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“CURIOUS OLD HOUSES THESE” PATTERNS OF CONSTRUCTION DATE IN THE FRENCH QUARTER

How old is the French Quarter? There are a number of reasonable responses. The underlying terrain is about 5,000 years old; its use by Indians as a terminus in the river-to-lake portage is perhaps 500 years old, possibly much older. Europeans under the command of Bienville first cleared its timber in March-April 1718, the time generally recognized as the foundation of New Orleans. The Quarter’s street network, which survives today almost in its entirety, was laid out in 1722. Perhaps this last date is a fair benchmark for marking time in the French Quarter. But it is not the street grid that imparts the strong sense of historical place to this space; it is the streetscape—the *tout ensemble* of tightly clustered buildings crowding narrow streets, enveloped by iron lace, gas lamps, crumbling stucco, weathered brick walls, and steep roofs. How old is *this* French Quarter, the historical built environment we know today? This chapter addresses this question by discerning historical and geographical patterns in the construction dates of extant French Quarter buildings, based on the Vieux Carré Survey analysis described in the previous chapter. But before exploring these trends, it is worthwhile to point out some superlatives among them.

SOLE SURVIVING FRENCH COLONIAL ERA STRUCTURE

Only one complete building survives from the first French colonial era: the Old Ursuline Convent at 1112 Chartres Street, designed in 1745 and built in 1749-1753 by Claude Joseph Villars Dubreuil according to designs by Ignace Broutin. The Ursuline Convent is the oldest documented structure still standing in the Mississippi Valley and deltaic plain, and the most aged in the city by a margin of about thirty years.¹⁹ Additionally, a few French colonial era walls remain scattered throughout the Quarter, long since incorporated into later constructions, and plenty of early eighteenth-century building materials (bricks, cypress beams) have been recycled into extant buildings. Remnants of the French colonial *Corps de Garde* are “encased in the walls of the Cabildo,”²⁰ leading some researchers to count it as another French colonial survivor. The photogenic Lafitte’s Blacksmith Shop at 941 Bourbon Street is reputed to date from the early 1700s but is more likely a product of the 1770s or 1780s. Some claimed that the storehouse at 723 Toulouse was erected in the extraordinarily early year of 1720—before the streets were laid out!—but evidence shows a more likely date of around 1808.²¹ Why the



The Old Ursuline Convent (center) is the only major structural vestige of New Orleans’ French colonial era. Designed in 1745 and built between 1749 and 1753, the convent ranks as the oldest documented structure still standing in the Mississippi Valley and deltaic plain, and the most aged in the city by about thirty years. Photograph by Ronnie Cardwell with author, 2004.

lack of French colonial era structures? The fires of 1788 and 1794 destroyed over a thousand of them; others, built of materials and by methods considered flimsy by later standards, were demolished for the more robust constructions of the Spanish colonial era and afterwards. The nearly two-and-a-half centuries that have passed since the end of the French regime have increased the likelihood that fire, storm, demolition, or decay would claim its structural vestiges. A second French colonial era transpired secretly starting in 1800 (the city ostensibly remained in Spanish control) and officially in November 1803, only to conclude permanently a month later, when the Louisiana Purchase was made official and New Orleans transferred to American hands. About twelve extant structures arose during this brief transitional era, but they are conventionally recognized as Spanish colonial era structures, not French.

There also exist a handful of French colonial *style* structures that, while post-dating France’s primary administrative era, nevertheless reflect the old French (and West Indian) ways, for the city retained its Francophone culture for many years afterwards. The most prominent example is the house at 632 Dumaine Street known as “Madame John’s Legacy,” built immediately after the 1788 fire with classic French colonial traits: pavilion-shaped with a steep double-pitched roof, center chimneys, and colonnades upholding an airy gallery, raised high on brick piers. The house’s foundation as well as some of its hardware may date as far back as 1730, having survived the 1788 fire. One can visualize French colonial New Orleans by picturing scores of structures like Madame John’s Legacy, of various sizes, setbacks, and orientations, lining the streets.

¹⁹ A dependency of the convent dating from the same era is counted as a second structure in the graphs.

²⁰ Edith Elliott Long, “Creole Cottage Blooms Under Scott Touch,” *Vieux Carré Courier*, March 17, 1967, p. 2.

²¹ *The Vieux Carré Survey: A Pictorial Record and a Study of the Land and Buildings in the Vieux Carré*, 130 binders (Williams Research Center, The Historic New Orleans Collection), Binder 61.

RARE SPANISH COLONIAL ERA STRUCTURES

Like “French colonial,” the term “Spanish colonial” in New Orleans can imply an architectural style or an historical era. The Spanish colonial style appeared locally in the latter years of Spain’s dominion (1762 to 1803), particularly after the 1794 fire, but persisted for a few years after the departure of the Dons, and for decades thence as an influence in related styles. Only thirty-eight of the 2,244 extant French Quarter structures were built during the Spanish colonial era, and of those, twenty-two exhibit Spanish colonial style. Another three structures feature this style but postdate the era by a few years. Edith Elliott Long, architectural historian and keen French Quarter observer for the circa-1960s *Vieux Carré Courier*, wrote that

out of some 3,000 buildings in the Vieux Carre probably only a score, or at the most 25, actually descend from [the Spanish Colonial era]. Fires razed some. Hurricanes were known to have leveled others. And the great prosperity and business drive that emerged after the American purchase of the Territory accounts for the destruction of the rest.²²

Some secondary sources imply that eighteenth-century buildings abound in the French Quarter, even suggesting that the neighborhood might be more accurately described as the “Spanish Quarter.” While many notable Spanish architectural traits were indeed carried on in subsequent Creole styles,

²² Edith Elliott Long, “Houses of Spanish Period,” *Vieux Carré Courier*, October 1, 1965, “Along the Banquette” column, p. 1. Differences between Long’s count and those presented here attest to the “fuzzy” nature of judging the construction date, style, and frequency of historical structures in a district of thousands. See previous chapter for methodological information.



This Chartres streetscape possesses the city’s largest assemblage of Spanish colonial structures. At the corner is the circa-1795 Reynes House, built as a townhouse with traits typical of the Caribbean and Latin America. It adjoins 609-615 Chartres, built contemporaneously. Next is the 1795 Bosque townhouse, with its wrought-iron balcony and Spanish courtyard. (The fires of 1788 and 1794 started near this site, which explains why these buildings generally date to 1795 or thereafter.) At 625-627 Chartres is a *porte cochère* building with a wooden balcony, built during the last years of Spanish rule. Three other Spanish colonials occupy this same square. In the background is the Cabildo (1799), the city’s best-known Spanish colonial structure. Photograph by author, 2002.



The oldest extant structure in the rear of the Quarter is the remarkable Ossorno House. A plantation house by design, origin, and function, it was apparently dismantled from Bayou St. John around 1781 and reassembled at present-day 913 Gov. Nicholls by 1784. Although its original West Indian-style hip roof had been remodeled to a gable by the 1830s, the house is still distinctly rural in appearance, orientation, and setback. It is an amazing exception to the French Quarter cityscape, like an old Dutch farmhouse in New York City or Spanish mission in Los Angeles. Photograph by author, 2004.

structures built in pure Spanish colonial styles and/or during the Spanish colonial era are, in fact, quite rare in the French Quarter today, and extremely rare in the rest of the city.²³

OLDEST STRUCTURE IN REAR OF QUARTER

The oldest extant structure in the rear of the original city—near Dauphine, Burgundy, and Rampart streets, the last areas to be built up—is the remarkable Ossorno House at 913 Gov. Nicholls. It is over twenty-five years older than any building in the surrounding sixteen blocks, eighty years older than the area’s average age, and possibly the only structure ever to occupy its parcel. The Ossorno House is a “pure Bayou St. John plantation house”²⁴ in its design and probably in origin and function as well: primary documents indicate that it was dismantled from the rural plantation country near Bayou St. John around 1781 and reassembled by 1784 (some secondary sources date the house to 1787). Although its original West Indian plantation-like hip roof had been remodeled to a gable by the 1830s, the house is still distinctly rural in its appearance, orientation, and setback distance. It is an amazing exception in the French Quarter streetscape, like an old Dutch farmhouse in New York City or an aged Spanish mission in modern Los Angeles. While the Ossorno House dates from the Spanish colonial era, it definitely does not represent the Spanish colonial style; rather, it is a French Creole style plantation house that postdates French colonial times. It is one of two plantation-style structures in

²³ A few French Creole style homes built during the Spanish colonial era still stand in the Bayou St. John/Bayou Road area.

²⁴ Edith Elliott Long, “Discovery: One of Our Oldest Buildings,” *Vieux Carré Courier*, “Along the Banquette” column, May 27, 1966, p. 2.

the French Quarter, the other being Madame John's Legacy, but unlike that much more famous building, the Ossorno House once actually stood on a plantation. The structure also boasts an interesting human history, having been the home of prominent New Orleanians and in the possession of only three families from 1795 to recent decades. That the Ossorno House may have literally come down Bayou Road from the Bayou St. John plantation country and ended up on Gov. Nicholls Street, where Bayou Road entered the city, is also of great significance. One may view it as a structural monument to the historic flow of materials and peoples traveling this route from city to bayou. Edith Elliott Long observed in 1966 that this outstanding building had somehow eluded the attention of tourists, artists, and even scholars, who devoted their research to the better-known structures in the heart of the Quarter. That observation remains true today: the Ossorno House almost never appears in popular photographic books or walking tours of the Quarter. Even Malcolm Heard's thorough *French Quarter Manual* missed it.

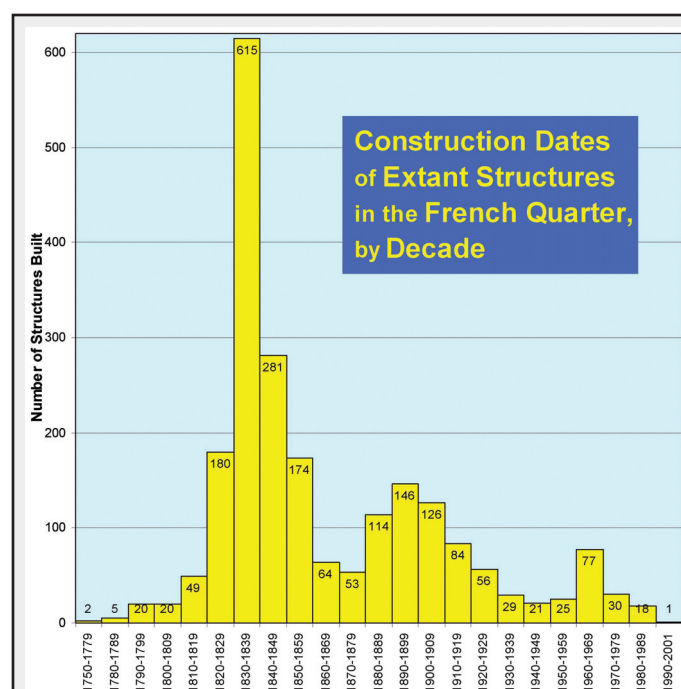
HISTORICAL PATTERNS OF CONSTRUCTION DATES

The histogram *Construction Dates of Extant Structures in the French Quarter, by Decade*, and the pie chart *Percent of Extant Structures in the French Quarter Built During Historical Eras*, show that, structurally speaking, today's French Quarter is a decidedly nineteenth-century neighborhood. About one of every hundred structures (1.2 percent) dates to the eighteenth century, while about three of four (77 percent) were built between 1800 and 1899 and one of five (21 percent) date from the twentieth century.²⁵ Viewed closer, the histogram shows that 61 percent of the entire present-day Quarter arose between the Battle of New Orleans (1815) and the onset of the Civil War (1861), especially between the 1820s and 1850s and in particular the 1830s. The histogram limns four "valleys" (before 1820, 1860-1880, 1930-1960, and after 1980) interspersed among three "peaks" (1820-1860, 1880-1930, and in the 1960s and 1970s) in the construction dates of the French Quarter's extant structures.

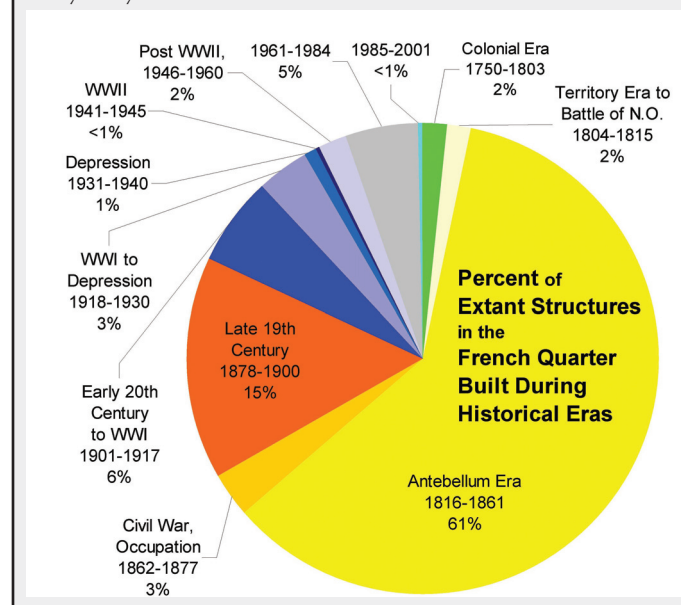
FIRST VALLEY, BEFORE 1820

The relatively few (ninety-six) surviving structures pre-dating 1820 do not, of course, represent low levels of construction prior to that year. On the contrary, the Quarter was entirely developed by 1820, so much so that it had spread into a number of adjacent *faubourgs*. Rather, this "valley" reflects the toll of time on centuries-old buildings in a busy, semitropical port city. Parcels opened up by the disappearance of these ancient edifices were usually reoccupied during later "peaks" in construction, which brings up an interesting

²⁵ Since these figures were computed, the Quarter's first twenty-first-century structure—a townhouse controversial among some neighbors for its above-average height—was constructed on Ursuline Street. It is not included in these maps and graphs.



These graphs show that 61 percent of present-day French Quarter structures arose between the Battle of New Orleans (1815) and the Civil War (1861). About one of every hundred Quarter structures dates to the 1700s; three of four were built in the 1800s; and one of five dates from the 1900s. Graphs and analysis by author.



subtext to the maps and graphs in this section: they depict not only the patterns of extant buildings, but also patterns of demolition of previous ones.

FIRST PEAK, CIRCA 1820-1861

The rise of sugar and cotton, the arrival of Northern emigrants and foreign immigrants, the development of the steamboat, and the city's monopoly on Mississippi Valley trade ushered great wealth to New Orleans during this antebellum "golden age." Hundreds of multistory edifices arose to meet the demand, especially in the 1830s, when New Orleans ranked among the wealthiest cities in the nation. Illustrating the prosperity of this era is the fact that, of the 1,294 extant structures built during 1820-1862, over half

(52 percent) were sumptuous townhouses. The French Quarter in these times was an affluent residential neighborhood, as well as a business district (in its upper blocks) and home to a substantial working-class immigrant community (particularly in its lower and rear flanks). These patterns, too, are evident in the data: 21 percent of structures built in this era were storehouses, with commercial use on the ground floor and residences above, and another 20 percent were cottages, where the working class citizens were more likely to dwell. The drop-off in construction in the 1840s and 1850s may be explained by a number of factors: full development of the city's parcels; increasing popularity of uptown and Esplanade Ridge sites for new construction; repercussions of the Panic of 1837; and increasing trade competition in the form of Northern canal and railroad construction.

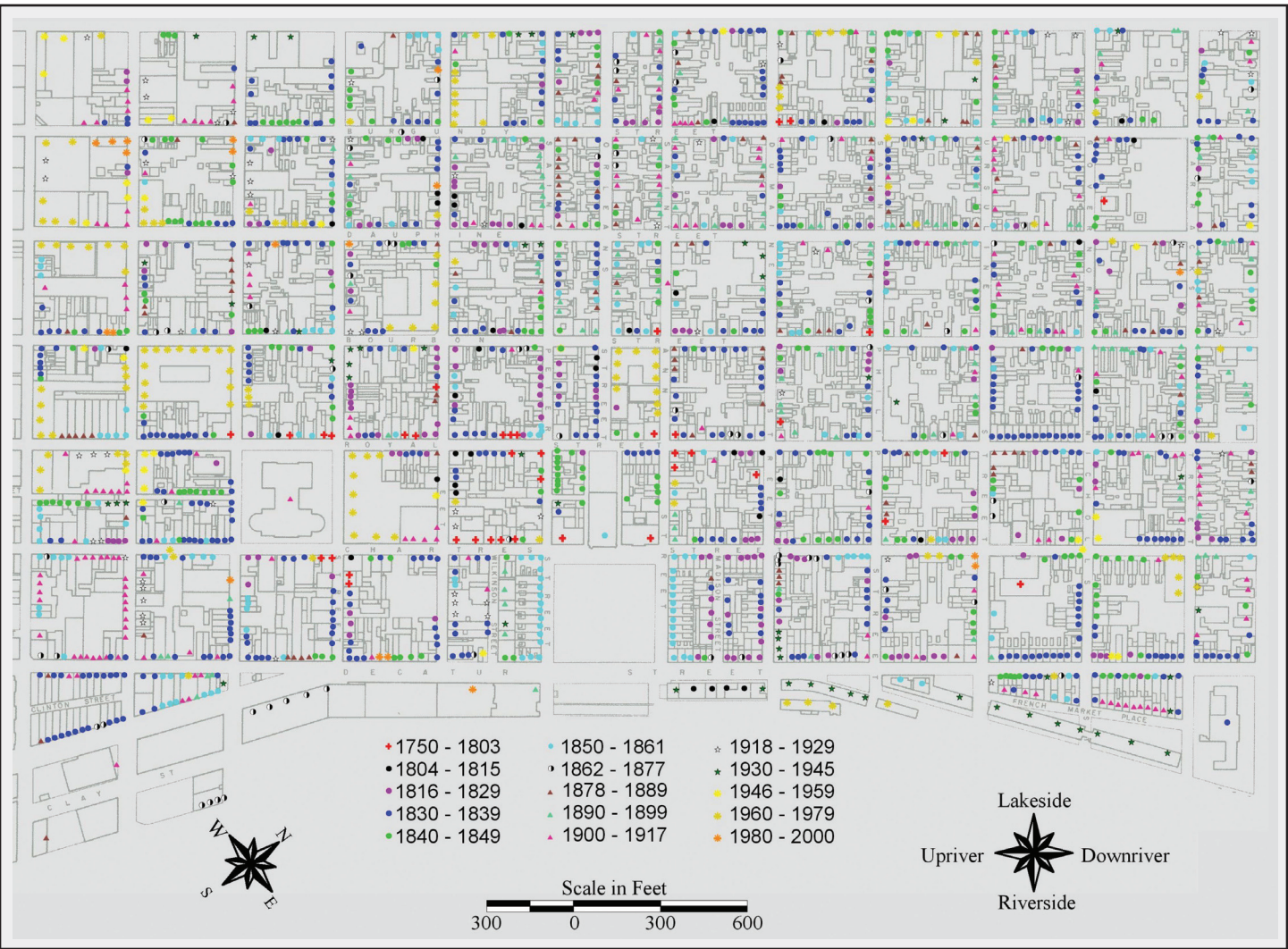
SECOND VALLEY, 1862-1877

The dearth of structures dating from these fifteen years directly reflects tumultuous historical events, not just subsequent demolitions. The Civil War, the blockade of the port, federal occupation, and Reconstruction interrupted the city's economic life from New Orleans' quick surrender in 1862 until 1877. Many local and regional businesses (namely plantations) folded, investment dollars were limited, and few buildings went up. Only 3 percent of today's buildings date from this era.

SECOND PEAK, 1880-1920s

New Orleans enjoyed a second (though much more modest) "golden age" in the turn-of-the-century era, which coincided with a minor construction boom in the French Quarter. But while a number of impressive Italianate townhouses and storehouses went up in this "second peak," the new construction consisted mostly of humble wooden abodes for families of modest means. The upper class had by this time departed for uptown or Esplanade Avenue, leaving the French Quarter to the working class, including thousands of indigent immigrants from Sicily and elsewhere in southern Europe, who were accommodated in old mansions subdivided into cheap flats. It was a phenomenon seen in many big cities in this era: "Vacated houses were converted into tenements and rooming houses," observed geographer David Ward regarding national trends, "while vacant lots and rear yards were filled with cheap new structures."²⁶ In New Orleans, those "cheap new structures" were shotgun houses and bungalows. Of the 196 shotguns and eighteen bungalows now standing in the French Quarter, fully 88 percent were built during 1880s to 1920s. And of the 525 total extant building erected during

²⁶ David Ward, "The Emergence of Central Immigrant Ghettos in American Cities: 1840-1820," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 58 (June 1968): 343.



these four decades, only 8 percent were upscale townhouses for the affluent.

THIRD VALLEY, 1930-1950s

A number of factors contributed to the decline in construction in these years. Depression and World War II diverted attention and funds away from real estate investment, while in the midst of that era, designation of the French Quarter as a protected historic district (1936-1937) regulated demolition and new construction. Tourism and conventions during this era were at levels low enough not to encourage new hotel construction. Countering these trends were the extensive renovations of the Works Progress Administration and Public Works Administration in the 1930s, especially in the French Market area, and the gerrymandering of the Vieux Carré Commission's jurisdiction from 1946 to 1964. During that eighteen-year period, certain edges of the Quarter (the Rampart Street frontage, the area riverside of upper North Peters, and the 200 block of Royal) lost their protected status, allowing for a number of demolitions and modern constructions.

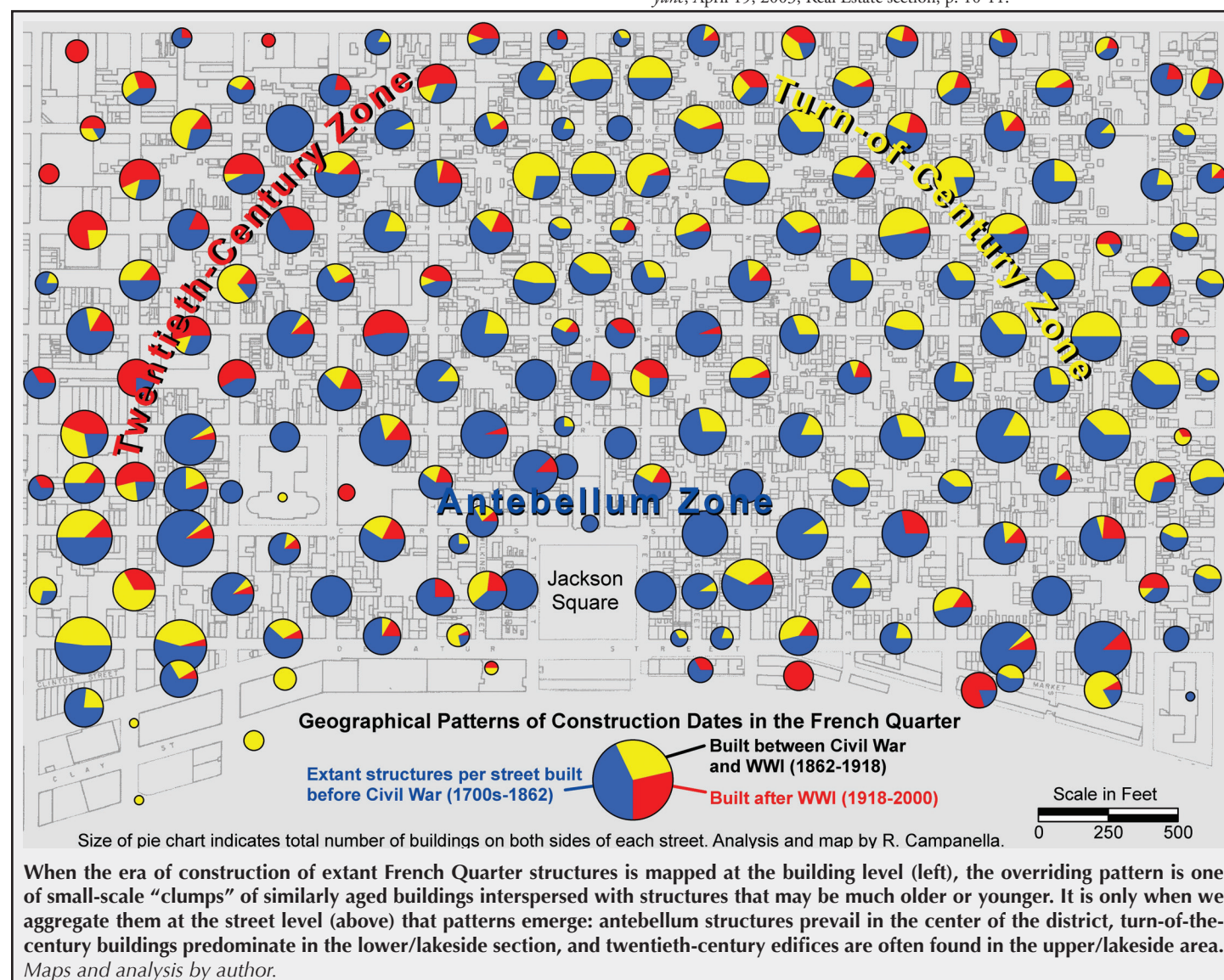
THIRD PEAK, 1950s-1970s

The late 1950s to the mid-1970s saw the final (to date) boom in French Quarter construction. These new structures tended to be large hotels and affiliated structures such as parking garages, built in response to the growth of the tourism economy. Some of these new hotels succeeded in recollecting historic antecedents, such as the Royal Orleans on St. Louis Street, designed after the famous St. Louis Hotel and City Exchange. Others were flagrantly ersatz.

PRESENT DAY VALLEY, 1970s TO PRESENT

Since the late 1970s, new construction has tailed off in the French Quarter, a result of prohibition on new Quarter hotels (banned since 1969) and the long, deliberative approval process for new construction. One fine example of new construction according to traditional styles is 841 St. Louis Street, built in 1999 on what was long an empty lot and now blending into the *tout ensemble*. Inside, however, is one dramatic difference: aluminum beams have replaced traditional wood, a response to the very serious threat of Formosan termite infestation.²⁷

²⁷ Mary Foster, "History and 21st Century Collide in Quarter Home," *Times-Picayune*, April 19, 2003, Real Estate section, p. 10-11.



THE FUTURE

Does another building boom loom in the French Quarter's foreseeable future? Barring fires or natural disasters, the only possible site for significant new construction are the "batture blocks" between North Peters and the levee, from Iberville to Toulouse. This terrain began forming decades after the city's founding, when the shifting river deposited sediment along the bank and augmented the downtown land base. The French Quarter batture was home, from the 1870s to the 1930s, to the city's Sugar District, consisting of sheds, refineries, warehouses, offices, and an ornate exchange.²⁸ This charmless industrial landscape was demolished or burned piecemeal during the 1940s through 1970s, leaving almost nothing but parking lots today. Ambitious plans to develop the area for mixed residential and commercial use have come and gone over the years, though a proposed rezoning of the area in 2004 may eventually lead to extensive new hotel construction.²⁹

GEOGRAPHICAL PATTERNS OF CONSTRUCTION DATES

While historical patterns of construction dates clearly reflect local and national events, geographical patterns of age in the French Quarter are a bit more complex to unravel. There are no expansive sections occupied entirely by structures of a single era; rather, the overriding pattern is one of small-scale "clumps" of similarly aged buildings interspersed liberally with structures that may be much older or younger. One often sees a row of townhouses built simultaneously, a line of cottages constructed within the same decade, or a series of shotguns all dating from the 1890s. But among or near them may be a rare Federal-style mansion, a massive Commercial style warehouse from the 1910s, or a modern hotel. This pattern of spatial intermixing by age itself is old: "There are still, here and there, the old houses, sandwiched in between those of a later generation—quaint, dilapidated, and picturesque," stated one observer in 1885. Some French Quarter buildings "are rickety, wooden structures, with overhanging porticoes, and with windows and doors all out of perpendicular.... Others are massive stone or brick structures, with great arched doorways, and paved floors...."³⁰

This spatial complexity is apparent in the first of the two accompanying maps, which shows construction dates categorized by fifteen historical eras for each and every building. This level of detail obscures overriding patterns. The second map, *Geographical Patterns of Construction Dates in the French Quarter*, resolves this problem by aggregating the information into only three eras (antebellum times, between the Civil War and World War I, and to the present), and amassing

it at the street level. That is, all buildings on both sides of each street were summed together by their construction era, which is depicted in the pie charts. The size of the pie chart represents the number of buildings on that street. Amid an abundance of exceptions, three overriding "age zones" emerge in this map.

Antebellum Zone — Older extant builders tend to cluster in the central heart of the Quarter. The preponderance of antebellum structures on Chartres, Royal, and Bourbon streets, within a few blocks of St. Louis Cathedral, is explained by the wealthy residents who once lived here. Well-off families before the Civil War were more likely to erect townhouses, which, because of their sturdiness, elegance, and value, had better odds of evading the forces of demolition and survive into the preservation era (and thereby show up in our data). The rich tended to live here because other areas were less desirable: those blocks near Canal Street were too commercial, those toward Esplanade and Rampart tended to be overly plebeian and old-world-oriented, and those closer to the river were too noisy, smelly, and bustling with port and market activity.

Numerical data bear out the cartographic patterns. The Quarter street which boasts the oldest average construction date for its structures is, as expected, Royal Street (1850), followed by Gov. Nicholls (1854), and St. Peter and St. Phillip (1855). Three of these four streets penetrate the heart of the Quarter. Those with the youngest average structural construction dates are Bienville (1898), Iberville (1890), and North Rampart (1882), all three of which are outside the district's heart. Pedestrian-level observations also bear this out: a walk down Royal Street is an experience of antebellum splendor; a walk down Iberville is a raffish encounter with architectural hodgepodge.

The densest cluster of *very* old buildings lies in the inner heart of this core, within one block of Royal Street from Conti to Dumaine (especially around the Royal/St. Peter intersection). Of the ninety-six Quarter structures which pre-date 1820, over half occupy this relatively small area. Incorporated in this highly historic area is the 600 block of Chartres (lake side), home to the Quarter's highest concentration of Spanish colonial era structures. Very old buildings have managed to survive around this stretch of Royal because of its distance from demolition-prone peripheral areas, and because of the magnificence and significance of the buildings themselves. This was also the area incinerated by the fires 1788 and 1794, clearing the parcels for the more sturdy constructions mandated by new Spanish colonial building codes.

Turn-of-the-Century Zone — Turn-of-the-century structures, defined generously here as those built between 1862-1918, are more likely to be found in the Quarter's lower/lakeside quadrant. This area, which once abutted the poor Third District (across Esplanade) and Tremé and the

²⁸ Richard Campanella, *Times and Place in New Orleans: Past Geographies in the Present Day* (Gretna, LA, 2002), 133-46.

²⁹ Bruce Egger, "Council Clears Way for Quarter Hotel," *Times-Picayune*, October 23, 2004, A1.

³⁰ Captain Willard Glazier, *Peculiarities of American Cities* (Philadelphia, PA, 1885), 273.

swamp (across Rampart), was home to working-class families often residing in cottages, which were often torn down after the Civil War and replaced by inexpensive shotgun houses. Demolition and replacement by shotguns was less likely in high-density commercial areas (toward Canal Street) or in blocks already occupied by spacious townhouses subdivided into apartments.

Twentieth-Century Zone — Buildings post-dating World War I are more common in the upper and lakeside section of the French Quarter. The modern tourism industry, responsible for most Quarter construction in recent decades, explains this pattern, as hoteliers were limited by both economic and legal factors to the commercial upper Quarter. The lower Quarter remains more residential. The French Market also registers some twentieth-century construction because of the Public Works Administration renovation work there during the Depression.

How old, then, is the French Quarter? From a structural standpoint, it seems reasonable to date the prototypi-

cal French Quarter streetscape to the second quarter of the nineteenth century, with a few streetscapes pre-dating this era and a fair number post-dating it. But, as these maps indicate, exceptions are the rule—and gloriously so. The spatial heterogeneity of the French Quarter makes it a Rosetta Stone of local, regional, and national history; a walk down any given street is a rich and rewarding tour of the past and of the processes of change. Wrote the New Orleans Press on transformations in the French Quarter circa 1885,

Tile roofs have begun to disappear, the cozy little cottage tenements...are fast changing into the newer style of corniced residences.... On all sides, one, who is at all observant, can see how that fickle old fellow, Time, is pushing back the past to make way for the present.... Some of those old Creole houses whose roofs have sparkled and glittered in the spring showers of one hundred years still remain, but they are fast fading away. Curious old houses these.³¹

³¹ William H. Coleman, *Historical Sketch Book and Guide to New Orleans and Environs, with Map* (New York, 1885), 65.

