Hewlett's Exchange, where thousands of slaves changed owners, occupied the corner of St. Louis and Chartres streets until the late 1830s, when it was replaced with the grand St. Louis Exchange Hotel (1840), also the site of slave auctions. Damage inflicted by the 1915 hurricane led to a decision to demolish the domed landmark, and prompted photographer Charles Franck to photograph its old slave auction block before the 1916 razing. *Photo by Charles L. Franck Studios. The Historic New Orleans Collection, 1979.325.4645.*

On the Structural Basis of Social Memory: Cityscapes of the New Orleans Slave Trade Part I

New Orleans in the early 1800s formed the premier domestic marketplace in the flow of enslaved people from the Upper South to the Deep South. Yet structural evidence of the city's lucrative slave trade is almost entirely gone.

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SOCIAL MEMORY benefits from an associated structural framework — that is, a place or object that reflects and evokes a historical recollection, both good and bad. As we individually treasure mementos to commemorate times past and loved ones lost, our societies collectively save old buildings, erect monuments, name and rename streets, designate hallowed grounds, and protect historical cityscapes so that citizens may synchronize their narratives of who they are as a people, where they came from, and where they should be going.

As a city with a complex, colorful, glorious and tragic past, and a modern-day economy based on marketing it, New Orleans proliferates in structurally based social memory. It uses the French Quarter, for example, to preserve the social memory of antebellum Creole society. It points to the Garden District to recall wealthy 19th-century Anglo society and upholds Tremé to remind us about the contributions of the city's free people of color. More recently, it welcomed a museum complex built in part to salute the city's key role in World War II, something that had gone unappreciated in prior times. Preservation is intrinsic to this arrangement; without it, we would forget, or fail to convince newcomers, of these narratives. Note, for example, how the demolition of the South Rampart Street commercial corridor, Louis Armstrong's neighborhood, and Storyville impaired the social memory of jazz. (Tourists regularly come away disappointed when they learn that the "birthplace of jazz" is more of a municipal slogan than a visitable place.) Out of sight, out of mind — and conversely, in sight, in mind. Hence the power of preservation.

New Orleans' role in the slave trade illustrates that power by providing a case study of its absence. To be sure, the modern city abounds in the handiwork of enslaved labor; numerous extant antebellum structures, including public edifices that arose in part through the toil of hired-out slaves, stand in silent testimony to bondage, as do the hundreds of slant-roof rear quarters that often housed enslaved domestics. Structural relics of slave *trading*, however, are a different story.

By nearly all estimates, postcolonial New Orleans was the nation's premier slave marketplace. The port formed a node in the domestic shipments of "surplus" slaves from the tired soils of the Upper South and into the Deep South with its insatiable demand for labor on sugar cane and cotton plantations. More than 750,000 people were forcibly shipped southward during the antebellum era, a shift in the African diaspora so significant that historian Ira Berlin described it as the "Second Middle Passage." During the antebellum years, the New Orleans cityscape abounded with the material machinations, structures, and spaces of the slave trade. The high visibility of the human marketplace — the shipping, escorting, jailing, preparing, marketing, presenting, auctioning, and purchasing of people — captured the attention of countless visitors, who scribed their observations in hundreds of diaries, travelogues, journals and news articles about the "peculiar institution." Those written by Europeans or Northerners (the lion's share) usually expressed compassion for the slave, dismay at the institution, and outright loathing for the trader. Southern sympathizers, ever fond of pointing out paternalistic master-slave relations and anecdotes of slave contentedness, either remained silent on

The former St. Louis Exchange Hotel lot remained vacant until 1960, when the present-day Omni Royal Orleans Hotel was erected in a style similar to the old St. Louis Exchange. Architects preserved a fragment of the 1840 structure: note the palimpsest of the word "EXCHANGE" under the red arrow.

the grim spectacle of the auction block, or effusively scapegoated the trader so as to exonerate the master and institution. Others did not directly record what they witnessed but nevertheless came away seared; among them was a young Abraham Lincoln, who guided a flatboat to New Orleans in 1828 and 1831 and, for the first and only time in his life, saw large-scale Southern plantation vassalage and big-city slave trading up close and personal. What he witnessed in the streets of New Orleans would inform his personal development and later affect the channels of American history. It is worthwhile, then, to reconstruct the cityscapes (that is, the visible urban elements) of the New Orleans slave trade in the era of Lincoln's visits, the high antebellum decades of the 1820s and 1830s.

Despite the grotesque public image of the commerce of slavery, city leaders in both the public and private sectors made little attempt to hide or disguise it. It entailed numerous professions, from shippers, brokers and traders to lawyers, auctioneers, penkeepers, notaries and others who earned incomes in the change-of-ownership process. New players entered the market constantly, and proclaimed their openings with collegial solemnity. "Newman & Mortimer," read one such announcement in 1828, "have formed a partnership [of] Brokers, offer[ing] their services to their friends and public [in the] buying and selling of real property, slaves and all kinds of produce…." Nearly all New Orleans' professional firms, banks and insurance companies had their hands in the slave trade to one degree or another.

Most slave transactions took place in two types of spaces. One involved private pens run by dealers, brokers, or traders, who bought and displayed numerous slaves and sold them to walk-in customers. The other was the public auction, where auctioneers coordinated transactions between current and prospective masters. Auctions were held in prominent places, open to all free classes, and advertised aggressively. Because of their public nature and ritualistic spectacle, auctions attracted much more attention from visitors than the private one-on-one retail transactions that occurred at the pens or elsewhere.

Since the early American years, auctions generally occurred in "coffee houses," a loan translation of *maison de café*, which meant, in France, an establishment that served coffee in the morning and alcohol later. In 19th-century New Orleans, coffee houses were traditional saloons with a rather sophisticated if garish atmosphere, catering to men of the establishment class. Their commercial functions earned them the name "exchange," which implied a full-service business-networking center, where white men could convene, discuss, negotiate, socialize, recreate, gamble, dine, drink, and lodge. Among the first, the Exchange Coffee House on Conti Street (1806), grew so popular as a saloon that it attracted commercial activities such as the auctioning of ships, houses, land, and, inevitably, slaves. It soon found itself competing with a new operation erected in 1810–1811 at the corner of Chartres and St. Louis streets. Originally called Tremoulet's Commercial (or New Exchange) Coffee House, this business became Maspero's Exchange in 1814, Elkin's Exchange after Pierre Maspero's death in 1822, and by 1826, Hewlett's Exchange, named for new owner John Hewlett. Because of the place's popularity and frequent management changes, newspapers and city directories ascribed a variety of names to the business at 129 (now 501) Chartres: the "Exchange Coffee House," "New Exchange Coffee House," "Hewlett's Coffee House," or "La Bourse de Hewlett." The two-story, 55-by-62-foot edifice boasted behind its gaudy Venetian screens a 19-foot-high ceiling, four 12-lamp glass chandeliers, framed maps and oil paintings (described by one Northerner as "licentious"), wood and marble finishing, and an enormous bar with French glassware. Like many of New Orleans' coffee houses, the upper floor contained billiards and gambling tables. Throughout the mid-antebellum years, Hewlett's Exchange buzzed with trilingual auctioning activity, in which everything from ships to houses to land to sugar kettles to people legally changed hands. The city's seven auctioneers worked the block on a rotating schedule, every day except Sunday, oftentimes while maintaining other jobs elsewhere. Joseph Le Carpentier handled Mondays, Wednesdays, and Saturdays; Toussaint Mossy (president of the New Orleans Architect Company) worked Tuesdays and Fridays; H. J. Domingon, George Boyd, and Joseph Baudue got Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays; and the busy Isaac McCoy and Francois Dutillet worked six days a week. At the time of Lincoln's visit, Hewlett's Exchange was the New Orleans business community's single most important public meeting site for networking, news-gathering, and wheeling-dealing.

Chartres Street at the St. Louis intersection hosted some of the most important commercial houses of the antebellum city; Chartres itself was widely viewed as "the 'Broadway' of New Orleans." The city's number-one slave auctioning venue, Hewlett's Exchange, was located on the corner at left (now occupied by the Omni Royal Orleans Hotel). The Girod House (now home to the famous Napoleon House Bar) appears at center. At right is an edifice built around the same time and in the same style as Hewlett's, known today (erroneously) as Maspero's Slave Exchange. Visitors in the 1820s-1830s made a point of seeing Chartres Street, particularly this bustling intersection, and oftentimes stepped into Hewlett's Exchange to witness the daily slave-auctioning ritual. Abraham Lincoln was likely among them. "It seems to be the Soul of New Orleans," one visitor said of Hewlett's in 1836; "He [who] does not visit it cannot [claim to have] seen all of New Orleans." *Photo by Richard Campanella, 2009; special thanks to Georgia Chadwick and Greg Lambousy for access to the roof of the Louisiana Supreme Court Building*

Slave auctioning would later add two illustrious new venues to the New Orleans cityscape. In 1837 the magnificent St. Charles Exchange arose in the Faubourg St. Mary, followed the next year by the imposing City Exchange on St. Louis Street in the Old City (for which Hewlett's Exchange and adjacent structures were demolished). Both edifices, occupying entire city blocks, rising over four stories, and topped with landmark domes, ranked among the nation's most splendid hotels. Both became famous, and infamous, for their auction blocks.

Not all slave owners subjected their human property to the slave pens and auction houses. Some masters, particularly residents of the city proper, opted to handle sales themselves by inviting prospective buyers to their homes. Urban domestic slaves, with whom white families frequently developed ostensibly warm relations, often changed hands in this manner. For-sale-by-owner ads appeared in local newspapers at a rate around one or two per day:

> For Sale—*A NEGRO WOMAN* 18 years of age: guaranteed against the diseases and vices proscribed by law…speaks English and French—understands cooking either in the French or English stile [sic], something of a washer, and a good nurse.

Prospective buyers of this teenager were directed to visit master J. Montamat at his house on Elysian Fields. Another announcement, posted during Lincoln's 1828 visit, advertised "a young and likely Negro fellow [and] several others of both sexes, for sale by the subscriber [David C. McClure] at No. 116, Bienville street." One of McClure's slaves later escaped, prompting the perturbed master to post a ten dollar reward for thirty-three-year-old "John… very stout built, black complected, [with] rather a frown on his countenance."

To be continued in the next Preservation in Print.

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