

University of New Orleans Press

Chapter Title: Signature of the City: Patterns of Iron-Lace Galleries and Balconies in the French Quarter

Book Title: Geographies of New Orleans

Book Subtitle: Urban Fabrics Before the Storm

Book Author(s): Richard Campanella

Published by: University of New Orleans Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1n2tx87.14>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



University of New Orleans Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Geographies of New Orleans*

JSTOR

SIGNATURE OF THE CITY PATTERNS OF IRON-LACE GALLERIES AND BALCONIES IN THE FRENCH QUARTER

Few images evoke *New Orleans* in the mental eye of the world like the city's iron-lace galleries and balconies. Countless iconic references to the city—photographs in generic “American the Beautiful” calendars, destination ads in airport waiting rooms, casino motifs in the seedier sections of Las Vegas—depict the frilly swirls of iron lace crowding narrow French Quarter streets. Television commercials wield wide-angle shots of iron lace to associate their product with a New Orleans they invariably portray as “funky,” yet authentic. Movies pan down the viney railings to set the location and mood of a scene. Newcomers' expectations are fulfilled when they see for themselves that the classic iron-lace streetscapes, complete with ferns spilling from hanging gardens and aloof eccentrics leaning in French doorways, do indeed exist, and in great numbers.



The frilly designs of cast-iron galleries form internationally recognized iconic imagery for New Orleans in general, and the French Quarter in particular. This specimen adorns the oft-photographed Labranche House on the corner of Royal and St. Peter. Photograph by author, 2003.

While architectural ironwork is intimately associated with New Orleans in general and the French Quarter in particular, the iconic iron lace of the calendar photographs was a late addition to the street scene. Ironwork “wrought” by hand may be traced back to the earliest days of the colony, attributed to black artisans and French and Spanish influences. Wrought iron, containing about 0.04–0.2 percent carbon, formed a “malleable substance which may be shaped by hammering, stretching, or rolling”⁸⁵ into “geometric or curvilinear designs,”⁸⁶ producing a strong, durable, relatively flexible finished product with a distinctively austere texture.

⁸⁵ Ann M. Masson and Lydia H. Schmalz, *Cast Iron and the Crescent City* (New Orleans, 1995), 5.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 5, and Marcus Christian, *Negro Ironworkers of Louisiana, 1718–1900* (Gretna, LA, 1972), 3.

It was costly in terms of labor and material, and therefore did not dominate the streetscape. Elegant but simple wrought-iron balconies, spanning half the width of the banquette (sidewalk) and supported not by columns but cantilevers, were traditional to Spanish colonial-era structures, and may be seen today on eighteen of the twenty-five such structures that remain. Another two Spanish colonial buildings, the *Ca-bildo* (1799) and *Presbytère* (1791–1813), retain their simple wrought-iron railings. Even as these surviving specimens were being installed two hundred years ago, the craft was about to be rendered obsolete by the Industrial Age and the economies of mass production.

Cast iron, a technology developed over centuries and refined in the early 1800s, was first introduced to New Orleans by the Leeds Iron Foundry in 1825.⁸⁷ Cast iron contained from ten to 150 times more carbon than wrought iron, making it brittle, weaker, rougher, and more prone to rust, but also conducive to pouring into lacy, detailed molds. The end result: a fancier (though not necessarily superior) product, available faster and cheaper. Soon, balconies with a mix of wrought- and cast-iron railings were seen fronting the hundreds of townhouses that arose in the 1830s, a “transitional” decade in New Orleans ironwork as well as in society and in architectural style.⁸⁸ Wrote Marcus Christian, “the Victorian taste for the ornate; the increasing demand created by the sugar, cotton, and business wealth; and the advent of the foundry system coupled with the heavy influx of white ironworkers that made cheap ironwork possible accounted for the change from wrought- to cast-iron ornamentation that overcame New Orleans after the 1830s.”⁸⁹ Reflecting the increased demand fostered by casting, nationwide iron produc-

⁸⁷ Masson and Schmalz, *Cast Iron and the Crescent City*, 3.

⁸⁸ See chapter, “A Draping of Fashions: Patterns of Architectural Style” for details on the transitional era of the 1830s.

⁸⁹ Christian, *Negro Ironworkers of Louisiana*, 31.



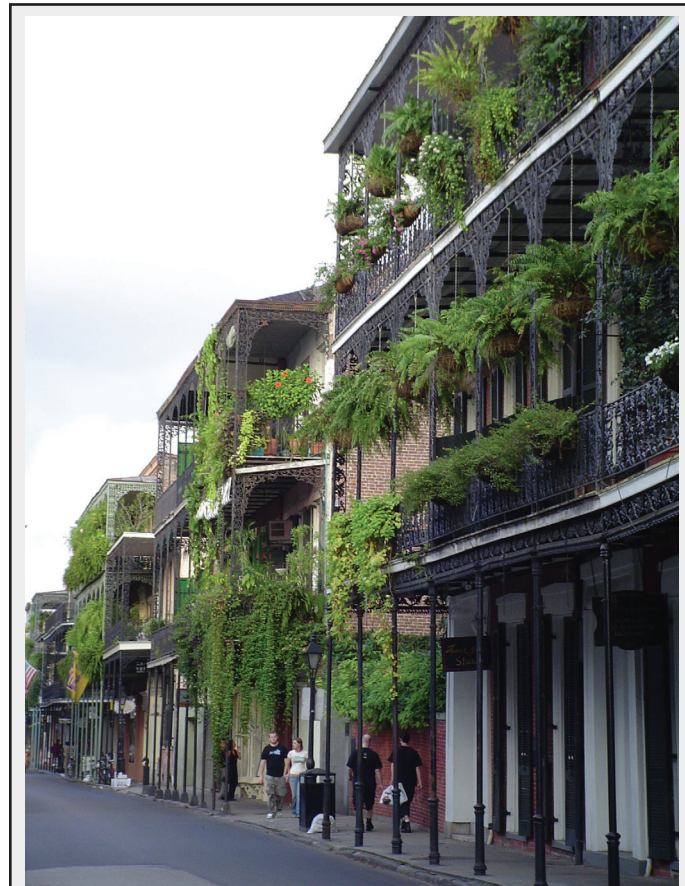
This Dumaine streetscene presents three ways in which New Orleanians have buffered the private space of the house with the public space of the street: with a narrow balcony (early nineteenth century, foreground); with a spacious wooden gallery under an oversized roof (center, late eighteenth century), and with a three-story cast-iron gallery as wide as the sidewalk (mid-nineteenth century). Photograph by author, 2004.

tion rose from about 20,000 tons in 1820, to 315,000 tons in 1840, to 1,000,000 tons by 1855.⁹⁰

Multi-story cast iron galleries, supported with columns and covering the entire banquette, started to appear in the wealthier blocks of the French Quarter and faubourgs around 1850. “One who has not seen New Orleans since two years ago,” wrote the *Daily Picayune* in July 1852, “could not fail to be impressed with the extent and importance of the improvements during that time,”⁹¹ among them the new penchant for ornamental iron. Unlike balconies, which were designed for little more than a perch and breath of fresh air, these new galleries were spacious, shaded platforms halfway between public and private space, the perfect re-articulation of a porch or front yard in an urban environment too congested for either. Conceptually, galleries were nothing new to Louisiana buildings: in function, they were typical to eighteenth-century French Creole architecture, though the earlier versions differed greatly in form (usually a wrap-around front porch unified under a single roof) and in material (exclusively wood, with colonnades for supports and balustrades for railings). Madame John’s Legacy at 632 Dumaine Street is the last best

⁹⁰ J.B. Wickersham, *Victorian Ironwork: A Catalogue* (Philadelphia, PA, 1977), 4.

⁹¹ *Daily Picayune*, July 7, 1852, “City Intelligence” column (article cited by Masson and Schmalz).



New Orleans is the only American city where iron-lace galleries dominate extensive streetscapes and affect the character of entire neighborhoods. Why? Perhaps the city had just the right mix of population density, climate, cultural heritage, wealth, port accessibility, and appropriate housing stock, plus a “golden age” that coincided with the age of cast-iron ornamentation. This “galleriescape” on Royal Street is among the most spectacular. Photograph by author, 2004.

example of an original French Creole gallery in the French Quarter. One wonders if the circa-1850 popularity of iron-lace galleries may be linked to the cultural predilection for semi-private outdoor space among eighteenth-century New Orleanians, which had been forced into the patio (literally) by Spanish building codes and urban densification, only to return years later when technology (iron casting) offered a new and affordable way.

Many sources credit the Baroness Micaela Almonester de Pontalba and her twin rows of elegant apartments and stores (1849-1851) bordering Jackson Square, for introducing full-blown iron-lace galleries to the city. Every unit of both the Baroness’ buildings is lined with a full-width canopied verandah—“probably the earliest in the city”⁹²—and an equally ornate third-floor balcony with graceful cast-iron initialed patterns, not to mention window grilles and sturdy iron columns. Such a notable resident and such an ambitious, centrally located project may well have popularized large iron-lace galleries among wealthy peers.⁹³ Madam Pontalba’s effort was joined by that of another prominent New Orleanian, businessman and philanthropist Judah Touro. Just beyond the French Quarter, Touro helped popularize ornamental iron with his six-unit “Touro Row” (1851) on the 300 block of St. Charles and twelve-unit “Touro Row” occupying the entire Canal Street block between Royal and Bourbon (built in increments between 1852 and 1856). While the St. Charles row had (and still retains) a fancy canopied balcony of iron, the Touro Row on Canal Street boasted a magnificent two-level covered iron-lace gallery spanning the entire block. Another row of business buildings at Carondelet and Common, built for H.C. Cammack in 1851, had similar ironwork. A *Daily Picayune* column on July 7, 1852, praised the increasing popularity of these features on the new building stock of the booming city:

Each month witnesses the commencement or completion of some handsome family residences or stores, and every new building that has been lately erected, shows that our property holders are not unmindful of ornament.... One of the most admirable innovations upon the old system of building tall, staring structures for business purposes, is the plan which we are glad to see is generally coming in use, of erecting galleries and verandahs of ornamental iron work.... [Instances include] the new row of houses erected on St. Charles street for Judah Touro, and several others of a similar style on Carondelet street, in the vicinity of Common.⁹⁴

Two wealthy, distinguished citizens thus seemed to play important roles in transforming the New Orleans streetscape in the late antebellum years, by erecting massive iron galleries at two prominent locations at roughly the same time. Others copied them, and city streets changed forever. Architect Malcolm Heard of the Quarter wrote, after Pontalba’s instal-

⁹² Masson and Schmalz, *Cast Iron and the Crescent City*, 17.

⁹³ One observer was not particularly impressed with the new feature, stating that the upper Pontalba building, completed by November 1850, presented “a much more striking and massive appearance” before “the heavy roofed balconies were erected.” “Pontalba Buildings,” *Daily Picayune*, November 2, 1850.

⁹⁴ *Daily Picayune*, July 7, 1852, “City Intelligence” column.

lation of ornamental iron in 1850, “building owners replaced their wooden and wrought-iron railings with new cast iron, frequently enlarging their balconies into post-supported galleries extending the full width of the sidewalk. The transformation of Quarter streets with filigree in the decades after 1850 must have been dramatic.”⁹⁵ Depictions of city street scenes from before the 1850s show mostly “tall, staring”⁹⁶ building façades with little more than the occasional balcony. But those dating from the late 1850s and afterwards, including sketches made by correspondents during the Civil War and occupation⁹⁷ and the 1866-1867 photographs of Theodore Lilienthal, are replete with the same full-fledged iron-lace galleries portrayed today in the calendar photographs and postcards.

For all their fame, some intriguing questions about New Orleans’ iron-lace galleries remain unanswered. Where is ornamental iron distributed within the French Quarter, and why there? When were iron-adorned edifices erected, and

how does this compare with the previously cited historical evidence? And why does New Orleans and not other American cities exhibit this distinguishing characteristic?

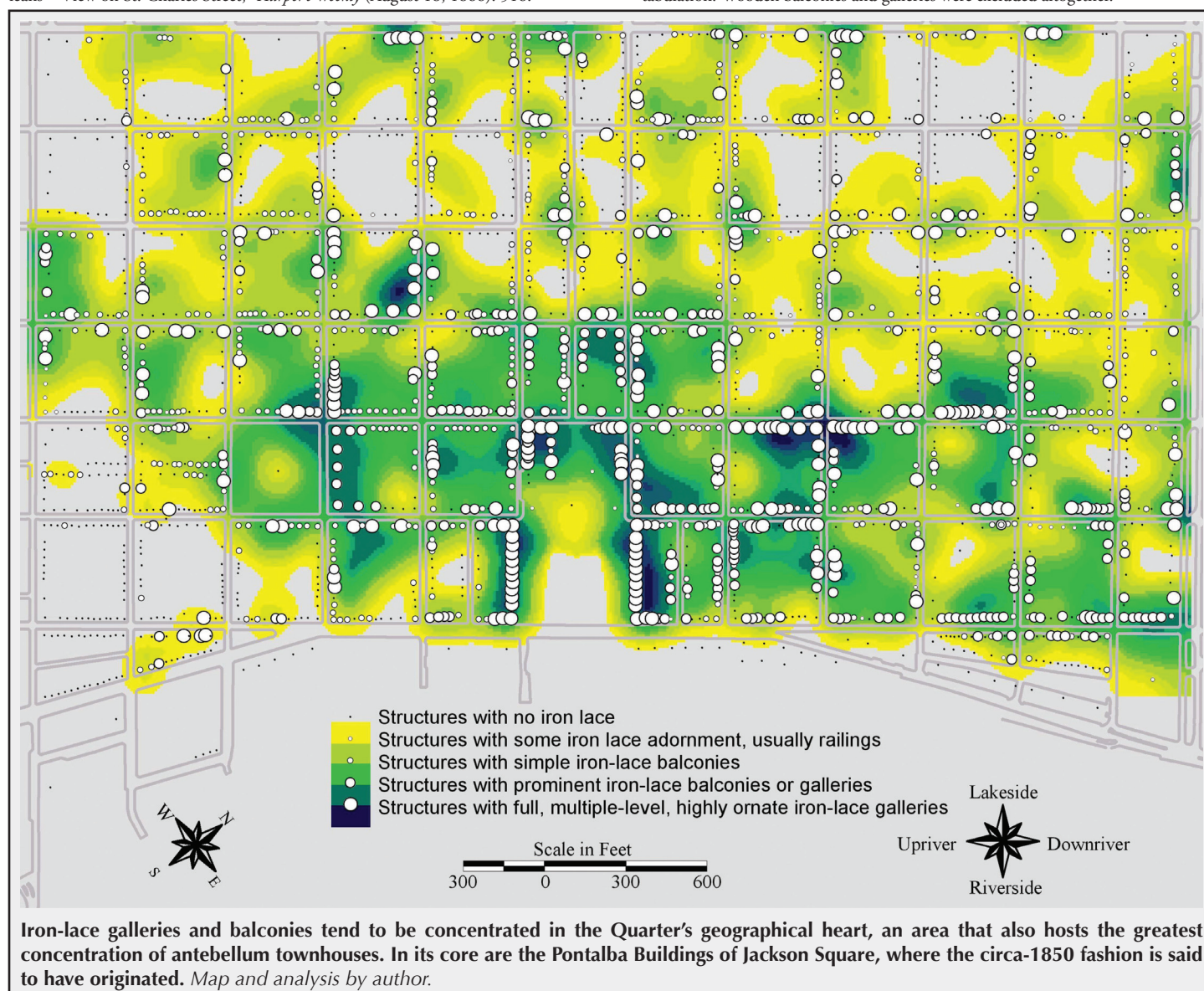
To address these questions, photographs of every building in the circa-1960s Vieux Carré Survey were reviewed, verified, and updated in the streets during late 2001, to quantify levels of iron-lace adornment. Each structure was ranked on an ordinal zero-to-four scale, where “0” indicated no iron whatsoever; “1” meant a minimal amount, usually a simple window grille; “2” implied simple, cantilevered balconies; “3” meant sizable galleries or multi-level balconies; and “4” was reserved for full-blown, highly ornate, multi-level, iron-lace galleries.⁹⁸ The results were mapped out for every building in the Quarter, according to the methodology described in the chapter, “An Architectural Geography of the French Quarter.” To accentuate the underlying patterns, the building-level data were interpolated into a continuous surface and color-coded from yellow (little iron), to green, to blue (classic iron-lace streetscapes), which appears in the accompanying map.

⁹⁵ Malcolm Heard, *French Quarter Manual: An Architectural Guide to New Orleans’ Vieux Carré* (New Orleans, 1977), 96.

⁹⁶ *Daily Picayune*, July 7, 1852, “City Intelligence” column.

⁹⁷ For example, see Alfred R. Waud’s 1866 sketch, “The Excitement in New Orleans—View on St. Charles Street,” *Harper’s Weekly* (August 18, 1866): 516.

⁹⁸ I did not distinguish between wrought and cast iron (most wrought-iron balconies fell in the “2” category), nor did I eliminate recently installed galleries, from the tabulation. Wooden balconies and galleries were excluded altogether.



The map shows that ornamental iron may be found at varying levels on almost every block of the French Quarter. But the distribution is not random: it tends to be concentrated in the district's geographical heart—those dozen or so blocks layered two deep around Jackson Square—then tapers out toward the edges of the Quarter. Among the most magnificent iron-lace streetscapes are Royal from St. Peter to Gov. Nicholls, St. Peter and St. Ann from Royal to Decatur, and the blocks around the Chartres/Dumaine intersection. This pattern seems to correlate spatially to the hypothesis that the Pontalba galleries instigated the fashion, as they are located in the crux of this cluster. But while the Pontalba Buildings probably explain the stylistic trend, do they explain the cluster? In other words, did neighbors “keep up with the Pontalbas” and adopt the fashion because of spatial proximity? There might have been some element of neighborly competition, if not here than in nearby blocks, where mismatched galleries may be seen on adjacent separate buildings. More likely, the pattern simply reflects economic geography: this central area formed the wealthy residential blocks of the French Quarter, where scores of magnificent residential townhouses arose during the 1830s through 1850s. It is a pattern reiterated in terms of structural age, style, and type, visible in the maps of the previous three chapters. Of the 803 townhouses counted in the Vieux Carré Survey for this analysis, 51 percent had substantial or full-blown galleries, while only 11 percent had no iron galleries or balconies at all. Wealthy townhouse-owners may have been impressed with Pontalba's bold new fashion statement, saw its aesthetic and utilitarian value, had the financial wherewithal to copy it, and did so, either by adding them to extant buildings or including them with new ones. When the Pontalba Buildings were completed in 1851, the *Daily Delta* lauded “that spirited and patriotic lady, Madam Pontalba,” commenting, “seldom do we see members, however rich, of our community, tax their fortunes to such a degree for the...place of their nativity, and when such generosity is evinced, it is worth noting, as *encouragement to other wealthy individuals*.”⁹⁹ Encouraged they were: the appearance of iron-lace galleries on prosperous Esplanade Avenue, in the Garden District, and in other noncontiguous wealthy areas in the 1850s indicate that this trend diffused hierarchically, wherever affluent New Orleanians resided, rather than contagiously outward from a point of origin. The sparser iron concentrations in the lower, lake-side (northern) quadrant of the Quarter can be explained by the historically lower per capita income of this area, which produced a humbler housing stock (cottages and shotgun houses) that was not conducive to such adornment anyway. The dearth of iron in the upper Quarter is also explained by economic geography: this was the more commercial end of the district, where storehouses and commercial structures outnumber domestic buildings. Galleries and balconies being primarily for the leisurely use of people and not the storage

or sale of merchandise, we would expect to see less of them in commercial areas. The Vieux Carré Survey data support this premise: of the 472 storehouses counted, 53 percent had no iron galleries or balconies at all; 26 percent had simple balconies, and only 7 percent had full, multi-story, ornate iron galleries.

The Vieux Carré Survey data also shed light on when iron galleries arose, though they fall short of answering the question directly. Since ornamental iron was often added to extant buildings—a trend that continues to this day—the construction date (which is recorded in the survey) is often not the best guide to the gallery date (which is not recorded.) The average construction date of those structures with no or little iron lace was computed at 1875, reflecting the many turn-of-the-century shotgun houses and other later buildings unsuitable for such adornment. But for all other levels of iron lace the mean construction dates of the host structures were 1853 (“2”), 1855 (“3”), and 1855 (“4”). These figures generally substantiate the historical evidence for a circa-1850s origin to this feature, and concur with Ann M. Masson's and Lydia H. Schmalz's survey of prominent ornamental iron-workers and iron business, whose operations often dated from the 1850s.¹⁰⁰

This leaves us with perhaps the most intriguing question about New Orleans' iron-lace galleries: why here? Why is New Orleans alone among American cities in its association with this feature? It is certainly not the only city with iron-lace galleries. Other coastal and river cities that experienced nineteenth-century economic booms expressed their wealth through flamboyant ornamental iron, sometimes executed exactly like a New Orleans-style gallery. Examples may be found in Charleston, Savannah, Mobile, Baton Rouge, Natchez, Vicksburg, St. Louis, Natchitoches, and Galveston, to name a few. But New Orleans is the only American city where iron-lace galleries fill streetscapes, dominate extensive vistas, and affect the character of entire neighborhoods. Explaining why is a challenge. The popular hypothesis views galleries as an airy, spacious response to a dense and crowded urban environment in a hot, humid, rainy climate. Indeed, galleries are not usually seen in rural towns in frigid climates, but this hypothesis fails to explain why we do not see galleries throughout all crowded cities in warm climates. Cultural factors may be at work as well: perhaps those semitropical or tropical cities imbued with French and Spanish influences are more likely to exhibit the trait. (The semi-public domestic space afforded by galleries is more in line with southern European notions of privacy than with those of northern Anglo-Saxons.) Perhaps the presence of skilled African, Spanish, French, and Creole craftsmen enabled the tradition to take root. Economic factors may be involved: iron may have been cheaper in certain areas—port cities, for example—and the upper class may have had to be sufficiently large and moneyed before a cityscape of iron-lace developed. The cities' build-

⁹⁹ “The Place D’Armes,” *Daily Delta*, January 3, 1851, p. 2 (emphasis added).

¹⁰⁰ Masson and Schmalz, *Cast Iron and the Crescent City*, 45–50.



Balconies span half the width of the banquette (sidewalk) and are usually supported by cantilevers; earlier examples in the French Quarter incorporate wrought iron and tend to be simple and strong. Galleries cover the entire banquette, are supported by cast-iron columns and lace, and form semi-enclosed, semi-private space. They became popular around 1850, permanently transforming the New Orleans cityscape. In these photographs, balconies appear in the foreground, and galleries in the rear. Photographs by author, 2004.



ing stock would have to harbor a certain structural typology, namely brick townhouses, to host the features. "Probably the durability and permanence of the material, in an atmosphere where wood is often quickly destroyed...had something to do with it."¹⁰¹ Finally, cities would have had to manifest all the relevant variables precisely at the time when cast iron became cheap, available, and in national vogue, to become salient in this regard. Perhaps New Orleans had just the right mix of density, climate, cultural heritage, wealth, port accessibility, and housing stock, plus a "golden age" that coincided with an age of cast-iron ornamentation, to produce these splendid streetscapes. The question warrants further investigation.

That iron-lace galleries have become the iconic signature of New Orleans, then, may derive from a genuinely unique abundance. It may also arise from the worldwide mytholo-

gization of New Orleans, to foster a nostalgic and romantic ambience for the sale of products and experiences, for which pictographic references to iron lace offer convenient imagery. There are probably no Milwaukee-style restaurants in Japan or Atlanta-theme casinos in Las Vegas, hence no need to lift attributes from those cities to "brand" the offerings. New Orleans, on the other hand, is used incessantly to infuse allure to commercial products and services, from foods to cars to alcohol to music to gambling, not to mention to sell the city itself. A truly distinguishing aspect of New Orleans' material culture thus provides an opportune symbol to help consumers connect the city's mystique with the product at hand. The aesthetic appeal of the swirling patterns of iron lace, and its easy adaptation to restaurant décor, menu borders, jambalaya mix cartons, CD labels, television studio sets, theatrical stages, and "A Night in New Orleans" theme parties, cinches the arrangement. Madam Pontalba would marvel at how far her fashion has spread.

¹⁰¹ Nathaniel Cortlandt Curtis, *New Orleans: Its Old Houses, Shops, and Public Buildings* (Philadelphia and London, 1933), 144. Yet we see plenty of wooden balconies in steamy San Juan, Puerto Rico.