

# Lessons Learned from the Loss of the DeLord-Sarpy House

By Richard Campanella  
Tulane School of Architecture

**T**WO CENTURIES AGO, one of New Orleans' most imposing residences arose on a recently subdivided upriver plantation. Known as the Delord-Sarpy House, the graceful structure would witness vast transformations of its environs and survive as probably the oldest house above Canal Street — only to meet its fate over a matter of feet.

The Delord-Sarpy House was a product of 18th-century Creole society at a time of accelerated change in the early 19th century. The recently Americanized city of New Orleans was growing rapidly: over 9,000 Haitian refugees had arrived via Cuba in 1809, and they would be followed by thousands of foreign and domestic migrants starting in the 1810s. With New Orleans' urbanized footprint — limited since 1788 to today's French Quarter and Central Business District (Faubourg Ste. Marie at the time) — increasing in population density, owners of adjacent plantations began to subdivide their parcels to cash in on the real estate boom. First came the Faubourg Marigny in 1805, followed over the next few years by parts of present-day Bywater and Bayou St. John, Faubourg Tremé, and five upriver plantations comprising today's Lee Circle and Lower Garden District area.

The parcel closest to Faubourg Ste. Marie belonged to the Delord family, who in 1806 had it surveyed by Barthélémy Lafon and sold in part to Armand Duplantier. The area became known variously as Faubourg Delord and Faubourg Duplantier, and its lowermost street was named Delord, today's Howard Avenue and Andrew Higgins Place.

Still bucolic in its setting yet proximate to the expanding urban core, Delord Street formed the perfect spot for a spacious and comfortable country home — a villa of sorts. According to the researchers of the *New Orleans Architecture* series, a surgeon named Joseph Montegut acquired a lot on what would later be 534 Howard and erected what was described at the time as “a beautiful new master house...brick and terrace roofed, [with] a flanking gallery on pillars and in the rear a small gallery...”

True to the West Indian-influenced design philosophies of local French Creole builders, Montegut's house had no hallways, an exterior staircase,

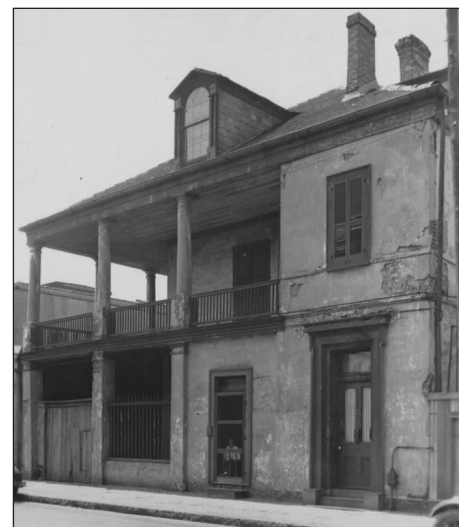


ABOVE: Delord-Sarpy House in 1928 by Arnold Genthe. Courtesy Library of Congress  
BELOW (LEFT TO RIGHT): Two photographs of the Delord-Sarpy House taken by Richard Koch as part of the Historic American Building Survey in 1936; The Delord-Sarpy House in 1930s, photographer unknown. Courtesy State Library of Louisiana

airy verandahs, austere stucco walls with no frills, and a flat-tiled hipped roof with a slight double pitch, punctuated by center chimneys and commanding dormers. It looked like something plucked from Port au Prince or Havana, with elements reminiscent of the French countryside or the Spanish port. Circumstances suggest the architect may have been Jean Hyacinthe Laclotte, who is thought to have also designed the famous Girod (Napoleon) House at 500 Chartres St. Indeed, the two buildings bear an uncanny resemblance but for the gallery, and both were started in 1814.

Dr. Montegut's financial troubles delayed completion until 1818, by which time the house came into the possession of Madame Delord-Sarpy. It would remain in the hands of her descendants, namely the Burthe family, for the next 40 years, even as the once-pastoral upper *banlieue* (outskirts) became enveloped by downtown urbanization.

Over the next century, residential land use would shift upriver, the port would modernize, and the Delord-Sarpy (or Sarpy-Burthe) House, having changed hands four times, would find itself hemmed in by storage and industry. Photographs from the 1920s show a poignantly weathered edifice, still resplendent despite peeling paint and plastered cinema posters, with an incongruous repair garage squeezed inches from its majestic pillars. The house struck an odd pose in that its left flank fronted Howard Street;





the magnificent façade and main gallery, having been originally oriented to view the distant Mississippi, now overlooked the garage. Conditions deteriorated by the Depression: “Pitifully out of place,” wrote the authors of the WPA *New Orleans City Guide* (1938), “with one gallery gone and its wide entrance ways boarded up, the plantation home, at present a boarding house, stands surrounded by warehouses.” (In fact, Delord-Sarpy was not technically a plantation home, in that it was never affiliated with an agricultural operation. It was erected on an urban street grid, arguably in the style of a plantation home.)

The Delord-Sarpy House, a product of the Napoleonic Age, had become by the Atomic Age an artifact of a different time and place, appreciated only by preservationists and architectural historians, faded and ragged but sturdy and enduring nonetheless.

Then came the bridge.

In 1952, the state legislature created the Mississippi River Bridge Authority, and with civic advocate Neville Levy as its chair and modernization-minded Mayor deLesseps “Chep” Morrison in City Hall, planners got to work selecting a route.

They decided to utilize the recently filled New Basin Canal right-of-way, already state-owned and devoid of structures, to bring traffic from points west into downtown. That trajectory dictated that a swath would have to be cleared through the Calliope and Gaienne street corridors, from Simon Bolivar Boulevard to Camp. What followed were two years of land acquisitions under eminent domain, \$3.5 million in compensatory payments, and, starting in 1956, demolitions of 52 historical buildings. Construction of the bridge, meanwhile, was well underway.

What threatened the Delord-Sarpy House was not the main Pontchartrain Expressway to the bridge but a forked off-ramp that brought West Bank traffic curving onto Howard Street (right lane) or heading down Camp Street (left lane). The old house sat within the interstice of the two lanes — but, alas, too close to the left lane by a matter of feet.

Could the ramp be relocated? Could the Camp lane be redesigned? Could the house be moved? In May 1955, alarmed members of the Louisiana Landmarks Society met with bridge officials and made their case.

But for reasons of funding, engineering, viability, and perhaps just plain intransigence, authorities would not budge. Bridge construction was proceeding at a rapid clip, and with little public support for preservation beyond the French Quarter and a postwar zeitgeist for modernization, the 140-year-old monarch didn’t stand a chance.

In early 1957, the Delord-Sarpy House was dismantled to salvage some components and then cleared away. Ramps were built, and on April 15, 1958, what was described as the world’s largest cantilevered highway bridge opened for traffic. Ever since then, every motorist exiting onto Camp Street from the West Bank has passed within feet of Delord-Sarpy’s space.

In 2012, in preparation for its latest expansion, the National World War II Museum commissioned a local archaeological firm to excavate the corner at Higgins and Camp. Researchers found an abundance of artifacts, from newspapers and shoes to patios with herring-bone bricks, plus the foundation of the Delord-Sarpy House as well as its cistern, kitchen, privy and outbuildings. Today they lie beneath another piece of history: the museum’s Road to Berlin and Road to Tokyo Campaigns Pavilion.

As for the Delord-Sarpy House, two of its mantels were rescued and donated to the Louisiana Landmarks Society’s Pitot House, where they remain today. But perhaps its lasting legacy was the experience of its defenders. The loss helped galvanize and embolden preservationists: no longer would advocates for historic buildings only play defense and negotiate without leverage with unyielding officials. The city’s preservation movement was not born in the ruins of the Delord-Sarpy House, but it in part came of age there, and the experience helped steel the movement for the larger battles of the 1960s and 1970s.

*Richard Campanella, a geographer with the Tulane School of Architecture, is the author of Bienville’s Dilemma, Lincoln in New Orleans, and other books. This article is drawn from his latest book, Bourbon Street: A History (LSU Press, 2014), to which readers are directed for more information and sources. Campanella may be reached through <http://richcampanella.com>, [rcampane@tulane.edu](mailto:rcampane@tulane.edu), and [@nolacampanella](https://twitter.com/nolacampanella).*



TOP: The Delord-Sarpy foundation, excavated in February 2012. Photo by Richard Campanella. ABOVE: The site of the former Delord-Sarpy House as it looks in 2015. Photo by Richard Campanella