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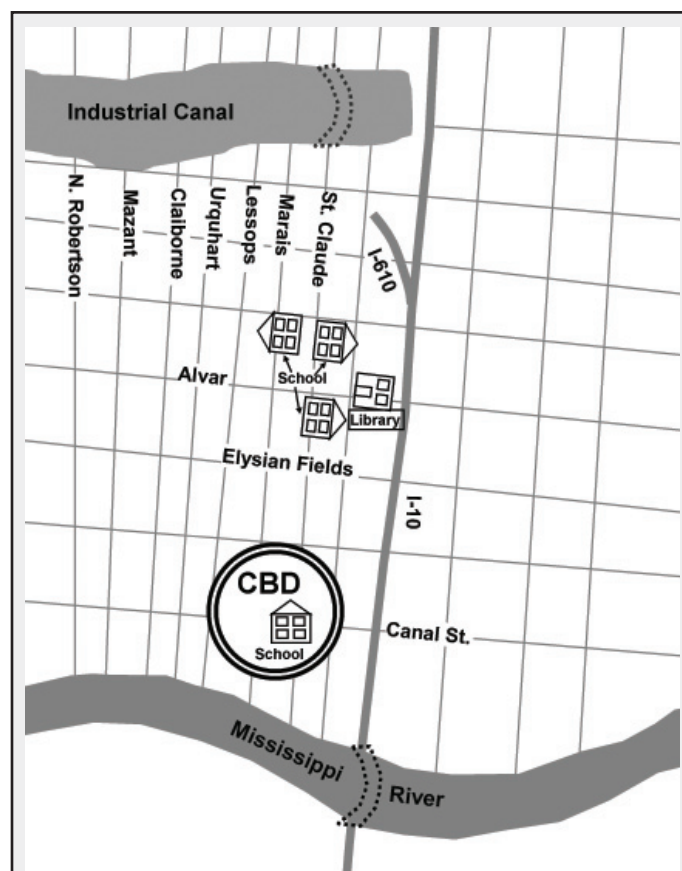
## UPTOWN/DOWNTOWN SHIFTING PERCEPTIONS, SHIFTING LINES

All but the smallest or most amorphous American communities perceive a “downtown” within their limits—an inner core from which the community grew, where major arteries intersect, where one finds municipal offices, and where businesses cluster (or once clustered). “Uptowns” are not as ubiquitous, pervading mostly in larger, older cities, and sharing less tangible but no less real characteristics: spacious residential living, an air of affluence and sophistication, the mottled shade of mature hardwoods, and a younger urban infrastructure. Cities with universally recognized downtowns and uptowns seem to exude a more distinguished and interesting aura than unvaried communities, giving newcomers a sense that a complex sociology and history have unfurled here, that a certain mystery known only to locals persists. (This may explain why some upwardly mobile cities declare their “Uptowns”—capital U—through official channels, whether popular usage warrants it or not.) The monotony of modern suburbs comes not solely from the homogeneity of the housing stock and predictability of the commercial strips, but also from the lack of perceptive regions within. It’s all the same, developed about the same time, in the same style, with no particular characteristics discerning one area from the next.

Not so New Orleans. One is hard-pressed to identify another American city with a more profound sense of *downtown* and *uptown*. Even Manhattan falls short. These areas are truly regions of the mind in the Crescent City, conjuring up vastly different images and informing manifold aspects of the city. History. Architecture. Infrastructure. Poverty and wealth. Race, religion, and ethnicity. Social scenes and gang rivalries. Accents.<sup>144</sup> Music.<sup>145</sup> Roofscapes and streetscapes. Mardi Gras Indian tribes and traditions. The smells, too, are distinct: the intermingling of cooking aromas, early morning humidity, and an unhealthy dose of automotive exhaust in downtown (particularly the French Quarter) recalls the emanations of Tegucigalpa or Quito or Mexico City. Uptown, particularly in the affluent areas, the fragrance of flowering gardens and sprawling oak trees recollects the fields and forests of the Felicianas. Even the tiniest residents, urban wildlife, reflect the distinction: hard-knock pigeons abound in the ancient streets and buildings of downtown, where squirrels are a rare sight; in leafy uptown, the ratio reverses. Traversing from downtown to uptown in New Orleans is a journey from the old to the new, from the city to the country, from the Caribbean to

<sup>144</sup> New *Awlins* is associated with downtown, and the tri-syllabic *Or-le-ans* with uptown. The difference may be primarily rooted in class distinctions, which in turn have geographical associations.

<sup>145</sup> “Creole style” jazz was played downtown; “canebrake” styles were heard uptown. Al Rose and Edmond Souchon, *New Orleans Jazz: A Family Album* (Baton Rouge, 1984), 215. See also Jerah Johnson, “Jim Crow Laws of the 1890s and the Origins of New Orleans Jazz: Correction of an Error,” *Popular Music* 19 (2000): 243-50.



People’s perceptions of space and place vary widely depending upon nativity, class, education, upbringing, age, race, and other factors. Locals tend to perceive New Orleans in terms of wards, school districts, and church parishes, while transplants often divide space into faubourgs and historic districts. This map shows how one seventeen-year-old public school student, a young African American male born and raised in the Ninth Ward, perceives his city. Level of detail is highest in the places most important to him, around his home and school in the Ninth Ward, in another school he attends in the CBD, and in a third school reached via I-10/I-610. Notice, however, the double-membrane around the CBD, and the complete absence of the world-famous French Quarter and all of uptown (three prosperous majority-white areas) from his world. Note also how he perceives the nearby Industrial Canal as wider than the inaccessible Mississippi River. A similar “mental map” drawn by an uptown Tulane student, a young professional new to the city, an elderly lifelong resident, or a tourist would reveal significant differences in geographical perceptions. Adapted from hand-drawn map. Special thanks to B.G./CBR Junior SEED Program, 2004.

the American. Everyone has their own idea of where downtown becomes uptown, and what sort of world lies on the other side; these perceptions in turn inform one’s perception of the city. Wrote Elsie Martinez and Margaret LeCorgne of their Depression-era childhood memories of the city, “we discovered that while we shared the same unique culture and customs of New Orleans, we often experienced them differently. One of us had an ‘uptown’ experience and the other had a ‘downtown’ experience.”<sup>146</sup>

Such strong senses of place pique the curiosity. What is the provenance of the downtown/uptown discourse? Where exactly are downtown and uptown, and how have these men-

<sup>146</sup> Elsie Martinez and Margaret LeCorgne, *Uptown/Downtown: Growing Up in New Orleans* (Lafayette, LA, 1986), xii.

tal regions changed over time? And what do these perceptions reveal about New Orleans?

### ORIGIN OF THE PERCEPTION

Two hypotheses explain the origin of this uniquely American perception. According to urbanist Robert M. Fogelson, the term *downtown* originated in early nineteenth-century Manhattan as an allusion to the southward location of the city's inner core. Northward, then, was "up," and when New York's booming commercial sector pushed residents out of the southern tip by the mid-nineteenth century, new residential areas blossomed northward on the island—"up town."<sup>147</sup> The second hypothesis views the term as a reference to the local hydrology. Since most early American cities abutted rivers, original city centers tended to be downriver while later developments expanded either "up" the flow-direction of the river, or "up" to higher elevations away from the river. In time, these references evolved into "downtown" and "uptown." The hypotheses are not incompatible (in the case of New York), but neither explains why we perceive downtowns and uptowns in many American cities today, regardless of cardinal directions and flow directions. This linguistic diffusion occurred, according to Fogelson, because, in mid-nineteenth-century New York, the stark difference between bustling, commercial downtown and placid, residential uptown superseded the original geographical basis of the terminology, and "the words gradually took on a functional meaning that reflected the changing structure of the city."<sup>148</sup> Stripped of their original cardinal-direction definition, *downtown/uptown* became convenient labels for the common phenomenon of a dense, inner commercial core adjoined by a spacious, outer residential zone. New Yorkers probably introduced this vocabulary to the nation as they visited other cities on long-term business trips or moved there permanently. Small towns, boasting only inner commercial districts, could only lay claim to their downtowns, but larger cities with suburbanization histories often developed perceptions of uptown districts as well. Both terms spread to various American cities in the mid- to late-nineteenth century, regardless of their orientation or hydrology.

A series of circumstances allowed downtown/uptown perceptions to take hold in the Crescent City. *Not* among them were the cardinal directions: New Orleans did expand northward, when the Faubourg Tremé was founded in 1810, but only after two earlier suburbs (Faubourgs Ste. Marie and Marigny, 1788 and 1805) developed to the southwest and northeast of the original city. Most subsequent urban expansion throughout the nineteenth century continued in a southwesterly direction, because the natural levees of the Mississippi availed more well-drained land there than the narrower levees to the east, or the backslope of the natural

levee to the north. To this day, cardinal directions are rarely used in the streets of New Orleans, and they clearly did not inform local perceptions of downtown and uptown.

Flow direction of the Mississippi, on the other hand, spoke explicitly to notions of "down" and "up," and since the southwesterly spread of the city equated to an upriver spread, the new semi-rural faubourgs became known as the "upper" portion of the city. Points east of the original city were, for the same hydrological reason, described as "lower." These directional terms were used as prepositions ("up the street," "below the city") or as adjectives ("upper part of the city," "Upper Banlieue," "Lower Banlieue"<sup>149</sup>).

The noun forms of this perception—uptown and downtown, which carry deeper connotations than the directional variants—seem not to have emerged from this indigenous hydrological observation, but rather by introduction from Northerners who settled in New Orleans during the high antebellum era. Considering that New York contributed liberally to New Orleans' growing Anglo-American population, and that Manhattan had particularly strong commercial ties to the Crescent City, the terms probably came down with New Yorkers as part of their cultural baggage that also contained the English language, Protestantism, Greek Revival architecture, common law, and other American traits. *Uptown* and *downtown* were, after all, English words in a French-speaking city, indicating that they were not indigenous concepts. The timing seems to corroborate this hypothesis: "downtown," according to Fogelson, emerged in New York in the early nineteenth century, while "uptown" followed around the century's second quarter, the same time when New Yorkers poured into New Orleans and the city grew dramatically in the upriver direction. These years also saw the installation of the horse-drawn streetcar line on present-day St. Charles Avenue (1835), which initiated development of the "streetcar suburbs" soon populated with many Northerners and now so closely associated with the image of uptown. Before long, the imported uptown/downtown terminology aligned with New Orleanians' new spatial self-perception. An example of early usage appeared in an anecdote published in the *Daily Picayune* in 1845:

Some of our "down-town" neighbors, whose vernacular language is the French, have a strange way, very often, of translating their ideas into English.<sup>150</sup>

At the risk of reading too much into one example, note the quotations around *down-town* (hyphenated in that nineteenth-century way), perhaps indicating that this was new jargon, heard enough to be used but not enough to be used inconspicuously. Note also the us-and-them viewpoint, "us" being the level-headed English-speakers on the upper side of town (the *Picayune's* office at this time was on the 300 block

<sup>147</sup> Robert M. Fogelson, *Downtown: Its Rise and Fall, 1880-1950* (New Haven and London, 2001), 9-10. I thank Thomas J. Campanella for recommending this source.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>149</sup> "The Upper Banlieue embrac[es] the suburbs of Duplantier, Soulet, La Course, Annunciation, and Religieuses....the Lower Banlieue embrac[es] the suburbs of Daunois and Clouet." *Banlieue* means suburbs, or in this context, suburban developments. John Adams Paxton, *The New Orleans Directory and Register* (New Orleans, 1822), 9. See also H. Didimus, *New Orleans As I Found It* (New York, 1845), 5.

<sup>150</sup> *Daily Picayune*, January 7, 1845, "City Intelligence" column.

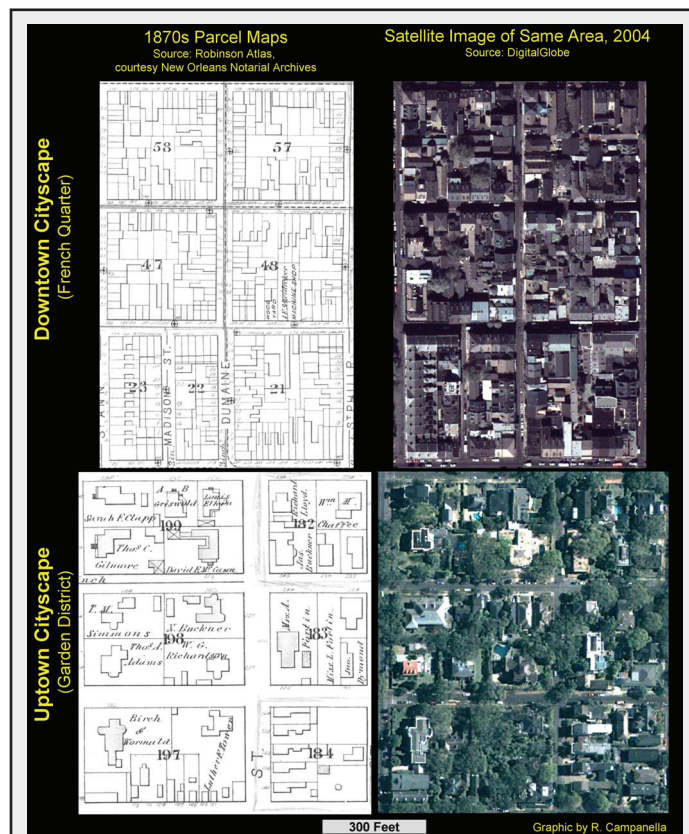
of Camp Street), and “them” being those strange Frenchmen on the “down-town” side, struggling with a new tongue with amusing results.

The *Daily Orleanian*, which served the Third Municipality below Esplanade Avenue, provides an example of usage from the downtown perspective. It noted that, in the wake of the 1849 Sauv  Crevasse flood, “the people up town are complaining of the want of tenements.... We would advise such persons, by all means, to come down here...where residences can be had on reasonable terms...compared with the rents demanded and obtained up town!”<sup>151</sup> Uptown by this time, as implied in the piece, was wealthier than downtown in general, and the Third Municipality, located as far downtown as one could go, was the poorest section of the city. (The piece did not run in the French-language edition of the paper, *L’Orl nais*, presumably because one would generally not address English-speaking uptowners in French.)

Also in 1849, the *Daily Picayune* predicted that the new market at Dryades and Melpomene would “prove highly advantageous to our up-town population.”<sup>152</sup> Another example appeared in the *Daily Picayune* in 1850, noting the “large

<sup>151</sup> *Daily Orleanian*, June 6, 1849, p. 2, col. 1.

<sup>152</sup> “Opening of the Dryades Street Market,” *Daily Picayune*, January 11, 1849, p. 2, col. 6.



This graphic juxtaposes six French Quarter blocks (top, along lower Dumaine Street) against six Garden District blocks (Prytania at Third and Fourth), to illustrate differences in housing density, setback distances, garden space, and foliage between downtown and uptown. These distinct cityscapes, traceable to European versus American notions of urban planning and man/nature relationships, deeply inform senses of place and states of mind in the modern city. Graphic by author; Robinson Atlas detail courtesy New Orleans Notarial Archives; DigitalGlobe imagery courtesy CBR.

crowds of our down-town citizens” catching a magic show at the St. Louis Saloon.<sup>153</sup> Such passing references are a far cry from universally held, heavily connoted perceptions of urban regions, but they indicate a start. It is possible that the 1852 reconsolidation of New Orleans, after sixteen years as three semi-autonomous municipalities, antiquated old terminology and led people to adopt the more stable and evocative terms of *uptown* and *downtown*. Use of that lexicon was sufficiently apparent to a tourist in 1869 to warrant mention in a letter to *Vanity Fair*:

You cannot help observing a change when, after strolling about in the business and American quarter, you step over [Canal Street] and promenade in the Creole quarter. The Americans adopt the term of “down-town” for the latter, and dignify their own residential quarter as “up-town.”<sup>154</sup>

Note the yoking of the word “dignify” with “up-town,” and the lack of any reference to river-flow direction. Note also the clear implication that this was an American import.

Another example comes from J. Curtis Waldo’s *Illustrated Visitors’ Guide to New Orleans* (1879), which described the location of a particular market as “considered very far up town”<sup>155</sup> when first built. But Waldo’s work—an early example of a tourist guidebook, as we know them today—did not consistently use the downtown/uptown dichotomy in regionizing the city for newcomers, something that is standard practice in today’s equivalents. Nor did his antebellum predecessors: the travelogues of John H.B. Latrobe (1834), Joseph Holt Ingraham (1835), H. Didimus (written 1835–1836), James S. Buckingham (1842), Benjamin Moore Norman (1845), and A. Oakey Hall (1851) made no reference to “uptown” or “downtown,” least of all in a significant interpretive manner. Nor was the terminology used in the introductory descriptions found in city directories of that era. The *Historical Sketch Book and Guide to New Orleans and Environs* (1885) introduced readers to myriad ways to divvy up the city—by wards, districts, neighborhoods, faubourgs, ethnic patterns, land uses such as “commercial centre of the city” or “residence quarter,” river-flow direction, and lake orientation—but used “down-town” and “up-town” only passingly, and rarely.<sup>156</sup> The official guide to the 1884–1885 World’s Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition, an event that helped put present-day uptown New Orleans on the map, also used this terminology in a passive, sporadic manner, to discern the “up-town lines of [street]cars” from the “down-town lines of cars,” putting the demarcation line clearly at Canal Street. (Those streetcars heading toward the lake were in a category of their own: the “rear of city lines of cars.”) More often, phrases such as “upper part of the city” and “cen-

<sup>153</sup> *Daily Picayune*, January 4, 1850, “City Intelligence” column, p. 2.

<sup>154</sup> “Life in New Orleans,” *Vanity Fair* (January 1, 1870): 6, letter dated December 1869.

<sup>155</sup> The reference was to St. Mary’s Market, on Tchoupitoulas between St. Joseph and present-day Howard, now considered to be in the Warehouse District—and downtown. J. Curtis Waldo, *Illustrated Visitors’ Guide to New Orleans* (New Orleans, 1879), 44.

<sup>156</sup> William H. Coleman. *Historical Sketch Book and Guide to New Orleans and Environs, with Map* (New York, 1885), 1-5, 82, 149.

tre of the city” were used.<sup>157</sup> Into the early twentieth century, documents such as a 1904 streetcar map of the city discerned the “American section of the city” from the “French section of the city,” even though these ethnic associations were fading by that time.<sup>158</sup> One unusual usage occurs in the title of Lulu King Saxon’s 1890 impressionistic painting, *Uptown Street*, which depicts a bucolic landscape in the rapidly developing area near present-day Audubon Park. Another appears in George Washington Cable’s 1880 novel, *The Grandissimes*, in which a reference to “that social variety of New Orleans life now distinguished as Uptown Creoles”<sup>159</sup> counters the traditional association of Creoles with downtown.

Judging from the documents they left behind, then, nineteenth-century observers of New Orleans were more likely to regionize the city by

- municipalities, municipal districts, wards, faubourgs, or neighborhoods;
  - cultural regions (“the Saxons of the Second Municipality...the Gauls of the First Municipality”<sup>160</sup>);
  - flow direction (“upper faubourg,” “lower banlieue”); or
  - age (“*vieux carré de la ville*,” “old square,” “new city”);
- than by “downtown” and “uptown.” These terms, while definitely in popular usage by the latter half of the nineteenth century, did not appear to carry the deeply connoted perceptions of place that they would assume in the twentieth century. Otherwise, it seems, they would have proliferated in the printed word of the day.

One way to quantify this perception is to count the number of businesses named “Uptown” or “Downtown” in annual directories. Entrepreneurs are usually quite savvy about public perceptions, making business names arguably a fair indicator of popular lexicon.<sup>161</sup> A perusal of the city directories of 1861, 1869, 1877, 1885, 1893, 1901, 1910, 1918, 1926, 1935, 1940, 1947, 1955, 1962, 1969, 1977, 1986, 1994, and 2001 shows that no listed business, organization, or agency started their name with either “Uptown” nor “Downtown” until around 1908. There were some entities named “Upper” as in the “Upper Station of City Police” near Lee Circle, as far back as 1861 and probably earlier, but “upper” lacks the connotations of “uptown.” Looking across the span of the twentieth century, we see that the terms became somewhat more popular toward the mid-1900s, but it is not until the late 1900s that the terminology really caught on among businesses (see graph).

Additional evidence about the regional perceptions of the past comes from news articles and the recollections of elders

<sup>157</sup> James S. Zacharie, *The New Orleans Guide and Exposition Hand Book* (New Orleans, 1885), 1, 20, 37-39.

<sup>158</sup> *Map of New Orleans Showing Street Railway System of the N.O. Railways Co.* (1904); New Orleans Railways Company.

<sup>159</sup> George Washington Cable, *The Grandissimes: A Story of Creole Life* (New York, 1880), 401.

<sup>160</sup> A. Oakey Hall, *The Manhattaner in New Orleans; or Phases of “Crescent City” Life* (New York, 1851), 162.

<sup>161</sup> Mapping business names by their locations is, of course, biased toward commercial districts at the expense of residential areas.

who took the time to pen their thoughts. One such piece, *Down Town New Orleans in the Early “Eighties:” Customs and Characters of Old Robertson Street and Its Neighborhood*, written by Elise Kirsch in 1951, recalls street life in the Seventh Ward in late nineteenth century, with colorful reminiscences of Creole French and Mardi Gras Indians. The early-1900s debate about siting new public buildings was couched strongly in downtown-versus-uptown terms (“Hurrah for Downtown”; “Downtown Is Taking the Lead;” “Downtown Will Have the New Postoffice;” “Downtown Will Have the New Court House”), with Canal Street clearly indicted as the Rubicon.<sup>162</sup> The more recent recollections of Elsie Martinez and Margaret LeCorgne, from the 1930s and 1940s, are so heavily predicated on these perceptions of place that the old friends structured their entire book around them, naming



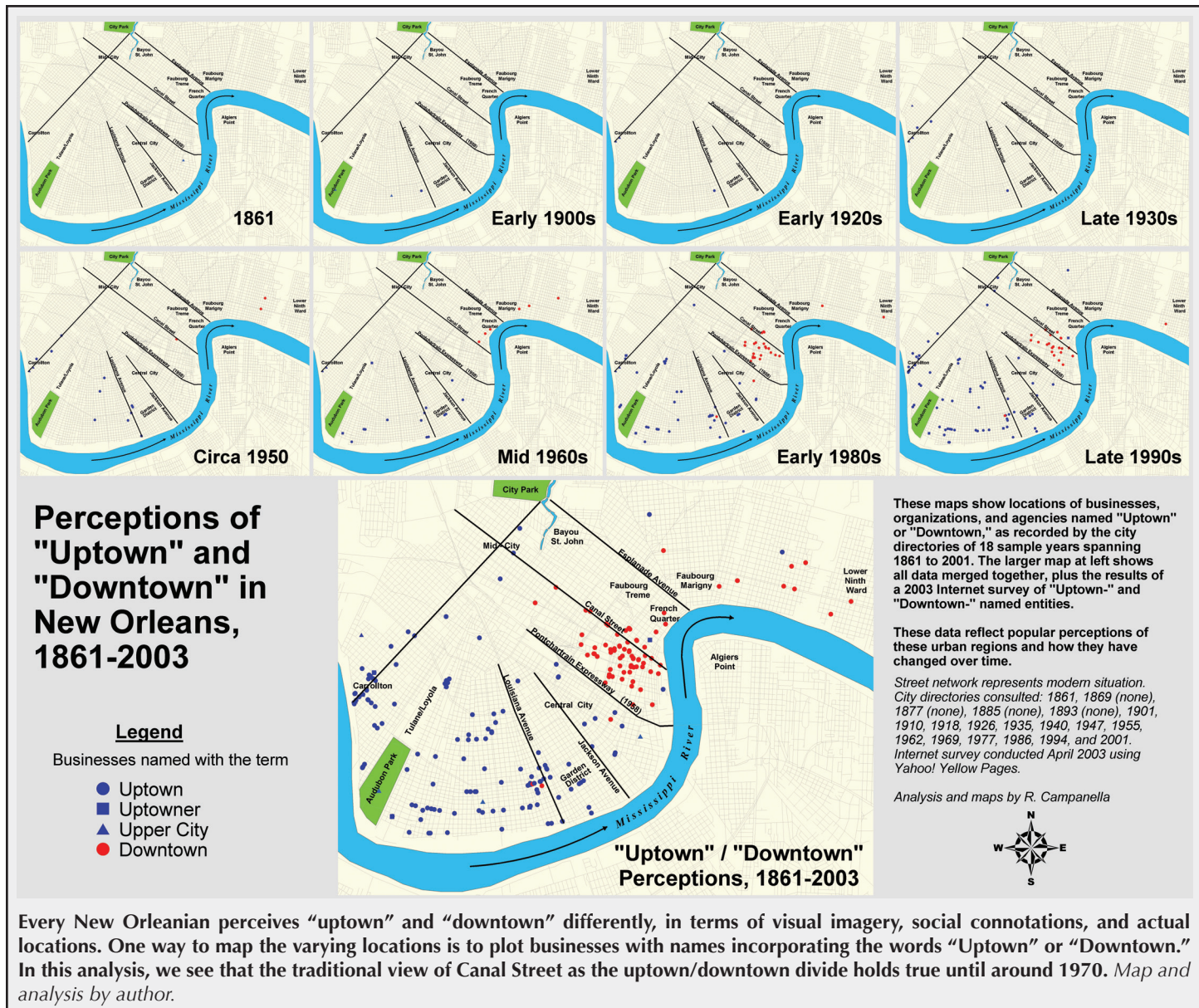
Canal Street, the traditional Rubicon. Photograph by Ronnie Cardwell with author, 2003.

the volume *Uptown/Downtown: Growing Up in New Orleans*. “Uptown” was a household word by 1923, when Hibernia Bank published a pamphlet celebrating the area’s attributes, describing it as “one of the most beautiful residential sections of the United States.” It delimited it as a half-mile-wide corridor straddling St. Charles Avenue from the muse streets (above Lee Circle) to Audubon Park, interestingly excluding the riverfront areas and Carrollton.<sup>163</sup>

In sum, downtown/uptown perceptions probably arrived in New Orleans from New York during the second quarter of the nineteenth century, but “laid low” in the local lexicon until the turn-of-the-century years, when they rose in popularity and began to assume their present-day connotations. If this assessment is accurate, one explanation behind the change may be the full development of the electrified streetcar system by the late 1800s, which fueled the development of uptown areas (“streetcar suburbs”). Another related reason is the rapid residential development of the Audubon Park area following the 1884-1885 World’s Industrial and Cotton

<sup>162</sup> “Down Town Also Wants That New Courthouse,” *Daily Picayune*, January 9, 1903, p. 5; and “Hurrah for Downtown,” *Daily Picayune*, January 13, 1903, p. 1. I thank Mark Tullis for bringing these articles to my attention.

<sup>163</sup> Hibernia Bank & Trust Company, *Uptown New Orleans: A Brief Sketch of Its Varied and Various Activities* (New Orleans, 1923), 5.



Every New Orleanian perceives "uptown" and "downtown" differently, in terms of visual imagery, social connotations, and actual locations. One way to map the varying locations is to plot businesses with names incorporating the words "Uptown" or "Downtown." In this analysis, we see that the traditional view of Canal Street as the uptown/downtown divide holds true until around 1970. Map and analysis by author.

Centennial Exposition, when many former plantations transformed from quasi-rural outskirts to a city of affluent homes and tree-lined streets—in a word, an *uptown*. The terminology seems only to have grown more popular during the course of the twentieth century, especially since around 1970, despite the national decline of downtowns everywhere and the supplanting of uptowns with outer suburbs and exurbs.

### LOCATIONS OF THE PERCEPTIONS

Ask New Orleanians to locate the dividing line between downtown and uptown, and most will respond in one of four ways: Canal Street, the Pontchartrain Expressway, Jackson Avenue, or Louisiana Avenue. Feelings on this matter can be surprisingly heartfelt, and differing opinions are often met with a slightly exaggerated, but ultimately good-natured, sense of disbelief.

Unquestionably, the original dividing line between downtown and uptown New Orleans was Canal Street. This perception predates the adoption of *downtown/uptown* terminology: observers of early nineteenth-century New Orleans routinely described Canal Street as a dividing line between

nearly everything that was old and Creole from all that was new and American (even though closer inspections would have revealed, culturally speaking, a blurrier separation). After the emergence of *downtown/uptown*, most descriptive accounts of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries continued to view Canal Street in that partitioning role (witness the 1869 *Vanity Fair* quote above). No less an authority than Charles L. Dufour wrote in 1986,

Uptown includes the area up-river from Canal Street; Downtown embraces the area down-river from Canal Street. Each of these sections of New Orleans, while sharing many things in common, has a lifestyle of its own—folklore and folkways, customs and traditions which differ in detail, if not in principle.<sup>164</sup>

Elsie Martinez and Margaret LeCorgne had no doubts about the dividing line between downtown and uptown in the circa-1940 New Orleans of their youth:

We don't think either of us at the time was aware of the "mystique" of Uptown New Orleans or the historical and cultural background of Downtown New Orleans. They were just the areas in which we lived and Canal Street was the dividing line between them. When one of us went to Canal Street she

<sup>164</sup> Martinez and LeCorgne, *Uptown/Downtown*, xi.

was going “uptown” and when the other to Canal Street she was going “downtown.”<sup>165</sup>

Many, perhaps most, New Orleanians retain this perception today, especially those who were born and raised in the city. Looking at the maps of business names (*Perceptions of “Uptown” and “Downtown” in New Orleans, 1861-2003*), we see that the Canal-Street-as-division view holds true in the data until around 1970. That is, all “Downtown”-named businesses were located below Canal Street, and all “Uptown”-businesses lay above Canal—usually *far* above.

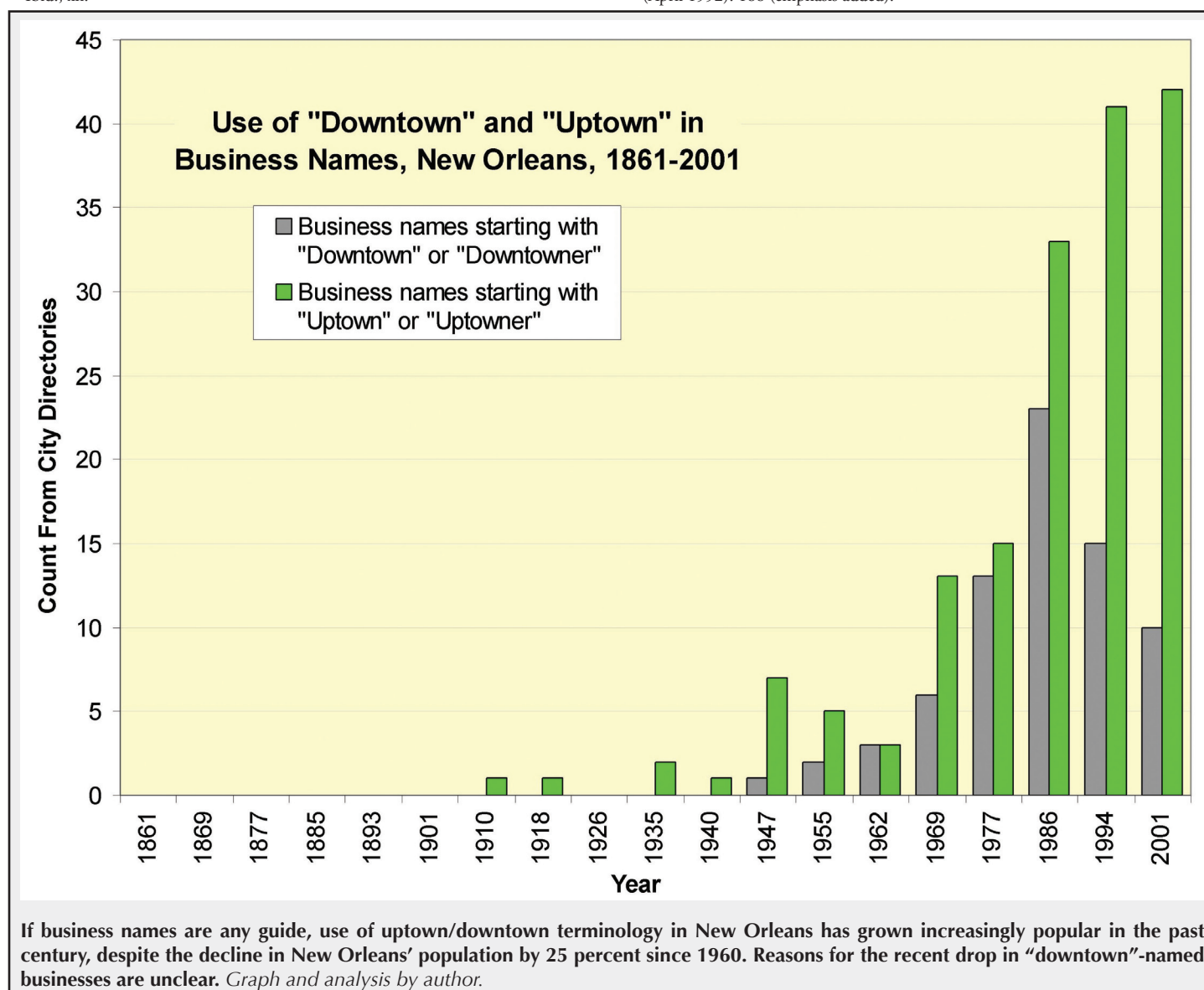
But something occurred by the early 1970s that apparently altered people’s perceptions. By that decade, the blocks immediately above Canal Street—that is, the former Faubourg St. Mary (Ste. Marie), a.k.a. the American Quarter, a.k.a. uptown—seem to have been annexed into downtown! Why? A number of transformations occurred in this era that may have swayed people to expand their perception of *downtown* beyond Canal Street. First, in the late 1950s, the Pontchartrain Expressway was built parallel to Howard Avenue to connect with the new Mississippi River bridge to Algiers. This elevated expressway established a stark, con-

spicuous barrier between the predominantly commercial zone below it and the mostly residential area above it—a barrier that separated two regions more physically disparate than those abutting Canal Street. Second, from 1965 to 1989, New Orleans’ skyline rose from a modest profile of 1920s-era office buildings to a jagged silhouette of modern skyscrapers. The presence of ninety-four high-rises<sup>166</sup> (not to mention the Superdome) sealed the transformation of this area from a historical residential uptown to an indisputable Central Business District of bright sunlight, stark shadows, glass boxes, and concrete canyons, a place that anyone would identify as a modern American downtown. “The skyscraper had a very important role in the development of a *consensus urban core* in large American cities,” serving “to anchor the central business district,”<sup>167</sup> observed urban geographer Larry

<sup>166</sup> Based on Emporis Building Database’s definition of “high rise” as a building at least twelve floors (about 114 feet) high. Most, though not all, of these structures are located in New Orleans’ CBD. Emporis’ “skyline ranking” system listed New Orleans as nineteenth in the nation, and seventieth in the world, in terms of the visual impact of its skyline—surprisingly high for a relatively small, poor Southern city. Hong Kong and New York, incidentally, ranked first and second, with 7,254 and 5,321 high-rises. Emporis Building Database, “Skyline Rankings,” <http://www.emporis.com/en/bu/sk/st/sr>, 2004.

<sup>167</sup> Larry R. Ford, “Reading the Skylines of American Cities,” *Geographical Review* 82 (April 1992): 188 (emphasis added).

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, xii.



Ford, adding that the downtowns of Philadelphia, Cleveland, and New York have also shifted with the rise of new skyscrapers. Thirdly, this era saw the beginning of the thirty-year decline of Canal Street from a regionally famous upscale shopping district to a raffish main drag of low-end retailers. Most streetcar lines were removed from the thoroughfare in 1964, and old-line department stores, shops, restaurants, and other city institutions folded so steadily into the late 1990s that almost none remained by the twenty-first century. The diminution of Canal Street may have erased the sophisticated air of the “Great Wide Way” in the popular perception, robbing it of its Rubicon role and annexing its surroundings to the gritty realities of downtown. Finally, recent decades also saw the introduction of the international jargon *Central Business District*, the rise of preservation activism, the development of zoning regulations, and the establishment of the Downtown Development District, all of which insinuated the notion of *downtown* to this area in increasingly formal manners. As a result, the consensus today, by the clear and overwhelming evidence of everyday usage, is that the former Faubourg St. Mary, today’s CBD, is not only downtown, but the *heart* of downtown. Those people incorporating this usage in their speech, if pressed, generally identify the Pontchartrain Expressway as the new downtown/uptown divide. Whereas a century ago, people in the French Quarter would have referred to Lafayette Square as being “in uptown,” today Quarterites would think of Lafayette Square as being “in the CBD,” whereas people in the modern uptown might think of the very same place as “in downtown.”

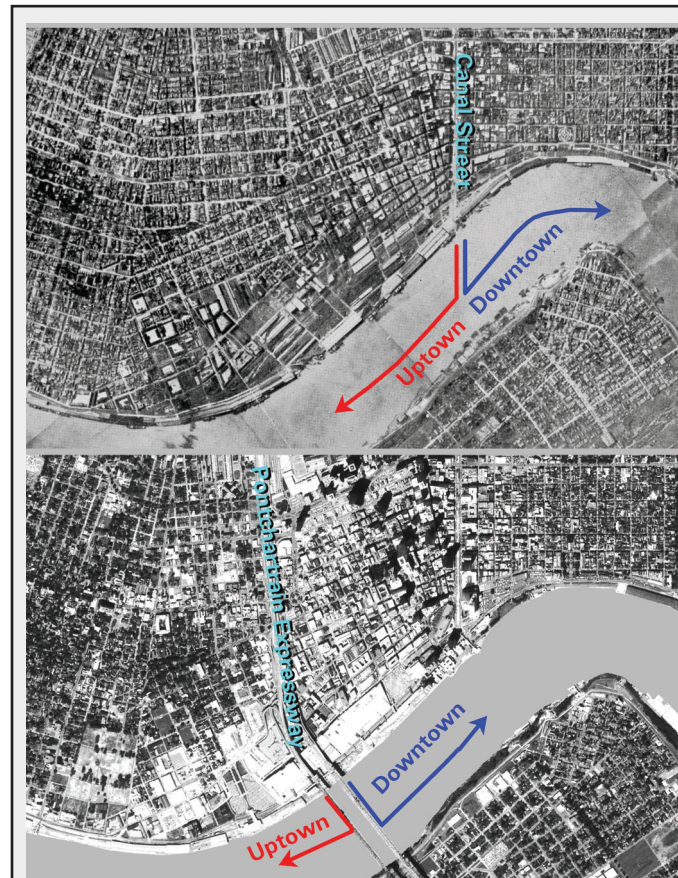
Yet a surprising number of locals still maintain the traditional view that Canal Street forms the division, pointing to the fact that the streets change names there (Royal becomes St. Charles; Decatur becomes Magazine, etc.) and that addresses, distances, and directions emanate from Canal Street. A representative of the *Times-Picayune*, to whom I posed this question, adamantly insisted that Canal Street was the one and only downtown/uptown divide and that he had never heard of any other usage<sup>168</sup>—despite the fact that his newspaper routinely employs the modern usage. A survey of the 114 *Times-Picayune* pieces about New Orleans (1993–2004) that contained the word *downtown* in the headline showed that 72 percent either directly stated or clearly implied that *downtown* spanned above Canal Street, usually the CBD and Warehouse District. Most of the remaining articles simply did not tie the term to specific sites or areas, and only a very few cited below-Canal sites exclusively, either consciously or unconsciously drawing upon the traditional definition.<sup>169</sup> Perusing the newspaper today, one would be hard pressed to find, for example, a new restaurant at St. Charles and Common described as an uptown bistro, or an incident at Camp

and Girod characterized as a crime in uptown New Orleans. These locales are considered downtown today, even though they are on the uptown *side* of Canal Street. Other media embrace the new definition: the June 2000 issue of *New Orleans Magazine* featured a cover story entitled “The Lights Are Brighter Downtown,” which celebrated the stylish mystique of downtown and delineated it as exactly the same area—the CBD—that an 1885 tour guide described as “Up-town.”<sup>170</sup> That so many New Orleanians nevertheless still cling to the old Canal Street view shows the power of tradition and perceptions of place in this city.

Those who disagree with both the Canal Street and the Pontchartrain Expressway perception may point to a third corridor, Jackson Avenue, as the downtown/uptown divide. One use of this definition is by the Uptown New Orleans Telephone Directory & Internet Guide, which views Jackson as the lower edge of uptown riverside of St. Charles, but Washington Avenue from St. Charles to South Claiborne (which is seen as the rear edge).<sup>171</sup> There is no historical precedence for this; Jackson Avenue was never a parish boundary, a district or ward line, nor even a line between faubourgs. The im-

<sup>170</sup> William H. Coleman, *Historical Sketch Book and Guide to New Orleans and Environs, with Map* (New York, 1885), 82. Interestingly, this 1885 source used the hyphenated “Up-town” to describe what we now call the CBD, and “Uptown” to refer to the comfortable residential district farther upriver, seemingly implying that the former was a relative location and the latter an absolute one.

<sup>171</sup> “Uptown New Orleans Telephone Directory & Internet Guide,” EATEL Sunshine Pages, <http://www.sunshinepages.com>.



Perceptions of the uptown/downtown divide seem to have shifted from Canal Street to the Pontchartrain Expressway in recent decades, illustrated here on a 1922 aerial photograph and a 2002 satellite image. Map by author.

<sup>168</sup> Personal communication with *Times-Picayune* staff (anonymous source), May 1, 2003.

<sup>169</sup> Lexis-Nexis survey conducted September 1, 2004. Articles that maintained the traditional below-Canal-Street usage of “downtown” were often written by Bettina Benoit, columnist for the *Downtown Picayune* supplement.

pression may derive from the fact that, starting in 1929, St. Charles Avenue below the Jackson intersection was zoned for light-industrial and commercial use, while the avenue above Jackson retained its affluent residential ambiance. Since then, lower St. Charles Avenue suffered numerous demolitions of stately old homes and saw their replacement with modern brick commercial structures. Today, few people live in this stretch, no graceful canopy of oaks shades the avenue, and the ambiance is of a rather mundane commercial strip, saved only by the streetcar and an occasional surviving historical structure. Above the Jackson Avenue intersection, all this changes: St. Charles exhibits its full uptown glory, with all the accoutrements. That some people see the Jackson line as the downtown/uptown line may reflect this change in land use.

Louisiana Avenue forms the fourth disputed boundary, but this is Uptown with a capital "U:" an official designation rather than a perception. The origin of this premise is the National Park Service's Uptown National Register Historic District, which uses Louisiana Avenue, Tchoupitoulas Street, South Claiborne Avenue, and Broadway as the main boundaries. Visitors' guidebooks have adopted this interpretation of Uptown for the sake of clarity. Gray zones and fuzziness are the norm in the perception of places, but they are anathema to those who seek to commodify and manage. This Uptown does not confusingly overlap or blend with other destina-



Most Americans would describe these cityscapes as "downtown." But according to the traditional perception of Canal Street as the dividing line, still held by many New Orleanians, these areas would be entirely uptown. Photographs by author and Ronnie Cardwell, 2003-2004.



tions, and enables a neat arrangement of chapters and a tidy restaurant matrix. At least one local television station reported using this interpretation in its news coverage.<sup>172</sup> Even as one of the nation's largest urban national historic districts, this region falls short of most natives' perception of uptown (with a small "u"), excluding such quintessentially uptown locales as the Garden District and Carrollton.

One final interpretation of "Uptown" is the official city neighborhood of that name, bounded by La Salle, Napoleon, Magazine, and Jefferson, which the architectural firm Curtis and Davis delineated in its 1973-1974 *New Orleans Housing and Neighborhood Preservation Study*. Labeling this arbitrary little trapezoid as "Uptown" is like referring to Wyoming alone as "The West." No one uses the term in this manner, but there it is in official city maps, nestled among Milan, Touro, West Riverside, Audubon/University, and Freret.<sup>173</sup> The Curtis and Davis study, which identified, delineated, and named scores of neighborhoods citywide, played a very influential role in altering perceptions of place and space in the city. "As a child of the '50s and '60s," recalled one middle-aged New Orleanian, "all I ever heard about was uptown, downtown, Kenner, Metairie, and "out by the lake." Now I hear about Bywater, Carrollton, Gert town, etc."<sup>174</sup> The study applied dozens of other hitherto unknown or antiquated monikers to specific areas, often pegged to census tract boundaries, which previously were known loosely as "uptown" or "downtown."

We have focused on the dividing line *between* downtown and uptown. An even blurrier line separates these regions from areas *behind* them. That is, at what point along Carrollton Avenue do residents consider their locale to no longer be "uptown," but rather Mid-City or Parkview or the City Park/Bayou St. John area? How far up Esplanade does one have to go to leave "downtown?" Is the lower Ninth Ward still "downtown," even though it is separated by a canal and nearly as far from lower Canal Street as Carrollton? The business-name maps show that, in 2001, downtown-named businesses were mostly clustered in the CBD and upper French Quarter, and indeed extended to the lower Ninth Ward. But nearly all were located between the Mississippi River and the North Claiborne Avenue area. According to these data, "downtown" remained below the Pontchartrain Expressway but within the confines of the historical city, which until a century ago was restricted to the narrow natural levee of the Mississippi.<sup>175</sup> Uptown-named businesses predominated within the natural levee of the Mississippi River and extending up the "Carroll-

<sup>172</sup> Personal telephone communication with WWL staff (anonymous source), May 1, 2003.

<sup>173</sup> Digital map file of New Orleans neighborhoods from the New Orleans City Planning Commission Geographic Information System.

<sup>174</sup> Yvonne Hiller, "Blake Pontchartrain-New Orleans Know-It-All," *Gambit Weekly*, December 21, 2004, p. 8.

<sup>175</sup> The 2003 map differs from the others because it was created through an Internet-based Yellow Pages search for business containing, rather than starting with, the words "downtown" and "uptown." It therefore includes entities such as "National Bank-Downtown Branch." According to this more liberal standard, "downtown" is used well up Canal Street, Tulane Avenue, and into Gentilly.

ton Spur,” again echoing the topographically based confines of the historical city.

### IMPLICATIONS OF THE PERCEPTIONS

Every New Orleanian carries his or her own mental map of downtown and uptown, along with certain implications associated with those regions. Some thoughts on what those connotations may be:

**History** — The maps indicate that New Orleanians use *downtown/uptown*, regardless of exact limits, to refer to the older, historical, architecturally significant sections of the city, to the exclusion of the mid-twentieth century subdivisions on the lakeside and eastern sections of the parish. The terms seem to be reserved for those picturesque neighborhoods that made New Orleans famous; they resist application to places with ranch houses and cul-de-sacs.

**Foliage** — Perhaps the single most dominating characteristic of uptown is the prevalence of mature trees, often forming canopies so contiguous that, when viewed from a perch, a veritable forest is formed. This distinction can be traced back to the American preference for spacious, set-back homes with gardens, which, in time, lent itself to the growth of mature trees. Such a sight in downtown New Orleans is about as common as a squirrel, which is to say, rare but not wholly absent. Downtown, for the most part, exhibits a hard urban edge, where structures and open sky dominate the vistas overhead, and where one is much more likely to see cliff-loving pigeons than tree-dwelling squirrels. Popular perceptions of uptown and downtown in New Orleans may be predicated on this dramatic difference in the cityscape. It may also explain why Central City may not be universally considered “uptown,” despite its upper location: it lacks trees and exhibits the gritty aesthetic of a downtown neighborhood. But by this same hypothesis, oak-lined Esplanade Avenue might be considered “uptown,” which it certainly is not.

**External and Indigenous Influences** — Esplanade Avenue offers an interesting test case to help deconstruct how New Orleanians use this terminology. If one understands “uptown” by either of its original Manhattan meanings—as a residential area forming northward of the original city or an affluent residential inner suburb—then Esplanade Avenue would qualify as “uptown” on both accords. Its mansions were even built about the same time, and in the same mix of international architectural styles, as those uptown. Yet no one ever describes Esplanade Avenue as uptown, a fact borne out in the maps. This suggests that New Orleans’ adoption of New York’s original downtown/uptown terminology, if indeed that was its provenance, has been locally adapted to account for river-flow direction, location with respect to Canal Street, and possibly other factors. Like New Orleans itself, *uptown* and *downtown* are an amalgam of external and indigenous influences.

**Race and Class** — In the modern American parlance, the adjective *inner-city* often serves as a euphemism for poor and black, while “suburban” implies wealthier and white. *Downtown/uptown* carry somewhat similar connotations, both in New Orleans and nationwide. A study conducted in New York City in the 1960s suggested that uptown/downtown lifestyle differences were primarily rooted in “differences in class, ethnicity, and family status,” not simply distance from the urban core.<sup>176</sup> But that sense in New Orleans is not borne out by statistics. While 2000 census data shows a generalized correlation of majority-white areas with uptown and majority-black blocks with downtown, there are so many significant exceptions—many riverside and back-of-town portions of uptown are black, while the quintessentially downtown French Quarter is one of the whitest neighborhoods in the city—that usage of uptown/downtown to infer white/black is, at most, metaphorical. But metaphors are not trivial: one often hears references to “uptown bluebloods,” “the downtown Creole community,” “the uptown aristocracy,” and other perceptions that speak volumes about the subtle social-geographical tensions of this city. There is no question that uptown, past and present, is generally wealthier than downtown. Racial distributions are different as well: uptown is more “clumped;” downtown is more intermingled. Uptown/downtown dichotomies have in fact informed the spatial distributions of a number of ethnic groups in the city’s history, including Anglo-Saxons and Creoles, Reform Jews and Orthodox Jews, and African Americans and Creoles of Color.

### PERSISTENCE OF THE SPATIAL PERCEPTION

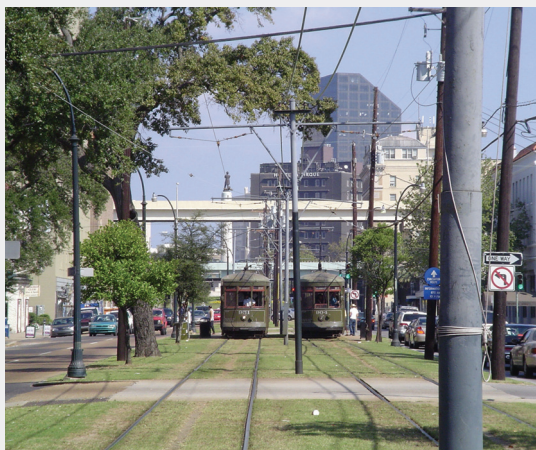
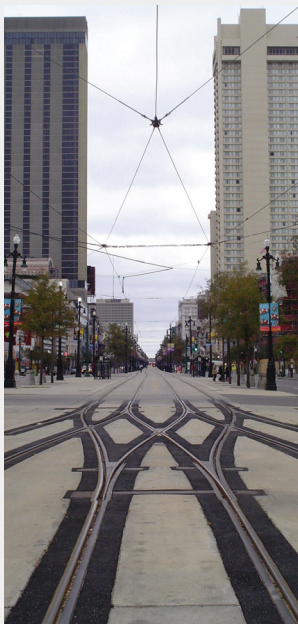
Since the city’s first expansion in 1788, New Orleanians have perceived urban space many ways: by faubourgs, municipalities, districts, and wards; by church and school districts; by ethnic associations; by neighborhood age and atmosphere; by nodes and nuclei; and by relative positions vis-à-vis Canal Street, the lake, or the river. The perceptions vary over time and within sub-segments of the population. Today, for example, native-born New Orleanians are more likely to regionize the city by wards, church parishes, and school districts, while transplants tend to favor recently revived historical names, like Faubourg St. John and Faubourg Tremé. What is “the Seventh Ward” to a native-born black Creole may be “Faubourg New Marigny” or “the Jazz Fest neighborhood” to a white transplant; what is the “upper Ninth Ward” to the working class may be “Bywater” to artists and bohemians. Many people spatially perceive the city by means of nodes such as favorite restaurants, stores, and nightspots, forming a perceptual map that can be shared within one’s social network, but not necessarily beyond it.<sup>177</sup> Locally born people,

<sup>176</sup> H. Laurence Ross, “Uptown and Downtown: A Study of Middle-Class Residential Areas,” *American Sociological Review* 30 (April 1965): 256.

<sup>177</sup> So central was a health-food store to the identity of an Esplanade Avenue neighborhood that some residents jokingly called the area “Faubourg Whole Foods,” a reference that might baffle those neighbors who could not afford to shop there.



Cityscapes uptown (left) and downtown (right), along the St. Charles Avenue-Royal Street corridor. Today and historically, the two major uptown/downtown divisions are the elevated Pontchartrain Expressway and 171-foot-wide Canal Street, pictured at center below. *French Quarter roofscape* by Ronnie Cardwell, 2004; all others by author, 2003-2004.



particularly old-timers, are often unfamiliar with the trendy faubourg names, and many recently arrived transplants are at a loss when asked what ward they live in. Gangs a century ago often identified themselves by referencing neighborhood landmarks: the “St. Mary’s Market Gang” and “Shot Tower Gang,” for example, were named for two prominent features in the Irish Channel area.<sup>178</sup> Gangs today usually spatialize their identity by ward (e.g. “10<sup>th</sup> Ward Posse”), something regularly seen in graffiti and on commemorative T-shirts sold at gangster funerals. Wards often pop up in rap song titles and lyrics; one rapper in 2005 dubbed himself “Fifth Ward Weebie.” Preservationists and real estate agents, on the other hand, are universally enamoured with mellifluous historical monikers, under the theory that most people would rather live in “the Faubourg Bouligny” than in “the Thirteenth Ward.” Many older members of the black community still speak of the “back-of-town” and “front-of-town,” even though the backswamp that gave meaning to those terms has long been drained away.

Overriding all these regions is the uptown/downtown dichotomy, which, since its antebellum inception, has grown all the more popular in the past century. The graph *Use of “Downtown” and “Uptown” in Business Names, New Orleans, 1861-2001* shows the increasing usage of this terminology in recent decades, despite the decline in New Orleans’ population by 25 percent in that same period. The relevance of the dichotomy and the chasm they describe seem to grow only more real over time. Geographical homogenization, the norm in the United States, poses no threat to this diversity. However, the perceived dividing lines between these places—Canal Street? Pontchartrain Expressway? Jackson or Louisiana avenues?—may soon homogenize. In the early 2000s, the Downtown Development District, the city agency tasked to improve conditions in the area between Canal Street and the Pontchartrain Expressway,<sup>179</sup> erected “Welcome to New Orleans-Downtown” signs at strategic points in the shadows of the Pontchartrain Expressway. For the first time, the downtown/uptown perception is now literally demarcated in the streetscape, which may eventually mute debate about where the division lies. This geographer hopes not: the rich diversity of adamantly defended perceptions reveals more about this people and this place than a line on a map or a sign on a street.

And what is the meaning of these perceptions of place, with all their history and connotations and controversies? That New Orleans is, indeed, a world unto itself.

*Epilogue: The uptown/downtown lexicon gained millions of new speakers when Hurricane Katrina made worldwide headlines in the late summer of 2005. “Downtown New Orleans” became the dateline of the calamity: it was here where journalists encamped, where the tragedies of the Superdome and Convention Center unfolded, and where cameras captured the boldest looting and anarchy. To say the words “downtown New Orleans” in the weeks after Katrina was to spatialize the epicenter of the catastrophe, even though most flooding and fatalities occurred in distant subdivisions. “Uptown New Orleans,” on the other hand, was used by the out-of-town press as a synonym for the Garden District—that is, the leafy, prosperous historical residential district—and was often contextualized to mean a calm, well-guarded, and relatively undamaged counter-point to the chaos downtown. Months later, “Uptown,” in the mind of Mayor Ray Nagin, served as a spatial metaphor for the white upper class and its perceived apathy toward the scattered black underclass. “I don’t care what people are saying Uptown,” he ranted on Martin Luther King Day 2006; “this city will be chocolate at the end of the day!”*



In the early 2000s, a city agency erected “Welcome to New Orleans-Downtown” signs at strategic points near the Pontchartrain Expressway. For the first time, the downtown/uptown perception is now visually demarcated in the street, perhaps eventually muting debate about where the division lies. The city would be the poorer for it. Photograph by author, 2003.

Ronette King, “Grocery May Get Fresh Start,” *Times-Picayune*, June 10, 2005, C1-5.

<sup>178</sup> “Gus Laurer-Irish Channel,” April 29, 1941, Lyle Saxon interview manuscript, Federal Writers’ Project Folder 81, 1.

<sup>179</sup> The Downtown Development District’s official delineation of downtown uses Canal Street, North Claiborne Avenue, the Pontchartrain Expressway (to South Rampart Street), Howard Avenue (from South Rampart to Lee Circle), the Pontchartrain Expressway again, and Convention Center Boulevard, as its boundaries.

