landscape, beginning the traditional nineteenth-century view of the natural world as a threatening and forboding place:

The rail-road, commencing at the levee, runs for the first half mile through the centre of broad street, with low detached houses on either side. A mile from the Levee we left the city and all dwellings behind [near the Natchez Claiborne intersection], and were flying through the fenceless, uninhabited marshes, where nothing meets the eye but dark trees, rank, luxuriant undergrowth, tall coarse grass, and long, twisting and winding their long, serpentine folds around the trunks of the trees like huge, loathsome water-snakes. By the watch, we passed a mile-stone every three minutes and a half; and in less than nineteen minutes we reached at the lake shore, quite a village [Milneburg, on Elysian Fields between Robert E. Lee and Leon C. Simon avenues] of handsome, white-painted hotels, cafés, dwellings, store-houses, and bathing-rooms, burst at once upon our view; running past them, we gradually lessened our speed, and finally came to a full stop at the pier.... The pier [near present-day Iberville], constructed of piles and firmly planked over, was lined with sloops and schooners, which were taking in and discharging cargo, giving quite a bustling, business-like air to this infant port. I saw ragged negroes, and gentlemen among them were fishing large numbers farther out in the lake; others were engaged in the delicate amusement of cray-fishing while the right the water was alive with bathers....<sup>125</sup>

After brushing shoulders with French- and English-speaking locals raising a ruckus at Milneburg’s smoked-filled omelets and billiard halls, Ingraham reboarded and returned to the city. Alas, the return trip did not go so smoothly: somewhere between the Gentilly Ridge and the city, the locomotive struck and completely severed a cow.

In 1836, the Englishman James Silk Buckingham arrived from Mobile to Port Pontchartrain and boarded the train through “a perfect swamp or morass...with impervious woods and thickets on either side” for the half-hour journey to New Orleans. He was more attuned to the cultural landscape than the physical one:

The avenue by which we entered the city was called Les Champs Elysées; and every thing that caught our attention reminded us strongly of Paris. The lamps were hung from the centre of ropes passing across the streets, as in France; women were seen walking unbonneted, with gay aprons and caps; the names of all the streets and places we passed were French; the car-drivers, porters, and hackney-coachmen, spoke chiefly French; the shops, signs, gateways, pavements, and passengers moving in the street seemed so perfectly Parisian, that if a person could be transported here suddenly, without knowing the locality, it would be difficult for him to persuade himself that he was not in some city of France.<sup>126</sup>

<sup>120</sup> *Louisiana Advertiser*, September 18, 1832, p. 1, col. 4.

<sup>121</sup> A. Oakey Hall, *The Manhattaner in New Orleans*, or Phases of “Crescent City” Life (New York, 1851), 113.

<sup>122</sup> Ingraham, *The South-West by a Yankee*, 1:176n.

<sup>123</sup> One example was former Pres. James K. Polk. *Daily Orleanian*, March 19, 1849, p. 2, col. 1.

<sup>124</sup> Ingraham, *The South-West by a Yankee*, 1:171-73.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:173-74.

<sup>126</sup> J.S. Buckingham, *The Slave States of America*, 2 vols. (London and Paris, 1882),



The English geologist Charles Lyell arrived by a Lake Pontchartrain steamer during Mardi Gras 1840 and traveled the Pontchartrain Railroad bound for New Orleans and the St. Charles Hotel. The train

conveyed us in less than an hour to the great city, passing over swamps in which the tall cypress, hung with Spanish moss, was flourishing, and beneath numerous shrubs just bursting into leaf. In many gardens of the suburbs, the almond and peach trees were in full bloom; the blue-leaved Nerio, and the leaves of the species of *...were very abundant. We saw a tavern called the "Elysian Fields Coffee House," and some others with French inscriptions. There were many houses with port[e]-cochères, and many lamps suspended from ropes attached to tall poles on either side of the road, as in the French capital. We might indeed have fancied that we were approaching Paris, but for the negroes and mulattos, and the large verandahs reminding us that the windows required protection from the sun's heat. It was a pleasure to hear the French language spoken...*

During his tour of the South in 1853 and 1854, a disoriented Frederick Law Olmsted, who would later gain worldwide fame in landscape architecture and whose firm would design Audubon Park, encountered a substantially more developed and reforested environment along Elysian Fields Avenue.

There were many small buildings near the jetty, erected on piles over the water—bathing-houses, bowling-alleys, and billiard-rooms, with the indications of a place of holiday resort. And, on reaching the shore, I found a slumbering village (Milneburg). [The locomotive backed, screaming loudly, down the jetty, and I returned to get my seat.

Off we went, past the restaurant...through the little village of white houses...and away into a dense gray cypress forest. For two or four rods [about sixty feet] each side of the track the trees had all been felled and removed, leaving a dreary strip of swamp, covered with stumps. It continued, for two or three miles; then the ground became dryer [Gentilly Ridge], there was an abrupt termination of the gray wood; the forest was lifting...disclosing a flat country skirted still, and finally bounded, in the background, with the swamp-forest lands near present-day Interstate 10 intersection]. A few new houses, one story high, all having verandahs before them, were scattered thinly over it.

At length, a broad road struck off by the side of the track [established portion of Elysian Fields Avenue]; the houses became more frequent; soon forming a village street, with smoke ascending from breakfast fires; windows and doors opening, maids sweeping steps, baggage wagons passing, and broad streets, little built upon, breaking off at right angles....

I asked the name of the village [Faubourg Marigny] and my geography was at fault. I had expected to be landed at New Orleans by the boat, and had not been informed of the railroad arrangement, and had no idea in what part of Louisiana we might be....

There was a sign, "Café du Faubourg," and, cutting my head out of the window, I saw that we must have arrived at New Orleans. We reached the terminus, which was surrounded with hackney cabs waiting at the foot of Elysian Fields in the style of Paris. "To the Hotel St. Charles," I said to a driver.... [We] rattled through narrow dirty streets, among gray old stuccoed walls; high arched windows and balconies

and entresols, and French noises and French smells, French signs, ten to one of English....<sup>128</sup>

The Pontchartrain Railroad's heyday lasted for over two decades. By the late 1850s, new railroads such as the New Orleans, Mobile and Chattanooga line connected the city directly with Gulf Coast cities and towns, relegating the Pontchartrain, which depended on steamboat traffic, to a secondary status. No longer would presidents and dignitaries descend Elysian Fields Avenue from points worldwide; now the Pontchartrain Railroad served primarily as a way to get to Lake Pontchartrain and to Milneburg, which became more of a resort and less of a port. In 1885, a half-century after its formation, the Pontchartrain Railroad was acquired by the Louisville & Nashville Railroad Company. By then, ridership comprised mostly local traffic to Milneburg and lake-side points, including tourism. James S. Zacharie, using the unmistakable cadence of a modern-day tour guide, described the circa-1885 Elysian Fields landscape to visitors seeking the picturesque and the interesting—a far cry from the culturally exotic and physically threatening environment reported by his predecessors:

Leaving the city, the road goes directly to the lake in a straight line, four miles. This is the narrowest point between the lake and river. Washington square, where the Third Presbyterian Church (on left) at Goodchild street (on right) Shell Beach R.R. depot to the Borgne. At the Gentilly Ridge (on left), a Jewish cemetery; passing through the old fortifications erected in 1862, and the swamp, Milneburg is reached, a small village, named after Alexander Milne, a benevolent old Scotchman. The village is composed of a series of restaurants and bathing houses. At the end of the long pier is a light house....<sup>129</sup>

## THE ANTECEDENT AXIS

Once the Pontchartrain Railroad was successfully established, Elysian Fields Avenue's geometry was reordained. By 1854, the top of Elysian Fields or *Champs Elysées* graced the full river-to-lake extent of the artery even though the actual roadbed would not for some time. Charles Zimpel's *Topographical Map of New Orleans and Its Vicinity* of that year showed the corridor bisected by the railroad tracks from the levee all the way to a pitchfork-shaped wooden pier over Lake Pontchartrain, with stations at the three major stops of the day: the Faubourg Marigny, the Gentilly Ridge (foreseen as the suburb Darcantel at the time), and at Milneburg. Paralleling the tracks from the levee, the Florida Walk was the "old Canal Marigny," the remnants of Marigny's old waterway.<sup>130</sup> It is clear from the Zimpel map that Elysian Fields Avenue was not only the first element of urbanization to extend to the lakefront, but also the antecedent axis to which all future adjacent subdivisions would align. Even as early as

1:294-95.

<sup>127</sup> Charles Lyell, *A Second Visit to the United States of North America*, 2 vols. (London, England, 1849), 2:110-11.

<sup>128</sup> Frederick Law Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom: A Traveler's Observations on Cotton and Slavery in the American Slave States*, 2 vols. (New York and London, 1861), 1:290-91.

<sup>129</sup> James S. Zacharie, *New Orleans Guide* (New Orleans, 1885), 99, all directions are Zacharie's.

<sup>130</sup> Charles F. Zimpel, *Topographical Map of New Orleans and Its Vicinity, 1834*, Southeastern Architectural Archive, Special Collections, Tulane University.



The foot of Elysian Fields Avenue appears in the lower half of this 1920s photograph; the Pontchartrain Railroad station is visible to the right of the smokestack. Oak-lined Esplanade Avenue (left) emanates from the same riverbank vertex as Elysian Fields, but differs utterly in its history and character. Southeastern Architectural Archive, Special Collections, Howard-Tilton Library, Tulane University.

1837 envisioned future lots were tentatively aligned to Elysian Fields—their planners had no choice—thus further imprinting the avenue into the future urban geography of the backswamp. Zoning's map show ghostly outlines of projected streets in the swampland properties of Milne, Hopkins, Lebeau, Hebert, Martin, and others, all laid out orthogonally to the antecedent axis.

Structurally, though, urban development proceeded very slowly on Elysian Fields Avenue. “Many persons were led to suppose,” the *Daily Orleanian* reminded its readers in 1849, “that rows of buildings would extend at either side to the Pontchartrain terminus, and connect the Lake end more immediately with our Municipality. How have [these expectations] been realized? Any one desirous of informing himself on the fact has only to refer to the railroads and perceive the snail-paced improvement in that quarter. Buildings on the open and airy road are ‘few and far between.’”<sup>131</sup> The problem was the backswamp. It was not until New Orleans’ municipal drainage revolution of the 1890s and 1900s that these areas were cleared for residential development, and not until a full century after the *Daily Orleanian*’s comments that Elysian Fields Avenue’s flanks were fully developed for residential living. Today, all street networks founded by St. Bernard Avenue, Lake Pontchartrain, Poydras, Almona, Franklin Avenues, and the Mississippi River pay geographic homage to Elysian Fields Avenue.<sup>132</sup> Likewise, the street names of the original Faubourg Marigny subdivision may be

found throughout the impacted area, clear to the modern subdivision border the lakefront.

Elysian Fields Avenue also symbolizes the land-use conflicts that arise when a poor community eager for investment grows into a city of homeowners unwilling to tolerate the nuisances of industry. When the Pontchartrain Railroad received its charter in 1850, the state and local government bent over backwards to accommodate the investment, granting permanent rights to a wide swath of semi-rural land that, within a few years, became enveloped by residential development. Tensions mounted between residents and the railroad, especially when brisk port business turned lower Elysian Fields into a veritable freight yard of noisy locomotives swapping out rolling stock. The conflict heightened in the 1870s when the city legally challenged the right of the railroad to the avenue’s neutral ground (which was air-tight in legal terms). When the Supreme Court inevitably ruled in the railroad’s favor in 1875, Mayor Joseph Shakespeare angrily ordered its depot at the foot of Elysian Fields demolished. Lawsuits and complaints against the railroad’s nuisances—countless grade crossings, blockage of streets, smoke and noise, unkempt neutral grounds, even the parking of sleeper cars in the middle of the avenue as “hotels” for visitors—persisted until the line’s last days.

Protesting neighbor played their part in the demise of the Pontchartrain Railroad, but it was direct-line railroads, automobiles, and buses that sealed its fate. In 1930, the Louisville & Nashville Railroad Company, which owned the line since 1880 and kept it running solely to maintain the company’s franchise on the route, began divesting of the century-

<sup>131</sup> *Daily Orleanian*, March 13, 1849, p. 2, col. 2.

<sup>132</sup> Among the few exceptions are four angular streets south of Gentilly Boulevard, which may trace their origin to the French *arpent* surveying system.



old line by releasing to the city control of the Elysian Fields neutral ground from North Rocheblave to the lake. "Abandonment of the railroad will remove the last barrier in the way of a proposed thoroughfare from the Mississippi river to Lake Pontchartrain via Elysian Fields avenue,"<sup>133</sup> predicted the *Times-Picayune* that year. Also in 1930, the Milneburg entertainment district, where generations of New Orleanians came to play and where some of the greatest names in jazz played for New Orleanians, closed to make way for the seawall and lakefront project.<sup>134</sup> On March 15, 1932, after 101 years of service, "Smoky Mary" made her last run down the Pontchartrain Railroad. Tracks were removed in 1935 from Elysian Fields lakeside of Rocheblave; its neutral ground was landscaped, and its flanks were developed with the Gentilly-style cottages popular at the time. Between 1949 and 1950, an 1,100-foot, \$1.405-million overpass was constructed over the Florida Avenue bridge—the backwash edge only sixty to seventy years earlier—making that portion of Elysian Fields more like a highway than a residential boulevard. It was not until 1954, when the final segments of the four to five parallel tracks were removed from North Rocheblave to the river, that the city interests along Elysian Fields Avenue finally won out over the railroad. This was achieved when the city gained control of the Florida Avenue to the river, in exchange for the Louisville & Nashville Railroad's gaining access to a route along Montegut Street, part of the Press Street railroad corridor still in use today. Thus ended Elysian Fields Avenue's *raison d'être*, and it commenced its modern era.<sup>135</sup>

<sup>133</sup> "Pontchartrain Rail Line About To Be Abandoned," *Times-Picayune*, August 26, 1930, p. 24, col. 1.

<sup>134</sup> Darlene M. V. *Milneburg City Neighborhood Profile* (New Orleans, 1978), 3.03-3.04.

<sup>135</sup> "L. & N. Railroad Would Abandon Route to Lake," *Times-Picayune*, January 22, 1930, p. 9, col. 1; "Pontchartrain Railroad Will Be Abandoned," *Times-Picayune*, December 12, 1930, p. 8, col. 3; Harry Heintze, "Elysian Fields Avenue to Get Major Face-Lifting," *Times-Picayune*, May 1, 1954, p. 28; and Charles Marshall, *Streets of New Orleans: A Regard to Elysian Fields Avenue* (New Orleans, 1909), 1-14.

Large-format photographs captured by A.E. Stewart from a low-flying aircraft in 1949 provide a detailed record of Elysian Fields Avenue's streetscape at this transitional time in its history.<sup>136</sup> The images show an industrial-looking foot of the avenue emerging from a debris-strewn riverfront, surrounded by the intricate nineteenth-century roofscape of what is now described by its historical name, Faubourg Marigny, but at the time was simply the nameless working-class neighborhood below the French Quarter. Three railroad tracks curve from North Peters by the French Market to Elysian Fields, where they furcate into five tracks, some with freight rolling stock standing uncoupled in the middle of the avenue. Close inspection of the courtyards and backyards evince a modern cityscape that, with the exception of the automobiles, could pass for a generation or two earlier. Kitchen kangs from clotheslines, chimneys and dormers punctuate the rooftops, and an occasional horse-drawn cart can be spotted—this, in 1949. The streetscape remains lined with tracks and abutted by nineteenth-century structures under North Rocheblave Street, where (near the location of today's eastbound I-10 on-ramp) all tracks veer seaward and disappear from the scene. At this point and perhaps nearly three blocks later, at the Florida Avenue Canal, more structures remain and open fields start to predominate. Recently built subdivisions appear sporadically, completely with promotional billboards positioned at key intersections like the suburb of any American city in the years after World War II. The cityscape takes on a slightly older and busier appearance at the angular Gentilly Boulevard intersection, where the Hebrew Rest Cemetery stands conspicuously. From here northward, Elysian Fields Avenue and its immediate flank are entirely drained and cleared of forest, but almost entirely undeveloped. Within a decade and

<sup>136</sup> A.E. Stewart, Set 1-B-3, 1949 Elysian Fields Avenue Aerial Photograph Collection, Louisiana Room, New Orleans Public Library.



The photograph at left was captured from the site of De Launay's sawmill, looking down what was once the mill's canal, now Elysian Fields. The avenue's foot is a bleak and uninviting place today, but in the 1830s through 1930s, it was a busy transportation node from which travelers boarded the Pontchartrain railroad to catch steamboats to Mobile and elsewhere. Many prominent names of nineteenth-century America passed through the point. The Pontchartrain (1831) was the first railroad west of the Appalachians and the first in the nation to complete its rail system. When it ended service in 1932, it was the nation's oldest railroad operating under its original charter. The spur-line track bed at right is one of the last vestiges of the railroad system here. Photographs by author, 2003.

half, it would be 100 percent incorporated into urban residential New Orleans.

The last photograph in the 1949 collection barely captures old Milneburg, at the Robert E. Lee and New York Street intersections. Founded in 1831 as part of the arrangements that created the Pontchartrain Railroad and an official port of entry at the lake, Milneburg (known colloquially as “Old Lake End”<sup>137</sup>) was New Orleans’ first significant urban foothold on the Lake Pontchartrain shore, growing quickly with the sudden success of the route. Like many railroad towns, Milneburg structures were clustered around the tracks, which extended out into the lake upon a wooden pier. Platforms were constructed at a level such that freight could be transferred between vessel and rolling stock with no hoisting, a railroad ing innovation at the time. Perpendicular to the tracks was a row of lakeshore “camps,” connected by boardwalks and shaded by live oaks. Most buildings of Milneburg—“the largest and most unique example of Louisiana lake architecture”<sup>138</sup>—were raised on high piers and painted white, giving the community a quaint village-like atmosphere. Buildings along the tracks served as restaurants, hotels, and saloons; those along the lake were often bathhouses or fishermen’s abodes. The social center of Milneburg was the Washington Hotel (1850), a stop-over point for travelers in passing. Milneburg’s port boomed until the mid-1850s, when the New Orleans, Mobile and Chattanooga Railroad drew business away from the Lake Pontchartrain shore. Later in the 1800s, it was home to an isolated but diverse population of (in 1880) under 300 people, about two-thirds white and one-third black, hailing from as far as France, Germany, Brazil, and even Greenland, but more likely born locally. Most were fishermen; some were woodcutters, dairymen, laborers, or barkeepers; and a small group of professionals maintained the port facilities.<sup>139</sup> Faded with obsolescence, Milneburg in the late nineteenth century—like New Orleans itself today—reinvented itself as a tourist destination, operating as a lakeside resort in competition with Spanish Fort and West End. Famous names of early jazz played regularly at the venues. The end finally came in the 1930s, when the demise of the Pontchartrain Railroad, the rise of the automobile, and the Lakefront land reclamation project closed the history of the century-old community. Some ancient frame buildings survived and persisted into the 1940s; the 1949 photograph described above captures a small cluster of older-looking buildings, but they are outnumbered by numerous post-World War II cottages and ranch houses, the style of which predominates here today. The demolition of old Milneburg robbed New Orleans of an important component of its structure history and early lakefront architecture.

<sup>137</sup> J. Curtis Waldo, *Illustrated Visitors’ Guide to New Orleans* (New Orleans, 1900), 26.

<sup>138</sup> August Perez and M.B. Young, *Milneburg* (unpublished paper, 1955, School of Architecture, Special Collections Vertical File, Tulane University).

<sup>139</sup> 1880 U.S. Census, Orleans Parish Population Schedules, Ward 7, Enumeration District 55 and Ward 8, Enumeration District 60. The last pages of these enumeration districts record Milneburg residents.

## READING THE HISTORICAL STREETSCAPE: ELYSIAN FIELDS AVENUE IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Elysian Fields never enjoyed the pulchritude and fame of New Orleans’ grand avenues, the likes of St. Charles, Esplanade, Napoleon, or Carrollton. It was born of a railroad track—running grimy freight trains, not costly streetcars—and that history suppressed the exuberance of both its built environment and its property values. Appreciating Elysian Fields comes in due time, after the more spectacular elements of the cityscape have been absorbed for their accessible charm. Reading its streetscape is done best by bicycle or foot,



A late-1870s lakefront survey is shown here overlaid on a 2004 satellite image. Most all blocks depicted in yellow were completely undeveloped at the time. The structures of the lakefront resort town Milneburg are visible at center, clustered around the New York Street/Elysian Fields Avenue intersection, a few hundred feet from the Lake Pontchartrain shore. Robinson Atlas map courtesy New Orleans Notarial Archives; satellite image courtesy DigitalGlobe; image processing by author.



as the avenue relinquishes neither its clues to the past nor its present-day ambience to those who whiz by in speeding cars. The following observations were made on foot and walking the full length of the avenue repeatedly in 2003.

Recalling the pastoral splendor in the 1803 painting *Under My Wings Every Thing Prospers* on the river, the foot of Elysian Fields Avenue today is surreal by comparison. Its role as a vertex in the lower-city street system has rendered it a field of concrete and asphalt, surrounded by parking lots and high floodwalls and sprinkled with the glass or shattered beer bottles. But a sense of a more interesting past abounds. Dubreuil's sawmill occupied a spot where North Peters now intersects Elysian Fields, while its canal extended directly up the present-day grassy central ground of the avenue. To the left is the outline of an old railroad bed, paved into the asphalt, a spur once connected to the main tracks on Elysian Fields. Behind the floodwall is a retired early twentieth-century coach from the Gulf, Mobile, & Ohio Railroad, possibly a veteran of the Pontchartrain line. No evidence of the passenger station remains, but some of its industrial neighbors still stand, most notably the early twentieth-century Romanesque brick electrical facility on the 400 block. It is not until the 600-700 blocks that we start to see antebellum architecture, in the form of two imposing Greek Revival stone houses straddling the Royal Street intersection, one adorned with a cast-iron gallery as splendid as any in the Quarter. Across the street is Washington Square, a leafy reminder of the grand

aspirations that Bernard Marigny once had for Elysian Fields. The 800 block is one of the few on the avenue that retains its full suite of historical architecture, including one of the most significant structures of the area. The house at 820 Elysian Fields is a survivor of Faubourg Marigny's earliest days, a circa-1820 black-between-post cottage with a steep hip roof and the clean, simple lines typical of early nineteenth-century Creole architecture. This patriarch of Elysian Fields has witnessed almost all of the avenue's history, from the old sawmill canal to the Parisian landscape evoked by antebellum travel memoirists; from Smoky Mountain and generations of Milneburg day-trippers to the lost tourists of today hunting for free parking.

Heading up the next few blocks, to what was the rural edge in the 1830s and the "back-of-town" in the 1890s, ancient live oaks shade what were once Victorian shotgun houses interspersed with an occasional antebellum cottage. Those trees growing in the new ground are necessarily much younger, since it was not until 1954 that the railroad tracks were removed. At the busy St. Claude intersection, amid modern commercial structures, is a local surprise: a Creole storehouse with an elegant balcony and jack arches, painted bright pink (home of "Gene's Pops") in a way that could only look good in New Orleans. Storehouses of this era and style are uncommon this close to the former swamp edge.

Reaching the North Peters intersection after eight blocks of mostly late nineteenth-century back-of-town house-



Twentieth-century neighborhoods from lakeside Elysian Fields are seen here from the air in 1952 and from space in 2002. The northernmost third of each image was occupied by water until 1926-1934, when the Lakefront project extended the city into Lake Pontchartrain. The flood-protection project created new land for recreational, military, residential, and institutional use, at the cost of old Milneburg and scores of lakeside fishing camps. Map by author based on USDA and Ikonos data.





At the North Roman intersection stands an ancient milestone of the Pontchartrain Railroad, its inscription "1 Mile From the River" now eroded away and covered with gangland graffiti. It is the last vestige of Western America's first railroad. Photograph by author, 2004.

g, the eyes are caught by an older corner cottage, only to be distracted by an ancient-looking marble slab protruding from the neutral ground. Etched deeply with the Roman numeral "I," the stone is located exactly one mile from the foot of Elysian Fields. Amazingly, it is the first milepost of the Pontchartrain Railroad, perhaps one of the set of five that Joseph R. Ingraham counted during his passage here 170 years earlier. The elements have rubbed away the full inscription, "1 Mile From the River," and gangland graffiti now covers the crooked stone, but there it stands, a remarkable relic of Western America's first railroad. Now it is its tombstone.

The next few blocks—the "North" streets of Priour, Johnson, Galvez, Miro, Torf, and Rocheblave—have an out-of-town feel to them today. Beyond these blocks was a fully deforested swamp until the 1893-1915 installation of the drainage system. The physical geography is written into the urban geography: these blocks host the last stretch of nineteenth-century architecture along Elysian Fields, before a modern infrastructure intersects its path and covers its character to that of a twentieth-century boulevard. Interstate 10 forms one component of that intersecting infrastructure, while immediately by the 1,100-foot Elysian Fields Overpass, built in 1949 as part of the modernization of the street system and elimination of unnecessary railroad crossings. Climbing the

overpass avails views of railroad tracks and a drainage canal: this was the "Elbow of Marigny Canal,"<sup>141</sup> where the old sawmill canal of Marigny and Dubreuil connected with a branch of Bayou St. John and eventually flowed out to the lake. The street called Florida Walk, now Florida Avenue, parallels it. Still the canal flows here, a descendent of the original project that created Elysian Fields Avenue. Still it separates sections of New Orleans civilization and wilderness in history and modernity now. Coasting down the overpass into the former swampland drained in the 1900s, we enter a twentieth-century landscape, with the oldest houses on each block dating to the Age of Jazz and the Depression rather than the Age of Jackson and the Civil War. And yet these are the exceptions: aerial photographs captured in 1949 show the blocks mostly as grassy lots; full development came in the following decade.<sup>142</sup> As recently as World War II, this back-of-town section of Elysian Fields (especially, North Priour to Florida Avenue) was the only portion of the avenue proper that was significantly or predominantly black in its residential population. Most blocks river side of this low-lying section were, with some exceptions, white, while blocks northward toward the lake were either fully white or still vacant.<sup>143</sup> Today, white transplants and some black families predominate in the Faubourg Marigny end of the avenue, while poorer African Americans generally remain in the former back-of-town by the intersection of Florida Avenue. From Gentilly to the lake resides a large middle-class black population, including many Creole families.

<sup>141</sup> Pontchartrain Railroad Company, Minutes, vol. 1, June 8, 1830, Special Collections, Tulane University.

<sup>142</sup> Stewart, Set B1-B18, 1949 Elysian Fields Avenue Aerial Photograph Collection. <sup>143</sup> R. Carter, *Report on Survey of Metropolitan New Orleans Land Use, Real Property, and Low Income Housing Area* (New Orleans, 1941), report maps following p. 136.



The overpass at Florida Avenue (called Marigny Avenue until 1924) marks where the Marigny Canal once joined a tributary of Bayou St. John and flowed to Lake Pontchartrain. The tributary formed the rear edge of town until the circa-1900 drainage project opened the backswamp for development. As a result, almost all nineteenth-century structures on Elysian Fields are located river side of this overpass, and almost all structures lakeside of it date from the twentieth century. Photograph by author, 2003.

<sup>140</sup> "Louisville & Nashville Employees Magazine, 1955," *Louisiana Rail Site: Where the East Meets the West*, [http://lrs.railspot.com/pontchartrain/p\\_tombstone.htm](http://lrs.railspot.com/pontchartrain/p_tombstone.htm).





Because the Gentilly Ridge was the only part of lakeside Elysian Fields that rose above the swamps, it hosted houses long before immediately adjacent swamps were developed. Some older structures still stand near the Gentilly Boulevard intersection, such as these shotgun houses. Photograph by author, 2003.

Ahead, past blocks of circa-1940 cottages in Spanish Revival and California-style designs, the Gentilly Boulevard intersection appears. The terrain below is the Gentilly Ridge, formed as the natural levee of the old Bayou Gentilly, or, thousands of years earlier, of the Mississippi River itself. The slight incline from sub-sea-level lowlands to the three-foot-high ridge is imperceptible to a cyclist, but not to surface water: the Gentilly Ridge was the only dry ground between river and lake and thus hosted an early community and stop on the Pontchartrain Railroad. It was here that the company bought the Darcantel plantation house and used it as a bungalow for its employees. Today the intersection of Elysian Fields and Gentilly Boulevard is a raucous spectacle of aging strip malls and jumbled billboards, but, peopled by a generally local crowd, there is a certain unpretentious authenticity to it, and it is appealing. The blocks immediately outside of the Gentilly intersection provide refuge from the sun and commotion; here, the neutral ground supports sumptuous magnolias proximate enough almost to form a canopy. On one side are the Anavas Sholem, Anshe Sfar



The UNO Technology Park at the head of Elysian Fields serves as a twenty-first-century architectural "pendant" to a circa-1820 Creole cottage near the avenue's foot. Photograph by author, 2003.

Beth Israel, and Jewish Burial Right cemeteries, all with east-facing below-ground tombs, in the Judaic custom, situated here to exploit the well-drained soils. Among the graveyards is the Seventh Day Adventist "New Life" Church, and across the street is the Pius X Catholic High School, with pearl-white statues of the Virgin Mary and Jesus. This microcosm of New Orleans religious culture is juxtaposed against the fact that near this spot, in 1862, was built a small fortification to defend Confederate New Orleans from Union penetration via the Pontchartrain Railroad ingress. No trace of the fortification remains.

From the architectural barometer, the housing stock on the Gentilly Ridge is, expectedly, somewhat older than that of the former swamp blocks, because those few extra inches of



Ferrer's Grocery, on Elysian Fields a half mile from the lake, marks the old shoreline prior to the 1930s lakefront project. The mural's depiction of "Smokestack," nickname for the Pontchartrain locomotive, is one of the few visible recollections of the old railroad that put Elysian Fields Avenue on the map starting in 1831. Photograph by author, 2003.

elevation allowed for urbanization prior to municipal drainage. Elysian Fields from this point northward exhibits pre-World War II housing—most notably Spanish Revival cottages, some of them quite grand—up to about the Fillmore intersection, after which ranch houses predominate and a suburban motif prevails. Approaching the streets of old Milneburg, which mostly retain their original 1830s names, no evidence of the white-washed hotels and billiard halls remains from the antebellum and Victorian eras. The neighborhoods known as St. Anthony and Milneburg today (which both oc-



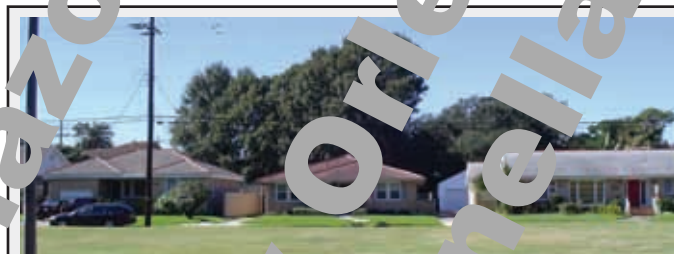
cupy the area of the original Milneburg) are completely modernized, though their street network is decades older than many areas considered historical. Aside from the toponym, the only evidence of Milneburg's past geography is a wall mural painted on the side of the Ferrara's Grocery Store, celebrating its 1906 foundation and nostalgic memories of Saint Mary. This painting, and the aforementioned milepost, are the only outward clues of the Pontchartrain Railroad remaining along Elysian Fields. Even the lakeshore, Milneburg's *raison d'être*, is gone. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, the Orleans Levee Board dredged sediments from the bottom of Lake Pontchartrain to build an additional half-mile of land into the water body, as a flood-protection measure and as new recreational and residential space for the lake-bound metropolis. Passing Leon C. Simon Drive, which traces the former shoreline, one can picture the long wooden pier that once extended here into the lake water, where countless steamboats from Mobile and elsewhere connected the Gulf Coast with the "back door" to the Green City of the South.

The northern terminus of modern Elysian Fields Avenue never knew the Pontchartrain Railroad; its underlying terrain is over a century younger. In some houses at the avenue's southern terminus, The mid-twentieth-century neighborhood of Lake Oaks boasts neo-classical mansions and affluent ranch houses on the side, and the 1960s-era modern architecture of the University of New Orleans marks campus on the other. A bit farther, the mid-twentieth century gives



This circa-1855 lighthouse once guided seafarers into Milneburg, where passengers boarded the Pontchartrain Railroad for New Orleans. The landlocked relict is now on the UNO Technology Park campus. Photograph by author, 2003.

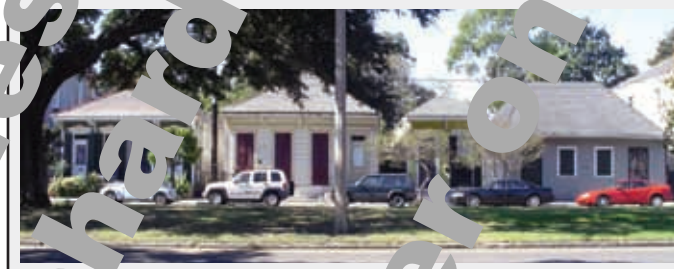
way to the early twenty-first, in the form of the ambitious UNO Technology Park and its new glass towers. But, once again, clues of geographies past may be found. Behind tall grass and trees, ignored by the proud Technology Park signs and surrounded by an unsightly cyclone fence, stands—incredibly—the circa-1855 Milneburg Lighthouse of Port Pontchartrain, a miraculous survivor of time, elements, and the literal expansion of the city's land base around its foundation. Once a beacon guiding the world to New Orleans' back door, it now stands empty, landlocked, and neglected, but standing nonetheless, in a richly symbolic position at the head of New Orleans' original terrestrial connection of river and lake.



Architectural eras manifested along Elysian Fields: late twentieth-century ranch houses at the far end of the avenue (above)...

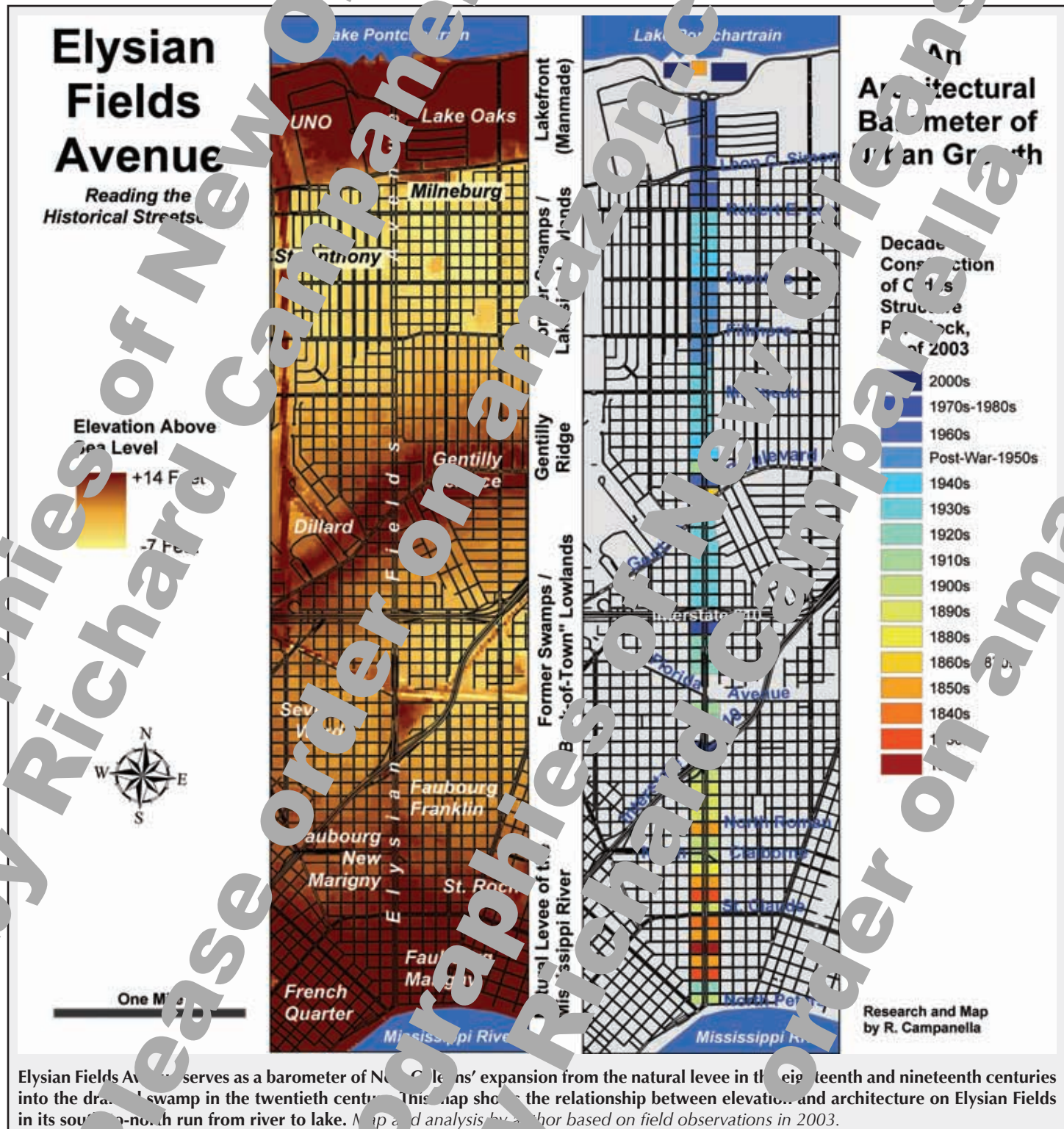


...early twentieth-century Spanish Revival and California bungalows near the Gentilly Ridge (above), and nineteenth-century Creole cottages and shotgun houses near the river (below). Photographs by author, 2004.



*Epilogue:* If Elysian Fields serves as a barometer for two hundred years of urban growth, it was a depth gauge for the floods that followed Hurricane Katrina. The avenue transects the entire elevational range of the city, from the crest of the riverfront levee to the back-of-town lowlands to the manmade lakefront. The avenue's uplands fared well during the ordeal, but the low-lying twentieth-century developments were inundated by up to five to six feet (rescue boats traveled the corridor like the railroad once did), and may face partial demolition. Once again, there will be open land along Elysian Fields Avenue—but not for long. The convenience of this spacious ingress and egress will probably attract residents back to its flanks, and Elysian Fields will record yet another chapter in the history of New Orleans' urban growth.







Though separated by 150 years and five miles, these historical and modern structures seem to share something beyond an address on Elysian Fields. Top left is a circa-1820 Creole cottage (oldest on the avenue near the river, converted to a 1960s ranch house by the 1980s). At lower left is an 1850s storehouse close to the river, compared to a modern bank near the 10th. Photographs by author, 2014.



TIMELINE: EMERGENCE OF ELYSIAN FIELDS AVENUE	
1718	New Orleans established
1740s	Dubreuil excavates canal projecting straight north from sharp bend of Mississippi, to power sawmill on plantation immediately below New Orleans.
1798	Plantation and canal come into possession of Marigny family; canal is expanded.
1803	Urban growth after Louisiana Purchase creates demand for new residential development.
1805	Marigny hires Finiels to design Faubourg Marigny; canal corridor becomes <i>Camps Ellysées</i> (Elysian Fields), centerpiece of suburb.
1807	Lafon lays out street network of Faubourg Marigny; house construction begins.
1815	Buildings line Elysian Fields from river to present-day New Rampart (mile 0.42); undeveloped blocks fill out up to North Miro Street (mile 1.0).
1828	Lower-city businessmen scheme to build railroad to the Pontchartrain, to gain access to potentially lucrative lake/coastal trade.
1829	New Orleans Railroad Company formed.
1830	State charters Pontchartrain Railroad Company to build line; Elysian Fields Avenue is selected as optimal route. Perfectly straight path is cleared and bed is formed to lake.
1831	Tracks completed from river to lake; horse-drawn Pontchartrain Railroad commences operation on April 23. Milneburg established at lakefront terminus.
1832	New Orleans Canal and Banking Company commences excavation of New Basin Canal in Faubourg St. Mary, designed to compete with Pontchartrain Railroad and Iberville Canal for lake and coastal trade.
1832	Wood-fired steam locomotive introduced to Pontchartrain Railroad. Old steam fields, though Marigny Canal remains.
1834	Blocks platted along Elysian Fields from river to Abundance Street (mile 1.36), though housing construction is limited to riverside blocks.
1835	From January to June, 152 steamboats, schooners, packets, sloops, barges, and other vessels arrive at Port Pontchartrain from Baton Rouge area eastward to Mobile and Florida Gulf Coast. Over 13,000 bales of cotton, lumber, firewood, shingles, fill, merchandise, and thousands of passengers, not to mention exports, make way down Elysian Fields' tracks.
1850s	New Orleans, Mobile and Chattanooga Railroad, connecting to Gulf Coast, diminishes importance of Pontchartrain Railroad. Milneburg becomes more resort than port, and railroad a means simply to get to lake.
1855	Lighthouse built off shore at Milneburg.
1862	Fortifications built on Elysian Fields at Gentilly intersection to prevent Union incursion on railroad.
1863	Developed blocks along Elysian Fields reach from river to North Miro Street (mile 1.2).
1870s	City and neighborhood residents begin long legal battle with railroad for control of Elysian Fields neutral ground; lasts until 1930s.

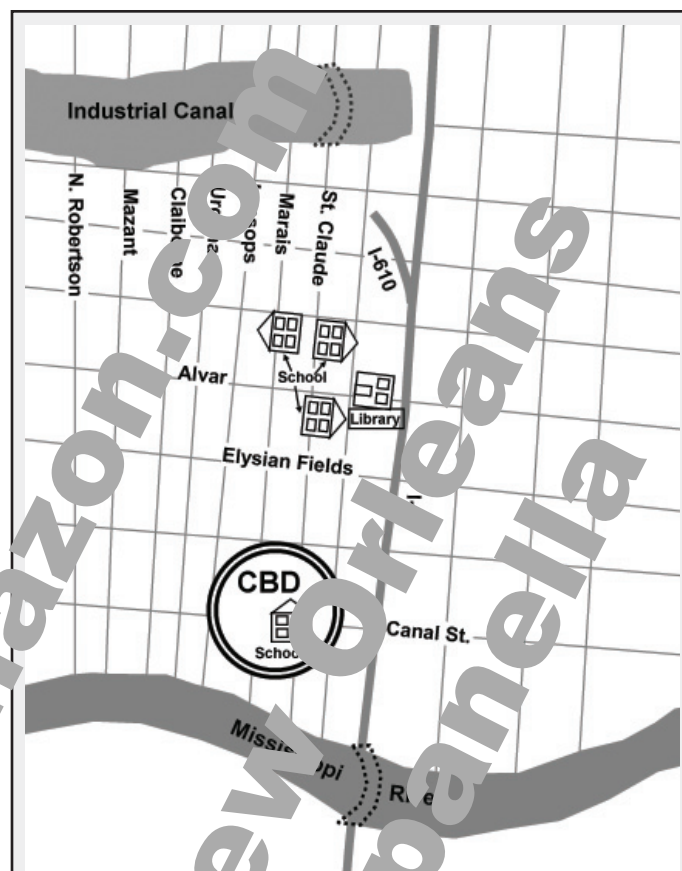
1878	Buildings line Elysian Fields from river to backswamp at Florida Walk (mile 1.62). Gentilly Ridge and Milneburg are also developed by this time.
1880	Louisville and Nashville acquires Pontchartrain Railroad; keeps line in operation.
1893-1915	Drainage system installed throughout city, opening up lakeside New Orleans for urban development.
1926-1934	Construction of Lakefront land adds 2.4 miles to northern terminus of Elysian Fields; destroys old Milneburg.
1930	City acquires rights to Elysian Fields neutral ground from North Rocheblave to lake.
1937	Rendered obsolete by automobiles, horses, and demise of Milneburg, Pontchartrain Railroad makes final run.
1930s	Scores of "California cottages" built along and near Elysian Fields in vicinity of Gentilly Boulevard; tracks removed from North Rocheblave to the lake; neutral ground landscaped.
1939	Pontchartrain Beach Amusement Park opens on new lakefront lands at the northern tip of Elysian Fields.
1940s	Camp Leroy Johnson Naval Air Station and other war-related facilities dominate lakefront end of Elysian Fields.
1949	Elysian Fields overpass built over Florida Avenue railroad tracks and canal.
1954	Railroad tracks removed from neutral ground from North Rocheblave to the lake. Median later landscaped, creating modern Elysian Fields Avenue.
1950-1960s	Scores of ranch homes built along Elysian Fields in lowlands south and north of Gentilly Boulevard intersection.
1958	Campus of Louisiana State University-New Orleans (present-day University of New Orleans) commenced at lakefront terminus of Elysian Fields.
1964	Lake Oaks, lakefront subdivision built on reclaimed land and final major urban development along Elysian Fields Avenue, is opened. Like most other subdivisions along avenue, its street network conforms to geometry of Elysian Fields.
1983	Pontchartrain Beach Amusement Park, a dependent of failed resort town of Milneburg, closes.
2000	UNO Technology Park built at lakeside terminus of Elysian Fields; only circa-1855 lighthouse remains from earlier days.

## UPTOWN/DOWNTOWN

### SHIFTING PERCEPTIONS, SHIFTING LINES

All but the smallest or most amorphous American communities perceive a “downtown” within their limits—an inner core from which the community grew, where major arteries intersect, where one finds municipal offices, and where businesses cluster (or once clustered). “Uptowns” are not as ubiquitous, pervading mostly in larger, older cities, and sharing less tangible but no less real characteristics: spacious residential living, an air of affluence and sophistication, the mottled shade of mature hardwoods, and a younger urban infrastructure. Cities with universally recognized downtowns and uptowns seem to exude a more distinguished and interesting aura than unvaried communities, giving newcomers a sense that a complex sociology and history have unfurled here, that a certain mystery known only to locals persists. (This may explain why some upwardly mobile cities declare their “Uptown”—capital U—through official channels, whether popular usage warrants it or not.) The monotony of modern suburbs comes not solely from the homogeneity of the housing stock and predictability of the commercial strips, but also from the lack of perceptive regions within. It’s all the same, developed about the same time, in the same style, with no particular characteristics discerning one area from the next.

Not so New Orleans. One is hard-pressed to identify another American city with a more profound sense of *downtown* and *uptown*. Even Manhattan falls short. These areas are truly regions of the mind in the Crescent City, conjuring up vastly different images and informing many aspects of the city. History. Architecture. Infrastructure. Poverty and wealth. Race, region, and ethnicity. Social scenes and gang rivalries. Accents.<sup>144</sup> Music.<sup>145</sup> Roofscapes and streetscapes. Mardi Gras. Indian tribes and traditions. The smells, too, are distinct: the intermingling of cooking aromas, early morning humidity, and an unhealthy dose of automotive exhaust in downtown (particularly the French Quarter) recalls the emanations of Tegucigalpa or Quito or Mexico City. Uptown, particularly in the affluent areas, is the fragrance of flowering gardens and sprawling oak trees, collects the fields and forests of the Felicianas. Even the times residents, urban wildlife reflect the distinction: hard-brook pigeons abound in the ancient streets and buildings of downtown, where squirrels are a rare sight; in leafy uptown the ratio reverses. Traversing from downtown to uptown in New Orleans is a journey from the old to the new, from the city to the country, from the Caribbean to



People's perceptions of space and place vary widely depending upon nationality, education, upbringing, age, race, and other factors. Locals tend to perceive New Orleans in terms of wards, school districts, and church parishes, while transplants often divide space into suburbs and historic districts. This map shows how one seventh-grade public school student, a young African American male born and raised in the Ninth Ward, perceives his city. Level of detail is highest in the places most important to him around his home and school in the Ninth Ward, in another school he attends in the CBD, and in a third school reached via I-10/I-610. Notice, however, the complete absence of the world-famous French Quarter and all of uptown (three prosperous majority-white areas) from his work. Note also how he perceives the nearby Industrial Canal as wider than the inaccessible Mississippi River. A similar “mental map” drawn by an uptown high school student, a young professional new to the city, an elderly long resident, or a tourist would reveal significant differences in geographical perception. Adapted from hand-drawn map. Special thanks to B.G./CBK, Junior SEED Program, 2004.

the American. Everyone has their own idea of where downtown becomes uptown, and what sort of world lies on the other side; these perceptions in turn inform one's perception of the city. Wrote Elsie Martinez and Margaret LeCorgne of their Depression-era childhood memories of the city, “we discovered that while we shared the same unique culture and customs of New Orleans, we often experienced them differently. One of us had an ‘uptown’ experience and the other had a ‘downtown’ experience.”<sup>146</sup>

Such strong senses of place pique the curiosity. What is the provenance of the downtown/uptown discourse? Where exactly are downtown and uptown, and how have these men-

<sup>144</sup> New Orleans is associated with downtown, and the Creole *Or-le-ans* with uptown. The difference may be primarily rooted in class distinctions, which in turn have geographical associations.

<sup>145</sup> “Creole style” jazz was played downtown; “brass band” styles were heard uptown. Al Rose and Edmond Souchon, *New Orleans Jazz: A Family Album* (Baton Rouge, 1984), 215. See also Jerah Johnson, “Jim Crow Laws of the 1890s and the Origins of New Orleans Jazz: Correction of an Error,” *Popular Music* 19 (2000): 243-50.

<sup>146</sup> Elsie Martinez and Margaret LeCorgne, *Uptown/Downtown: Growing Up in New Orleans* (Lafayette, LA, 1986), xii.



tal regions changed over time? And what do these perceptions reveal about New Orleans?

## ORIGIN OF THE PERCEPTION

Two hypotheses explain the origin of this uniquely American perception. According to urbanist Robert M. Fogelson, the term *downtown* originated in early nineteenth-century Manhattan as an allusion to the southward location of the city's inner core. Northward, then, was "up," and when New York's booming commercial sector pushed residents out of the southern tip by the mid-nineteenth century, new residential areas blossomed northward on the island—"uptown."<sup>147</sup> The second hypothesis views the term as a reference to the local hydrology. Since most early American cities abutted rivers, original city centers tended to be downriver, while later developments expanded either "up" the flow-direction of the river, or "up" to higher elevations away from the river. In time, these references evolved into "downtown" and "uptown." The hypotheses are mutually incompatible (in the case of New York), but neither explains why we perceive downtowns and uptowns in many American cities today, regardless of cardinal directions and flow directions. Linguistic diffusion occurred, according to Fogelson, because, in mid-nineteenth-century New York, the stark difference between bustling, commercial downtown and quiet, residential uptown superseded the original geographical basis of the terminology, and "the words gradually took on a functional meaning that reflected the changing structure of the city."<sup>148</sup> Stripped of their original cardinal-direction definition, *downtown* and *uptown* became convenient labels for the common phenomenon of a dense, inner commercial core adjoined by a sparsely populated outer residential zone. New Yorkers probably introduced this vocabulary to the nation as they visited other cities on long-term business trips or moved there permanently. Small towns, boasting only a few commercial districts, could only lay claim to their downtowns, but larger cities with suburbanization histories often developed perceptions of downtown districts as well. Both terms spread to various American cities in the mid- to late nineteenth century, regardless of their orientation or hydrology.

A series of circumstances allowed downtown/uptown perceptions to take hold in the Crescent City. Not least among them were the cardinal directions: New Orleans did not expand northward, when the Faubourg Tremé was founded in 1810, but only after the earlier suburbs (Faubourg Ste. Marie and Marigny, 1788 and 1805) developed to the southwest and northeast of the original city. Most subsequent urban expansion throughout the nineteenth century continued in a southerly direction, because the natural levees of the Mississippi availed more well-drained land there than the narrower levees to the east, or the backslope of the natural

levee to the north. To this day, cardinal directions are rarely used in the streets of New Orleans, and they clearly did not inform local perceptions of downtown and uptown.

Flow direction of the Mississippi, on the other hand, spoke explicitly to notions of "down" and "up," and since the southwestern spread of the city equated to an upriver spread, the now semi-rural faubourgs became known as the "upper" portion of the city. Points east of the original city were, for the same hydrological reason, described as "lower." These directional terms were used as prepositions ("up the street," "below the city") or as adjectives ("upper part of the city," "Upper Banlieue," "Lower Banlieue"<sup>149</sup>).

The noun forms of this perception—*uptown* and *downtown*, which carry deeper connotations than the directional adjectives—seem not to have emerged from this indigenous hydrological observation, but rather by introduction from Northerners who settled in New Orleans during the high antebellum era. Considering that New York contributed liberally to New Orleans' growing Anglo-American population, and that Manhattan had particularly strong commercial ties to the Crescent City, the terms probably came down with New Yorkers as part of their cultural baggage that also contained the English language, Protestant and Greek Revival architecture, common law and other American traits. *Uptown* and *downtown* were, after all, English words in a French-speaking city, indicating that they were not indigenous concepts. The timing seems to corroborate this hypothesis: "downtown," according to Fogelson, emerged in New York in the early nineteenth century, while "uptown" followed around the century's second quarter, the same time when New Yorkers poured into New Orleans and the city grew dramatically in the upriver direction. These years also saw the installation of a horse-drawn streetcar line on present-day St. Charles Avenue (1835), which initiated development of the "streetcar suburbs" soon populated with many Northerners and now so closely associated with the image of uptown. Before long, the important uptown/downtown terminology aligned with New Orleansans' new spatial self-perception. An example of early usage appeared in an anecdote published in the *Daily Picayune* in 1845:

Some of our "down-town" neighbors, whose vernacular language is the French, have a strange way, very often, of translating their ideas into English.<sup>150</sup>

At the risk of reading too much into one example, note the quotations around *down-town* (hyphenated in that nineteenth-century way), perhaps indicating that this was new jargon, heard enough to be used but not enough to be used inconspicuously. Note also the us-and-them viewpoint, "us" being the level-headed English-speakers on the upper side of town (the *Picayune's* office at this time was on the 300 block

<sup>147</sup> Robert M. Fogelson, *Downtown: Its Rise and Fall, 1880-1950* (New Haven and London, 2001), 9-10. I thank Thomas J. Campanella for recommending this source.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>149</sup> "The Upper Banlieue embrac[es] the suburbs of Duplantier, Soulet, La Course, Annunciation, and Rengis[es]....the Lower Banlieue embrac[es] the suburbs of Daunois and Clouet.... Banlieue means suburbs, or in this context, suburban developments. John Adams Saxton, *The New Orleans Directory and Register* (New Orleans, 1822), 9. See also H. J. Edmunds, *New Orleans As I Found It* (New York, 1845), 5.

<sup>150</sup> *Daily Picayune*, January 7, 1845, "City Intelligence" column.

of Camp Street), and “them” being those struggling Frenchmen on the “down-town” side, struggling with a new tongue with amusing results.

The *Daily Orleanian*, which served the Third Municipality below Esplanade Avenue, provides an example of usage from the downtown perspective. It noted that, in the wake of the 1849 Sauv  Crevasse flood, “the people up-town are complaining of the want of tenement houses.... We would advise such persons, by all means, to come down here, where residences can be had on reasonable terms...compared with the rents demanded and obtained in town!”<sup>151</sup> Uptown by this time, as implied in the piece, was wealthier than downtown in general, and the Third Municipality, located as far downtown as one could go, was the poorest section of the city. (The piece did not run in the French language edition of the paper, *L’Orl nais*, probably because one would generally not address English-speaking up-towners in French.)

Also in 1849, the *Daily Picayune* predicted that the new market at Dryades and Melpomene would “prove highly advantageous to our up-town population.”<sup>152</sup> Another example appeared in the *Daily Picayune* in 1850, noting the “large

<sup>151</sup> *Daily Orleanian*, June 6, 1849, p. 2, col. 1.

<sup>152</sup> “Opening of the Dryades Street Market,” *Daily Picayune*, January 11, 1849, p. 2, col. 6.



This graphic juxtaposes six French Quarter blocks (top, along lower Dryades Street) against six Garden District blocks (Prytan e, Third and Fourth), to illustrate differences in housing density, street block distances, garden space, and foliage between downtown and uptown. These distinct city spaces, traceable to European versus American notions of urban planning and man/nature relationships, deeply inform sense of place and states of mind in the modern city. Graphics by author; Robinson Atlas detail courtesy New Orleans Notarial Archives; DigitalGlobe imagery courtesy CBR.

crowds of our down-town citizens” catching a magic show at the St. Louis Saloon.<sup>153</sup> Such passing references are a far cry from universally held, heavily connoted perceptions of urban regions, but they indicate a start. It is possible that the 1852 reconsolidation of New Orleans, after sixteen years as three semi-autonomous municipalities, antiquated old terminology and led people to adopt the more stable and evocative terms of *uptown* and *downtown*. Use of the term *uptown* was sufficiently apparent to a tourist in 1869 to warrant mention in a letter to *Vanity Fair*:

You cannot help observing a change when, after strolling about in the business and American quarter, you step over [Canal Street] and promenade in the Cre le quarter. The latter has adopted the term of “down-town” for the latter, and finally their own residential quarter as “up-town.”<sup>154</sup>

Note the yoking of the word “dignify” with “up-town,” and the lack of any reference to river-flow direction. Note also the clear implication that this was an American import.

Another example comes from J. Curtis Waldo’s *Illustrated Visitors’ Guide to New Orleans* (1879), which described the location of a particular market as “considered very far up town”<sup>155</sup> when first built. But Waldo’s work—an early example of a tourist guidebook, as well known then today—did not consistently use the downtown/uptown dichotomy in regionizing the city for newcomers, something that is standard practice in today’s equivalents. Nor did his antebellum predecessors. The travelogues of John H.B. Latrobe (1834), Joseph Holt Ingraham (1835), H. Didimus (written 1835, 1836), James S. Buckinridge (1842), Benjamin Moore Sherman (1845), and A. Oakley Hall (1851) made no reference to “uptown” or “downtown” at least of all in a significant interpretive manner. Nor was the terminology used in the introductory descriptions found in city directories of that era. The *Historical Sketch Book and Guide to New Orleans and Environs* (1885) introduced readers to myriad ways to divvy up the city—by wards, districts, neighborhoods, boroughs, ethnic patterns, and uses such as “commercial center of the city” or “residential quarter,” river-flow direction, and lake orientation—but used “down-town” and “up-town” only passing, and rarely.<sup>156</sup> The official guide to the 1884-1885 World’s Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition, an event that had put present-day uptown New Orleans on the map, also used this terminology in a passive, sporadic manner, to discern the “up-town lines of [street]cars” from the “down-town lines of cars,” putting the demarcation line clearly at Canal Street. (Those streets heading toward the lake were in a category of their own, the “rear of city lines of cars.”) More often, phrases such as “upper part of the city” and “cen-

<sup>153</sup> *Daily Picayune*, January 1, 1850, “City Intelligence” column, p. 2.

<sup>154</sup> “Life in New Orleans,” *Vanity Fair* (January 1, 1870): 6, letter dated December 1869.

<sup>155</sup> The reference was to Mary’s Market, on Tchoupitoulas between St. Joseph and present-day Howard, now considered to be in the Warehouse District—and downtown. J. Curtis Waldo, *Illustrated Visitors’ Guide to New Orleans* (New Orleans, 1879), 44.

<sup>156</sup> William H. Colver, *Historical Sketch Book and Guide to New Orleans and Environs, with Maps* (New York, 1885), 1-5, 82, 149.



tre of the city" were used.<sup>157</sup> Into the early twentieth century, documents such as a 1904 streetcar map of the city discerned the "American section of the city" from the "French section of the city," even though these ethnic associations were fading by that time.<sup>158</sup> One unusual usage occurred in the title of Lulu King Saxon's 1890 impressionistic painting, *Uptown Street*, which depicts a bucolic landscape in the rapidly developing area near present-day Audubon Park. Another appears in George Washington Cable's 1880 novel, *The Grandissimes*, in which a reference to "that social variety of New Orleans life now distinguished as Uptown Creoles"<sup>159</sup> counters the traditional association of Creoles with downtown.

Judging from the documents they left behind, then, nineteenth-century observers of New Orleans were more likely to regionize the city by

- municipalities (municipal districts, wards, faubourgs, or neighborhoods);
- cultural regions ("the Saxons of the Second Municipality...the Creoles of the First Municipality"<sup>160</sup>);
- flow direction ("upper faubourg," "lower banlieue") or
- age ("vieux carré de la ville," "old square," "new city")

rather than by "downtown" and "uptown." These terms, while definitely in popular use by the latter half of the nineteenth century, did not appear to carry the deeply connoted perception of place that they would assume in the twentieth century. Otherwise, it seems, they would have proliferated in the printed word of the day.

One way to quantify this perception is to count the number of businesses named "Uptown" or "Downtown" in annual directories. Entrepreneurs are usually quite savvy about public perceptions, making business names arguably a fair indicator of popular lexicon.<sup>161</sup> A perusal of the city directories of 1861, 1869, 1877, 1885, 1893, 1901, 1910, 1917, 1926, 1935, 1940, 1947, 1955, 1962, 1969, 1977, 1985, 1994, and 2001 shows that no listed business, organization, or agency started their name with either "Uptown" or "Downtown" until around 1908. There were some entries named "Upper" as in the "Upper Station of City Police" near Lee Circle, as far back as 1861 and probably earlier, but "upper" lacks the connotations of "uptown." Looking across the span of the twentieth century, we see that the terms became somewhat more popular toward the mid-1900s, but it is not until the late 1900s that the terminology really caught on among businesses (see graph).

Additional evidence about the regional perceptions of the past comes from news articles and the recollections of elders

who took the time to pen their thoughts. One such piece, *Down Town New Orleans in the Early 'Eighties: Customs and Characters of Old Robertson Street and Its Neighborhood*, written by Elise Kirsch in 1951, recalls street life in the Seventh Ward in late nineteenth-century, with colorful reminiscences of Creole, French and Mardi Gras Indians. The early-1900s debate about siting new public buildings was couched strongly in flow-town-versus-uptown terms ("Hurrah for Downtown"; "Downtown Is Taking the Lead"; "Downtown Will Have the New Postoffice"; "Downtown Will Have the New Court House"), with Canal Street clearly indicted as the Rubicon.<sup>162</sup> The more recent recollections of Elsie Martinez and Margaret LeCorgne, from the 1920s and 1940s, are so heavily predicated on these perceptions of place that the old ladies structured their entire book around them, naming



Canal Street, the traditional Rubicon. Photograph by Annie Caravello with author, 2002.

the volume *Uptown/Downtown: Growing Up in New Orleans*. "Uptown" was a household word by 1923, when Hibernia Bank published a pamphlet celebrating the great attributes, describing it as "one of the most beautiful residential sections of the United States." It delimited it as a half-mile-wide corridor straddling St. Charles Avenue from the muse streets (above Lee Circle) to Audubon Park, interestingly excluding the riverfront areas and Carrollton.<sup>163</sup>

In any case, downtown/uptown perceptions probably arrived in New Orleans from New York during the second quarter of the nineteenth century, but "downtown" in the local lexicon until the turn-of-the-century years when they rose in popularity and began to assume their present-day connotations. If this assessment is accurate, one explanation behind the change may be the full development of the electrified streetcar system by the late 1860s, which fueled the development of uptown areas ("streetcar suburbs"). Another related reason is the rapid residential development of the Audubon Park area following the 1884-1885 World's Industrial and Cotton

<sup>157</sup> James S. MacChesney, *The New Orleans Guide and Exposition World Book* (New Orleans, 1885), 30, 37-39.

<sup>158</sup> *Map of New Orleans Showing Street Railway System of the N.O. Electric Co.* (1904); New Orleans Railways Company.

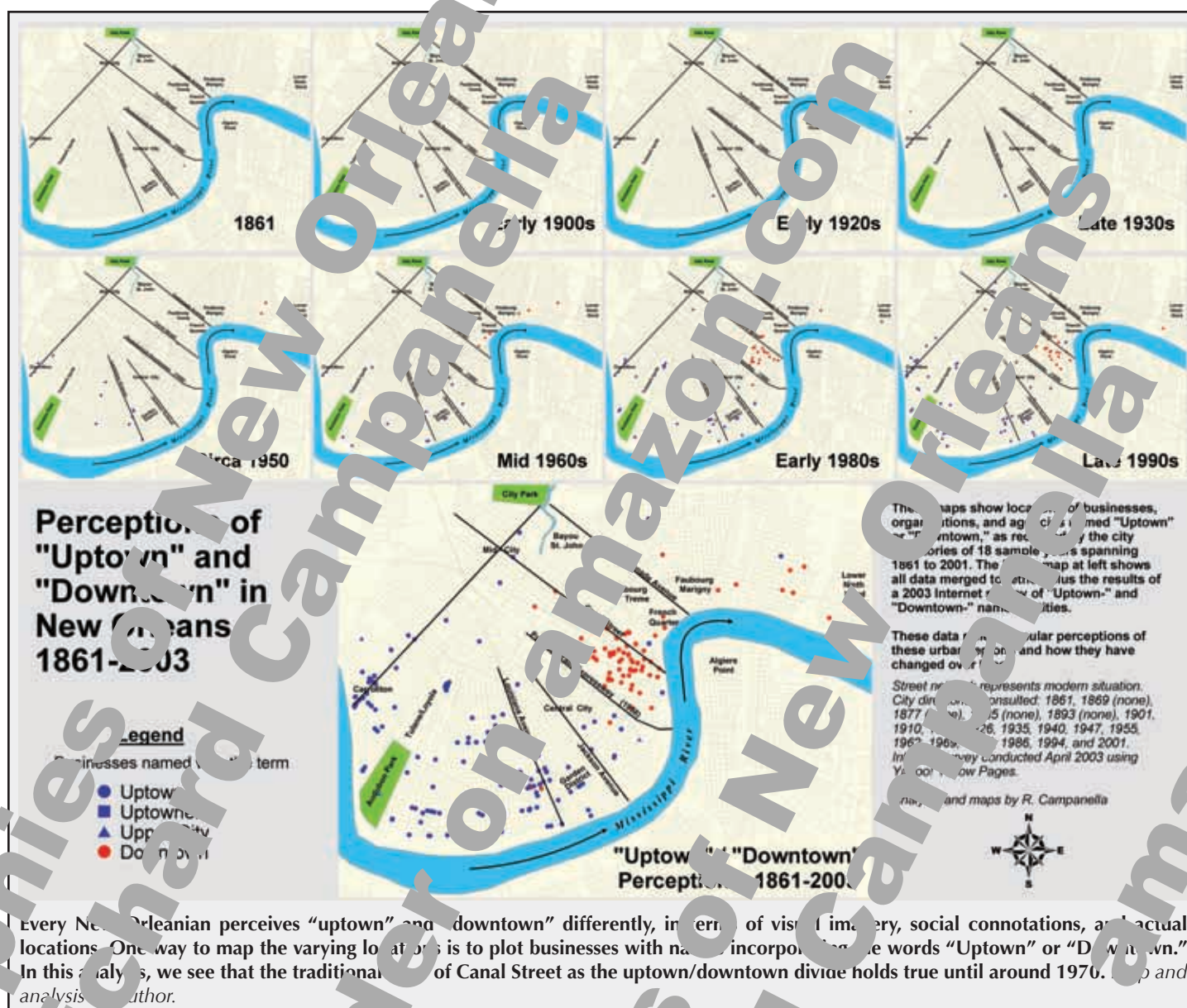
<sup>159</sup> George Washington Cable, *The Grandissimes: A Story of Creole Life* (New York, 1880), 401.

<sup>160</sup> A. Oakley Hall, *The Manhattaner in New Orleans: or Phases of "Crescent City" Life* (New York, 1851), 162.

<sup>161</sup> Mapping business names by their locations is, of course, biased toward commercial districts at the expense of residential areas.

<sup>162</sup> "Down Town Also Wants That New Courthouse," *Daily Picayune*, January 9, 1903, p. 5; and "Hurrah for Downtown," *Daily Picayune*, January 13, 1903, p. 1. I thank Mark Tull for bringing these articles to my attention.

<sup>163</sup> Hibernia Bank & Trust Company, *Uptown New Orleans: A Brief Sketch of Its Varied and Varied Activities* (New Orleans, 1923), 5.



Every New Orleanian perceives "uptown" and "downtown" differently, in terms of visual imagery, social connotations, and actual locations. One way to map the varying locations is to plot businesses with names incorporating the words "Uptown" or "Downtown." In this analysis, we see that the traditional perception of Canal Street as the uptown/downtown divide holds true until around 1970. (map and analysis by author).

Centennial Exposition, when many former plantations transformed from quasi-rural outskirts to a city of affluent homes and tree-lined streets—in a word, an *uptown*. The terminology seems only to have grown more popular during the course of the twentieth century, especially since around 1970, despite the national decline of downtowns everywhere and the supplanting of uptowns with outer suburbs and exurbs.

### LOCATIONS OF THE PERCEPTIONS

Ask New Orleanians to locate the dividing line between downtown and uptown, and most will respond in one of four ways: Canal Street, the Pontchartrain Expressway, Jackson Avenue, or Louisiana Avenue. Feelings on this matter can be surprisingly unsettled, and differing opinions are often met with a sharply exaggerated, but ultimately good-natured sense of disbelief.

Unquestionably, the original dividing line between downtown and uptown New Orleans was Canal Street. This perception predates the adoption of *downtown/uptown* terminology: observers of early nineteenth-century New Orleans routinely described Canal Street as a dividing line between

pretty everything that was old and Creole from all that was new and American (even though closer inspections would have revealed, culturally speaking, a blurring of separation). After the emergence of *downtown/uptown*, more descriptive accounts of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries continued to view Canal Street in the partitioning role (witness the 1869 *Vanity Fair* quote above). No less an authority than Charles L. Dufour wrote in 1936

Uptown includes the area north of Canal Street; Downtown embraces the area south of Canal Street. Each of these sections of New Orleans, while sharing many things in common, has a life of its own—folklore and folkways, customs and traditions which differ in detail, if not in principle.<sup>164</sup>

Elsie Martinez and Margaret LeCorgne had no doubts about the dividing line between downtown and uptown in the circa-1940 New Orleans of their youth:

We don't think either of us at the time was aware of the "mystique" of Downtown New Orleans or the historical and cultural background of Downtown New Orleans. They were just the areas in which we lived and Canal Street was the dividing line between them. When one of us went to Canal Street she

<sup>164</sup> Martinez and LeCorgne, *Uptown/Downtown*, xi.



was going “uptown” and when the other to Canal Street she was going “downtown.”<sup>165</sup>

Many, perhaps most, New Orleansians retain this perception today, especially those who were born and raised in the city. Looking at the maps of business names (*Locations of “Uptown” and “Downtown” in New Orleans, 1861–2003*), we see that the Canal-Street-as-separator view holds true in the data until around 1970. That is, all “Downtown”-named businesses were located below Canal Street, and all “Uptown”-businesses lay above Canal—usually far above.

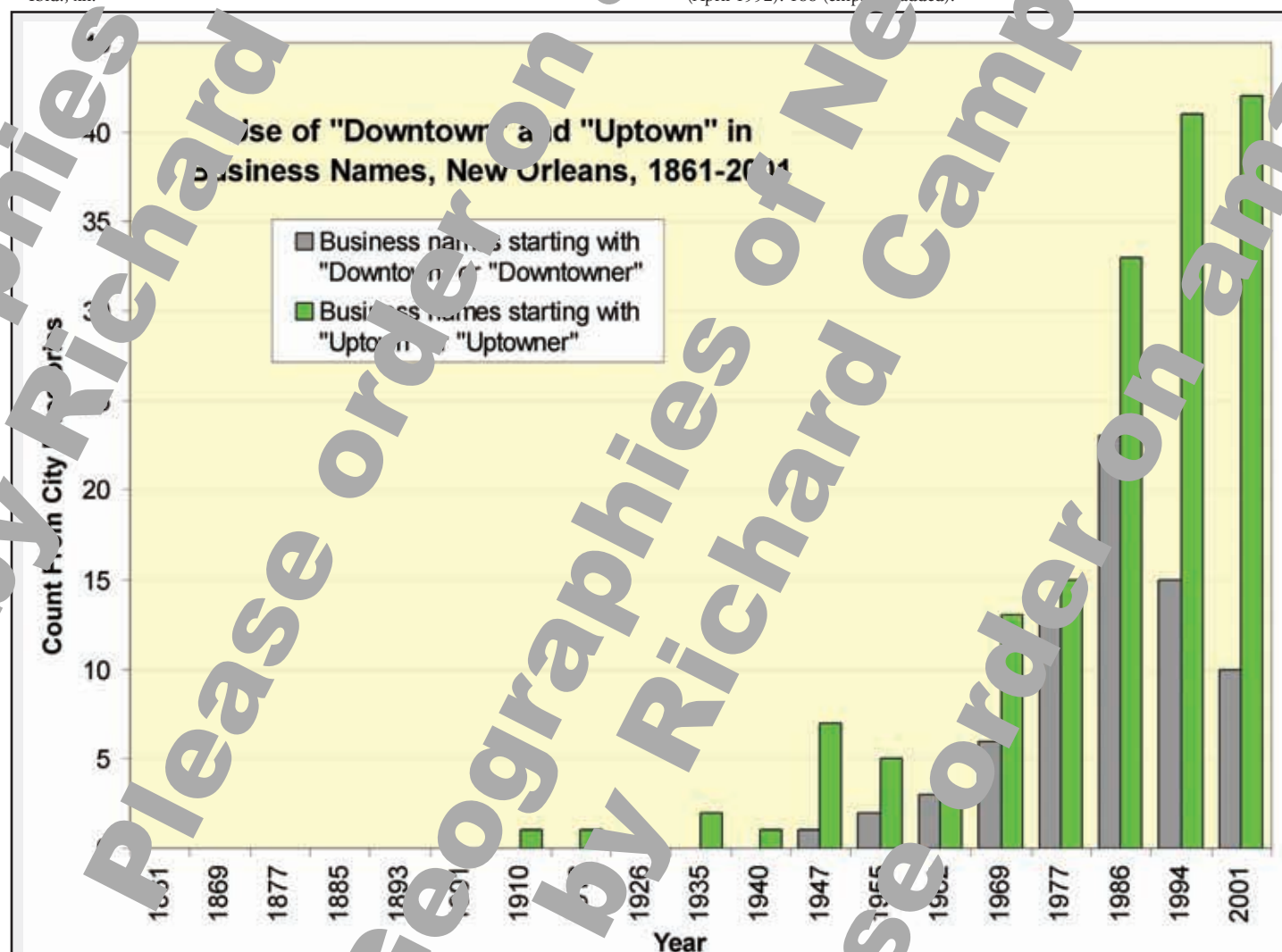
But something occurred by the early 1970s that apparently altered people’s perceptions. By that decade, the blocks immediately above Canal Street—that is, the former Faubourg St. Mary (Ste. Marie), a.k.a. the American Quarter, a.k.a. uptown—seem to have been annexed into downtown! Why? A number of transformations occurred in this era that may have swayed people to expand their perception of *downtown* beyond Canal Street. First, in the late 1950s, the Pontchartrain Expressway was built parallel to Howard Avenue to connect with the new Mississippi River bridge at Algiers. The elevated expressway established a stark, ob-

spicuous barrier between the predominantly commercial zone below it and the mostly residential area above it—a barrier that separated two regions more physically disparate than those abutting Canal Street. Second, from 1965 to 1989, New Orleans’ skyline rose from a modest profile of 1920s-era office buildings to a jagged silhouette of modern skyscrapers. The presence of ninety-four high-rises<sup>166</sup> (not to mention the Superdome) sealed the transformation of this area from a historical residential uptown to an indisputable Central Business District of bright sunlight, stark shadows, glass boxes, and concrete canyons, a place that anyone would identify as a modern American downtown. “The skyscraper had a very important role in the development of a *core urban core* in large American cities,” serving “to anchor the central business district,”<sup>167</sup> observed urban geographer Larry

Forster based on Emporis Building Database’s definition of “high-rise” as a building at least twelve floors (about 114 feet) high. In fact, though not all of these structures are located in New Orleans’ CBD, the city’s “skyline ranking system” listed New Orleans as nineteenth in the nation, and seventieth in the world, in terms of the visual impact of its skyline—surprisingly high for a relatively small, poor Southern city. Hong Kong and New York, incidentally, ranked first and second, with 7,254 and 5,321 high-rises. Emporis Building Database, “Skyline Rankings,” [http://www.emporis.com/en/bu/sk/st/stsr\\_2004](http://www.emporis.com/en/bu/sk/st/stsr_2004).

<sup>167</sup> Larry R. Ford, “Reading the Skyscrapers of American Cities,” *Geographical Review* 82 (April 1992): 188 (emphasis added).

<sup>165</sup> Ibid., xii.



If business names are any guide, use of uptown/downtown terminology in New Orleans has grown increasingly popular in the past century, despite the decline in New Orleans’ population by 25 percent since 1960. Reasons for the recent drop in “downtown”-named businesses are unclear. Graph and analysis by author.

Ford, adding that the downtowns of Philadelphia, Cleveland, and New York have also shifted with the rise of new skyscrapers. Thirdly, this era saw the beginning of the thirty-year decline of Canal Street from a regional famous upscale shopping district to a raffish main drag of low-end retailers. Most streetcar lines were removed from the thoroughfare in 1964, and old-line department stores, shops, restaurants, and other city institutions folded steadily into the late 1990s that almost none remained by the twenty-first century. The diminution of Canal Street may have erased the sophisticated air of the “Great Wide World” in the popular perception, robbing it of its Rubicon role and annexing its surroundings to the gritty realities of downtown. Finally, recent decades also saw the introduction of the international jargon *Central Business District*, the rise of preservation activism, the development of zoning regulations, and the establishment of the Downtown Development District, all of which insinuated the notion of *downtown* to this area in increasingly formal manners. As a result, the consensus today, by the clear and overwhelming evidence of everyday usage, is that the former Faubourg St. Mary, today’s CBD, is not only downtown but the *heart* of downtown. Those people incorporating this usage in their speech, if pressed, generally identify the Pontchartrain Expressway as the new downtown/uptown divide. Whereas a century ago people in the French Quarter would have referred to Lafayette Square as being “in uptown,” today Quarterites would think of Lafayette Square as being “in the CBD,” whereas people in the modern uptown might think of the very same place as “in downtown.”

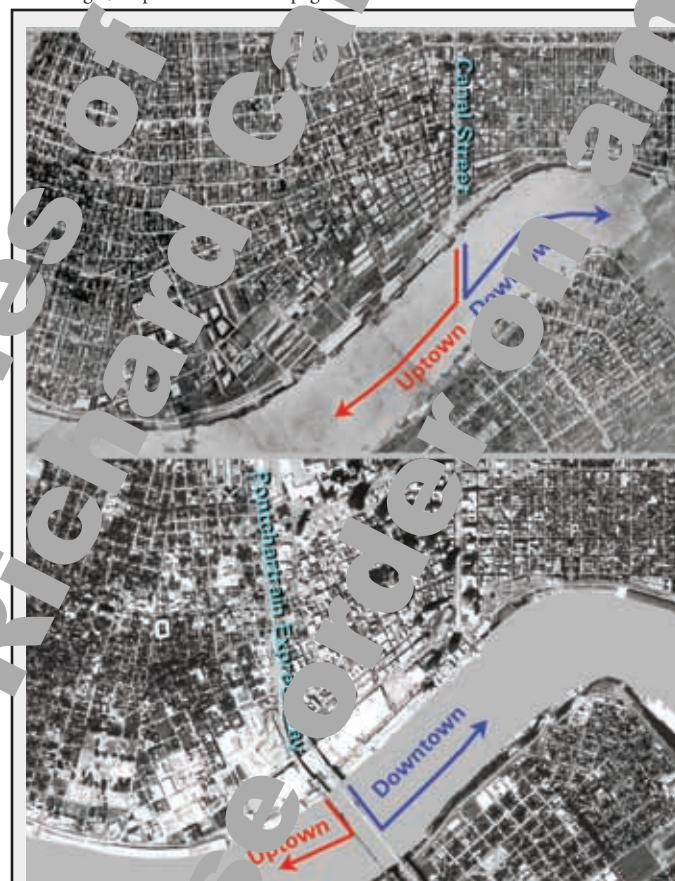
Yet a surprising number of locals still maintain the traditional view that Canal Street forms the division, pointing to the fact that the streets change names there (Royal becomes St. Charles, Decatur becomes Magazine, etc.) and that addresses, distances, and directions emanate from Canal Street. A representative of the *Times-Picayune*, to whom I posed this question, adamantly insisted that Canal Street was the only and only downtown/uptown divide and that he had never heard of any other usage<sup>168</sup>—despite the fact that his newspaper routinely employs the modern usage. A survey of the 114 *Times-Picayune* pieces about New Orleans (1993–2003) that contained the word *downtown* in the headline showed that 72 percent either directly stated or clearly implied that *downtown* spanned above Canal Street, usually the CBD and Warehouse District. Most of the remaining articles simply did not tie the term to specific sites or areas, and only a very few cited below-Canal sites exclusively, either consciously or unconsciously drawing upon the traditional definition.<sup>169</sup> Perusing the newspaper today, one would be hard pressed to find, for example, a new restaurant at St. Charles and Common described as an uptown bistro, or a incident at Maple

and Girod characterized as a crime in uptown New Orleans. These locales are considered downtown today, even though they are on the uptown side of Canal Street. Other media embrace the new definition: the June 2000 issue of *New Orleans Magazine* featured a cover story entitled “The Lights Are Brighter Downtown” which celebrated the stylish mystique of downtown and delineated it as exactly the same area—the CBD—that in 1885 tour guide described as “Up-town.”<sup>170</sup> That so many New Orleanians nevertheless still cling to the old Canal Street view shows the power of tradition and perception of place in this city.

Those who disagree with both the Canal Street and the Pontchartrain Expressway perceptions may point to a third corridor, Jackson Avenue, as the downtown/uptown divide. The basis of this definition is the Uptown New Orleans Telephone Directory & Internet Guide, which views Jackson as the lower edge of uptown (the side of St. Charles), but Washington Avenue from St. Charles to South Claiborne (which is seen as the rear edge).<sup>171</sup> There is no historical precedence for this; Jackson Avenue was never a parish boundary, a district or ward line, nor even a line between faubourgs. The im-

<sup>170</sup> William H. Coleman, *Historical Sketch Book and Guide to New Orleans and Environs, with Map* (New York: 1885), 82. Interestingly, this 1885 source used the hyphenated “Up-town” to describe what we now call the CBD, and “Uptown” to refer to the comfortable residential district further upriver, seemingly implying that the former was a location and the latter an absolute one.

<sup>171</sup> “Uptown New Orleans Telephone Directory & Internet Guide,” EATEL Sunshine Pages, <http://www.sunshinepages.com>.



Perceptions of the uptown/downtown divide seem to have shifted from Canal Street to the Pontchartrain Expressway in recent decades, illustrated here on a 1922 aerial photograph and a 2002 satellite image. Map by author.

<sup>168</sup> Personal communication with *Times-Picayune* staff (anonymous source), May 1, 2003.

<sup>169</sup> Lexis-Nexis survey conducted September 1, 2003. Articles that maintained the traditional below-Canal-Street usage of “downtown” were often written by Bettina Benoit, columnist for the *Downtown Picayune* supplement.



pression may derive from the fact that, starting in 1929, St. Charles Avenue below the Jackson intersection was zoned for light-industrial and commercial use, while the avenue above Jackson retained its affluent residential ambience. Since then, lower St. Charles Avenue suffered numerous demolitions of stately old homes and saw their replacement with modern brick commercial structures. Today, few people live in this stretch, no graceful canopy of oaks shades the street, and the ambiance is of a rather mundane commercial strip, saved only by the streetcar and an occasional surviving historical structure. Above the Jackson Avenue intersection, all this changes: St. Charles exhibits its full uptown glory, with all the accoutrements. That some people see the Jackson line as the downtown/uptown line may reflect the change in land use.

Louisiana Avenue forms the fourth disputed boundary, but this is Uptown with a capital U: an official designation rather than a perception. The origin of this premise is the National Park Service's Uptown National Register Historic District, which uses Louisiana Avenue, Tchoupitoulas Street, South Claiborne Avenue, and Broadway as the main boundaries. Visitors' guidebooks have adopted this interpretation of Uptown for the sake of clarity. Gray zones and fuzziness are the norm in the perception of places, but they are anathema to those who seek to modify and manage. The Uptown designation confusingly overlap or blend with other destina-

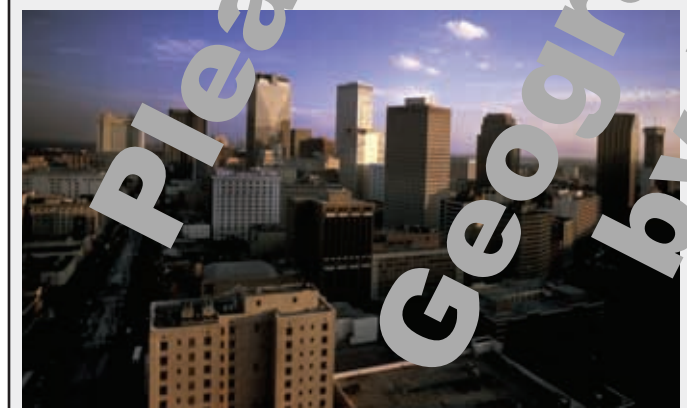
tions, and enables a neat arrangement of chapters and a tidy restaurant matrix. At least one local television station reported using this interpretation in its news coverage.<sup>172</sup> Even as one of the nation's largest urban national historic districts, this region falls short of most natives' perception of uptown (with a small "u"), excluding such quintessentially uptown locales as the Garden District and Carrollton.

One final interpretation of "Uptown" is the official city neighborhood of that name, bounded by St. Salle, Napoleon, Magazine, and Jefferson, which the architectural firm Curtis and Davis delineated in its 1973-1974 *New Orleans Housing and Neighborhood Preservation Study*, labeling this arbitrary little trapezoid as "Uptown" is like referring to Wyoming alone as "The West." No one uses the term in this manner, but it is in official city maps. Nestled among Mid-City, Touro, West Riverside, Audubon/University, and Freret. The Curtis and Davis study, which identified, delineated, and named scores of neighborhoods, played a very influential role in altering perceptions of place and space in the city. "As a child of the '50s and '60s," recalled one middle-aged New Orleanian, "all I ever heard about was uptown, downtown, Kenner, Metairie, and out by the lake." Now I hear about Bywater, Carrollton, Gert town, etc."<sup>174</sup> The study applied dozens of other names to unknown antiquated monikers to specific areas, even pegged to census tract boundaries, which previously were known loosely as "uptown" or "downtown."

We have focused on the dividing line *between* downtown and uptown. An even finer line separates these regions from areas *behind* them. That is, at what point along Carrollton Avenue do residents consider their locale to no longer be "uptown" but rather Mid-City or Parkview or the City Park/Bayou St. John area? How far up Esplanade does one have to go to leave "downtown?" Is the lower Ninth Ward still "downtown," even though it is separated by a canal and nearly as far from lower Canal Street as Carrollton? The business-name maps show that, in 2001, downtown-named businesses were mostly clustered in the CBD and upper French Quarter, and indeed extended to the lower Ninth Ward. But nearly all were located between the Mississippi River and the North Claiborne Avenue area. According to these data, "downtown" remained below the Pontchartrain Expressway but within the confines of the historical city, which until a century ago was restricted to the narrow natural levee of the Mississippi.<sup>175</sup> Uptown-named businesses predominated within the natural levee of the Mississippi River and extending up the "Carroll-



Most Americans would describe these cityscapes as "downtown." But according to the traditional perception of Canal Street as the dividing line, still held by many New Orleanians, these areas would be entirely uptown. Photographs by author and Ronnie Cardwell, 2003-2004.



<sup>172</sup> Personal telephone communication with WWL staff (anonymous source), May 1, 2003.

<sup>173</sup> Digital map file of New Orleans neighborhoods from the New Orleans City Planning Commission Geographic Information System.

<sup>174</sup> Yvonne Hiller, "Black Pontchartrain-New Orleans Know-It-All," *Gambit Weekly*, December 21, 2004, 6.

<sup>175</sup> The 2003 map differs from the others because it was created through an Internet-based Yellow Pages search for business containing, rather than starting with, the words "downtown" and "uptown." It therefore includes entities such as "National Bank-Downtown Branch." According to this more liberal standard, "downtown" is used well up Canal Street, Tulane Avenue, and into Gentilly.

ton Spur,” again echoing the topographically defined confines of the historical city.

## IMPLICATIONS OF THE PERCEPTIONS

Every New Orleanian carries his or her own mental map of downtown and uptown, along with certain implications associated with those regions. Some thoughts on what those connotations may be:

**History** — The maps indicate that New Orleanians use *downtown/uptown*, regardless of exact limits, to refer to the older, historical, architecturally significant sections of the city, to the exclusion of the mid-twentieth-century subdivisions on the lakeside and eastern sections of the parish. The terms seem to be reserved for those picturesque neighborhoods that made New Orleans famous; they resist application to places with row houses and chain-sacs.

**Foliage** — Perhaps the single most dominating characteristic of uptown is the prevalence of mature trees, often forming canopies so contiguous that, when viewed from a perch, a veritable forest is formed. This distinction can be traced back to the American preference for spacious, set-back homes with gardens, which, in time, lent itself to the growth of mature trees. Such a sight in downtown New Orleans is as rare as corn in a squirrel, which is to say, rare but not wholly absent. Downtown, for the most part, exhibits a more urban ecology where structures and open sky dominate the landscape, and where one is much more likely to see cliff-loving pigeons than cave-dwelling squirrels. Popular perceptions of uptown and downtown in New Orleans may be predicated on this dramatic difference in the city's tree life. It may also explain why Central City may not be universally considered “uptown,” despite its upper location; it lacks trees and exhibits the gritty aesthetic of a downtown neighborhood. But by the same hypothesis, oak-lined Esplanade Avenue might be considered “uptown,” which it certainly is not.

**External and Indigenous Influences** — Esplanade Avenue offers an interesting case to help deconstruct how New Orleanians use this terminology. If one understands “uptown” by either of its original Manhattan meanings—a residential area forming northward of the original city, or an affluent residential inner suburb—then Esplanade Avenue would qualify as “uptown” on both accords. Its mansions were even built at the same time, and in the same mix of international architectural styles, as those uptown. Yet no one ever describes Esplanade Avenue as uptown, a fact borne out in the maps. This suggests that New Orleanians’ adoption of New York’s original downtown/uptown terminology, indeed that was its provenance, has been locally adapted to account for river-flow direction, location with respect to Canal Street, and possibly other factors. Like New Orleans itself, *uptown* and *downtown* are an amalgam of external and indigenous influences.

**Race and Class** — In the modern American parlance, the adjective *inner-city* often serves as a euphemism for poor and black, while “suburban” implies wealthier and white. *Downtown/uptown* carry somewhat similar connotations, both in New Orleans and nationwide. A study conducted in New York City in the 1960s suggested that uptown/downtown lifestyle differences were primarily rooted in differences in class, ethnicity, and family status,<sup>176</sup> not simply distance from the urban core.<sup>176</sup> But that sense in New Orleans is not borne out by statistics. While 2000 census data shows a generalized correlation of majority-white areas with uptown and majority-black blocks with downtown, there are so many significant exceptions—many riverside and back-of-town portions of uptown are black, while the quintessentially downtown French Quarter is one of the whitest neighborhoods in the city—that usage of uptown/downtown to infer white/black is at most, metaphorical. But metaphors are not trivial: one often hears references to “down bluebloodes,” “the downtown Creole community,” “the uptown aristocracy,” and other perceptions that speak volumes about the subtle social-geographical tensions in this city. There is no question that uptown, past and present, is generally wealthier than downtown. Racial distinctions are evident as well: uptown is more “clumped;” downtown is more intermingled. Uptown/downtown dichotomies have not informed the spatial distributions of a number of ethnic groups in the city’s history, including Anglo-Saxons and Creoles, Reform Jews and Orthodox Jews, and African Americans and Creoles of Color.

## PERSISTENCE OF THE SPATIAL PERCEPTION

Since the city’s first expansion in 1788, New Orleanians have perceived city space many ways: by faubourgs, municipalities, districts, and wards; by church and school districts; by ethnic associations; by neighborhood atmosphere; by nodes and nuclei; and by relative positions vis-à-vis Canal Street, the lake, or the river. The perceptions vary over time and within sub-segments of the population. Today, for example, native-born New Orleanians are more likely to regionize the city by wards, church parishes, and school districts, while transplants tend to favor recently revived historical names, like Faubourg St. John and Faubourg Tremé. What is “the Seventh Ward” to a native-born black Creole may be “Faubourg New Marigny” to “the Jazz Fest neighborhood” to a white transplant; what is the “upper Ninth Ward” to the working class may be “the center” to artists and bohemians. Many people spatially perceive the city by means of nodes such as favorite restaurants, stores, and nightspots, forming a perceptual map that can be shared within one’s social network, but not necessarily beyond it.<sup>177</sup> Locally born people,

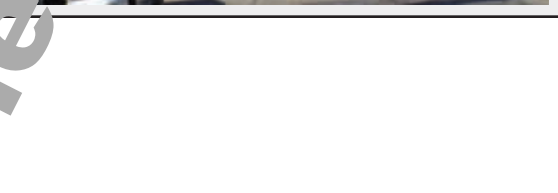
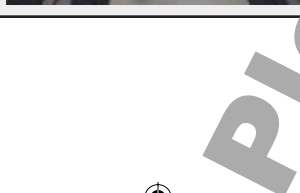
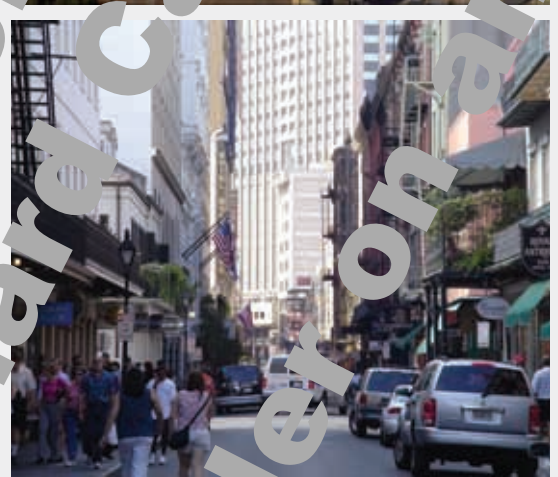
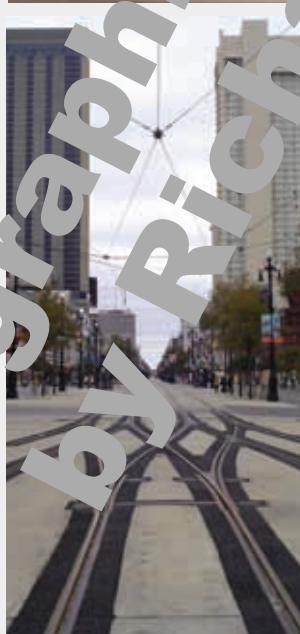
<sup>176</sup> H. Laurence Ross, “Uptown and Downtown: A Study of Middle-Class Residential Areas,” *American Sociological Review* 30 (April 1965): 256.

<sup>177</sup> So central was health-food store to the identity of an Esplanade Avenue neighborhood that some students jokingly called the area “Faubourg Whole Foods,” a reference that might baffle those neighbors who could not afford to shop there.





Cityscapes uptown (left) and downtown (right) along the St. Charles Avenue–Royal Street corridor. Today and historically, the two major uptown/downtown divisions are the elevated Pontchartrain Expressway and the 11-foot-wide Canal Street, pictured at center below. French Quarter roofscapes (top left) and the Garden District (top right). Please order on amazon.com





particularly old-timers, are often unfamiliar with the trendy faubourg names, and many recently arrived transplants are at a loss when asked what ward they live in. Kings a century ago often identified themselves by referencing neighborhood landmarks: the “St. Mary’s Market Gang” and “Shoe Tower Gang,” for example, were named for two prominent features in the Irish Channel area.<sup>178</sup> Gangs today usually spatialize their identity by ward (e.g. “Fifth Ward Posse”)—something regularly seen in graffiti and on commemorative T-shirts sold at gangster funerals. Wards often pop up in rap song titles and lyrics; one rapper in 2005 dubbed himself “Fifth Ward Weebie.” Preservationists and real estate agents, on the other hand, are universally enamoured with mellifluous historical monikers, under the theory that most people would rather live in “the Faubourg Bouliouvain” than in “the Thirteenth Ward.” Many members of the black community still speak of the “back-of-town” and “front-of-town,” even though the backswamp that gave meaning to those terms has long been drained away.

Overriding all these regions is the uptown/downtown dichotomy, which, since its antebellum inception, has grown all the more popular in the last century. The graph *Use of “Downtown” and “Uptown” in Business Names, New Orleans, 1861–1991* shows the increasing usage of this terminology in recent decades, despite the decline in New Orleans’ population by 25 percent in that same period. The relevance of the dichotomy and the chasm they describe seem to grow only more real over time. Geographical homogenization, the norm in the United States, poses no threat to this diversity. However, the perceived dividing lines between these places—Canal Street, Pontchartrain Expressway, Jackson or Louisiana avenues?—may soon homogenize. In the early 2000s, the Downtown Development District, the city agency tasked to improve conditions in the area between Canal Street and the Pontchartrain Expressway,<sup>179</sup> erected “Welcome to New Orleans—Downtown” signs at strategic points in the shadows of the Pontchartrain Expressway. For the first time, the downtown/uptown perception is now literally demarcated in the streetscape, which may eventually mute debate about where the division lies. This geographer hopes not: the rich diversity of adamantly defended perceptions reveals more about this people and this place than a line on a map or a sign on a street.

And what is the meaning of these perceptions of place, with all their history and connotations and controversies? That New Orleans is, indeed, a world unto itself.

*Epilogue: The uptown/downtown lexicon gained millions of new speakers when Hurricane Katrina made worldwide headlines in the late summer of 2005. “Downtown New Orleans” became the dateline of the calamity: it was here where journalists encamped, where the tragedies of the Superdome and Convention Center unfolded, and where cameras captured the boldest looting and anarchy. To say the words “downtown New Orleans” in the weeks after Katrina was to spatialize the epicenter of the catastrophe, even though most flooding and fatalities occurred in distant subdivisions. “Uptown New Orleans,” on the other hand, was used by the out-of-town press as a synonym for the Garden District—that is, the leafy, prosperous historical residential district—and was often contextualized to mean a calm, well-guarded, and relatively undamaged counter-point to the chaos of downtown. Months later, “Uptown,” in the mind of Mayor Ray Nagin, served as a spatial metaphor for the white upper class and its perceived apathy toward the scattered black underclass. “I don’t care what people are saying about Uptown,” he stated on Martin Luther King Day 2006; “this city will be in shambles at the end of the day!”*



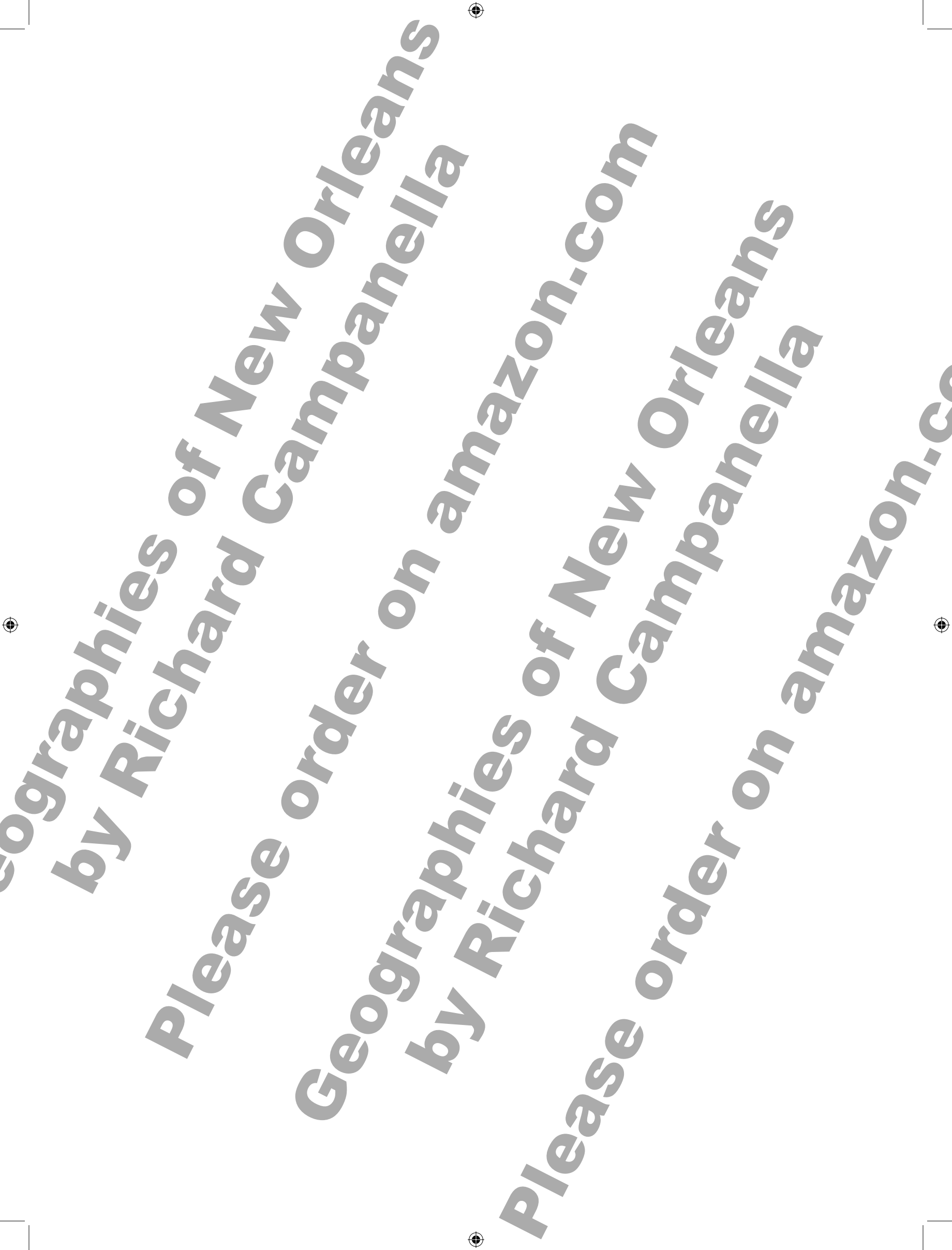
In the early 2000s, a city agency erected “Welcome to New Orleans—Downtown” signs at strategic points near the Pontchartrain Expressway. For the first time, the downtown/uptown perception is now visually demarcated in the street, perhaps eventually muting debate about where the division lies. The city would be the wiser for it. Photograph by author, 2003.

Ronette King, “Every May Get Fresh Start,” *Times-Picayune*, June 10, 1995, C5.

<sup>178</sup> “Gus Laurer-Irish Channel,” April 29, 1941, Saxon interview manuscript, Federal Writers’ Project Folder 81, 1.

<sup>179</sup> The Downtown Development District’s official delineation of downtown uses Canal Street, North Claiborne Avenue, the Pontchartrain Expressway (to South Rampart Street), Howard Avenue (from South Rampart to Lee Circle), the Pontchartrain Expressway again, and Convention Center Boulevard, as its boundaries.





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## WHAT THE YELLOW PAGES REVEALS ABOUT NEW ORLEANS

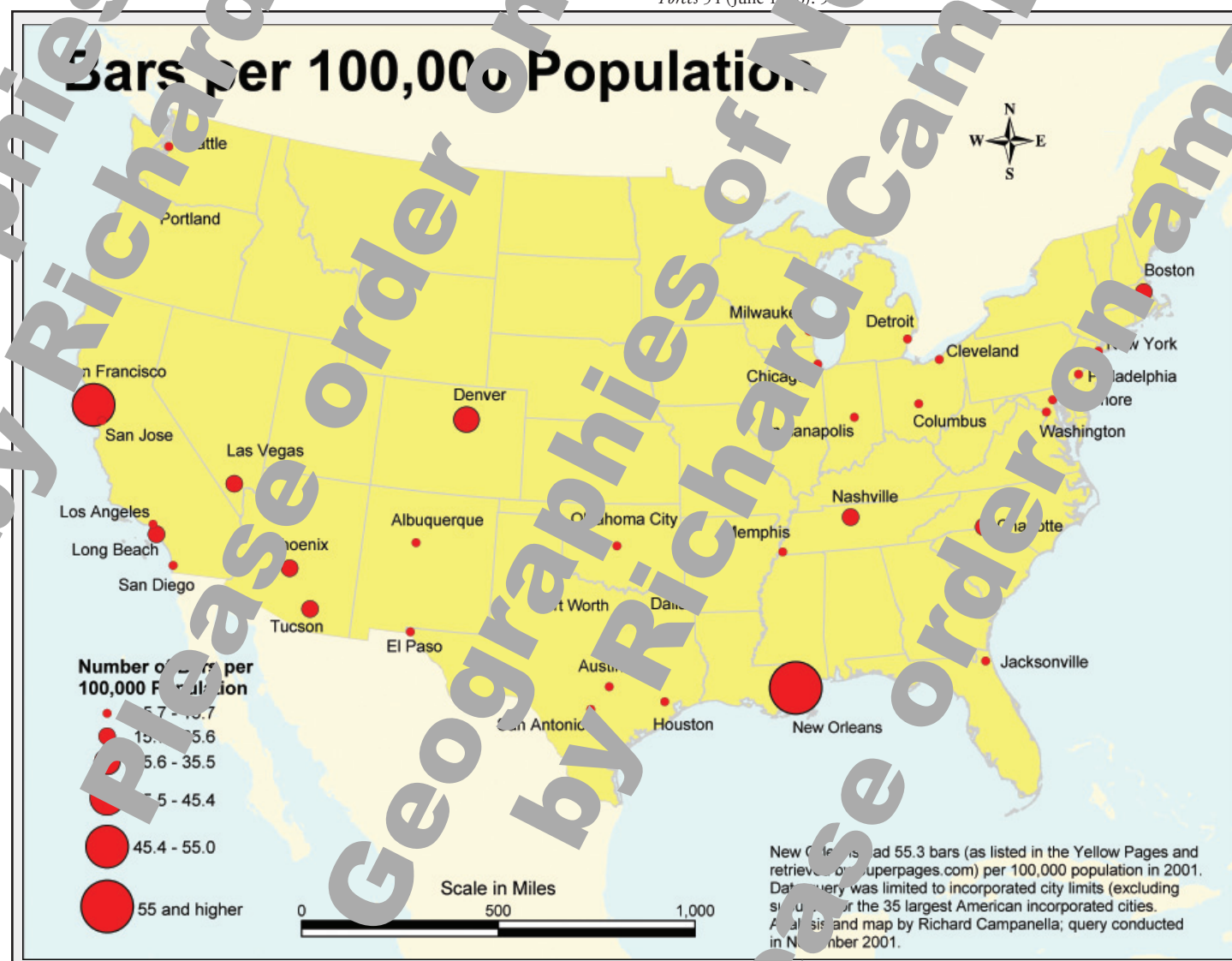
In the 1950s, the academic discipline of geography underwent a “quantitative revolution,” a change toward the use of numbers, statistical methods, and hypothesis testing, at the expense of traditional descriptive approaches. Out went the pipe-smoking, knapsack-toting field geographer of old, with his hand-drawn maps and informant interviews; in came the number-crunching bean counter with her *alphabet*, correlation coefficients, and *eigenvectors*, with the aid of mainframe computers in the 1960s, a generation of young geographers schooled in quantitative methods delved frenziedly into the reams of numerical data produced by an increasingly information-based society, hoping to identify and explain the spatial patterns of the world.

It didn't work. If patterns emerged from the statistics, it still took traditional descriptive methods to understand and explain them. If patterns did not emerge, all the more so. Neither quantitative nor qualitative methods could claim a monopoly on the truth; each now play important roles in

geographical analysis, optimally as complements rather than competitors.

One interesting example of both methods at work is sociologist John Shelton Reed's classic 1976 study, “The Heart of Dixie: An Essay in Folk Geography,” and its 1988 follow-up, “The Dissolution of Dixie and the Changing Shape of the South,” both appearing in the academic journal *Social Forces*. Seeking to reinvent the South as a cultural region rather than as a physical or historical one, Reed tracked the use of the words “Southern” and “Dixie” in relation to the word “American” in telephone-directory entries of selected American cities. If the South is “that part of the country where the people think they are Southerners,”<sup>180</sup> then use of “Southern” in business or organization names is one reasonable measure of where the storied region lies. “Dixie” goes beyond “Southern” as a barometer of regional identity, connoting a sense of traditional affection and reverence for place as well as a certain level of defiance. “American” entries served as the control, on the assumption that this business name would occur consistently in most American cities, fluctuating primarily with population size and economic activity. After mapping Southern-to-American and Dixie-to-American ratios for ninety-

<sup>180</sup> John Shelton Reed, “The Heart of Dixie: An Essay in Folk Geography,” *Social Forces* 54 (June 1976): 3.





eight cities nationwide, Reed came to the important conclusion that, essentially, there were few surprises. The definition of 'the South' based on the frequency of entries beginning with 'Southern' and 'Dixie'...yields substantially the same results as earlier definitions based on quite different criteria. In Alabama, the proverbial Heart of Dixie, proved true to the proverb by this method; Louisiana, with its Protestant north and Catholic south, straddled the edge of Dixie, also confirming perceptions. When Reed repeated the methodology in 1988, however, the findings challenged traditional notions of Southern regional identity: the South as mapped by "Southern" lost ground along its western, northern, and Florida fronts, while "Dixie" lost ground extensively—especially in Alabama.<sup>182</sup> Many scholars today agree that the South as a cultural region, while still strong, is diminishing in its distinctiveness. Reed's clever technique produced intriguing quantitative perspectives on the changing notions of Southern regional identity, which he accompanied by descriptive analysis. It also showed that those bulky yellow tomes that sit in our kitchen cabinets contain clues of seemingly mundane

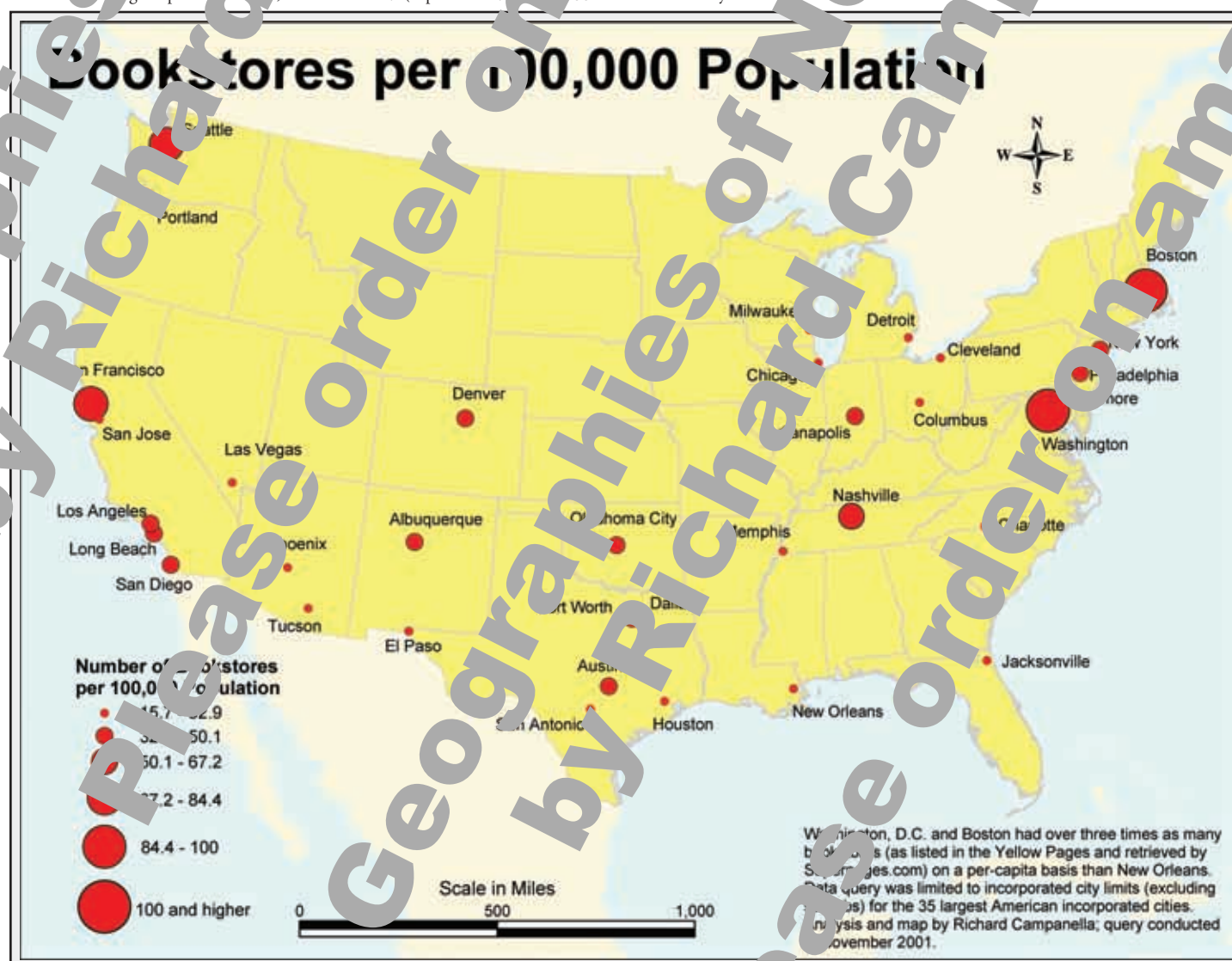
data that, in fact, reveal much about cultural-geographical distinction.

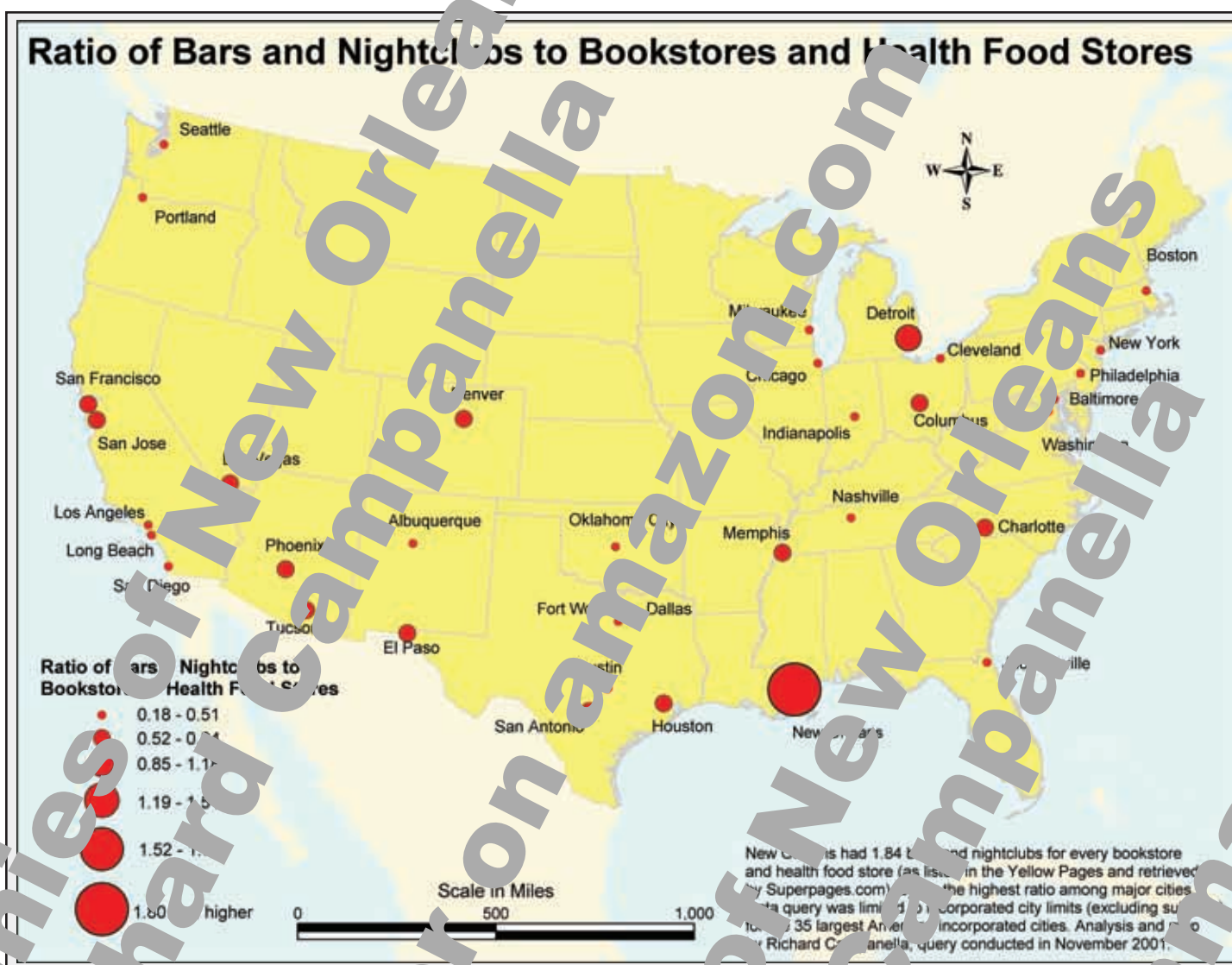
This chapter delves into the Yellow Pages and other sources to address, for New Orleans, a guiding question of geography: how do places differ from each other? The comparisons were made among the thirty-five largest incorporated places (as opposed to Metropolitan Statistical Areas, or MSAs<sup>183</sup>) in the United States according to the 2000 census, rounding up after New Orleans' rank as the thirty-first largest. Three disclaimers: First, one can only address, not answer, this question through such methodology. Societies are far too complex to expect patterns from the pages of telephone directories to decode them. Nevertheless, they shine new light on old adages, challenge assumptions, and provoke thought. Second, this methodology is biased against activities that are not represented as businesses or organizations with listings in the Yellow Pages. Readers will be alerted to this serious shortcoming as it arises in the pages ahead. Third, to extract the data, I used a technology woefully unavailable to Reed in his research: Internet-based Yellow Pages search mechanisms.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

<sup>182</sup> John Stuart Reed, James Mills, and Carol Hanchette, "The Dissolution of Dixie and the Changing Shape of the South," *Social Forces* 69 (September 1995): 321-33.

<sup>183</sup> Because the thirty-five largest cities were ranked by population *within city limits*, rather than MSAs, metropolises such as Atlanta and Miami were not included in this study.





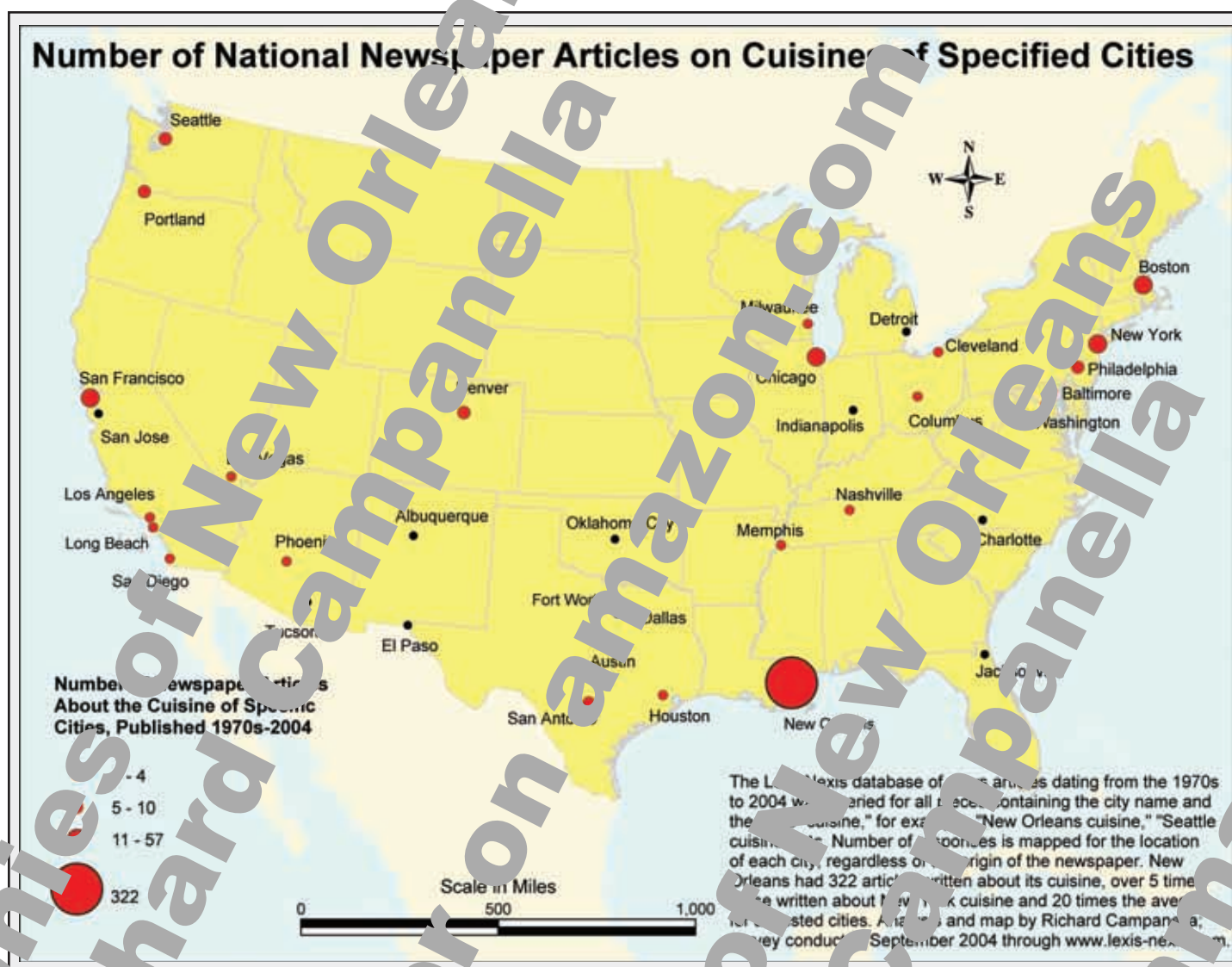
In most online Yellow Pages, searching "New Orleans, LA" or "Washington, D.C." may yield unwanted results from nearby suburbs like Mandeville or Manassas. On the theory that outlying suburban areas may homogenize certain city characteristics and mask inter-city differences, I ensured (for some queries) that only those listings located within incorporated city limits were extracted, querying with city-specific ZIP codes. Because Superpages.com allows users to select multiple zip codes, and because, in test cases, it yielded a minimum of duplicates and other "data artifacts," I selected this mechanism for most of the maps that follow. Total population and per capita income for each city were also determined, to neutralize population and wealth differences. With these data in hand, I searched on the selected phenomena for each of the thirty-five cities, summed the number of responses, eliminated duplicates and erroneous listings, coded the totals in a spreadsheet, neutralized them for population and income, mapped the results, and attempted to interpret the pattern.

Which leaves the question, what phenomena shall we select? The possibilities are endless and interesting to debate. In judging distinction among places, one may instinctively start with standard socioeconomic measures such as population growth, per capita income, employment, and crime. But

these data are readily available through standard sources, and reflect differences rooted primarily in economics, not culture. Communist Louis Eric Elie pointed out that New Orleans' "vernacular culture"—jazz, second-line parades and po-boy sandwiches—have risen to prominence among our defining features.<sup>184</sup> To address the more intriguing, less quantifiable cultural questions, I scrutinized these and other popular images of New Orleans culture—this being the putative "most interesting city in America," whose name is practically yoked to the word "unique"—and pulled from them key indicators that may be found in the Yellow Pages. The City That Care Forgot? Count the number of bars and nightclubs. A city that lives in the moment, not particularly healthy or literate? Compute the number of health food stores and bookstores. Creole City? Birthplace of jazz? Home of Mardi Gras? Count the number of businesses using the word "Creole," "jazz," and "Mardi Gras," and see how they compare nationally. A clubby sort of town? Tabulate the number of fraternal organizations, lodges and krewes. Restaurants, po' boy joints, music stores, Creole-named businesses: popular imagery and mythology about New Orleans offer a plethora of indicators of cultural difference which may be compared to other

<sup>184</sup> Eric Elie Lolis, "Creole Nation Gives Birth to Great Art," *Times-Picayune*, April 19, 2004, Metro section, p. 1.





American cities. The maps below provide no answers, but raise interesting questions.

## Pops

On a per capita basis, the *Yellow Pages* in 2001 listed more bars for New Orleans—523 per 100,000 population—than any other city included in this study. A close second was San Francisco, with fifty-two per 100,000; the next two cities were home to approximately double the rate of bar listings recorded for Denver, Boston, Portland, Phoenix, and Las Vegas, and over five times the rate of other large cities. This statistic corroborates popular perceptions of New Orleans as a drinking city, a reputation that dates back to at least the early nineteenth century. “More than 2,500 taverns are always filled with drinkers,” commented the French geographer Elisée Reclus during his 1855 voyage to New Orleans, “and fuel the most violent passions with brandy and rum.”<sup>185</sup> The city was described as “The Cradle of Civilized Drinking,” is home to some of the oldest and most famous bars in the nation, such as Lafitte’s Blacksmith Shop, the Old Absolut

<sup>185</sup> Elisée Reclus, “An Anarchist in the Old South: Elisée Reclus’ Voyage to New Orleans, Part II,” trans. Camille Martin and John C. Moore, *Mesochabite: The Journal of Surre(gion)alism* (Winter 1993-1994): 21.

<sup>186</sup> Ted Haigh and Phil Greene, as quoted in Pableaux Johnson, “Home of the Cocktail,” *Times-Picayune*, January 7, 2005, *Lagniappe* section, p. 37.

House, the Napoleon House, and Pat O’Brien’s. The cocktail is said to have been invented here, and the city now hosts a museum dedicated to the mixed drink. A coffee-table book celebrating the city’s saloons, *Obituary Cocktail*, became a local bestseller in the late 1990s. Alcohol by the pint is sold at the most mundane public events, and first-time visitors are often stunned by the casual legality of open containers in the French Quarter. “Booze is part and parcel of just about every event and occasion in town, from debate balls to jazz funerals to pee-wee league T-ball games,” wrote columnist Chris Rose, “with barely an ounce of hypocrisy.”<sup>187</sup> The impression is not lost on the nation: a recent Internet survey of 500,000 people ranked New Orleans as America’s number-one city for bar-hopping, night life, and dining out—and dead last, incidentally, in cleanliness.<sup>188</sup>

Four factors are at work behind the pattern in the accompanying map (*Bars per 100,000 Population*), some cultural, others economic. Port cities as a general rule boast lively night scenes, with plenty of spirits and places to serve them. Historically, sailors at sea for weeks or months demanded such services immediately upon their arrival, and port cities

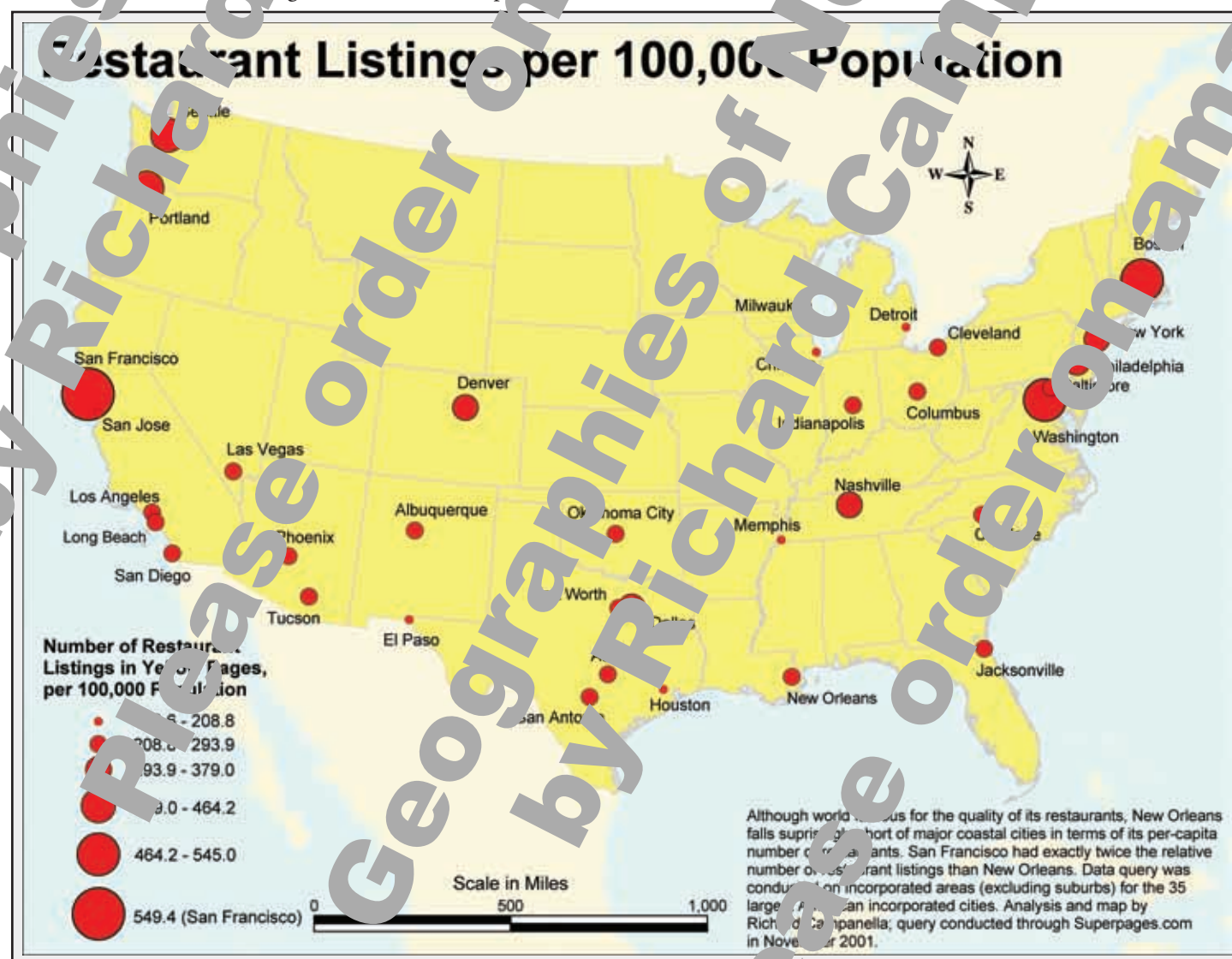
<sup>187</sup> Chris Rose, “Saloons and the City,” *Times-Picayune*, August 20, 2004, *Lagniappe* section, p. 23.

<sup>188</sup> Rebecca M. Gray, “Mixed Vieux,” *Times-Picayune*, March 23, 2004, C1.

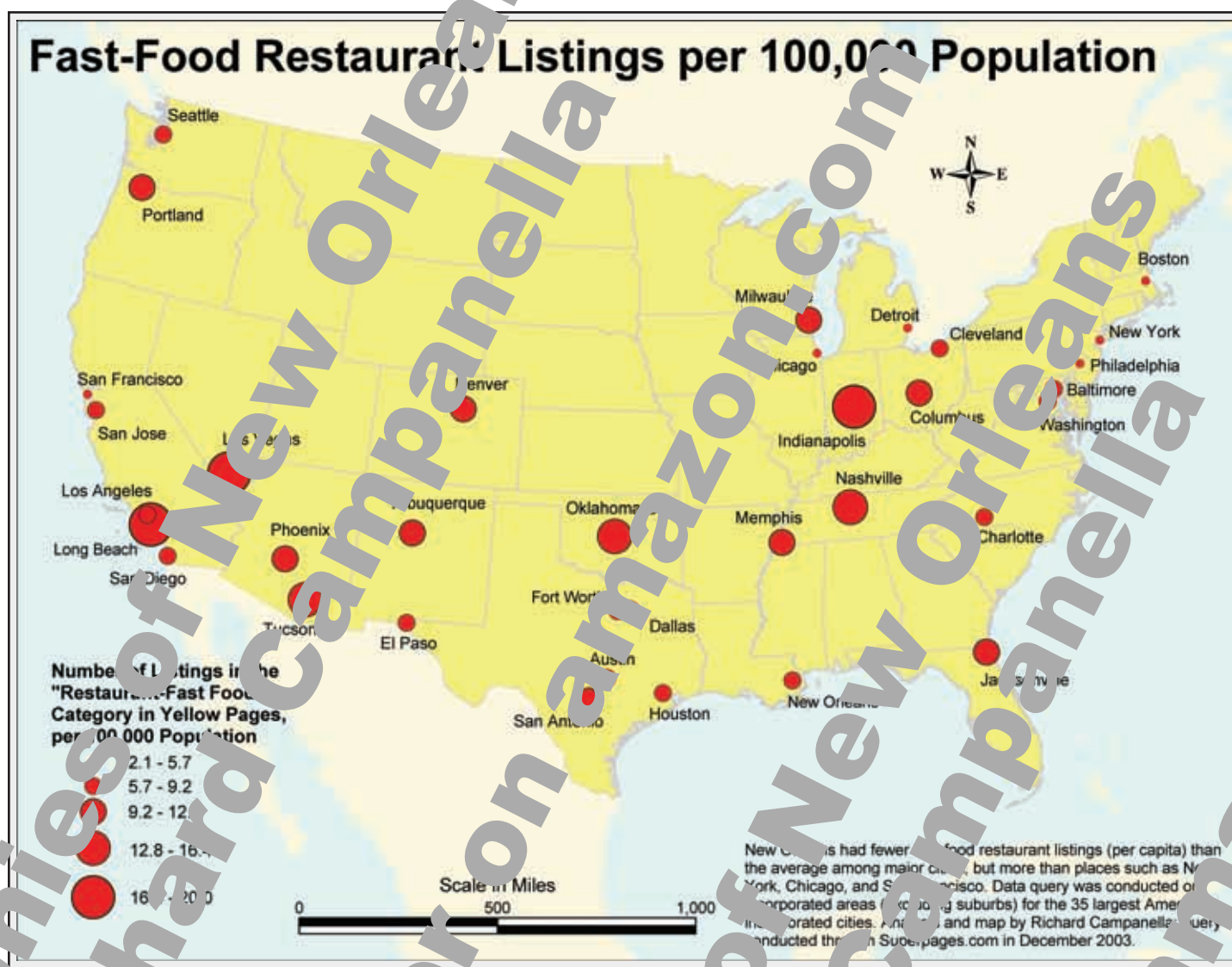
happily obliged them, often calling off traditional bans on late-night and Sunday sales to accommodate those arriving at odd hours. (The words “Last call!” are rarely heard in New Orleans.) Port cities are also typically more cosmopolitan and liberal than interior cities. So we should not be surprised that New Orleans, San Francisco, and Boston see among the highest bar rates in the accompanying map. A second possible reason explaining New Orleans’ lead in this area is its Latin cultural connection, informed as it has been by the societies of France, Spain, Italy, the Mediterranean, and the Caribbean, where alcohol is viewed as part of the daily bread rather than an escapist’s vice. In Louisiana one can buy hard liquor between the dairy aisle and the produce section in any supermarket; alcohol is found in K-Mart and Wal-Marts, and daiquiris in go-cups are sold legally at drive-through outlets. Cross into Mississippi and Arkansas, and one must visit special liquor stores for such beverages, usually highly taxed if they are legal at all in that country. Alcohol is simply part of the culture in Louisiana, and especially in New Orleans.

The economic factors behind the map include the fact that many, perhaps most, of the Yellow Pages listings are for bars located in the French Quarter and CBD, catering to tourists and conventioners and their “party town” expectations, more than local living out their lives. The perception

of New Orleans as “The City That Care Forgot” may have developed over centuries vis-à-vis sailors and visitors letting loose in this remote and exotic port, but with the mechanization of shipping and the advent of other transportation options, those bar hoppers of old are gone, leaving only the reputation of a fun city. The modern tourism industry enthusiastically exploits this historical reputation, creating an expectation of revelry that perpetuates the reputation, leading to greater expectations. The result: Bourbon Street, go-cups, a bar on every corner, and other decent citizens indulging to such excess that puddles of vomit on the sidewalks have become a fact of life for French Quarter residents. The high rate of bar listing in New Orleans, then, may simply reflect the city’s huge tourism and convention industry, boasting over ten million visitors annually and promoted by a crack professional marketing staff. It may also be a case of numerator inflated by tourism divided by a relatively small denominator, since New Orleans had the thirty-first largest population out of the thirty-five cities included in this study. The per capita bar statistics for other cities in the map, particularly the surprisingly low rates of Chicago and New York and the high rates of Phoenix and Tucson, may be explained by an interplay of the above factors.







## BOOKSTORES

New Orleans is a great literary city: inspiration to the likes of George Washington Cable, William Faulkner, and Tennessee Williams, but has never been a particularly literary city. The French colonial era passed in its entirety before the city's first printing press began operation,<sup>189</sup> and a local newspaper did not arrive until three-quarters of a century (1794) after the city's founding. Libraries were even scarce according to a visitor in 1827:

That which every town of 2,000 inhabitants is now provided with, a reading-room and circulating library, you would seek in vain in New Orleans. Though the Anglo-American attempted to establish such an institution, which is indispensable in a great commercial city, it failed through the unwillingness of the creoles to trouble their heads with reading.<sup>190</sup>

The book store had changed little by 1846 when Charles Lyell visited:

The printing even of books of local interest is done by press 2,000 miles distant.... There is only one newspaper in the [French Quarter], which I was told as very characteristic of the French race; for, in the [American Quarter], although se-

<sup>189</sup> This was the print shop of Denis Braud, which operated from 1764 to 1770. Douglas C. McMurtrie, *Early Printing in New Orleans, 1764-1810* (New Orleans, 1929), 21-22.

<sup>190</sup> Charles Sealsfield, *The Americans As They Are; Described in A Tour Through the Valley of the Mississippi* (London, 1828), 186.

males newer, than the Americans have, during the last ten years, started ten newspapers.<sup>191</sup>

"No one reads in Louisiana!" exclaimed one struggling book publisher in 1888. "There is here a prodigious apathy toward everything addressed to the intellect. I scarcely sell one book per month!"<sup>192</sup> Public education had been neither a priority nor a forté from the eighteenth to the twenty-first century and consistently ranks today as one of the city's most vexing problems. Traditional literacy rate studies quantify this phenomenon at the citywide level; in 1998, for example, 36 percent of New Orleans' adult population were judged to be functionally illiterate.<sup>193</sup> A recent University of Wisconsin study ventured beyond individual reading skills to measure the "literate-ness" of major American cities, based on the census, the Yellow Pages, and records of national associations of booksellers, periodicals, and library associations. Out of sixty-four metropolitan areas studied, New Orleans ranked fortieth in an overall list of "America's most literate cities;"

<sup>191</sup> Sir Charles Lyell, *A Second Voyage to the United States of North America*, 2 vols. (London, 1850), 2:121.

<sup>192</sup> As quoted in Joseph C. Tingle, Jr., "Creoles and Americans." In *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization*, eds. Arnold R. Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon (Baton Rouge and London, 1992), 184.

<sup>193</sup> "1999 NALS Synthetic Estimates of Adult Literacy," Literacy Volunteers of America, <http://www.literacyvolunteers.org/home/press/may1298/Lanals.html> (accessed December 29, 2003).

it was twenty-fourth and twenty-fifth in terms of booksellers and publications, thirty-first in terms of newspapers, fortieth in terms of education, and sixty-second in terms of libraries. The five "most literate" cities were Minneapolis (first), Seattle, Denver, Atlanta, and San Francisco.

A Yellow Pages survey of bookstore listings per 100,000 population of incorporated cities (including suburbs, unlike the University of Wisconsin study) substantiated New Orleans' historical distinction as a not particularly lettered city. Major cities of the east and west coasts (many *Bookstores per 100,000 Population*) led in this category, with Washington, D.C., Boston, San Francisco, and Seattle having nearly triple the rate of bookstore listings as New Orleans' 30.1 per 100,000 population. Clearly there is an socioeconomic factor at work here: New Orleans, like El Paso and Detroit in the map, has a low per capita income and a large population of uneducated poor, unlikely to buy and read books. For New Orleans, there may also be an age-old cultural factor at work. The Mediterranean and Caribbean societies that peopled the city in its formative years generally did not (and, arguably, still do not) hold education in the hallowed regard that Anglo societies did in places such as Boston, where a university

was founded only sixteen years after the Pilgrims' arrival. The number of bookstore listings in the Yellow Pages can only tell us so much, but this much is clear: New Orleans' present-day public-education crisis has deep roots in the history, culture, and economics of the city.

## RATIO OF BARS AND NIGHTCLUBS TO BOOKSTORES AND HEALTH FOOD STORES

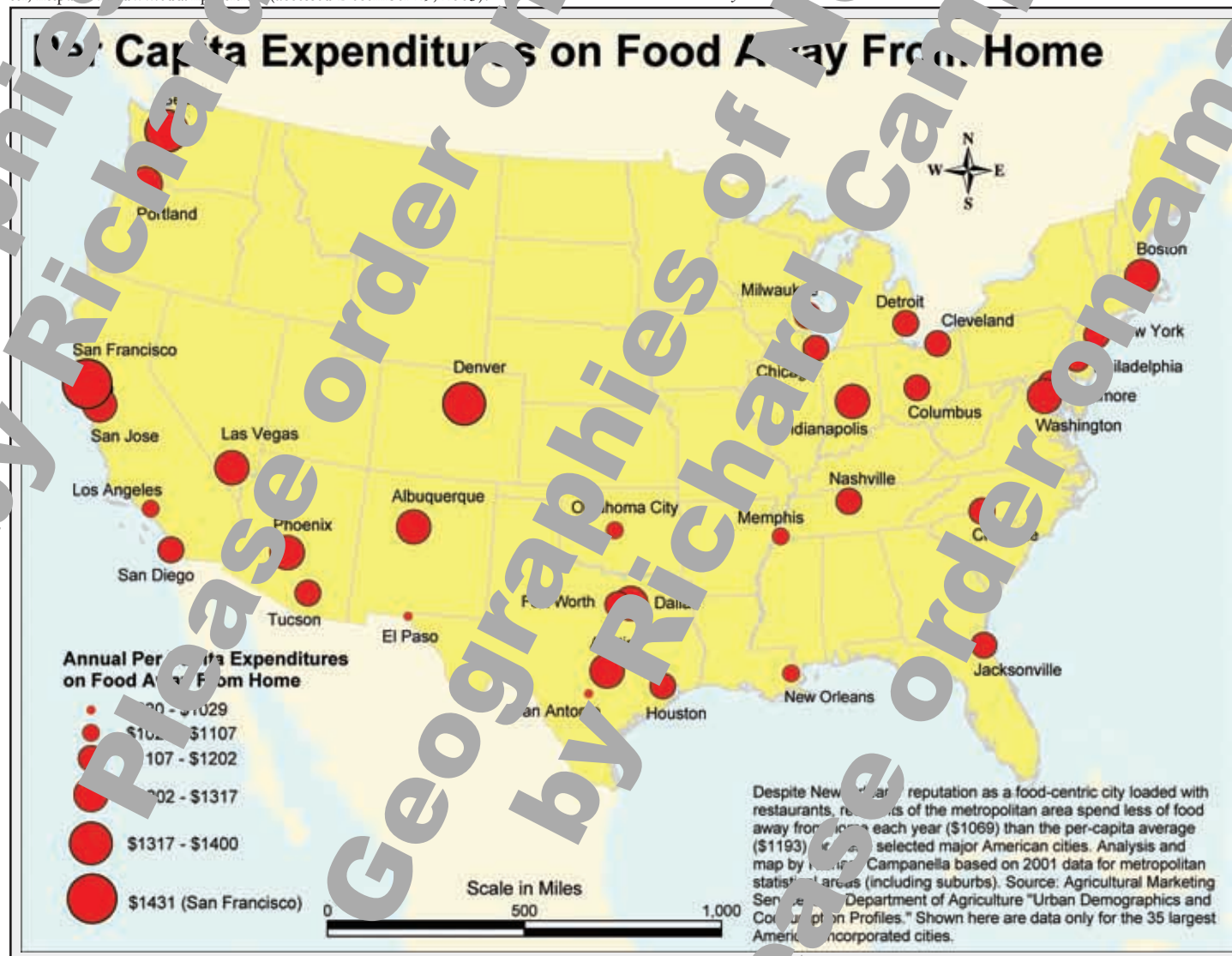
Penance and prayer! fasting and abstinence! in New Orleans. Oh! the idea is preposterous!<sup>195</sup>

Part town? Not particularly literate? Music city? Fat-free and least healthy city in America?<sup>196</sup> Multiple indicators were extracted from the Yellow Pages and computed in ratios to shed more light on the reputations of cities. In the accompanying map, *Ratio of Bars and Nightclubs to Bookstores and Health Food Stores*, the number of bar listings was added to the number of nightclubs and divided by the sum of bookstore and health-food store listings. Any sort of double-counting between bars and nightclubs is not a concern, since

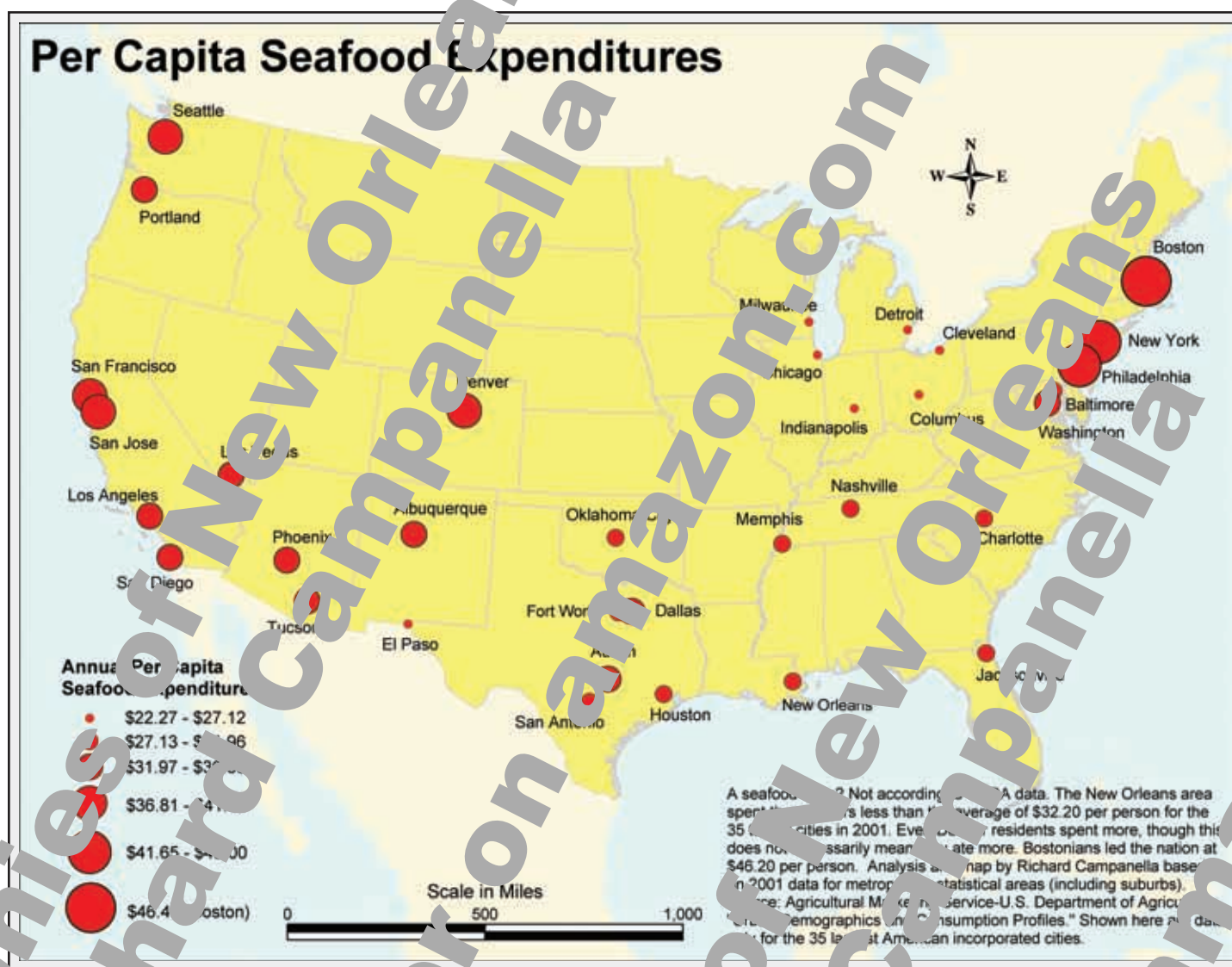
<sup>194</sup> Jack M. Miller, "America's Most Literate Cities," University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, <http://www.uww.edu/npr/cities/> (accessed December 29, 2003).

<sup>195</sup> *Daily Orleanian*, February 21 (Ash Wednesday), 1849, p. 2, col. 1.

<sup>196</sup> John Pope, "We're Too Fat To Go To GYM: Fattest City Is Now The Least Fit," *Times-Picayune*, December 15, 1998, Metro section, B1.







all cities would have been held to the same standard.) The results: New Orleans had, by far, the highest ratio between these two phenomena. All cities in the survey except New Orleans had more bookstores and health-food stores than bars and nightclubs; Detroit, at 0.5, came closest to a one-to-one ratio. New Orleans nearly doubled the one-to-one mark: the city proper had 1.84 bars and nightclub listings for every bookstore or health food store. Tourism undoubtedly inflates the numerator of this quirky statistic, while the city's poverty rate helps deflate the denominator, thus producing high ratio. But cultural factors are probably at play as well.

### FOOD AND RESTAURANTS

"The joys of the table...are provided not only in [New Orleans'] many fine restaurants and in the clubs," wrote a contributor to *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* in 1883, "but in a multitude of homes. No city has finer restaurants."<sup>197</sup> "New Orleans is one of the great eating cities of the world...a city for the gourmet," concurred food critic Richard H. Coe seventy-seven years later. It "enjoys the grand traditions of one of the few remaining special regional cuisines in the world—the Creole cuisine," and maintains "a tradition of

fine dining unknown in any other American city."<sup>198</sup> Indeed, the reputation of New Orleans as a food-centric, food-obsessed city, home of the nation's best and most famous restaurants, is a major source of civic pride. Food—as well as music—in south Louisiana play important roles in reflecting or constructing regional identity, with the underlying message being resistance to national homogenization and pride in "otherness." Not coincidentally, food is also one of the tourism industry's "trinity" of promoted attributes, along with architecture and music,<sup>199</sup> and restaurateurs and the food industry form powerful lobbies in both the city and state. A query of the Lexis-Nexis archive of newspaper articles shows that far more news pieces have been written about New Orleans cuisine (322 since the 1970s; see map *Number of National Newspaper Articles on Cuisines of Specified Cities*) than any other of the tested U.S. cities, even much larger ones.<sup>200</sup> New Orleans regularly ranks high in popular studies about

<sup>198</sup> Richard H. Coe, *The New Orleans Underground Gourmet* (New York, 1970), 13-15.

<sup>199</sup> Rebecca Mowbray, "Down But Not Out: Even Though Convention Business Is In a Slump, Festivals Are Filling Holes," *Times-Picayune*, June 8, 2003, Money section, p. 1.

<sup>200</sup> Queries of Lexis-Nexis database were performed on the city name plus the word "cuisine" (for example, "New Orleans cuisine;" "Seattle cuisine") appearing anywhere in the text of an article, in the "General News" categories of all major national newspapers for all available dates, from the 1970s to 2004.

<sup>197</sup> Julian Ralph, "New Orleans, Our Southern Capital," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 81 (February 1893): 364.

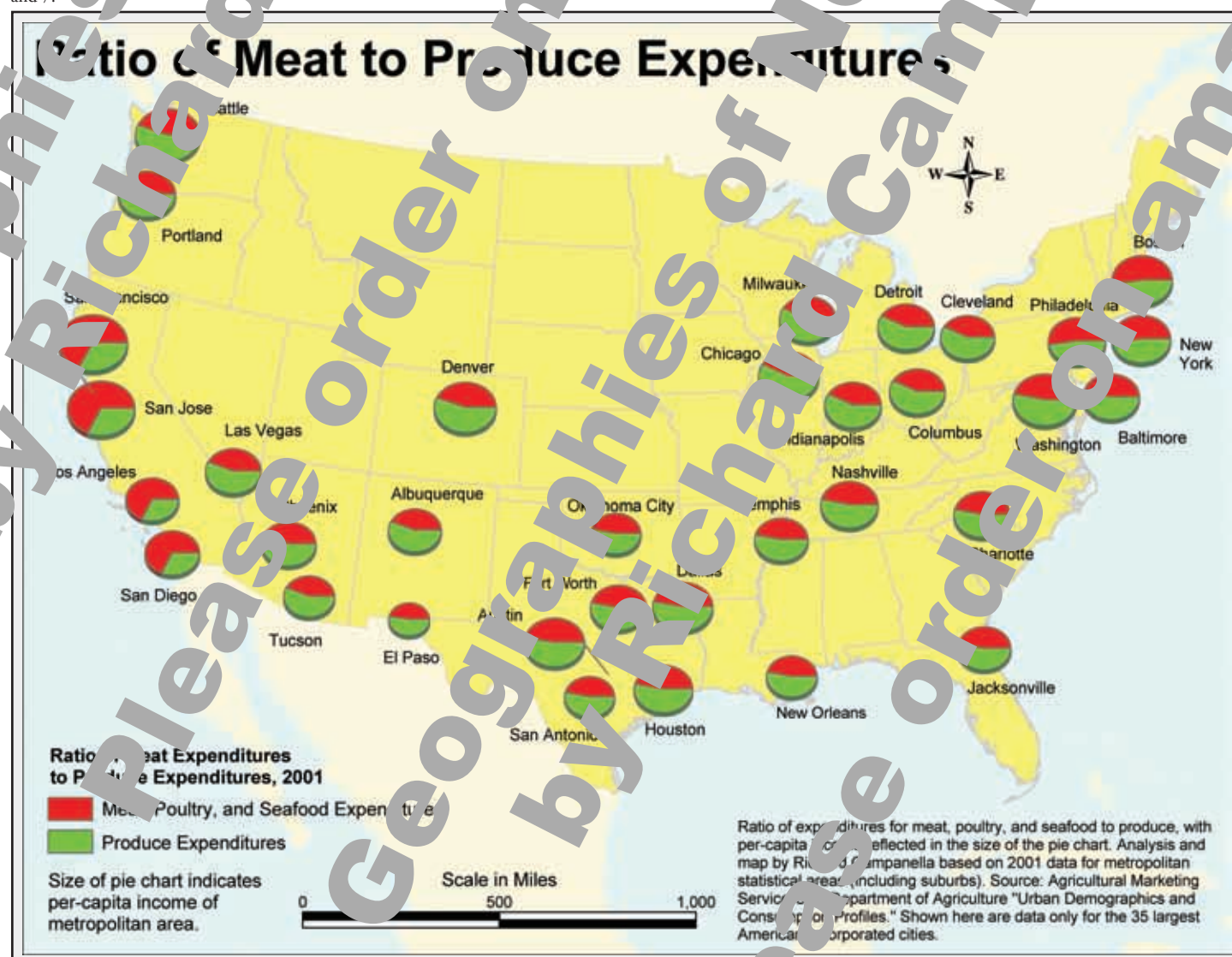
the “Fattest City in America,” and when it recently dropped from first to fifth place in *Men’s Fitness* magazine’s annual survey, local wags decried it as a “downright embarrassing slap in the face.”<sup>201</sup> “The whole culture centers around eating and drinking,” observed one recent transplant in an article about gaining weight in New Orleans. “So you say you’re new to the area? Noticed the po-boys, gumbo sauces and pralines around every corner?... Welcome to New Orleans, a tough place to manage your weight.”<sup>202</sup> New Orleans may indeed be the only American city with a truly indigenous cuisine, and no one denies its weight problem, but claims about its cultural orientation toward food, and particularly eating out, invite a closer look.

The Yellow Pages show that, contrary to image, New Orleans proper has only an average number of per capita restaurant listings (272 per every 100,000 population, excluding suburbs) compared to the thirty-five major American cities included in this study. The map entitled *Restaurant Listings per 100,000 Population* shows the major coastal cities of the Northeast and West Coast had significantly more than New Orleans, relative to population, and San Francisco in particular

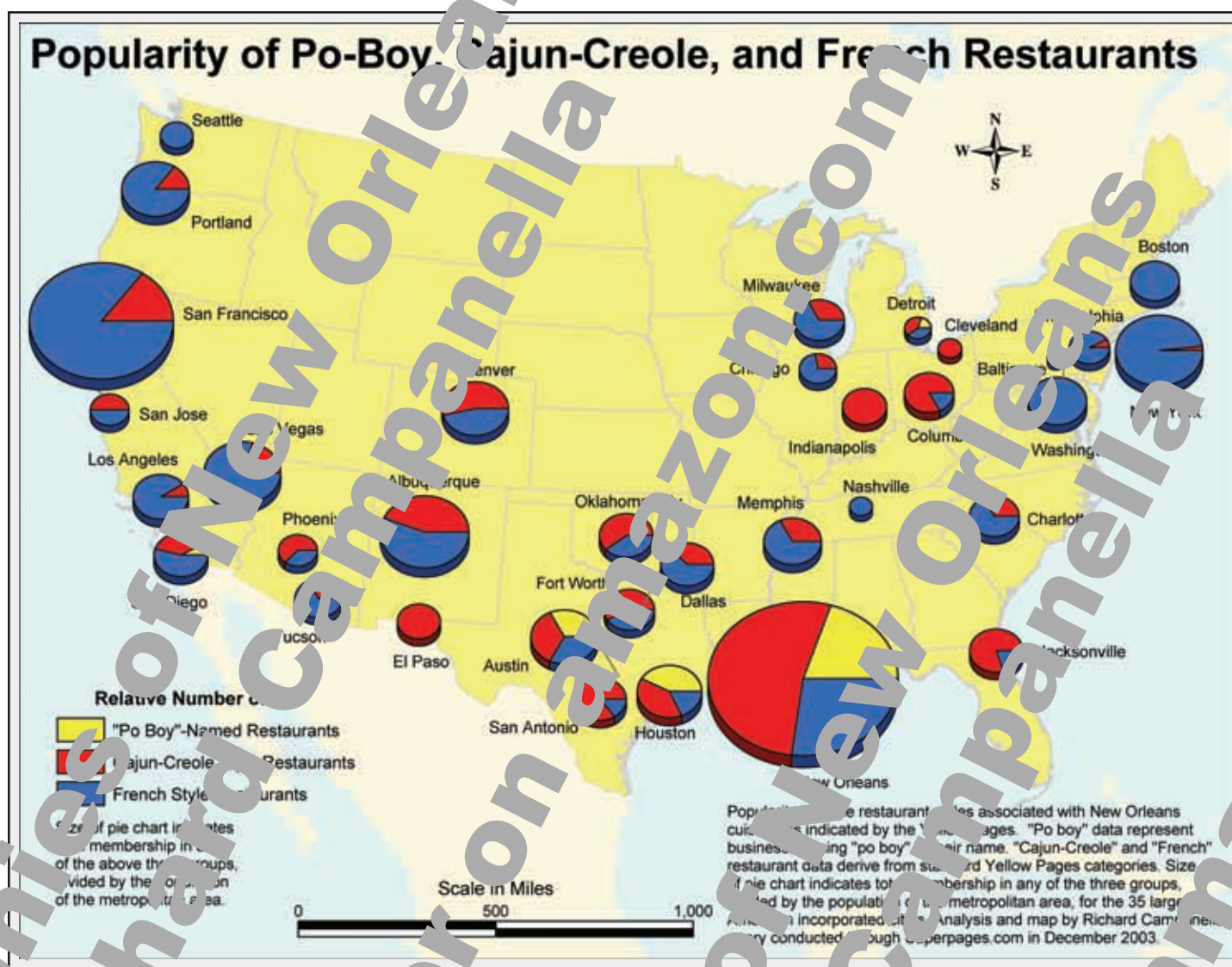
had double the rate. At first, I thought this shortfall might be explained by Orleans Parish’s relative lack of suburban-style arteries such as Veteran’s Boulevard in Jefferson Parish, which is lined with dozens of fast-food restaurants. Such eateries, which would be listed right alongside the most elegant dining establishments in the Yellow Pages, might inflate the number of restaurant listings for other cities. But a query of establishments in the “Restaurant Fast Food” category failed to confirm this hunch (map, *Fast-Food Restaurant Listings per 100,000 Population*). New Orleans indeed has a less-than-average rate of fast-food listings, and many fewer than certain cities in the heartland, but not sufficiently less to explain the relative paucity of all restaurants. These data accurately represent the true situation in New Orleans, but then the impression that restaurants abound citywide is either a myth from a bygone era, or a false impression cast by certain high-profile areas—the French Quarter and CBD, or Magazine Street and the CBD bend—where restaurants do indeed teem. That said, it must be stated clearly that this Yellow Pages methodology does not take into account restaurant quality, creativity, local ownership, or other angles in New Orleans’ alleged love affair with dining out. It also ignores completely those tiny mom-and-pop eateries operating out

<sup>201</sup> Angus Lind, “He’s Really Steamed: Results of Sweaty-City Survey Are Real Insult to New Orleans,” *Times-Picayune*, July 7, 2002, Living section, p. 1.

<sup>202</sup> Siona Taffel, “Fat City,” *Times-Picayune*, April 29, 2004, Living section, p. 1 and 7.







of corner stores, service stations, booths, and other venues ignores the Yellow Pages.

USDA data on expenditures on restaurant and take-out food (map, *Per Capita Expenditures on Food Away from Home*, which includes suburban areas) are strikingly contrary to expectation.<sup>203</sup> The New Orleans metropolitan area spends less (\$1,069 per person per year) than the average for the thirty-five major American cities (\$1,193 per person per year) on prepared food purchased away from home. It appears that dining out is, quite rationally, more a function of economic than culture: those cities spending the most on restaurants (San Francisco, Seattle, Denver, and San Jose) had four of the five highest per capita incomes of the thirty-five cities studied. The poorest city of the lot, El Paso, spent the least on restaurants, and New Orleans—fourth poorest—spent the third least. Economics seems to trump culture when it comes to eating out.

Economics also seems to trump culture in terms of what is eaten. Is New Orleans "a seafood city"?<sup>204</sup> Perhaps its favorite recipes and famous restaurants do not account

to the pocketbook of its citizens. The 1,342,211 residents of the metropolitan area spent \$39,137,000 on seafood in 2001, equating to \$29.16 per person per year—three dollars less than the thirty-five-city average, a third less than Boston's \$6.49, and only \$5.20 more than the desert denizens of El Paso (map, *Per Capita Seafood Expenditures*). Is New Orleans a meat-lover's paradise? Maybe in quantity, but not in expenditures (map, *Ratio of Meat to Produce Expenditures*). New Orleansians spent more on produce than meat, poultry, and seafood combined, as did most cities, with the exception of Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and the reputedly health-conscious cities of the California coast. Such expenditure data does not tell the full story. One may eat large amounts of cheap meat and not "show up" in these USDA statistics.

Likewise, coastal areas presumably have less expensive seafood and therefore may consume more for less money. Nevertheless, the relatively low per capita income of the New Orleans area renders its population a bit less extravagant and indulgent in its eating habits than the New Orleans mystique may lead one to believe. There is, however, one sub-category of meats in which the New Orleans market (generously defined to include all the way over to Mobile, Alabama) recently held a national lead: sausages. People along this swath of Gulf Coast purchased over twenty million pounds of dinner sau-

<sup>203</sup> All USDA expenditure data cited in this section derive from the "Urban Demographics and Consumption Profiles" for metropolitan statistical areas in 2001, tabulated by the Agricultural Marketing Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

<sup>204</sup> "Imported Seafood Restaurants," *Times-Picayune*, November 2, 2003, Lagniappe's 2003 Dining Guide, p. 1.

sage one recent year, more than metropolises of much larger sizes.<sup>205</sup> One wonders, however, if this statistic would hold up if it were restricted to just Orleans Parish.

Detecting patterns in the styles of restaurant food served nationwide would offer a fascinating commentary on the culinary geography of this nation, and perhaps New Orleans' role in influencing it. In 2004, a Yellow Pages-based methodology employed by the Deep South Regional Humanities Center at Tulane University found that barbecue restaurants were more likely to be found in interior Southern cities, and that New Orleans ranked dead last among the twenty-six Southern cities tested. (When the results were reported in the popular press, a minor citywide controversy ensued.<sup>206</sup>) The accompanying map, *Popularity of Po' boy, Cajun-Creole, and French Restaurants*, shows the relative occurrence of these three restaurant categories in thirty-five major American cit-

ies, with the total number of all three depicted in the size of the pie chart.<sup>207</sup>

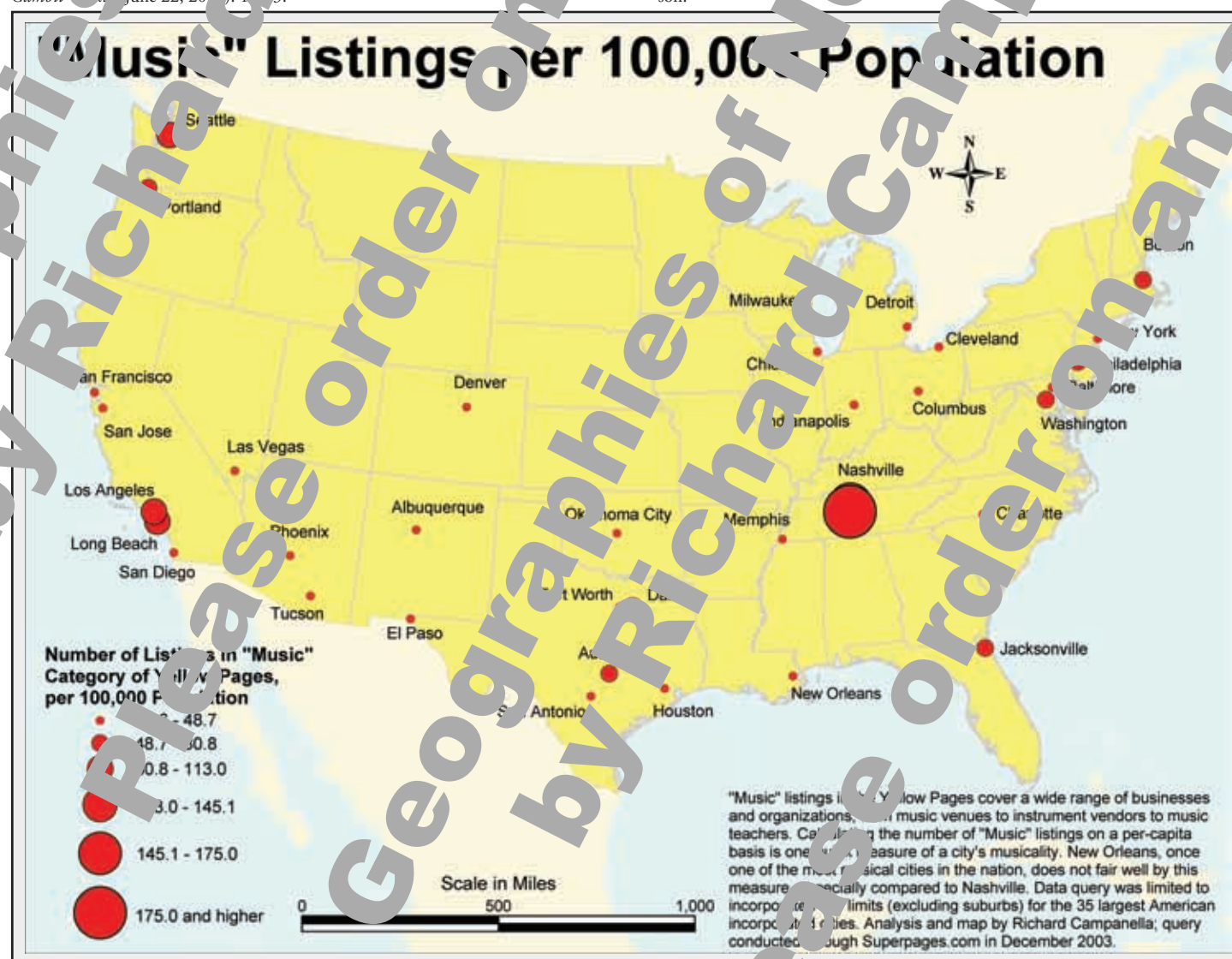
Po' boys, the ubiquitous overstuffed French-bread sandwiches, are said to have been created (or at least named) during the 1929 streetcar strike in New Orleans. The Martin Brothers restaurant, run by former streetcar conductors sympathetic to the strikers' plight, "provided French sandwiches to the carmen for the duration of the strike. Whenever a striker would come by, one of the brothers would announce the arrival of another 'poor boy,' hence the sandwich's name."<sup>208</sup> There are other stories, but all seem to agree that the po' boy is *bona fide* New Orleans invention, both in name and in that which distinguishes it from the hoagie, the sub, and the hero: the special un-tapered French bread, the generous filling of fried seafood or hot meat inside, and the lettuce and tomato "dressing." Po' boys are now offered on menus nationwide, at least in name. But po' boy-name eateries, according to the Yellow Pages, seem to be clustered very close

<sup>205</sup> "Top Ten Sausage Eating Cities in America," National Hot Dog and Sausage Council, [http://www.neworleansbar.org/join\\_bar.html](http://www.neworleansbar.org/join_bar.html) (accessed December 29, 2003), based on supermarket sales of pounds of refrigerated dinner sausage during April 2001–2002.

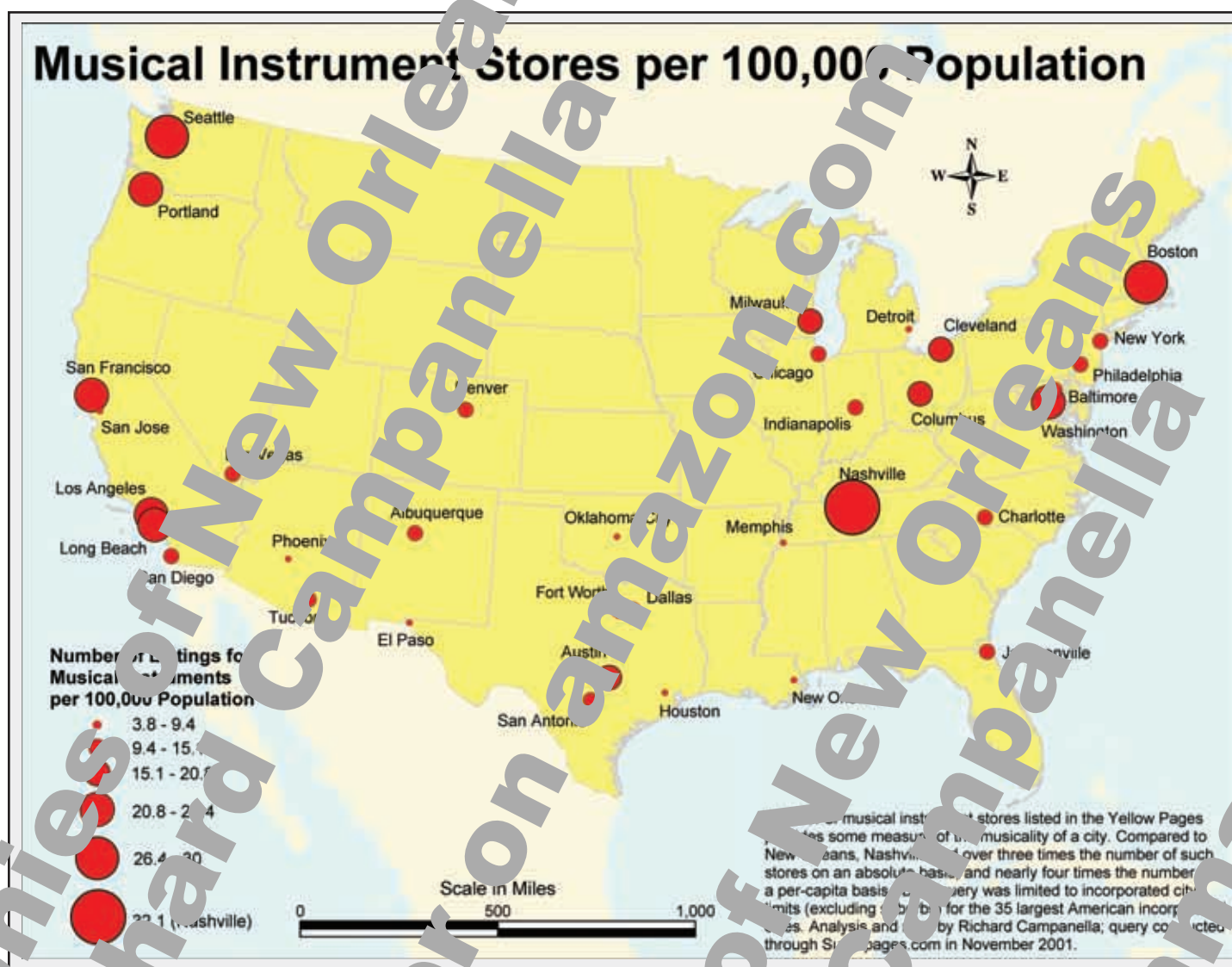
<sup>206</sup> "Barbecue Nation," *South at the Center*, Deep South Regional Humanities Center at Tulane University newsletter (Spring/Summer 2004): 7; Sara Roahen, "Where There's Smoke, There's a Barbecue Town? Don't Tell It to the Pit Bosses," *Gambit* (New Orleans), June 22, 2003, p. 13.

<sup>207</sup> While the Yellow Pages maintains special categories for "Restaurants-Cajun-Creole" and "Restaurants-French," allowing for easy tabulation, no such category exists for "po' boy." Instead, I queried businesses with po' boy in their name to tabulate the number of po' boy joints. This difference of standards should be kept in mind when viewing the map.

<sup>208</sup> Brett Anderson, "Humble Origins for the King of Sandwiches," *Times-Picayune*, May 30, 2003, *Lagniappe* section, p. 22, citing the research of Michael Mizell-Nelson.







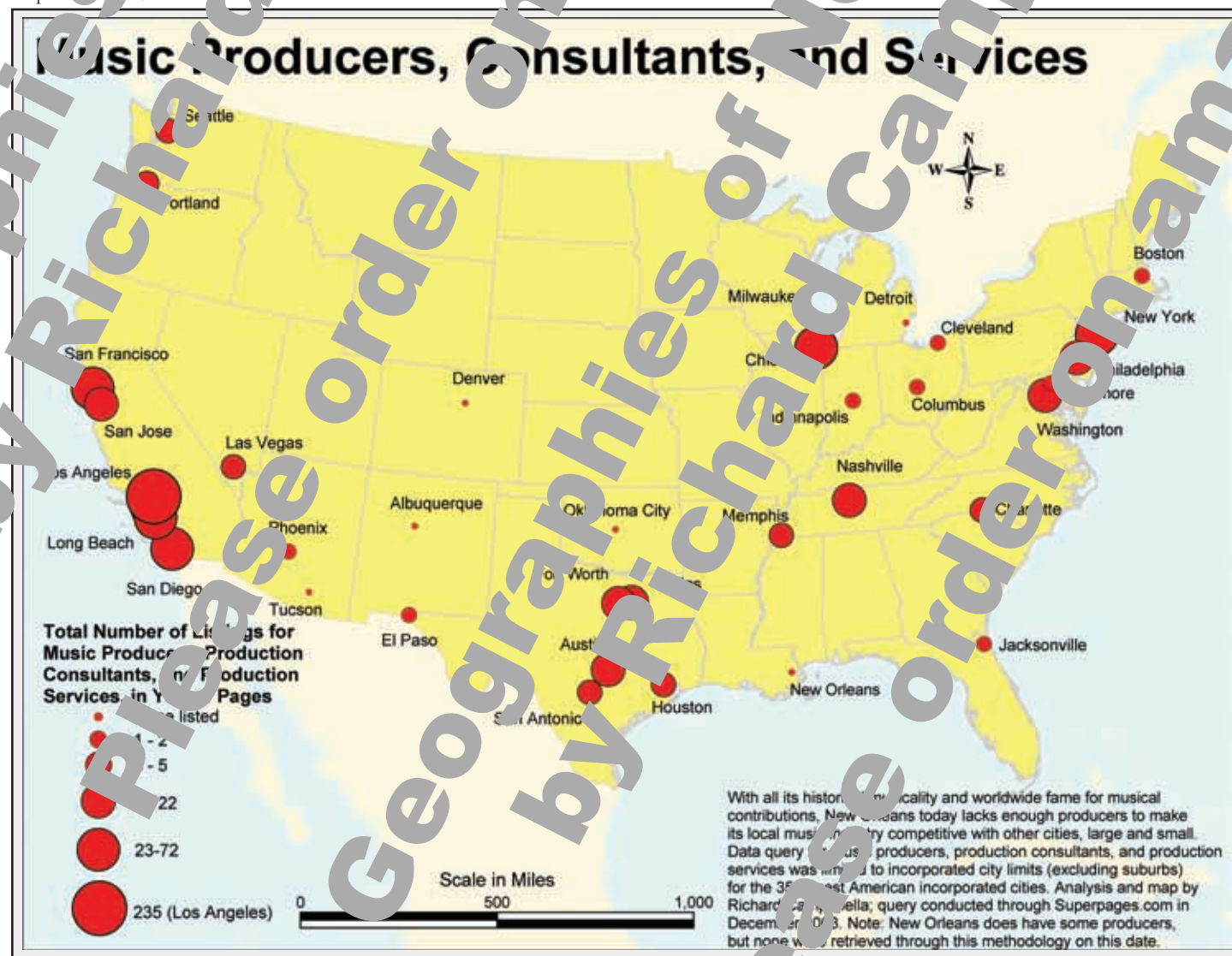
points: New Orleans boasts a superlative musical heritage, contributing disproportionately to the world of music starting with religious and martial influences in the 1700s, operatic and compositional work in the 1800s, jazz in the early 1900s, rhythm-and-blues in the 1950s-1960s, rock in the 1970s, and rap and hip-hop today. Second, modern New Orleans has failed to capitalize on this legacy, losing its Music City reputation—and the attendant artist, producer, recording studios, and dollars—to adroit rivals in other cities, namely Austin and Nashville.<sup>211</sup> “I don’t know that there’s any city in the world that has more talent and more consistent talent, than we have,” said Pulitzer Prize-winning jazz artist and New Orleans native Wynton Marsalis. “But no city in the world has done as sad a job of developing that talent.”<sup>212</sup> The best source on today’s local music scene, *Offbeat*, a free monthly published on Frenchmen Street and distributed in clubs and coffee shops, documents well the controversial efforts to restore New Orleans’ former greatness in this area. The accompanying music-related maps seem to say that New Orleans has not only lost a tremendous opportunity, but, worse, may have also lost its own indigenous musicality—this in a

where, it was once said, you could hold up a horn and it would practically play itself.

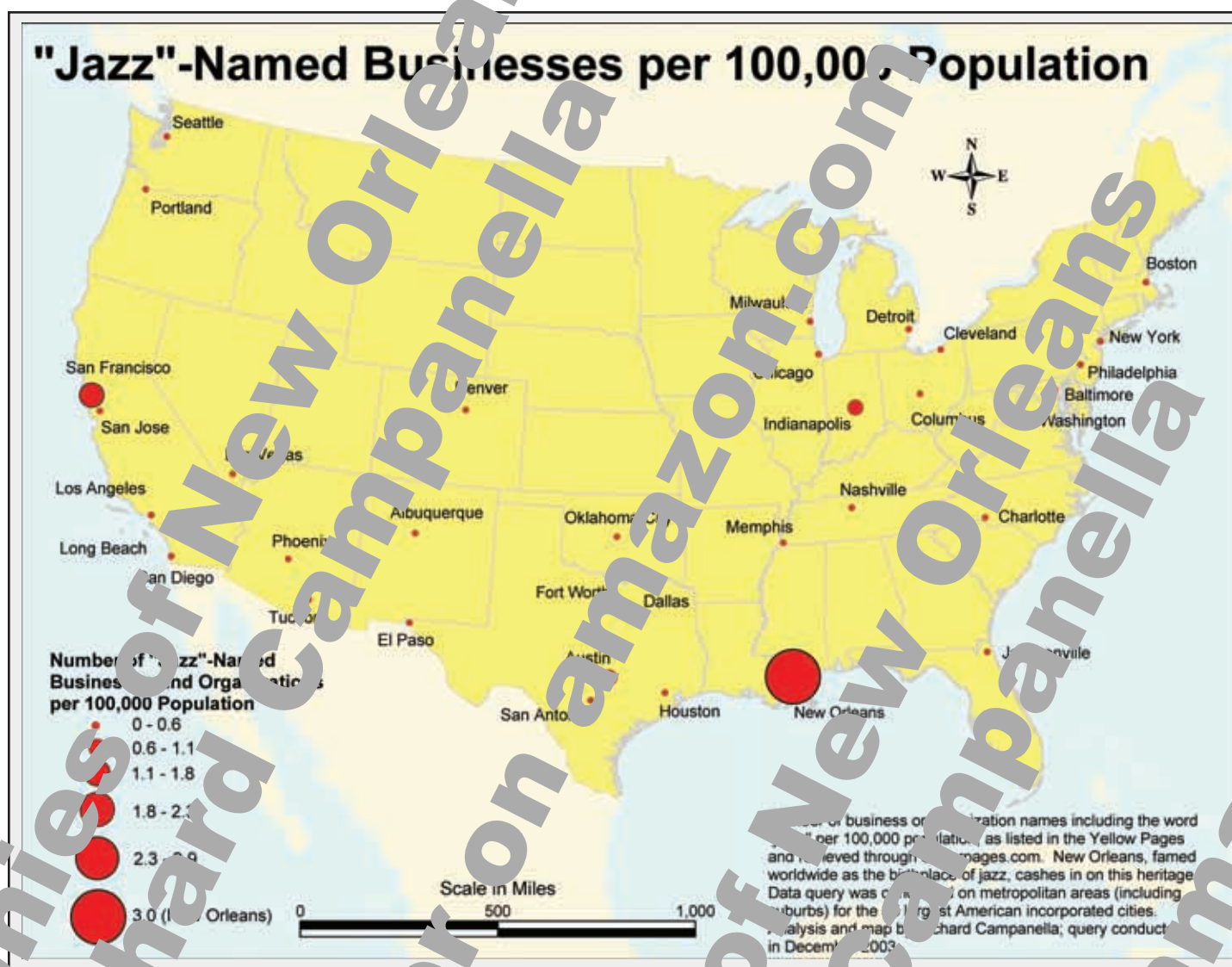
Total number of listings in the “Music” category of the Yellow Pages is perhaps the bluntest measure of a city’s musicality. It includes any entity with the word *music* associated with it: musician, arrangers and composers, musical instrument dealers, retailers, teachers, venues, and others. Since all cities are held to the same standard, over-counting or dubious inclusions should be neutralized. The per capita results for incorporated cities in 2003 (*Music Listings per 100,000 Population*) show that New Orleans lags behind the large, prosperous coastal cities, as one might expect for a small city in the Deep South. But in comparison to Austin and especially Nashville shows New Orleans to be far behind in a category that it once dominated. New Orleans had about thirty music-related entities for every 100,000 population, less than the average of forty-nine for the tested cities, and less than a quarter of Nashville’s 177 listings. Clearly, Nashville’s country music industry is reflected in that figure (not to mention the fact that its relatively small population jacks up its presence on the map, beyond its much larger music scenes of New York and Los Angeles). But the contributions to jazz and rhythm-and-blues made by New Orleans, also a small city, do not show up in an equivalent manner. *Musi-*

<sup>211</sup> Stewart Yerton, “How Do We Live Around New Orleans’ Music Industry?” *Times-Picayune*, April 8, 2003, Money section, p. 1.

<sup>212</sup> As quoted in J.E. Bourgeois, “Back Home,” *Times-Picayune*, January 3, 2004, People section, p. 17.







ical Instrument Stores per 100,000 Population a better gauge of a city's musicality, corroborates the pattern. Again, New Orleans fell short (8.5 musical instrument store listings per 100,000 population in 2001) of the thirty-five-city average of 11.6, trailed the big coastal cities, and lagged well behind Nashville's 32.1 stores per 100,000 population. The explanation of this trend may not be entirely attributable to poverty and lack of education. Much of New Orleans' population was, relatively speaking, poor and uneducated one hundred years ago, at the peak of the city's musicality. Nor does the lack of a major music industry (as evidenced by the lack of *Music Producers, Consultants, and Services*) fully explain this shortfall, as this industry did not exist a century ago. It would well be that, while New Orleans still has a large, vibrant, and creative musical community, it is just that—community of musicians, performing in venues in the French Quarter, Marigny, uptown Mid-City, and on the festival circuit. The overall musicality of New Orleans' larger population may have slipped to the levels of any randomly selected city. The same phenomena seems to have affected two other cities famous for their music, Memphis and Detroit, both of which have a minimal number of music instrument stores relative to their populations.

But this may be an overly pessimistic interpretation. Using the Yellow Pages to shed light on this topic is biased toward commercial manifestations of musicality; only entities with enough wherewithal to warrant listing get counted. Missing are many of the marching bands, aspiring rap artists, Dixieland trios, and neighborhood music makers who fly beneath the radar of the Yellow Pages. Under-funded public school marching bands often reuse their instruments for many years, inferring that fewer instrument stores might be around to sell them new ones. Most musicians in the hip-hop, rap, and "bounce" genres, probably the most nationally influential musical contribution of the city today, come from the African American poor, who are more likely to be undercounted by this methodology. That New Orleans still retains a deep-rooted musicality is evidenced by its "second line" tradition, in which neighbors gather in the street and parade, usually to the *oomp* of a tuba and the blare of a trumpet, to commemorate an anniversary, a holiday, a slain comrade, or nothing in particular. It is a tradition that is unique in the nation, and, unlike many other New Orleans traditions, seems to be increasing in popularity.

Whatever the state of the city's present-day musicality, the mystique of its historical musical achievements is well trumpeted today, as evidenced by the relative popularity of

businesses using the word “jazz” in their names. In this regard, the New Orleans metropolitan area led major American cities, with nearly triple the rate of “jazz”-named businesses than San Francisco and six times more than New York. New Orleans music is also a popular subject of news articles: a query of the Lexis-Nexis database shows that more news articles have been written about New Orleans music (1,866 from the 1970s to 2004; see map, *Number of National Newspaper Articles on Music of Specified Cities*), than the music of New York, Los Angeles, and all other tested cities.<sup>213</sup>

## FRATERNAL ORGANIZATIONS

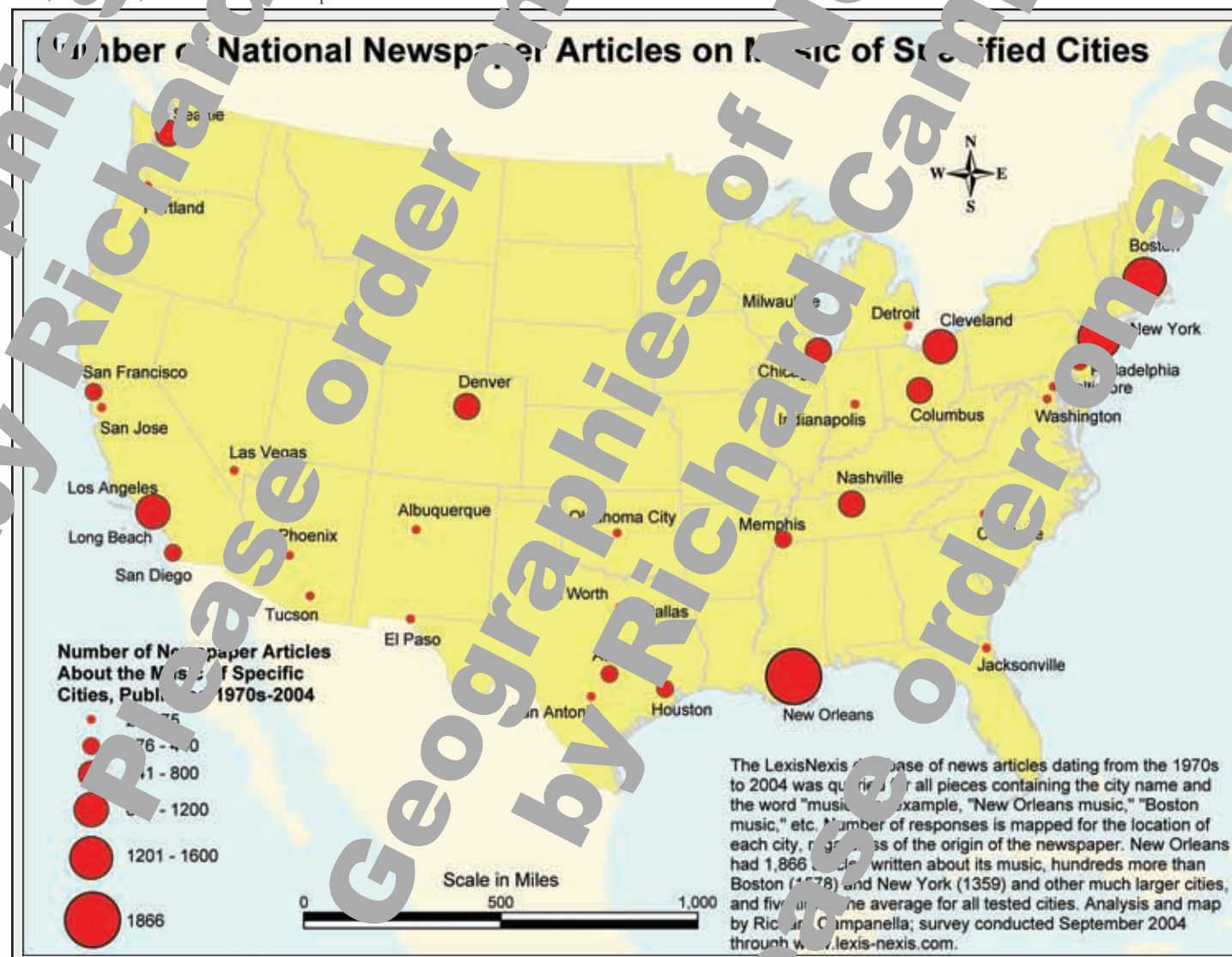
Is New Orleans a “club town,” a culture of “clubby clubs,”<sup>214</sup> obsessed with society rituals and debutante parties? That is certainly the image, and during Carnival season, the city is like no other in the sheer pageantry of its krewes, parades, and balls. A Yellow Pages search on fraternal organizations, lodges, and krewes<sup>215</sup> yielded inconclusive but none-

theless interesting information on how New Orleans compares to other cities in this regard (map, *Fraternal Organizations per 100,000 Population*). The problem is that the Yellow Pages is simply an inadequate source to measure this social phenomenon. The standard Yellow Pages categories of “Fraternal Organization” and “Lodges,” which include Rotary Clubs and VFWs, do not do justice to New Orleans’ brand of clubs. Comparing the men’s clubs and societies of Midwestern cities to New Orleans’ illustrious old-line organizations such as Box Comus, Le Petit Salon, and the Orléans Club, is to compare McDonald’s to Antoine’s. Besides, “krewes” as a term would rarely appear in the Yellow Pages listings of cities outside Louisiana and the Gulf Coast, and many krewes and private clubs within New Orleans are either selective or otherwise uninterested in a Yellow Pages listing. Is New Orleans genuinely a clubby kind of town? The question warrants further investigation. My sense is that the club scene in New Orleans is a *bona fide* distinguishing social phenomenon with deep roots in the city’s culture, but is gradually disappearing, as aging members of many old-line clubs are not replenishing their ranks with equally dedicated young people. As for elaborate social rituals, all one has to do is peruse the Social Scene column of the *Times-Picayune* anytime between Twelfth Night and Lent—or watch the televised “Meeting of

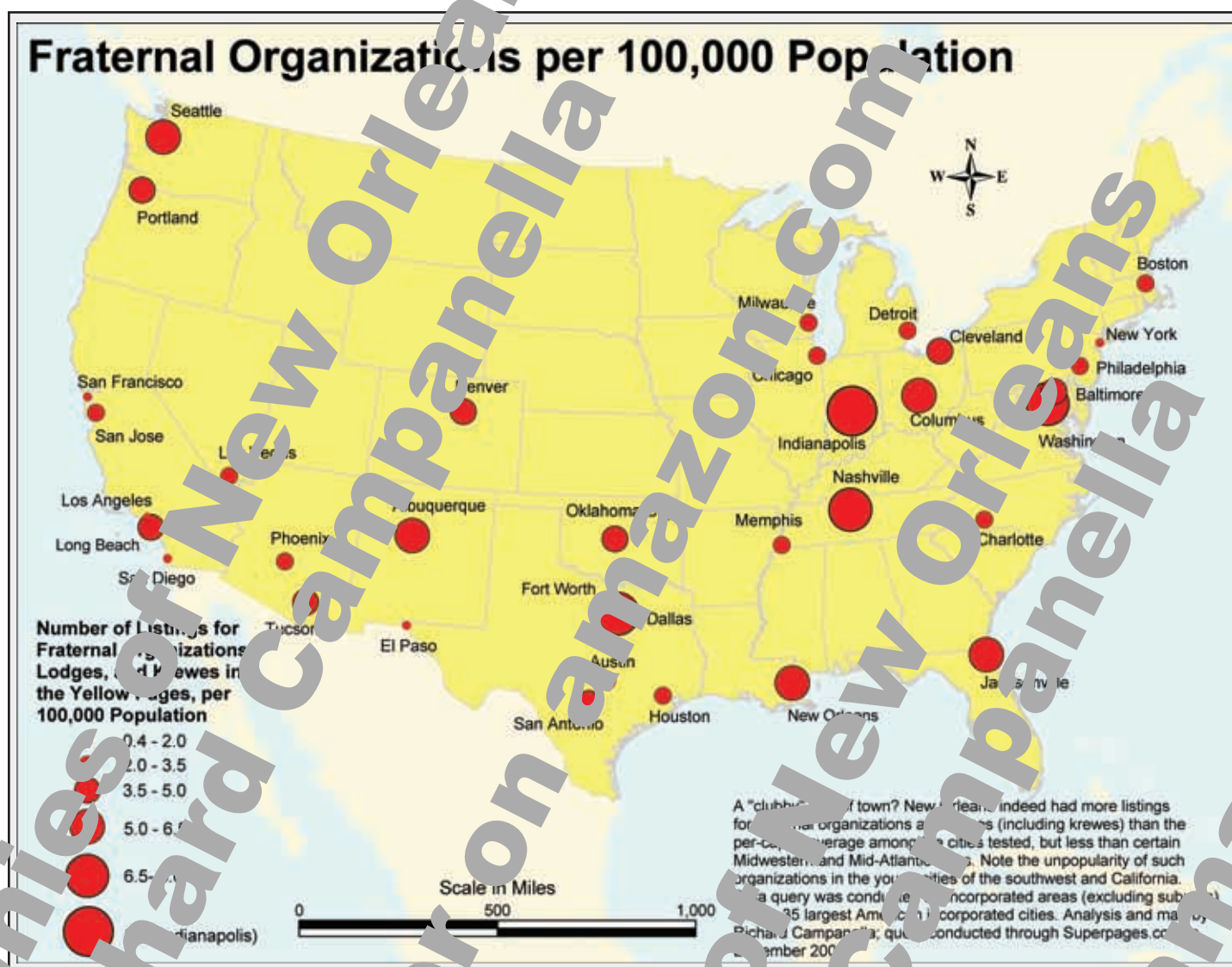
<sup>213</sup> Queries of Lexis-Nexis database were performed on the city name plus the word “music” (for example, “New Orleans music,” “Boston music”) appearing anywhere in the text of the article, in the general news category of all major national newspapers for all available dates, from the 1970s to 2004.

<sup>214</sup> S. Frederick Starr, *New Orleans Uniqued* (New Orleans and New York, 1953), 53.

<sup>215</sup> I did not include the “Clubs” category in the search because it listed mostly health clubs, motorcycle clubs, and other business enterprises.







the Court of Rex and Comus" on Mardi Gras evening—to gauge New Orleans' uniqueness in this regard.

### MARITIME ATTORNEYS

New Orleans has long been home to large and influential legal community, as a former capital of a colony, territory, and state; as a business center; and today as home to two major law schools (Tulane and Loyola, with LSU a far way), the Louisiana Supreme Court, and the U.S. Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals. In legal minds such as Edward Livingston, Judah Benjamin, and A.P. Tureaud all practiced law in New Orleans. Louisiana's civil law heritage, inherited by the French and Spanish regimes and producing today one of the most interesting mixed-jurisdiction legal systems in the world,<sup>216</sup> also makes New Orleans a hub for students and practitioners of the law. The New Orleans Bar Association claims over 2,500 judges and lawyers in their membership, and the Yellow Pages yields 4,330 attorneys for the city. These numbers cannot compare to other larger cities. The 2003 Yellow Pages for Washington, D.C., and New York, for example, listed 11,922 and 20,000 attorneys, respectively.

<sup>216</sup> For more information, see Vernon Valentine Palmer, *Louisiana: Microcosm of a Mixed Jurisdiction* (Durham, NC, 1999).

<sup>217</sup> New Orleans Bar Association, [http://www.neworleansbar.org/join\\_bar.html](http://www.neworleansbar.org/join_bar.html) (accessed December 30, 2003).

But in one particular branch of law—maritime law—the New Orleans area had the highest per capita number of listings of any tested city (map, *Maritime Attorneys per 100,000 Population*). The city is home to the Tulane University Maritime Law Center, which describes itself as "the premier institution for the study of maritime law in the United States" and publishes one of only four specialist maritime journals in the United States.<sup>218</sup> New Orleans' strategically located port and historically complex legal environment are manifest in this statistic.

### STRUCTURAL PROBLEMS

New Orleans' soft alluvial soils have long challenged structural engineers. The most visible reflection of this geological reality is the relatively late arrival to New Orleans of modern skyscrapers, most of which were built in the 1970s and 1980s, years after similar buildings arose in other mid-sized American cities. Such projects depended on new piling technology that exploited the hard Pleistocene Epoch clays over a hundred feet below the surface. Less visible, but much more prevalent, is the settling problems of smaller structures, from old townhouses on the natural levee to new ranch houses

<sup>218</sup> Tulane Maritime Law Center, <http://www.law.tulane.edu/tuexp/centers/marcenter/default.htm> (accessed October 3, 2004).

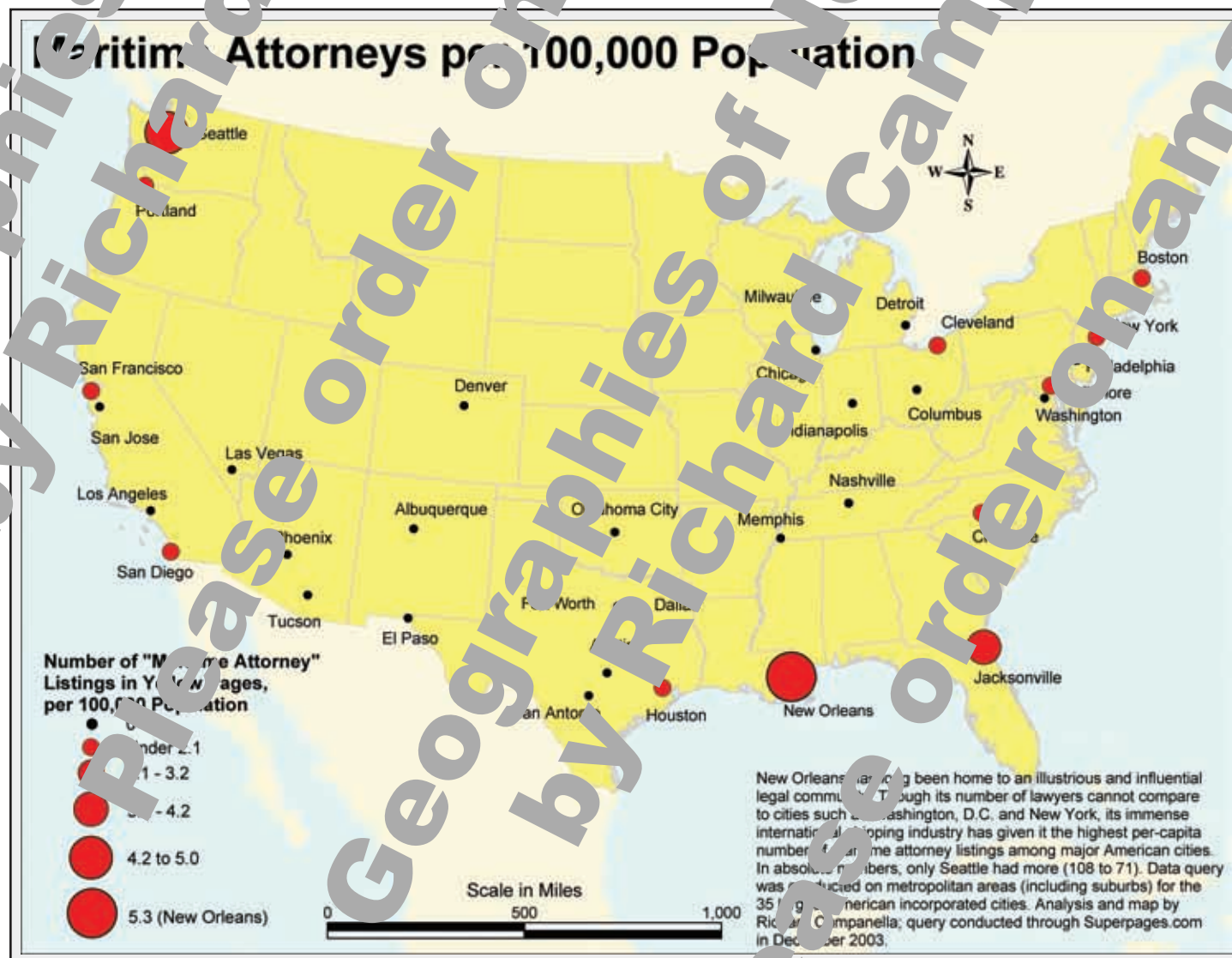
on drained swamplands. Soil subsidence affects many cities around the world, in coastal areas, deserts, and former lakebeds, where water tables have been lowered. Scientists measure subsidence in increasingly accurate techniques using networks of Global Positioning Systems receivers, and it is this data that would determine if New Orleans' subsidence problem is indeed the worst in the nation. The accompanying map, "Shoring" (House Leveling) Listings per 100,000 Population, indicates the severity of the New Orleans metropolitan area's problem in terms of shoring specialists and contractors. It sustained nineteen Yellow Pages listings for shoring specialists, twice the absolute number of those in Phoenix and well ahead of all other cities in per capita terms. (Note the high numbers in other desert cities such as Las Vegas, Tucson, and Albuquerque.) One shoring company, Levy Brothers, has been in business locally since the 1840s; the same decade Antoine's Restaurant was founded; the two operations are now the oldest companies in New Orleans. Sinking houses and fine cuisine apparently make for job security in this city.

A semitropical environment, an immense inventory of old wooden buildings, and a busy shipping port have conspired to make New Orleans the unwilling home of a vicious termite infestation problem. Native termites have caused their share of damage; the accident arrival of invasive For-

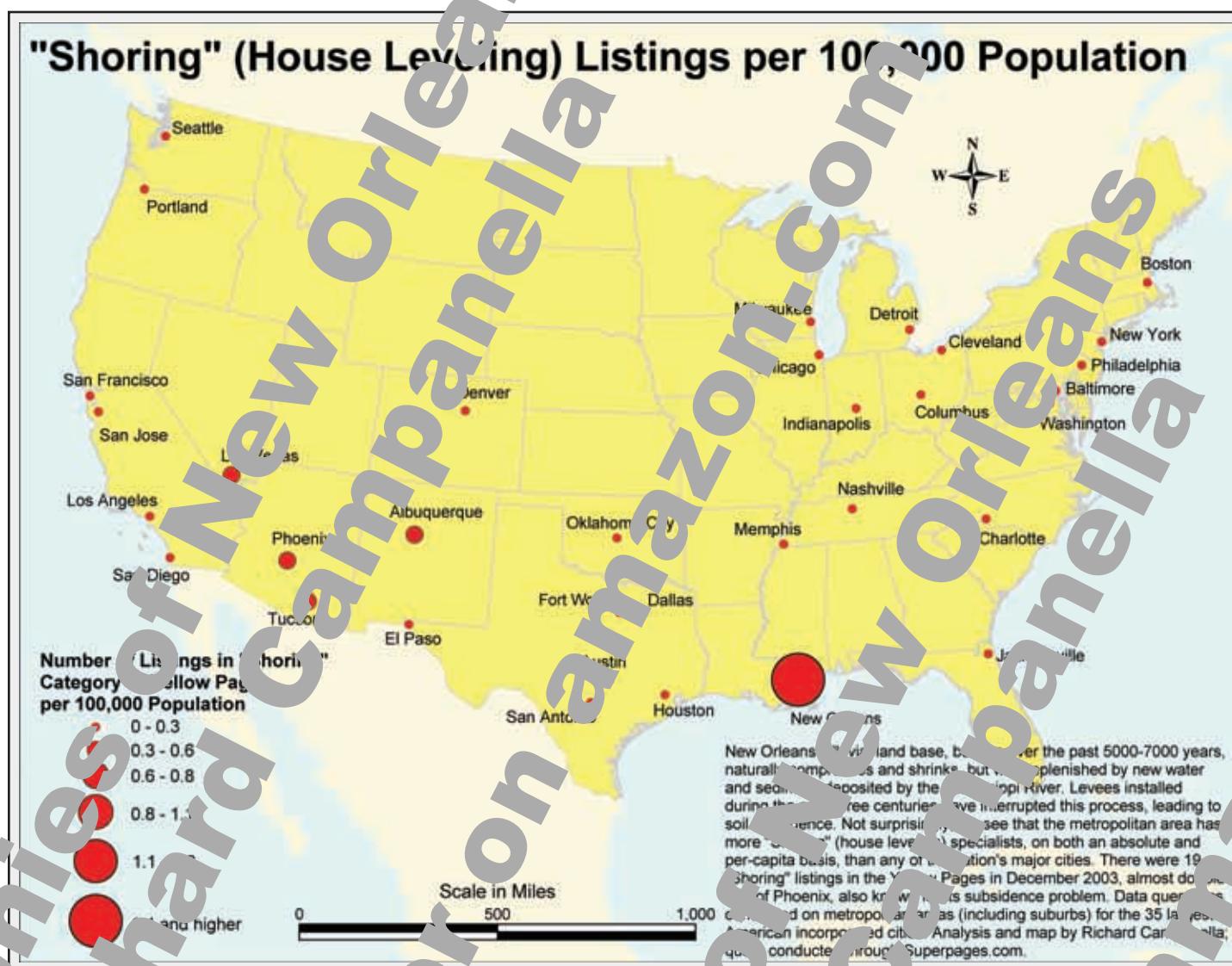
mosan termites from East Asia, via shipping palettes unloaded originally in Houston during World War II, exacerbated the problem. Among the victims of the annual swarms are the city's most treasured attributes: historic landmarks, old houses, even its ancient live oaks. One estimate puts the costs of damage and control in New Orleans at \$307,990,000 annually. Curiously, the map of "Pest and Termite Control" Listings per 100,000 Population does not indicate that New Orleans leads the nation in this regard. This may be explained in two ways: New Orleans' pest control specialists are few in number but large in operation. Or it may be that, as bad as the problem is in the city, it is actually a national problem, particularly in the warmer sections of the country. For mosan termites are now found throughout the southern two-thirds of the continental United States, the same area that recorded higher numbers of listings of termite and pest control specialists.

### NOMENCLATURE

How has New Orleans culture diffused through the nation? Its contributions to national and world culture exceed those of most American cities its size. It is regularly recognized as one of the truly American contributions to the arts; Mardi Gras celebrations have recently diffused inland to cities with no carnival traditions (and not necessarily to







the advantage of either Mardi Gras or the *Creoles*). And New Orleans cuisine, coupled with recent interpretations of Cajun cooking, may be found in supermarket shelves and restaurant menus from Miami to Fairbanks.<sup>219</sup> The influence of New Orleans on American culture awaits thorough scholarly investigation, but it is safe to say that, whatever its findings, the words *jazz*, *Creole*, and *Mardi Gras* will figure prominently in the future. The Yellow Pages sheds some light on the use of these three code words in business names nationwide (minus "Jazz", "Creole", and "Mardi Gras"-Named Businesses). With the exception of the desert Southwest, all three terms were found nationwide. All three were equally popular in New Orleans, where 104 businesses used them as names in 2003. "Mardi Gras" seemed to be popular in California and the Northeast, while "Creole" was often used in Texas, Houston and sporadically throughout the nation. The absence in Southwestern states may reflect their large Hispanic immigrant populations, which may be less familiar with popular New Orleans imagery. The overall results generally correlate

well with the findings of *Number of "New Orleans"-Named Businesses*.

These maps may underreport the true cultural impact of New Orleans on America. The words *jazz*, *Creole*, *Mardi Gras*, and *New Orleans* all have widespread cachet and are used nationwide, commercially and otherwise to signify certain images traceable to the city and state that created them. The same cannot be said for equivalent code words for other regions. As a city advocate recently wrote, "Have you heard of Atlanta cuisine? Houston music?"<sup>220</sup> Indeed, few are the restaurants named for Atlanta, San Diego, or Newark. Few are the businesses named "Knickerbocker," or "Fat Heel," save for those in Atlanta, New York, or North Carolina. And few are the clubs named for the music of Denver, Milwaukee, or Houston.

## CONCLUSIONS?

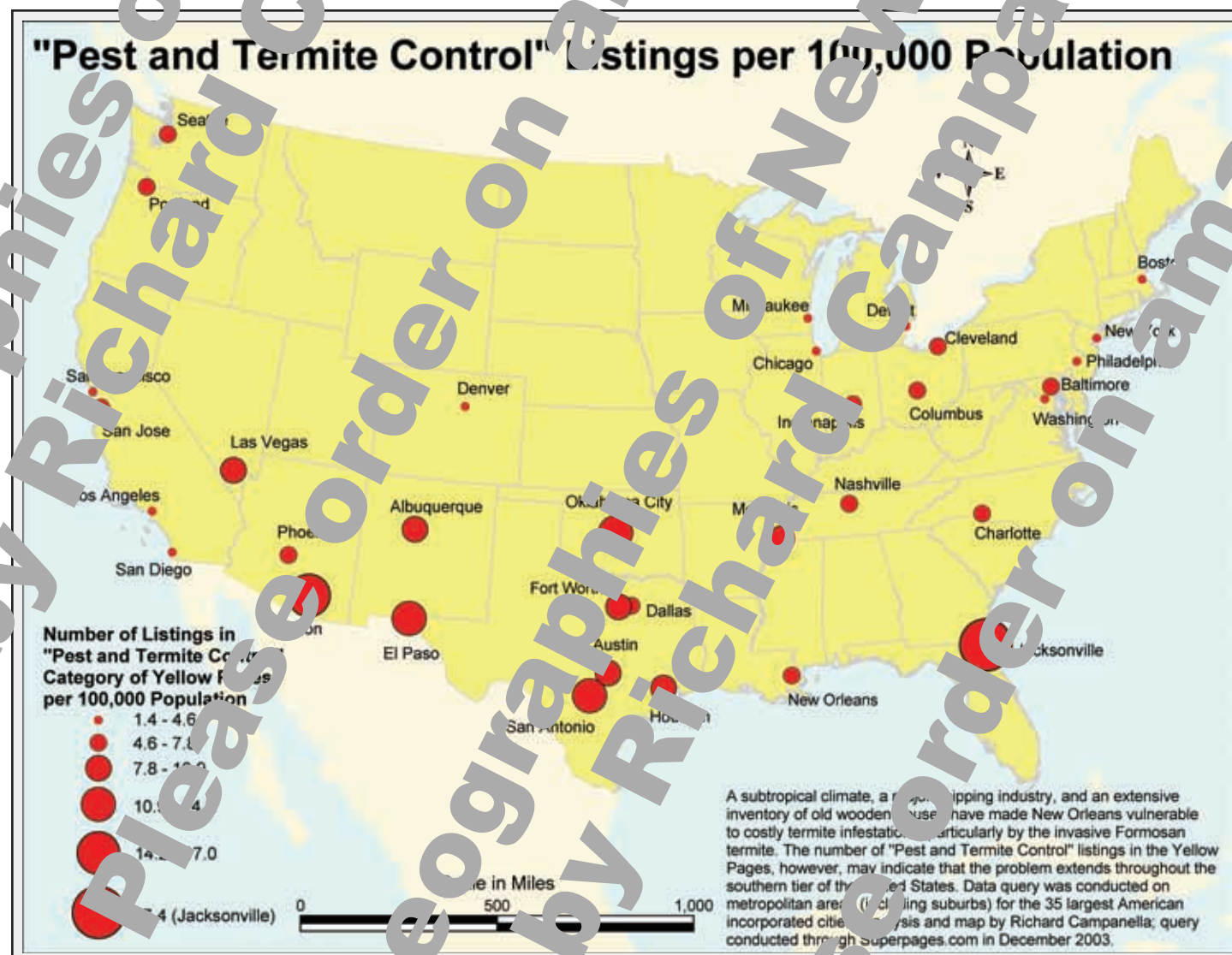
No specific conclusions can be drawn from these maps; they were not designed to test hypotheses about cultural differences, only to address them. But some patterns do emerge, and what the Yellow Pages reveals about New Orleans is this: *popular perceptions can be misleading*. Many cherished notions of New Orleans' uniqueness may not hold up to critical

<sup>219</sup> A 1992 study by geographer Cary de Wit found that Texas and Louisiana were among the five American states most connected with specific foods, as indicated by their packaging labels. The other three, California, Vermont, and Oregon, ranked high more for their recent specializations in health and organic foods, than for deeply rooted, culturally based food-place associations. Cary De Wit, "Food Place Associations on American Product Labels," *Geographical Review* 82 (July 1992): 323-30.

<sup>220</sup> Renee Dodge, Editorial, "Times-Picayune, March 9, 2004, Metro section, p. 4.

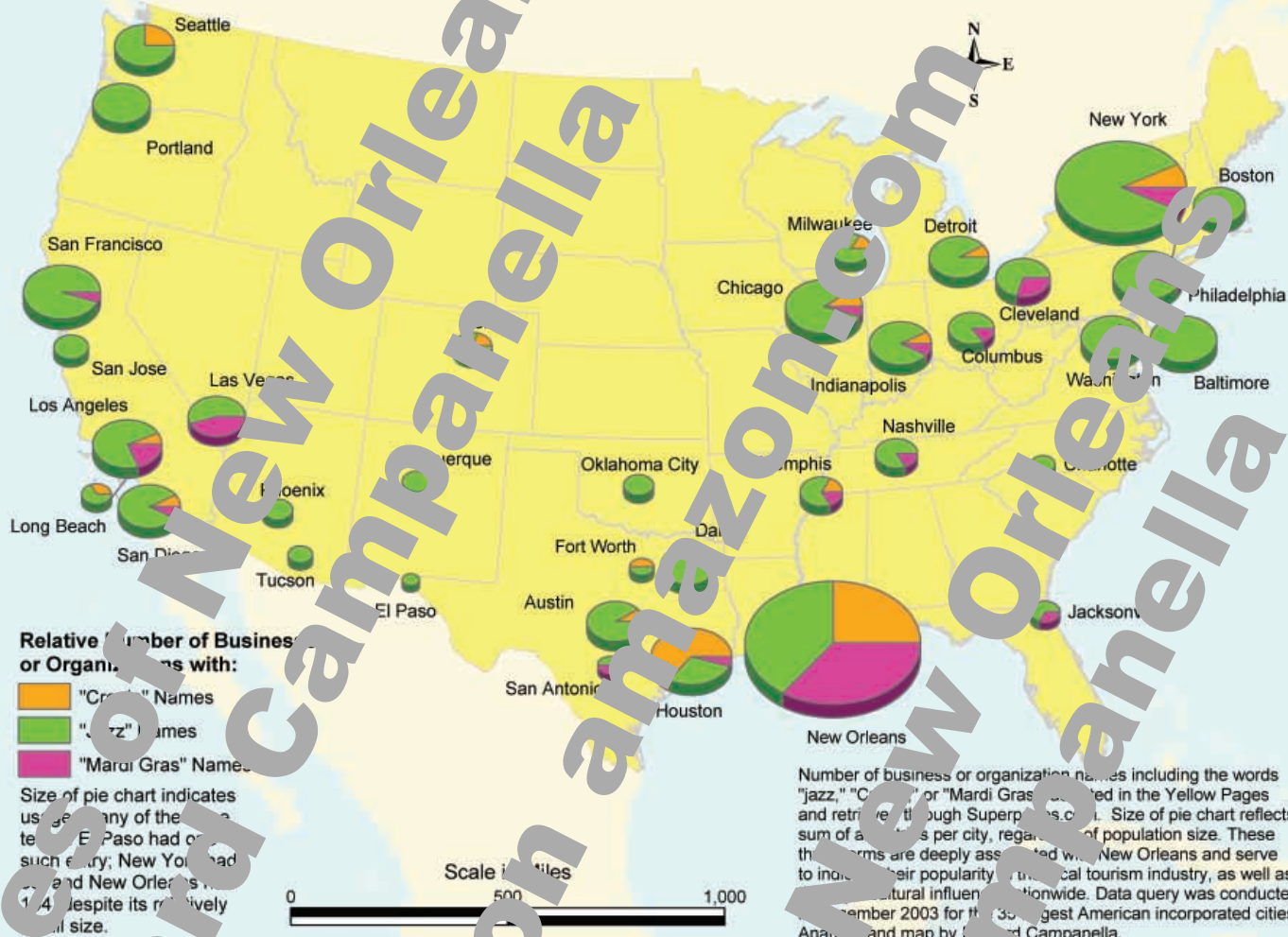
cal analyses. Genuine cultural differentiation from New Orleans from the rest of America started diminishing (or, rather, hybridizing) as the ink dried on the Louisiana Purchase in 1803. Ever since, the forces of Americanization have slowly absorbed the colonial orphan into the national fold. The Crescent City today has more in common with the Atlantas and Portlands and Cincinnati of the nation than many New Orleanians may care to recognize. The, deeply rooted cultural distinction remains; it is abundantly evident in the built environment and during Carnival, All Saints' Day, and Good Friday rituals, but can be subtle and elusive in its inhabitants as they live out their everyday lives. And it is highly prone to mythologization and hyperbole by those who seek to profit from its exhibition or to trouble themselves by standing next to it. Truth is, New Orleans, for all its unusual circumstances, follows the same general rules that guide all modern cities and societies.

*Epilogue: See the final chapter, "Hurricane Katrina and the Geographies of Catastrophe," for some thoughts on how the Katrina tragedy may affect perceptions about New Orleans. Regarding New Orleans itself, the Yellow Pages may become a fine annual gauge for how the city recovers—which businesses and residents return, where and when, and what that reveals about the future New Orleans.*





# "Jazz"-, "Creole"-, and "Mardi Gras"-Named Businesses



## Number of "New Orleans"-Named Businesses

