

[Souther on Campanella, 'The West Bank of Greater New Orleans: A Historical Geography'](#)

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Richard Campanella. *The West Bank of Greater New Orleans: A Historical Geography.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2020. xvi + 389 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-7297-1.

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J. Mark Souther on Richard Campanella's *The West Bank of Greater New Orleans*

The arc of the Mississippi River as it wraps around New Orleans inspired the nickname “The Crescent City.” The river’s curvature literally shaped the area’s sugar plantations into long, pie-like wedges that narrowed to a point as they moved from the riverfront toward the backswamp. Property lines guided a fan-like grid of streets as plantations yielded to urbanization. This same geography—inside the crescent—attracted the preponderance of wealth and investment, as well as mythmaking and scholarly attention. Historical geographer Richard Campanella’s richly layered new book, *The West Bank of Greater New Orleans*, demonstrates that despite voluminous scholarship on New Orleans, a tendency to neglect all that lay outside the crescent left an incomplete picture of the metropolitan area’s development across three centuries. Campanella’s astute corrective earns a place alongside classics like Peirce F. Lewis’s *New Orleans: The Making of an Urban Landscape* (1976), Craig Colten’s *An Unnatural Metropolis* (2005), and Ari Kelman’s *A River and Its City* (2006).

Throughout his fascinating account of the relationship between the geography of the West Bank and the development of its communities, Campanella explores how the West Bank’s proximity to and isolation from the East Bank either helped or hampered its prospects. The West Bank’s location where water raged against the riverbank presented certain problems. Even as the more sluggish flow along the East Bank piled up alluvial sediments that created new land alongside the Warehouse District, converse conditions across the river claimed land from property owners in Gretna. However, Campanella notes that one benefit was that the West Bank “terrestrially adjoined the entire southwestern quadrant of the nation,” making it a staging ground for westward expansion through railroad development, which explains the curious name of the West Bank municipality of Westwego. A balance of proximity and isolation also helped the West Bank attract many types of industry, earning it a reputation as “the industrial muscle of an otherwise mercantilist metropolis” (p. 67). So, too, did the fact that the East Bank became so crowded with commercial steamboat wharves that industries such as shipbuilding yards located on the opposite bank. Campanella does not deny New Orleans’s failure to develop as robust a manufacturing economy as in many other cities, but his inclusion of the West Bank forces historians to modulate their description of the city’s metropolitan economy.

Far from allowing geography to become deterministic, Campanella attends to human decisions and actions, reminding readers that people shaped the landscape, even as its features facilitated or

threatened certain activities and livelihoods they pursued. Historians will be rewarded with carefully crafted accounts of a wide cast of figures from Jean Lafitte to African American freedmen to Robert Moses. Campanella adjusts his lens throughout the book depending on the field of view needed to frame important topics. Sometimes, he zooms in for a granular look at how specific communities formed and developed. Generations of the Harvey family employed enslaved Africans to dig and build locks on the eponymous canal that made the unincorporated Harvey community an important nexus between New Orleans and natural resources from the bayous and tidal lakes to its south. Other topics, including piracy, marronage, oil exploration, and wetland loss, necessitate a wide-angle lens to capture connections between places on the far edges of Barataria Basin and the urbanized West Bank. Campanella's analysis of the linkages between the West Bank and the region to its south and west also complicates the notion of a social and cultural separation between "Creole" New Orleans and "Cajun" southern Louisiana. He pinpoints the role of the Harvey Canal (and Horace Harvey's adjacent refugee camp) in facilitating the migration of Acadian refugees of the 1893 Chênière Caminada hurricane northward to safety and posits that many stayed and "made Westwego and adjacent communities the closest greater New Orleans would have to a 'Cajun neighborhood'" (p. 155).

Campanella's book provides fresh perspective for contextualizing Hurricane Katrina. In addition to explaining why the West Bank was spared the brunt of the storm, he shows that including the West Bank produces a different and more complete account of the ceaseless struggle to keep rising water away from greater New Orleans. He details numerous disastrous events such as the Bell Crevasse in 1858 whose catastrophic flooding, had the West Bank been more populated, would have invited comparison to the better-known 1927 Mississippi River flood and Hurricanes Betsy and Katrina. He points out that "ferry operators cashed in on the curiosity seekers" clamoring to see the "relentless flood," an example of disaster tourism almost 150 years before charter buses groaned through the apocalyptic tableau of the Lower Ninth Ward (p. 146). Campanella demonstrates how concerns about flooding evolved as levee improvements displaced fears of river crevasses (breaches) to the lack of protection levees ringing the metropolis. He details competition between the West Bank and East Bank to land a massive new seaway called the Mississippi River-Gulf Outlet, or MR-GO. Here the West Bank's isolation from mainstream political and economic power structures in New Orleans crushed hopes. In a twist in the zero-sum game of alluvial deposits and riverine erosion that had long differentiated the two banks, the West Bank would eventually be relieved that it lost this competition because during both Betsy and Katrina, the MR-GO "funneled surges into the metropolis" (p. 178). Finally, Campanella posits, geography not only creates disparate experiences across metropolitan areas, it also shapes how and whether certain events are incorporated into histories. Hurricane Juan in 1985, magnified by human interventions in the environment, was the worst hurricane-induced flood in the West Bank's history but has been largely ignored in contrast to Betsy and Katrina, neither of which affected the West Bank as much as the East Bank.

Campanella offers a welcome, sustained treatment of the West Bank's post-World War II transformation into a major component of the South's largest metropolitan area in the context of New Orleans's slippage relative to Houston, Dallas, Atlanta, and Miami. The qualities that had made the West Bank attractive to working- and middle-class Orleanians, chiefly affordable housing and proximity to industrial work, persisted into the postwar era. He connects the West Bank's intensifying racial segregation to similar patterns across the river and in cities throughout (and beyond) the

South, although strangely he dates the “legal overturning” of racially restrictive covenants to the 1960s despite the US Supreme Court’s *Shelley v. Kraemer* ruling in 1948 (p. 191). Campanella provides ample evidence of persisting efforts “to try to save ‘separate’ by making concessions on ‘equal’” into the late 1960s, but his characterization of a “shift from *de jure* to *de facto* segregation” in and after the 1960s revives a binary that a number of historians have argued elides the ways in which seeming *de facto* segregation reflected policy decisions (pp. 213-14). He also explains how large-scale developments such as Aurora Gardens in Algiers and Terrytown near Gretna capitalized on public faith in drainage pumps and canals. These developments helped dissolve an earlier checkerboard pattern of black and white residency and reconfigured the earlier convergence of the poor and minorities and environmental precarity. Campanella argues that the same canals that created dry (if ultimately unstable) land also cordoned off whites in much the same manner that freeways did in many cities.

Campanella also explores the West Bank’s transformation into an “ethno-urbia” and ponders whether the area represents a type of metropolitan geography found in most other cities. In documenting Asian, Middle Eastern, and Latin American immigration to the West Bank, Campanella connects to a broader phenomenon in which the greatest ethnic diversity bloomed not in the central city but in its suburbs. His “ethno-urbia” concept, reminiscent of the older term “ethnoburb” that urbanists have employed for the past two decades, contributes an important southern case study to expanding discussions of transnational and global urban history. Some readers may question Campanella’s effort to project the West Bank onto parts of other cities. His “West Banks of the World” formulation is both catchy and provocative, but one wonders if this is not a solution in search of a problem. Is it necessary to create a new place-based category? Historians of suburbanization, notwithstanding Kenneth T. Jackson’s more conventional definition in *Crabgrass Frontier* (1985), have long embraced the idea that suburban landscapes are varied. John R. Stilgoe wrote extensively about the messy patchwork on the suburban fringe in *Borderland* (1988); Becky M. Nicolaides’s *My Blue Heaven* (2002) and Andrew Wiese’s *Places of Their Own* (2004) examined rustic, blue-collar suburban enclaves carved out by white and black migrants, respectively; and Robert Lewis’s edited volume *Manufacturing Suburbs* (2004) pioneered the study of industrial suburbs. Perhaps the West Bank is not a template but a reflection of broader suburban patterns.

On the whole, *The West Bank of Greater New Orleans* is another fine addition to the large, innovative body of historical geography produced by Richard Campanella, who has done more than most to explicate the contours of the Crescent City. In addition to his deeply documented scholarship, his willingness to offer informed speculation where evidence is not conclusive is one reason why his scholarship engages a wide audience. Campanella continues to surprise with discoveries that challenge long-held assumptions about New Orleans and point to opportunities for further research. His newest book will interest southern historians, urban historians, geographers, and environmental historians as well as anyone who seeks to understand New Orleans better.

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