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Meet the Unlikely Tulane Rock Star Who Unearths New Orleans' Curiosities and Mysteries

• BY GORDON RUSSELL | Staff writer Dec 28, 2023



Geographer Richard Campanella in Coliseum Square in New Orleans on Dec. 4, 2023. (Photo by Chris Granger The Times-Picayune)

*This is the third story in *The Guardians*, a 6-part series highlighting those dedicated to saving and passing down New Orleans' unique heritage.*

As he gazes down Coliseum Square, Richard Campanella can see it — the ghost of an ancient drainage system designed by Barthelemy Lafon more than 200 years ago as the neighborhood now known as the Lower Garden District was laid out.

A stream called Bayou Cannes helped drain the area then, eventually joining Bayou St. John and Lake Pontchartrain. Lafon used this natural feature to create something both elegant and functional, explains New Orleans' best-known geographer, brandishing an old map of Lafon's street grid.

On the square's river side along Camp Street, the city rebuilt the sidewalks a few years ago, Campanella recalls with delight. The project — which inevitably took years to complete — exposed brick water-collection structures with vaulted ceilings that were rooted in Lafon's old drainage system. He shines a light down a catch basin to see if any can still be spotted, but alas, it's too dark to see anything.

It's just another day of urban exploration and discovery for Campanella, 57, the peripatetic Tulane professor who has managed, against all odds, to achieve rock-star status by writing and lecturing about the confluence of New Orleans geography, geology and history. Though he's a Brooklyn native and didn't set foot in New Orleans until he was in his mid-twenties, delving into the city's mysteries and explaining them has become his life's central project. Campanella has published a dozen books and hundreds of scholarly articles about Crescent City curiosities, and he has no intentions of slowing down.

“He works like a Trojan,” says Lawrence Powell, the eminent Tulane historian and author of “The Accidental City,” a book about New Orleans that plumbs Campanella’s blend of geography and history. “He’s more productive than anyone else on campus,” he added, calling Campanella “a treasure to the city and to the university.”

You've probably seen him at his trade, if you're paying attention. For years, Campanella commuted by bike from his Bywater home to Tulane every day, a 14-mile roundtrip through the city’s old neighborhoods. Now he lives closer to Tulane, but his offices are in the CBD, and he walks 4 miles home every day. These sojourns inspire many of his investigations.



King Richard Campanella throws cups as Krewe du Vieux parades through the Faubourg Marigny on Jan. 27, 2018, to the theme, "Bienville's Wet Dream." Campanella, a geographer with Tulane University, was chosen as king by the krewe known for its wild satire, adult themes, and political comedy. The krewe wound through the Marigny and ended in the French Quarter. Advocate Staff photo by SOPHIA GERMER < p>

His body of work has resulted in an unusual popularity for a geographer dedicated to documenting the quirks of America's 53rd-largest city. Campanella has almost 27,000 followers on X, formerly Twitter. His monthly articles in The Times-Picayune, including a recent one on Bayou Cannes, attract thousands of readers. The two courses he teaches each semester are in high demand. He was even crowned king of the bawdy Krewe du Vieux parade in 2018.

But maybe the best gauge is this: He titled a recent book simply, “The West Bank of Greater New Orleans,” which is a bit like headlining this story “A Profile of Tulane Geographer Richard Campanella.” His publisher didn’t bat an eye. “I’m an advocate of straightforward titles,” Campanella says dryly.

Campanella has a “devoted regional audience,” is how Alisa Plant, director of LSU Press, puts it. She added that he has “plenty of fans ... who will buy his latest book just because it’s his latest book.”

'Preternaturally curious'

The secret to Campanella’s magic isn’t immediately obvious. He doesn’t dumb things down like a popular historian or a journalist might. His conversations are peppered with the geographer’s nerdy lexicon. Within a couple of sentences, he’ll drop “dendritic” and “thalweg” into a chat about the Mississippi. His expectation is that you’ll understand — or Google if necessary.



Geographer Richard Campanella in Coliseum Square in New Orleans on Dec. 4, 2023.

(Photo by Chris Granger The Times-Picayune)

That said, his lectures and his writings appeal to a broad audience, perhaps because locals and the city's admirers love to read about what makes this place exceptional. Somehow, Campanella delivers deeply researched pieces about sometimes-arcane topics while keeping things entertaining. His love of discovery always shines through.

“He’s preternaturally curious,” Powell says. “And he finds a way of making sure what he finds out is interesting to a broad public.”

Ever wonder where most New Orleans transplants come from? He researched it and mapped it. Want to understand the farming history of New Orleans East? Read his article. How about a heat map of New Orleans hipness? He made one.

Campanella’s research takes him across disciplines — primarily history, geography, geology and architecture — but he doesn’t shy away from others. His undergraduate degree, from Utah State, is in economics, and that training also shows up in his writings.

“He’s sui generis — kind of a man for all seasons,” is how Powell puts it.

This drive and curiosity is poured into answering what is to Campanella a basic but pregnant question: Why are we here? Not in the theological or philosophical sense. No — why are we here, in this exact place, instead of, say, five miles to the east, or on the other side of the lake, or in Michigan?

Geography and history tell us so much. “How we get to school, how you get to work — you’re following along a spatial logic that is traceable to what this place was two or three hundred years ago,” Campanella says. Explaining how, and why, is the challenge.

Following Lincoln's flatboat

Speaking of how things got where they are: How did Rich Campanella — who first saw New Orleans in 1991, when he was in his mid-twenties — become one of New Orleans’ pre-eminent explainers?

It’s an unlikely journey, but it has its own internal logic. Campanella, the youngest of two sons born to fourth-generation Italian-American parents, grew up in the far reaches of Brooklyn. His mother, Rose, worked for an insurance company in Manhattan during World War II. Later, she would take the young Campanella and

his older brother, Thomas, on car trips from their home in Marine Park — which, while in Brooklyn, was far from a subway stop — into “the city” to show them the larger world.

Their father, Mario, ran an electrical motor shop. Unusually for a tradesman, he had bachelor’s degrees in both electrical engineering and English. He was boundlessly curious, a “remarkable man,” per his son, and he loved to take the family to the country. On these outings, he’d behave a bit like a geography professor.

“He was highly observant and relished history,” Campanella recalls. “I think, between the two of them, they exposed us to inquiry about what I would describe as the ‘where and wherefore of place’ — you know, why are things where they are? And what meaning does this bring to light?”

So perhaps it isn’t surprising that both Campanella boys wound up plowing remarkably similar academic ground. The elder brother, Thomas, plies his trade at Cornell University; his focus has remained on the Northeast, and Brooklyn in particular. “His background is in landscape architecture and historical urbanism. And my background is in geography, the mapping sciences, which I apply to historical urban geography. Historical urbanism and historical geography applied to cities — you know, its water flowing in very similar channels,” Campanella said. “So, in a way that you could never preplan, our rivers flow through similar valleys.”

Richard left the five boroughs behind shortly after graduating from Xavierian High School, an independent Catholic school in Bay Ridge whose New Orleans analogue would be either Jesuit or Brother Martin. He did his undergraduate work at Utah State, and worked summers as a ranger in the nearby High Uintas Wilderness. Then it was off to Honduras, where he served in the Peace Corps and helped create a cloud-forest reserve.

Working in Washington, D.C. in his 20s, Campanella met his soon-to-be wife, Marina, a native of Oaxaca, Mexico. (These days, Marina sells Oaxacan crafts made by her extended family, including many Day of the Dead items, from a stall at the French Market.)

Campanella worked a series of interesting jobs — including stints for NASA and the Army Corps of Engineers — before eventually applying to the master’s program in geography at LSU. A professor there, Fred Kniffen, was an early inspiration. “He crisscrossed the state in the 1930s, in the early days of highway travel, in an automobile, mapping Louisiana folk culture, mapping shotgun houses, right? No one had this notion back then,” Campanella says. “And finding meaning not just in the design of the architecture, but in the locations, where were they? Why were they there? The basic questions of geography: where, why there?”

And why do we care? And mapping them out — mapping being the premier tool of the geographer — and analyzing those spatial distributions. And that's what I do.”

In a way, Campanella thinks, he was working his way down to New Orleans, a place he'd never visited but which had imprinted itself on his imagination when he was a young boy. His parents gave him a book called “Meet Abraham Lincoln,” which Campanella still treasures.

“The author describes how this young man growing up in Indiana built a flatboat and sailed down this long river to this exotic city at the other end,” Campanella says, still intoxicated by the memory. “And right then, my interest was piqued, OK? And that's when I first heard of the Mississippi River and New Orleans. And it took 20 years for me to act on it. But that initial fascination was planted through that book, under my parents’ wings, at that moment.”

New Orleans was every bit as beguiling as that children’s book made it out to be, and Campanella has never looked back. In 2010, he published his own book about Lincoln’s time in the Crescent City, completing an intellectual journey that started back in 1971.

Campanella’s parents died in 2011 and 2012, deaths that were followed almost immediately by the birth of his son, Jason. These days, Jason, 11, sometimes accompanies his father on his urban jaunts, just as Campanella once tagged along with his dad.

What's on tap?

His next book will be a departure of sorts. While Campanella’s research often takes him out of the New Orleans metro area, this will be his first work with a statewide reach.

The topic? It’s both true to his north star, and emblematic of his willingness to take on a herculean task. The book will explain why each city and town in Louisiana is where it is. He has analyzed 420 communities so far.

“It’s about the initial rationales that explain why that community began in that location,” he said. “And its things like river confluences, portages, head of navigation, railroad stations, crossroads, resource-extraction sites, resource-processing sites, things like that.”

Campanella wishes there were a better English phrase for the French *raison d’être*, meaning “reason for being.”

“It’s an awkward thing to try to explain,” he said. “The term I’ve come up with is, and what I hope will be the title, is *‘siting stories.’* My hope is that this phrase gains traction.”

He calls the research “exhilarating,” partly because he feels like he’s breaking new ground. “Geographers have very much looked at siting, right?” Campanella says. “But no one has done an analysis purely focused on this question.”

Some of his initial takeaways: Railroad stations are the most common reason for a Louisiana community’s existence. But most of them are in rural places.

“Our major siting rationale in the first century of our state’s history was waterborne — it was ports, it was landings,” he says. “And even though that faded away as a siting rationale, it still explains why most Louisianans live where they do.”

And what explains why Richard Campanella lives where he does? What caused him to decide to stay put once he made it to New Orleans?

He's thought about this one plenty, and has a ready answer: "What geographer Yi-Fu Tuan described as 'topophilia' — love of place."

