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Confessions
of a lifelong
Louisiana
scavenger

Like a cat bringing an unlucky bird or mouse to the doorstep, my grown children sometimes like to share news about things they find in their adventures out of doors. Luckily, their treasures are more benign than what the proverbial cat drags in.

Earlier this summer, they were visiting each other in California when they decided to gather shells from the beach. A picture soon arrived on my smartphone — a lovely image of seashells lining a beach towel, creating a banner that cheered me throughout the summer.

When I flip through pictures from this anxious year, that snapshot will be a keeper.

What is it, I was moved to wonder, that drives our impulse to gather bright, shiny things? Maybe it's the primal hunter-gatherer in our genes, a survival tool we've continued to carry into our comfortable modern lives.

I thought about all of this over the summer as I read the late Penelope Fitzgerald's reminiscences about foraging for odd little treasures during her British childhood a century ago. It's no surprise that Fitzgerald's sharp eye for the glimmering bits and bobs of the rural English landscape would lead her to become a novelist, an occupation where a gift for the small detail can be a plus.

When the young Fitzgerald was sent out for errands, she'd find time for a little scavenging, too.

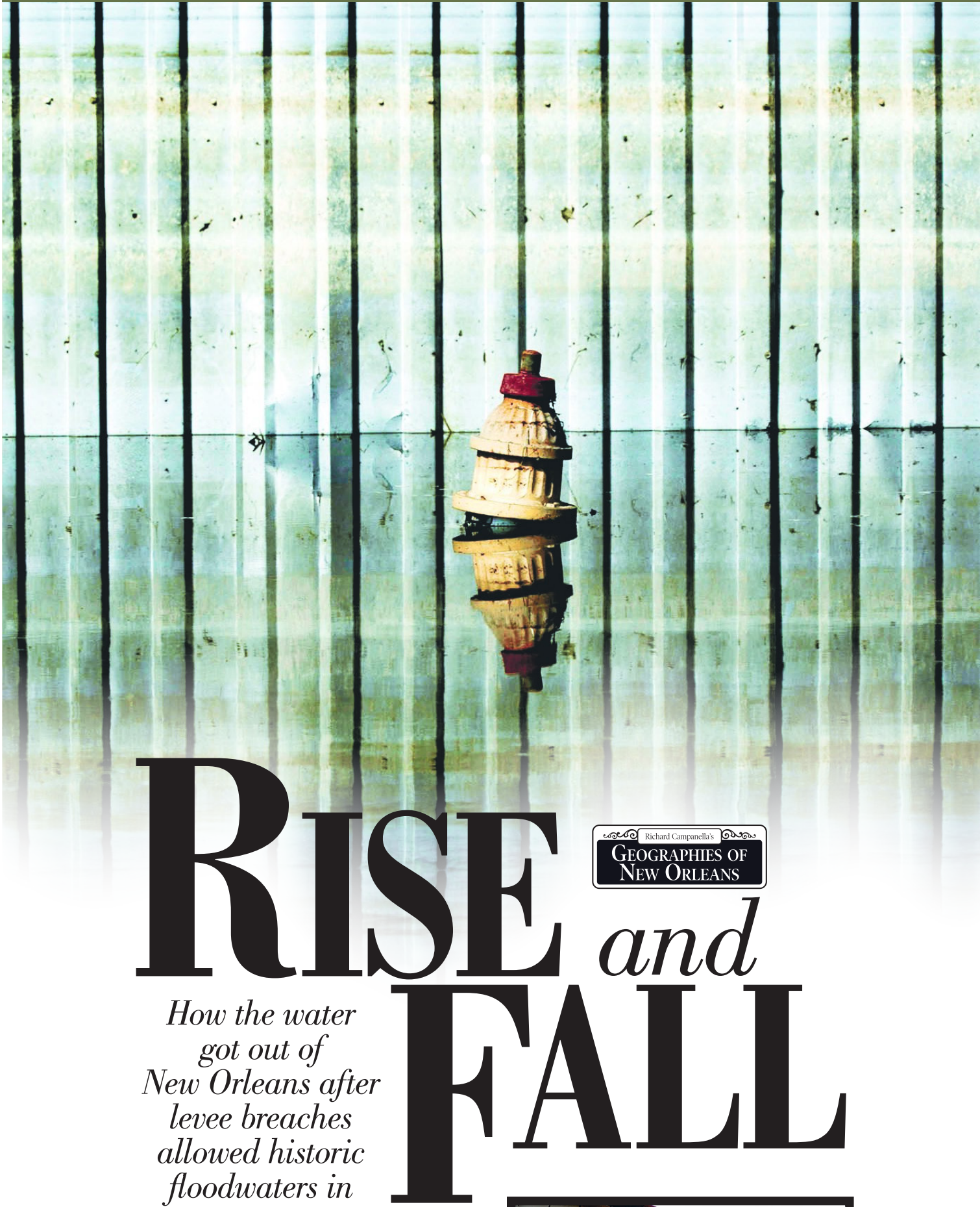
"On the way there and back, across the fields and by the roadside, I had my collecting to do," she tells readers. "Feathers, pheasant feathers in particular, were needed for ... headdresses. My brother, when he was at home, was a warrior brave, and I was Minnehaha. Then there were horseshoe nails, cast horseshoes, snail shells, bechnuts, pignuts, flints, and wayside flowers. When I got home, everything was laid out on my bedroom windowsill to be counted and recounted, one of the most reassuring activities for a small child."

Some of us don't outgrow the scavenging habit, and I count myself among the tribe. I live a few blocks from my office, so I often walk to work, and the things I find along the way tend to end up on a shelf above my desk as a small reminder of life's variety.

"They're talismans of a sort, pointing me toward a simple reality," I confessed in a magazine essay earlier this year. "It's the

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Receding water lines tell the story on how fast the water disappeared as indicated on a metal building on Poydras Street near the Superdome Sept. 12, 2005. | STAFF FILE PHOTO BY DAVID GRUNFELD



RISE *and* FALL

How the water got out of New Orleans after levee breaches allowed historic floodwaters in

BY RICHARD CAMPANELLA
Contributing writer

How the water got into New Orleans on Aug. 29, 2005, is well-documented. Hurricane Katrina pushed seawater across eroded marshes and up a network of navigation and drainage canals, along which federal floodwalls and levees breached in multiple locations. The surge poured into neighborhoods that had subsided below sea level during the century prior, due to mechanized swamp drainage. What resulted was a catastrophe like few others: an immense, deep, impounded deluge.

This is the story of how the water got out. It focuses on the role of Sewerage & Water Board employees who were on the front lines, as they recounted to famed broadcast journalist Norman Robinson in a series of interviews recorded in 2015. I express my gratitude to those employees and to Mr. Robinson. Following is an edited



STAFF FILE PHOTO BY SHAWN FINK

Two 200-foot-tall water towers rise over the New Orleans Sewerage & Water Board Carrollton Water Plant in 2018. The towers, which together hold 4 million gallons of water, were erected to provide gravity-powered water pressure to the city's system in the event of an electrical power failure.

➤ See **WATER**, page 8D

Did the Choctaw people fight alongside Andrew Jackson?

Maj. Gen. Andrew Jackson, with sword raised, rallies American forces against the British in a painting depicting the American victory at the Battle of New Orleans in January 1815.

IMAGE BY E. PERCY MORAN/
LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



BY MATTHEW HAINES
Contributing writer



A reader recently submitted a question that, on the surface, seems simple enough. They wondered, "Did the Choctaw tribe fight alongside Gen. Andrew Jackson in the Battle of New Orleans?"

The short answer is yes, but the in-depth response is far more

interesting. To understand it fully, we need to look at the years before and after Jackson's famed victory.

The Battle of New Orleans, which took place in January 1815, was the culminating skirmish in the larger War of 1812 between the United Kingdom, the United States and their respective North American allies.

War broke out between the countries for several reasons. One was that Britain — which was engaged in the Napoleonic wars with the French — attempted to restrict trade between France and the young United States. The Americans believed this violated international law. A second practice that upset the U.S. was that

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WATER

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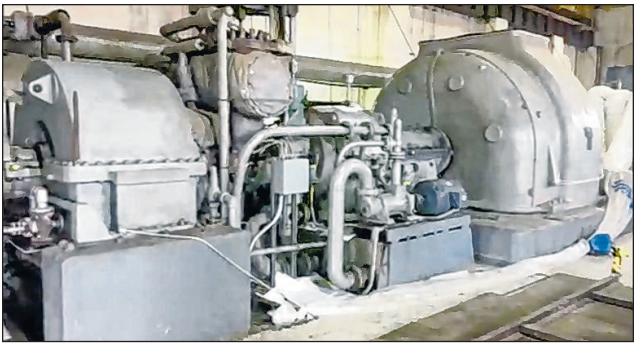
excerpt from “Draining New Orleans: The 300-Year Quest to Dewater the Crescent City” (LSU Press, 2023).

At great personal risk, more than 300 Sewerage & Water Board personnel stayed on the job round-the-clock, most of them manning pumping stations. Early on Monday, Aug. 29, 2005, gusting winds brought torrents of rain, but operators were able to remove the runoff — until the “run-off” started to rise faster than the rain was falling. How could that be?

Bob Moenian, operator of an Interstate 10 underpass pump, surmised that perhaps a vessel had ruptured a levee. “I did not know that the levees were breached,” recalled Moenian. He tried futilely to pump out the rising water. At one point, Moenian got a radio call from a colleague at Pumping Station No. 5 who asked, “Mr. Mo, the water’s coming up — we’re about to drown — what do we do?” Lifejackets on, the staffers scrambled up ladders to surveil the situation. Clearly, something catastrophic had happened, and any attempt to pump the water out was Sisyphean.

Reynaldo Robertson, operating the Melpomene No. 1 pumps on Broad, was forced to stop relaying water to the lift pumps in Lakeview once the 17th Street Canal floodwall had breached, at which point his crew climbed up the station’s catwalks. After a helicopter pilot was unable to perform a risky rooftop rescue, Robertson made radio contact with his colleague at the Algiers pumping station, Richard Alexander, who hitched a boat to his truck and drove over the Crescent City Connection to rescue Robertson and his crew.

State Police stopped him, even after Alexander informed them of his official status. Incredulous, Alexander radioed Deputy Chief Warren Riley of the New Orleans Police Department. Over the speaker phone, Riley shouted, “This



FILE PHOTO BY BEAU EVANS

Turbine No. 1 is one of four steam-powered turbines housed at the Sewerage & Water Board’s Carrollton Plant.

is for you, or any other policemen, or anyone else listening: The Sewerage & Water Board has full access to the city!” Minutes later, Alexander got his boat in the water and made his way to Broad Street, passing people waist-deep in water, unable to help them. All were desperate. Some were angry. One was dead.

Richardson finally reached Robertson and colleagues, and together they set out to rescue others. All had remained at their posts until they absolutely had to leave. “We stayed because we knew if we left,” Robertson said, “the City of New Orleans could potentially be lost.” Moenian and co-workers found themselves in a similar situation at the I-10 pumping station, where they were rescued by boat and set out to save others. “We lost the battle,” Moenian said. “But we didn’t lose the fight.”

Floodwaters swell

After the morning breaches, the afternoon winds, and an eerily placid Monday evening, flood levels steadily rose. Even under clear blue skies on Tuesday and into Wednesday, floodwaters swelled to the point of threatening the S&WB’s power-generating station in Carrollton, the heart of the entire water-removal system.

“We were standing in the driveway on Eagle Street looking toward Claiborne Avenue,” remembered Gabe Signorelli, chief of Facility Maintenance, “when we saw this ... heightening of water ... rolling up the street toward the plant.” The turbines had already fallen silent for the first time in memory, and now they were about to drown. “We were rushing around trying to

stop it,” recalled operating engineer Damon Adams. “We had sandbags up and they washed away, so we actually got a backhoe fired up and took scoops of mud and put them in place to stop the leak into the plant.”

Keeping the water at bay, the engineers focused on their next challenge: Would they be able to cold-start the turbines? It had never been done before. All the while, pressure weakened in the water and sewerage mains and eventually petered out. Life in the city, what remained of it, was now untenable.

“I got in a boat to rescue the folks from Station A,” said emergency manager Jason Higginbotham, in reference to a sewerage pumping station in Tremé. “We went down Claiborne Avenue, [and] I saw the bodies, just bodies ... people who are just floating, dead.” When they got to the station, the operator refused to leave, for his dedication and also because he had arranged for his wife to meet him there if their Broad Street home flooded. It took much cajoling to convince the operator to leave, for the good of everyone involved. Only later did the operator learn his wife had already perished, after which he suffered a severe nervous breakdown.

Tense moments

Elsewhere, everywhere, society seemed to be coming apart at the seams. “The unlawfulness,” remembered Higginbotham, shaking his head. “It was chaos[;] at night time, you can hear the gunshots.” In one tense moment at the S&WB water plant across the river, some residents converged on a FEMA

truck bringing food and water to plant operators. Officials defused the tension by letting residents clean out the truck. “It hit home” just how bad the situation was “when one of our plants was under attack.”

The bridge itself became a beacon of hope for desperate flood victims, even at night, drawn by the lights at the Algiers S&WB plant. Most were turned away by police, sometimes aggressively, but the lights still beckoned. “It looked like Oz; it had power,” said Robert Jackson, chief of communications. “During most of that period, the only lights you saw in the city were at the water plant in Carrollton and the water plant on the West Bank.”

At the S&WB headquarters on St. Joseph Street, executive director Marcia St. Martin and general superintendent Joseph Sullivan conferred over what to do. The drainage system was now useless; even if the pumps could be activated, they would only eject water right back into the flooded city. This could only change after external water dropped below internal water levels. “Joseph Sullivan had calculated how long it was going to take for the water to equalize between the lake and city,” recounted St. Martin. “He projected it was going to equalize that Friday afternoon around 2 o’clock,” four days out. “He was dead on the money,” St. Martin marveled. “He did that on Monday afternoon, probably around 3 o’clock. Brilliant engineer. Just brilliant.”

Carrollton power plant

Now that the equalization point had been determined, engineers knew when they could start pumping out the water. But pumps don’t work without electricity, and electricity doesn’t get produced without generators. It was at this point that the Carrollton power plant became the single most important place in the battle to save New Orleans.

Its workers already had quite a week. They doused an electrical fire on Monday, kept floodwaters at bay Tuesday and Wednesday, loaded sandbags onto helicopters to try and plug

the breaches, and secured precious fuel and supplies from unflooded Algiers. Now the engineers prepared to do something never before attempted: cold-starting the turbines.

“So many components have to come on and stay on, and dovetail into another operation, and have to fall in place just right,” explained operating engineer Damon Adams in his interview with Robinson. “It took four tries and three days,” each attempt requiring refilling the boilers, reheating the water, releasing of steam and rolling the turbines. Finally, “on the fourth try, it stuck, and we got it to hold, [and] we got it all right.” Steam billowed, the turbines roared to life, and the century-old system regained its electrical current. It was a historic moment, but no one present had any time to reflect.

At the auxiliary power station in the Upper 9th Ward, Gerald R. Elwood never got the call to fire up his turbines from nearby Pumping Station 19. Looking out from the Florida Avenue plant, all he could see was water, water, water. “The only evidence of life,” he recounted, “was myself and my co-workers.” The next day, some bedraggled men in life-preservers “came up the stairs [and] knocked on the door.” They were the pump operations, and they had just swum through deep filth strewn with debris. “We were happy to see them,” Elwood said. “[Now] let’s try to get the generators going.”

As in Carrollton, dozens of preliminary steps had to be taken, including solving a problem with the air compressors. “At 2 or 3 o’clock in the morning, we were lifting 55-gallon drums, putting oil into the generators,” recounted Elwood. “We had to get the generators up. We got to get the water out.”

They succeeded on both accounts. “That was the biggest challenge,” said Adams of the restoration of power at the Eagle Street and Florida Avenue plants. Else, “there is no society[;] there is anarchy, pestilence, disease. ... It had to come back.”

Soon, S&WB personnel shifted from deadly crisis

management to round-the-clock operations in pumping out the impounded deluge — all while coordinating their own personal predicaments. Eighty percent of the agency’s 1,200 employees lost their homes to the flood, including St. Martin, and because most were native-born New Orleanians, most had extended families directly affected.

‘Never left ... never stopped’

Everyone thinks of police, fire and military personnel as “first responders,” noted Jackson of the S&WB, but “in fact, we’re ‘zero responders.’ We never left ... We never stopped working.” Few would credit S&WB workers for being the first people to save New Orleans, but that’s exactly what they were. “It’s an untold story because we’re practically an invisible force,” said Jackson. “We’re all underground; everything we have is underground. [But] no matter how many billions you put into a city — you can put gold roofs on every house — if you don’t have sewer, water and drainage, you have to leave. ... No water, no sewer, no drainage, no city.”

Incredibly, S&WB engineers and operators managed to remove most of the floodwaters from the city’s main basins in just 11 days, far faster than the three months many predicted. Smaller quantities either evaporated or got absorbed into the soil. The remainder was removed by the Army Corps of Engineers’ Task Force Unwatering, which brought in truck-mounted pumps to eject a quarter of a trillion gallons of floodwater over 53 days, into late October 2005.

By then, finally, all the water was out.

Richard Campanella, a geographer with the Tulane School of Architecture and Built Environment, is the author of “Draining New Orleans,” “Crossroads, Cutoffs, and Confluences,” “Bourbon Street: A History,” and other books from LSU Press. He may be reached at richcampanella.com, rcampane@tulane.edu, or @nolacampanella on X.



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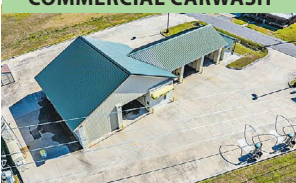
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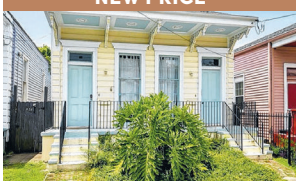


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