

THE ACCIDENTAL FOREST



CHRIS VAN DER ZWET

forest is nonetheless dense and robust, with vines dangling from a full canopy and palmettos rising from a shady open floor. It exudes the same bewitching subtropical aura that fascinated and frightened our forebears. Exploring it today, one can easily be transported back in time, as there are no sounds or sights therein of the surrounding metropolis.

Why did it survive? It's probably easier to explain why it never urbanized — that is, why things did not happen there.

The reasons are partly geographical, partly historical and largely accidental, and they start with the curving shape of nearby Gentilly Boulevard, which, as a topographical ridge, constituted the main pathway through the backswamp.

As early as the 1720s, French surveyors delineated parcels perpendicularly to the narrow ridge, creating a snake-like array of lots which over the next century would host small farms, dairies, pastures and orchards. Dense stands of cypress swamp, meanwhile, stood in the low country to the rear.

By the 1830s, Creole families with names like Martin, Bermudez, Martel, Lebeau and Darcantel owned these rural properties. But it was only the Darcantel clan who, by 1834, planned to subdivide their land into a faubourg. Reason: the new Pontchartrain Railroad (1831) gave it direct access to the city and thus increased its land values. This is today's busy intersection of Gentilly Boulevard at Elysian Fields Avenue.

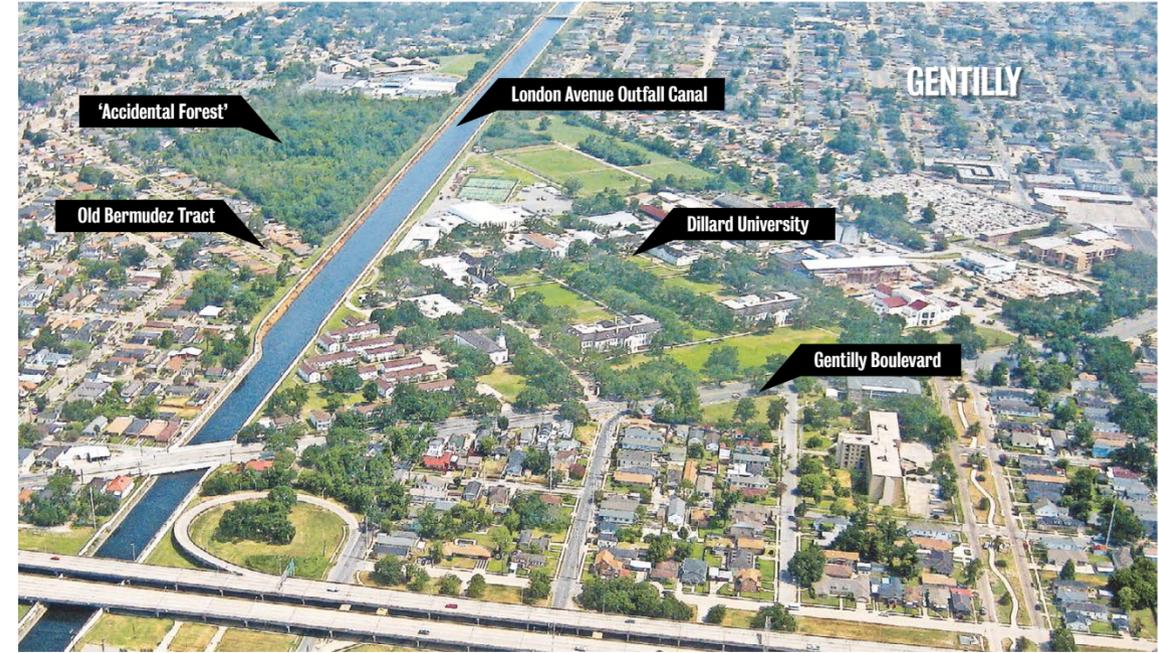
What the Pontchartrain Railroad also did was establish a perfectly straight north-south axis across an otherwise wild region defined previously by the curvaceous Gentilly Road.

When engineers began developing this area, they positioned new infrastructure relative to the railroad on Elysian Fields, rather than the winding ridge-top road. For this reason, the Darcantel street grid was laid out parallel with Elysian Fields.

Likewise, when the London Avenue Outfall Canal was dug 40 years later, engineers aligned it too with Elysian Fields, slicing the channel across a corner of the angled Bermudez parcel. So detached, this patch would, in time, become our "accidental forest."

By the early 1900s, as that outfall canal and the associated pumping station lowered the ground water, Gentilly's backswamp became dry land — and prime residential real estate. Large expanses came under the ownership of the New Orleans Land Co., whose surveyors laid out an orderly street network within the preexisting framework of Elysian Fields and the London Avenue canal. One by one, subdivisions filled the checkerboard, and former woodlands became modern neighborhoods.

For some reason, the old Bermudez property did not get subsumed into the



SOURCE: RICHARD CAMPANELLA, PHOTO: JAAP VAN DER SALM

company's holdings, and thus retained its original shape abutting Gentilly Boulevard. Instead it came into the hands of the real estate partnership of Bassich and DeMontluzin, which in 1917 began laying out the Rose Hill Cemetery upon it.

It's likely that whatever ancient trees still stood in our present-day woods were felled for the cemetery — a bit ironic, because the city would purchase the next lot east on Gentilly Boulevard for its municipal tree nursery.

Progress on the burial ground moved slowly, possibly because the project, according to one allegation detailed in the Times-Picayune, "was not in reality a cemetery;" rather, "a body...had been obtained from Charity Hospital and buried there as a ruse to avoid paying taxes."

Whatever the case, the increasingly valuable Rose Hill tract attracted other interests. One organization in 1923 proposed a tuberculosis hospital for the land. Four years later, trustees for Dillard University, the product of a recent merger of two predecessor institutions of higher education for African Americans, envisioned the site as their new campus.

In 1931, Dillard purchased 70 acres of Rose Hill for \$339,750 and, after a few bodies and markers were removed from the cemetery (among them the Dreux Monument now on Jefferson Davis Parkway), workers proceeded to construct a campus east of the London Avenue Canal, fronting Gentilly Boulevard.

The western portion, however, remained undeveloped because it was too far from the boulevard and on the wrong side of the canal. Sections were sold off in the 1940s for small subdivisions, and by the 1950s, what remained was a trapezoidal patch of open land which Dillard might have eventually

sold to a developer.

But circumstances changed in the 1960s. The population exodus shifted new development to the suburbs, and land values declined in the city proper. Dillard found itself stuck with a forest too inconvenient for campus use, too far from the boulevard, and too late to sell for a subdivision. In 1982, university officials made a deal with the city, swapping their isolated forest for the front of the old municipal nursery. Dillard subsequently expanded its campus eastward, to where the Cook and Nelson buildings are now located. (The university did, however, retain ownership of a sliver of the forest near Van Avenue.)

The city, meanwhile, had no particular plans for its new arboreal acquisition, except for a school that would be built on its northern tip. (This was F.W. Gregory Junior High, recently demolished.) The rest gradually returned to nature, slipping through the cracks of 300 years of urbanization.

Today it forms the last substantially sized remnant of wild forest in the heart of New Orleans' East Bank, outside of parkland or batture.

Urbanization evaded these 27 acres because they constituted interstitial space — that is, small, undesignated and highly idiosyncratic areas wedged amongst larger planned areas. Through serendipity and happenstance, this tract ended up getting left behind by human endeavors, like a sliver of cake sliced at various angles and left on the plate uneaten.

This is not to say that the forest has completely evaded attention. According to Dillard urban planning professor Robert Collins, the university in the early 2000s expressed interest in reacquiring it for campus use. But largely for the cost of erecting an Army

Corps-approved pedestrian bridge over the London Avenue Canal, Dillard abandoned the idea.

The city, which labels the woodland as Parcel 41109359, has also eyed the area. When planners behind the recent City Zoning Ordinance proposed changing its status from Single Family Residential to Educational Campus, one citizens' group expressed concerns about neighborhood impacts, and suggested either keeping the status quo or zoning it as Regional Open Space.

Others have recognized the forest's ecological and hydrological value. The Greater New Orleans Urban Water Plan spearheaded by local architect David Waggonner envisioned a London Avenue Canal Wetland Park with siphons from the canal feeding "a circulating water system to nourish the wetland habitat" plus "boardwalks (to) allow visitors to engage the diverse flora and fauna..." Prof. John Klingman's studio at the Tulane School of Architecture saw similar potential, and students in the Dillard Department of Urban Studies, according to Prof. Collins, use the forest for field mapping projects. Perhaps someday things will happen here. But after exploring in and around this fortuitous little Eden, and at one point following a rather contented turtle marching stridently toward the emerald refuge, I'd be satisfied if things continued not to happen in the Accidental Forest.

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This 27-acre woodland is by no means virgin old-growth. Its oldest oaks today appear to be at most a century of age.

A tract of woods in Gentilly remains a wild Eden in the middle of the city

By Richard Campanella
InsideOut columnist

Some of history's toughest questions are those that ask "why not?" Many features in our cityscape, for example, can only be explained by understanding why certain decisions were not made and why things did not happen. A case in point is a remarkable remnant of what was once our region's dominant ecology. Tucked along the western side of the London Avenue Canal, lakeside of Virgil Boulevard in the Fillmore-Dillard section of

Gentilly, lies a last fragment of the storied New Orleans backswamp, that vast, damp, dense forest which has long since been felled by axes, drained by pumps and populated by us. This 27-acre woodland is by no means virgin old-growth. Aerial photographs attest that it was a second-growth thicket in the 1940s, and its oldest oaks today appear to be at most a century of age. Nor is it still truly "swamp" — that is, forested wetland — although one section, at 4 feet below sea level, appears to impound rainwater during heavy downpours. But this nameless city-owned



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