



#PRESERVE nola300

THE PRESERVATIONISTS WHO SAVED NEW ORLEANS

Preservation's 'Second Wave,' and the Losses That Impelled It

BY Richard Campanella
Tulane School of Architecture

A CASE CAN BE MADE that the preservation movement in New Orleans has formed three waves over the past century, each impelled by, among other things, traumatic losses.

The "first wave" mounted in the 1920s, starting with the formation of the Vieux Carré Restoration Society and other historical and architectural associations, which brought about a 1925 ordinance to study the Vieux Carré and a 1936 change to the State Constitution leading to the 1937 establishment of the Vieux Carré Commission. Changing values ultimately explain this victory, but three searing losses helped motivate them: the 1903 demolition of 400 Royal/Chartres St. for a new courthouse, the 1916 razing of the old St. Louis Exchange Hotel, and the 1919 burning of the Old French Opera House. All located in the historical heart of the city, the four acres of demolition potentially foretold the leveling of the entire French Quarter, unless citizens intervened. And intervene they did.

Fast-forward to today, and a "third wave" seems to be upon us, entailing the incorporation of community sustainability into the movement's traditional goal of structural preservation, while also expanding the range of exactly what architectural and historical pasts ought to be preserved. The Hurricane Katrina calamity and ensuing gentrification of New Orleans helped induce this shift.

Here we focus on that critical "second wave," which occurred during the long 1970s and brought forth, among other things, the remarkably influential *New Orleans Architecture* series, the Historic District Landmarks Commission, the Preservation Resource Center, this magazine, and much of the movement's policy and legal apparatus. To be sure, national forces abetted this wave, principally the 1966 National Historic Preservation Act and the launch of the National Register, State Historic Preservation offices and restoration tax credits. But it was ultimately up to local citizens to act locally, and many were roused into action by specific incidents in the decades prior.

Among them was the Antoine David Olivier House, a magnificent Creole plantation home with a double-pitched hipped roof and enormous wrap-around gallery, built in the 1820s at what is now 4111 Chartres St. in Bywater. The manse became part of the Catholic Orphans Association's St. Mary's Orphan Asylum, which starting in 1835 made the block into a compound of dormitories, classrooms and religious buildings. It thrived for a hundred years, until the state took over most social services in the 1930s and the orphanage closed. That left the Olivier House empty and mismatched with Ninth Ward real estate needs, and the market soon deemed it to be worth less than the land.

In 1949, leaseholders hired a demolition contractor to clear the land for a beer warehouse. Frantic efforts on the part of famed preservationists Richard Koch, Martha Robinson, Samuel Wilson Jr., Dean Buford Pickens of the Tulane School of Architecture, sculptor Angela Gregory and historian Charles "Pie" Dufour, came close to saving the old landmark. But with zero legal backing and limited finances, they had to

settle for a salvage operation. The bulldozers rolled in April 1949.

From the ruins, however, would arise an influential new organization. Its founders had initially aimed only to save the Olivier House, calling themselves the Society for the Preservation of Louisiana Antiquities. One year later, after another bruising defeat in trying to save the John Gould House on St. Charles Avenue, the group formally re-organized as the Louisiana Landmarks Society. First such group in the state, Louisiana Landmarks would become the premier voice for preservation during the lonely mid-century decades between the first and second waves of the larger movement.

Members found themselves busy again in 1955, when plans for the new Mississippi River Bridge and Pontchartrain Expressway, which itself came at the expense of scores of historic buildings, threatened the majestic Delord-Sarpy House on Howard Avenue at Camp Street. Built in 1814 for Joseph Montegut, the house had a flat-tiled hipped roof punctuated by center chimneys and commanding dormers, below which were austere stucco walls and airy verandahs. It looked like something out of Port-au-Prince, or Havana, or the French countryside. It soon came into the hands of Madame Delord-Sarpy, whose descendants would own it for 40 years, during which the once-bucolic faubourg transformed into a gritty industrial district. Photographs from the 1920s show a poignantly weathered edifice, still resplendent despite peeling paint, with an incongruous garage inches from its majestic pillars.

Then came the bridge and its Camp Street off-ramp. In May 1955, Louisiana Landmarks members pleaded their case: could the ramp be relocated? The lane be redesigned? The house moved? Authorities would not budge, and in early 1957, the Delord-Sarpy House was dismantled and cleared away. The loss nevertheless helped galvanize and embolden preservationists: no longer would advocates for historic buildings only play defense and negotiate without leverage with unyielding officials. The experience helped steel the movement for the larger battles of the 1960s.

Chief among them was the Riverfront Expressway, the defeat of which (in 1969) marked the first major preservationist victory of a truly momentous threat since the 1920s-1930s. That much-heralded triumph, however, stood in contrast to less-remembered but far more extensive losses in this same era. There was the widening of Poydras Street in 1965, which entailed the expropriation of 47 properties for the sake of greater traffic volume. Also that year was the clearing

of all blocks riverside of South Peters Street between Canal and Poydras for the Rivergate Exhibition Hall. Then there was the destruction of the Claiborne Avenue Oaks for the I-10 overpass, which drew hardly any opposition from preservationists focused on fighting the Riverfront Expressway. This occurred within a few years of the displacement of hundreds of Tremé residents, and demolition of dozens of old Creole houses, for the creation of a cultural center and park later named for Louis Armstrong (whose own childhood neighborhood suffered the same fate in 1954 to make room for the new



Demolition of the Olivier House in 1949. Courtesy Library of Congress HABS. Photo by Richard Koch



Delord Sarpy House in 1928. Photo by Arnold Genthe. Courtesy Library of Congress

City Hall complex). The Central Business District (CBD), meanwhile, saw the wholesale razing of scores of 19th-century storehouses, including most of historic South Rampart Street, to make way for petrol-industry skyscrapers and parking lots, or simply to “unburden” owners of neglected liabilities. So extensive was the destruction that the city itself, hardly a bastion of preservationism, declared in 1975 a demolition moratorium after the CBD lost 20 percent of its older structures in just five years, leaving 40 percent of its acreage vacant.

That was just around the time that the local preservation movement’s “second wave” was gathering momentum. In subsequent decades, with great toil and perseverance, the movement would win over the hearts and minds of more and more New Orleanians, who, along with increasing numbers of leaders and developers, came to see the cultural and economic value of restoring old buildings.

A generation later, the same CBD streetscapes once replete with wrecking balls are now filled with construction cranes and restoration crews. They bring new value and new neighbors to the neighborhood, as well as mounting concerns over gentrification and cultural upheaval—which brings us to today’s “third wave.”

BELOW TOP: Widening of Poydras Street in 1965. Photo by Joseph C. Davis. Courtesy New Orleans Public Library **BOTTOM:** Demolition of lower Canal for Rivergate and International Trade Mart, leaving only Liberty Place Monument, January 1965. Courtesy New Orleans Public Library



RICHARD CAMPANELLA, a geographer with the Tulane School of Architecture, is the author of *Cityscapes of New Orleans*, *Bourbon Street: A History*, *Bienville’s Dilemma* and other books. He may be reached through richcampanella.com, rcampane@tulane.edu, or [@nolacampanella](https://twitter.com/nolacampanella) on Twitter.