

PART ONE

# UNDERSTANDING *the* CITY



## A **TOO-SHORT HISTORY** *of* **a FASCINATING PLACE**

NEW ORLEANS EXERCISES A STRANGE fascination over the rest of the country, and for good reasons. It's foreign territory at heart. It has flown three national flags—four if you count the Confederate States of America—and changed hands a couple more times than that. Like several other southern cities, it was “occupied” by then-hostile Union forces, had to repulse periodic Native American raids, and might briefly have flown a British flag as well if the Battle of New Orleans had turned out differently. (And, legend aside, it might easily have done so.) Andy Jackson notwithstanding, New Orleans's legal system is still based upon the Napoleonic code.

New Orleans has always lived an unnatural, enchanted life, an island dug out of the swamp some yards lower than the river that embraces it, tethered to the world by bridges, ferries, and causeways. Its proximity to the swamps exposed it to almost yearly epidemics; in the course of just over 100 years, between 1795 and 1905, an estimated 100,000 lives were lost to yellow fever, malaria, or cholera. The city has been flattened by hurricanes—and nearly erased by floods. And despite all that water around it, it has been destroyed twice by fire—catastrophes that wiped out almost the entire first century of construction.

New Orleans has been identified with both the most sophisticated Creole culture and good-ol'-boy corruption; it has produced a rich ethnic melting pot and the most virulent racism. Oil drillers rescued it in the first half of the 20th century, and international petroleum prices nearly strangled it in the second half. Mardi Gras is the world's most famous frat party, yet when New Orleans threw a World's Fair to celebrate itself, it nearly went bankrupt.

Somehow, as low as New Orleans gets—as much as ten feet below sea level in some places—it never quite goes under. Like that Ol’ Man River that surrounds it, like those famous good times, it just keeps rollin’ along.

## THE FRENCH FLAG

LOUISIANA STOOD AT THE CENTER of imperial rivalries right from the beginning. Columbus had claimed the New World for Spain, but the other seagoing nations also pursued colonial territory and (as they believed) Asian trade. In 1519, the Spanish explorer Alonzo de Pindea sailed at least past, if not up, the mouth of the Mississippi River. In 1534, Cartier sailed down the St. Lawrence waterways from Canada into the Northeast. Only a few years later, Hernando de Soto established settlements along the southeastern coast and actually reached the Mississippi, but Spanish attention was distracted by the conquest of Mexico and expansion into the American Southwest and northern South America.

In the 1670s, while the British were planting Union Jacks up and down the Atlantic Coast from Maine to the Carolinas, René Cavalier, Sieur de La Salle, set out from Canada with the intention of following the Illinois River all the way to the mouth of the Mississippi River in the Gulf of Mexico and, in 1682, claimed for France all the land drained by the Mississippi. He named the land Louisiana in honor of his sovereign lord King Louis XIV, the Sun King. Spain launched a huge manhunt in an attempt to intercept La Salle (when they finally reached his settlement, mutineers had already murdered him), but by the turn of the 17th century, other Frenchmen had established settlements all over Louisiana and what is now the state of Mississippi.

In 1699, the Sieur de Bienville planted a huge cross at the bend of the Mississippi River, and 20 years later his brother, the Sieur d’Iberville, stood looking out over the Mississippi where it connected to Lake Pontchartrain through Bayou St. John and ordered the construction of his “city.” He named it La Nouvelle Orleans in honor of Philippe, Duc d’Orleans, who was then the Regent of France.

It was probably fortunate that the name of the river eventually settled into Mississippi, a corruption of the name of the Mamese-Sipou tribe that lived along its banks. At various times, it was referred to as the Sassagoula, the St. Louis, the Escondido, and, most curiously for such a muddy stream, the Immaculate Conception.

Marshy, mosquito infested, and oppressively hot, New Orleans became the subject of a real-estate scam that might have inspired the Florida land boom of the 1920s. Posters and supposed eyewitness tales of the gold-rich territories flourished—most promulgated by an unscrupulous Scottish crony of the regent’s with the ironic name of John Law, though even he thought Baton Rouge a likelier site. These stories lured thousands of French optimists and opportunists to the

crude settlement, where they had little choice but to build the city they had been told already existed. Life in the settlement was so meager that in 1727, 88 women convicts were released from prison on the condition that they accompany the Ursuline nuns to New Orleans as mail-order brides.

These were not the only unaristocratic imports: in fact, there were probably far more exiles, common soldiers, petty thieves, intractable slaves, and indentured servants than blue-bloods, and fewer “casket girls”—the respectable but impoverished girls who also came out as wards of the Ursuline Sisters with their few belongings packed in small trunks—than street women. (It should be remembered, however, that life in Paris was very hard and that many young girls fell or were sold into prostitution as a last resort, so their records should perhaps not be held against them. They worked pitifully hard for their “freedom” in New Orleans, in any case.)

The city was laid out with the streets in a grid around a central plaza that faced the river—the Place d’Armes, now Jackson Square. *Vieux Carré* means “Old Square,” and the district almost was square: it extended from the Mississippi River to Rampart Street, which was once literally a rampart or wall, and from Esplanade Avenue to Iberville. (The *Vieux Carré* is generally said to extend to Canal Street, but Canal Street was originally intended to be just that: a canal dividing the French Quarter from the American sector in what is now the Central Business District.) Gradually the settlement grew, and merchants, traders, and practical farmers, as well as more restless aristocrats, came to Louisiana to stay. With them came the beginning of a caste system—aristocrats, merchants, farmers, and servants—that became a hallmark of Creole society.

## THE SPANISH FLAG

IN THE 1760S, TWO OTHER GROUPS ARRIVED, one in extremity and one in force. The first were the Acadians—or Cajuns—whom the British forced to leave their homes in Nova Scotia, and who settled in the bayou country west of New Orleans. Though most New Orleanians looked down on the Acadians—whom they considered countrified (to say the least) with their “uncultured” dialect—the Cajuns were French nationals driven into exile by France’s enemy, Britain, and so they were accepted.

The other new arrivals were anything but welcome: the Spanish. To their dismay, the ethnically proud New Orleanians discovered that King Louis XV had secretly surrendered the Louisiana Territory to his Spanish cousin Charles III (some writers say it was used to pay off huge gambling debts). The residents violently resisted the Spanish takeover and succeeded in routing the first commissioner sent from Madrid. But in 1769, a more determined mercenary with the intriguing name of Don Alexander O’Reilly, or “Bloody Reilly,” arrived with

an armada of 24 warships and 2,000 soldiers. He executed several of the most prominent rebels and made swift work of the insurrection. The Arsenal and Cabildo were erected on the square (*cabildo* means “governing body”), and French and Spanish aristocrats began inviting each other to dinner.

By the time the American colonies declared independence from Britain, New Orleans was an important Spanish outpost, which made the entrance of the Spanish on either side potentially decisive. Finally, Oliver Pollack, a New Orleans native who had become a member of the Continental Congress, persuaded Bernardo de Galvez, then-governor of New Orleans, to send a convoy of 20 supply ships to New York to aid the American revolutionaries. Great Britain then declared war on Spain, and de Galvez proceeded to roll over the British colonies along the Gulf of Mexico. Consequently, although Lafayette and the French are usually remembered as the key European allies of the American forces, the Spanish also played an essential role.

### THREE FLAGS IN FORTY YEARS

UNSETTLED AS NEW ORLEANS'S FIRST 60 YEARS had been, the next 40 or so were just as dramatic.

The city was devastated by two great fires, the first in 1788 and the second, which came before the community had rebuilt, in 1794. Only a couple of buildings remain from before that time: the Old Ursuline Convent, whose age is undisputed; and Madame John's Legacy, which is the subject of some debate. Determined to prevent a third disaster, the Spanish promulgated new building codes: all roofs had to be tiled, houses were to be made of brick or plaster rather than wood, high walls had to separate gardens so one fire wouldn't spread from house to house, and alleys were eliminated to prevent a bellows effect that might feed a blaze. So what is considered classical French Quarter architecture—arches, rear courtyards, and the famous ornamental wrought iron of the balconies and fences—is actually Spanish.

Meanwhile, the city's merchants and shippers continued to prosper. The city was not only a major exchange point between the eastern and midwestern markets, but it also controlled much of the European-American import and export trade. New Orleans's strategic position, both for trade and defense, made the city highly attractive to the new government of the United States, and a source of great regret to the French government. The city remained solidly French at heart, with a royalist cast of mind—another wave of French aristocrats had fled the Revolution in 1789—and so when Napoleon set out to establish his own French empire, New Orleans became a spoil of war. In 1800, by yet another secret treaty, Spain ceded the Louisiana Territory back to France.

Napoleon became a romantic idol to the colonists, who proudly named a battalion of streets after his battle victories—Marengo,

Milan, Perrier, Constantinople, Austerlitz, Cadiz, Valence, Jena, and even Forcher (after his great general)—not to mention Napoleon and Josephine themselves.

But when things began to turn sour for him, Napoleon decided to cash in the American colonies to finance his European campaigns and the effort to reclaim Santo Domingo (Haiti) after the great slave rebellion of Toussaint L'Ouverture. When President Thomas Jefferson offered to buy the port of New Orleans, Napoleon surprised him by offering to sell the entire Louisiana Territory—more than 500 million acres—for the sum of \$15 million (\$11 million in cash and \$4 million in forgiven debt). The sale was officially transacted in the Cabildo on December 20, 1803. Louisiana became a U.S. territory, and in 1812 it was granted statehood, a fact commemorated in the arrival of the first steamboat, the *New Orleans*. It is one of those curiosities of political history that this exchange, facilitated by British and Dutch banks, provided Napoleon with funds to continue his war against those same nations.

Despite Napoleon's apparent betrayal, in 1820 loyal New Orleans Creoles plotted to rescue the deposed emperor from his prison on St. Helena, but he died before it could be attempted. His death mask, however, was delivered to his followers and is still on display at the Cabildo.

The purchase of Louisiana by the United States inspired thousands of Americans—and not-yet-Americans, recent immigrants still looking to make their home there—to ride, raft, barge, stage, and even walk to the thriving port.



**In the first seven years after Louisiana became a state, the population of New Orleans more than tripled, from 8,000 to 25,000.**

A huge non-Creole community sprang up just upriver of the Vieux Carré, near the older sugar plantations and sometimes on top of them, and out into what is now the Garden District. The new arrivals were not exactly welcomed by the more-civilized-than-thou New Orleanians. The Scotch-Irish, who had already settled along the Carolina and Virginia mountains, were a new and particularly rough presence among the old Creole families; they took the word *riffing*, Gaelic for “rowing,” and contemptuously referred to all the laboring men and hardscrabble farmers who poled their way down the Mississippi as “riffraff.”

A huge drainage canal emptying into the river was marked out along the upriver edge of the French Quarter, ostensibly as part of the construction of the booming city but also to serve as an emotional (if not actual) barrier between the French Quarter, now also known as the First Municipality, and the American quadrant, officially the Second Municipality. In response to this subtle but elegant slight, the Americans laid out their sector, called Faubourg Ste. Marie, as a sort of mirror image of the Vieux Carré, with Lafayette Square (a seemingly polite tribute, but subtly claiming the marquis for the Americans) as a Place d'Armes;

St. Patrick's as a rival to St. Louis Cathedral; and Gallier Hall, which was the official City Hall until the 1950s, in place of the old Cabildo. Each had its own mayor and council, each its own regulations. The city was not officially united until 1852.

As it happened, the canal was never built; and for a time, although it was referred to as the "neutral ground," the swath was the scene of repeated brawls between Creole residents and brash, aggrandizing newcomers. Eventually a grand boulevard, divided by a great median, was paved through the strip instead and was dubbed Canal Street. Even so, it remained the acknowledged border between the two communities, and ever since, the New Orleans term for a median strip has been "neutral ground."

### "THE WHITES OF THEIR EYES"

THE WINNING OF THE BATTLE OF NEW ORLEANS has become such a touchstone of American pride that it has inspired hit songs (Johnny Horton's "Battle of New Orleans") and Hollywood epics (such as *The Buccaneer*, with Charlton Heston as Andrew Jackson and Yul Brynner as Jean Lafitte). The legend is glorious and shining—overnight excavations, secret meetings, Redcoats coming ghostlike through the fog to the banshee wailing of bagpipes, and Jackson shouting, "Don't shoot until you see the whites of their eyes!"

As is frequently the case with warfare, the truth is a little muddier. It is true, however, that the ruthless and lucky Jackson lost only 13 men while killing 2,000 British Army soldiers. It's probably true that without the combined efforts of 5,000 American, Creole, black, and Native American volunteers—not to mention the heavy arms and ammunition donated by Lafitte from his store of plunder—Jackson's Tennessee soldiers would have had a much harder time. And considering how intensely most Native Americans hated Jackson, who had commanded many brutal campaigns against the Creek and Choctaw tribes, their participation was even more remarkable.

The great irony is that the war was already over. The Treaty of Ghent had been signed a fortnight earlier. However, the campaign and victory served to unite the previously rancorous Creole and American communities, along with the smaller Scots-Irish, German, mestizo, and native-Creole outposts, and to establish New Orleans, distinctive as it might be, as an all-American city.

### FREE BLACKS, SLAVES, AND MULATTOS

THE PRESENCE OF AFRICAN AND CARIBBEAN BLACKS, both free and slave, in New Orleans can be documented as far back as the early clearing of the French Quarter neighborhood. In 1721, only a couple of years after the city's founding, there were 300 slaves for only 470 Europeans, and a *code noir* ("black code") was enacted in 1724 as a way of regulating the slave trade.

Free blacks, people “of color” (of mixed racial heritage in almost any proportion), and slaves made up a substantial portion of the population; the free blacks of New Orleans outnumbered those of any other southern city. In fact, by 1803 there were exactly as many blacks and mixed-race residents as whites: 4,000 of each, with 1,300 (40%) of the blacks being free. By the beginning of the Civil War, there were an estimated 30,000 free blacks in New Orleans.

An elaborate caste system emerged in which those of mixed race assumed social rank according to the amount of white (Creole) ancestry they could claim. *Mulattos* were half black, half white; *quadroons* were one-quarter black (that is, they had one black grandparent); and *octo-rooms* were one-eighth black. Women of mixed heritage were considered exceedingly handsome, and though the Creole aristocrats would never have dreamed of marrying a black woman, it was considered a mark of wealth and good taste—another bit of conspicuous consumption—to have a well-spoken, elegantly dressed black or biracial mistress. Many of these women became heads of the Creoles’ city homes, running second establishments, in effect, and if they were really lucky, might be freed at their masters’ death. If not, at least their children might be recognized as illegitimate offspring and left some money.

This was such a widely recognized custom that the Creoles might even formally court these women, making semiofficial offers to their mothers or owners that included property settlements, allowances, and the like. The annual quadroon balls became notorious tableaux of young “available” beauties, something between an auction and a debutante ball. Many of these balls were held in the Orleans Ballroom, a grandiose hall built in 1817 and now a special-events site within the Bourbon Orleans Hotel.

As time went on, the *gens de couleur libre*—literally, “free people of color”—developed their own quite-sophisticated culture. The sons of Creole aristocrats were often given first-class educations befitting their (fathers’) status, and some were even sent to Europe, where people of multiracial heritage were somewhat better accepted. Alexandre Dumas, the author and playwright (*The Three Musketeers*, *The Count of Monte Cristo*), was biracial, and by some accounts Napoleon’s Josephine, from the island of Martinique, had some mixed ancestry as well.



**Both free and slave blacks were allowed to congregate in Congo Square, near North Rampart and Orleans streets in what is now Louis Armstrong Park; as many as 2,000 gathered in this Choc-taw meeting place on Sundays to sing, dance, trade, eat, fight, and perhaps practice a little voodoo until the “curfew,” a cannon in the Place d’Armes, sounded. (In tribute, the first New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival in 1969 was held in Congo Square.)**

In the years just before the Civil War, New Orleans was the largest slave market in the nation. Blacks, even well-to-do persons of color

and freedmen, remained mere residents rather than citizens; blacks were not granted the right to vote until 1868, during Reconstruction and despite a campaign of terror by the Ku Klux Klan. They were effectively disenfranchised again in 1898 through a legislative maneuver requiring stringent proof of literacy. The vote was returned only in 1965, and although African Americans make up more than half of the city's population, the first black mayor, Ernest Morial, was not elected until 1978. (His son Marc became mayor in 1994 and was reelected in 1998.) Carnival krewes were not integrated until 1991, and some krewes boycotted or even withdrew from Mardi Gras when that happened.

## THE WAR BETWEEN THE STATES AND RECONSTRUCTION

THE PORT OF NEW ORLEANS PRACTICALLY floated on money in the decades after the Treaty of Ghent. Steamboats were in their prime; at the peak, there were some 11,000 plying the waters of the Mississippi; some of the luxury paddle wheelers, the “showboats,” had capacities of 600 and served 500 for dinner. It was, so to speak, the beginning of New Orleans's tourism industry. Cotton, tobacco, and the slave trade fueled the economy. By 1840 New Orleans was the second-busiest port in the nation, after New York, and had a population of more than 100,000. The Irish Famine of 1841 sparked another flood of immigrants, who settled northwest of the American sector in what gradually became known as the Irish Channel; a large number of Germans also moved in. Unfortunately, their arrivals were offset by the yellow-fever epidemic of 1853, which killed 11,000 people and incapacitated another 40,000, thus becoming the most deadly epidemic in the nation's history.

But in 1861, with the secession of the Confederate States, Louisiana changed flags for the fourth time—and with the taking of New Orleans by Union forces under Admiral David Farragut in 1862, flew its sixth.

The Union occupation (as New Orleanians saw it, although officially it ceased to be an “occupation” after 1865) lasted 15 years. New Orleans fell so early that its three-year occupation by “enemy troops” is the longest unfriendly occupation of any city in the United States, and amnesty was not granted Confederate officers until 1872. Reconstruction was a period of tremendous unrest in the entire region.

It was the rapid evolution of steamboat travel that helped resurrect interest in the city. As trips became faster and shorter, a craze for unofficial river races took hold, and steamboats vied to set speed records between St. Louis and New Orleans, often with great sums wagered on the outcomes. In the summer of 1870, the then-recordholder, the *Natchez*, belonging to Thomas P. Leathers, took up the challenge of Captain John W. Cannon, owner of the *Robert E. Lee*. The two steamed out of New Orleans on June 30 with a reported \$1 million,

much of it from European gamblers, riding on the race. By stripping his boat to a near shell, and arranging for midriver refueling—a very modern concept—Cannon managed to beat Captain Leathers by six and a half hours, arriving in St. Louis on Independence Day after a trip of 3 days, 18 hours, and 14 minutes. After that contest, the steamboat race craze subsided.

In the final two decades of the 19th century, as the reviving port began to bring new industry and pleasure seekers into the city, what might be called the Bourbon Street culture made its first bow. By 1880 there were almost 800 saloons operating in New Orleans, along with about 80 gambling parlors and even more bordellos, which, though officially banned, had never been prosecuted or even regulated. New Orleans was starting to develop a reputation as a party town, a reputation that many people resisted and resented.

In 1897, an alderman named Sidney Story proposed that all these activities be restricted to a red-light district along Basin Street adjoining the French Quarter. The business of vice prospered almost virtuously in what was quickly dubbed “Storyville.” The fanciest bordellos boasted not only elegant décor, sophisticated refreshments, and fine entertainment (these “sporting palaces” were where many of the great jazz improvisors got their start), but also well-dressed and willing ladies whose names, addresses, and racial heritage were listed in “blue books” that parodied the Social Register. One of the few surviving blue books is in the Old U.S. Mint Museum, along with several beautiful stained-glass windows from a bordello.

## **THE 20TH CENTURY AND THE NEW MILLENNIUM**

THE CENTURY BEGAN PROMISINGLY: oil was discovered in Louisiana, and the new dredging and refining industry pumped new money into the regional economy (and pollutants into the water). But a second potential moneymaker, jazz, which had struck its first ragtime notes just before the turn of the 19th century, was turned out: the Storyville neighborhood, the bordello area and center of the burgeoning “jass” movement, was closed and virtually bulldozed off the face of the earth. “King” Oliver, Jelly Roll Morton, and other prominent musicians moved north to New York and Chicago, launching successful careers and a nationwide craze.

Some New Orleanians might have felt that the Great War was being fought at home. A massive hurricane struck the city in 1915, devastating the economy and widening the division between the well-to-do and the subsistence farmers; and although a cure for the dreaded yellow fever had been discovered in the early years of the century, the great influenza epidemic of 1918 killed at least 35,000 residents. In 1927 one of the worst floods in history flattened the city, ushering the Depression into the state even before it struck the rest of the nation. (Such natural disasters are a repeated chorus in Louisiana history: Hurricanes Betsy, in

1965, and Camille, in 1969, caused billions of dollars' worth of damage, and periodic floods have caused even more damage.)

Louisiana would have remained a virtual feudal society had it not been for the antiestablishment revolution of Huey Long, the “Kingfish”—populist, demagogue, and drunk—who became governor in 1928 and bullied, bludgeoned, and blackmailed the state legislature into expanding public education, roads, and hospitals. Within a year he was indicted on bribery charges, but he was cleared and subsequently elected to the U.S. Senate. He began as a vocal New Deal supporter but soon embraced a populism that bordered on socialism and alarmed even the most liberal of Washingtonians. In 1935, while on a trip home, he was assassinated, but the Long arm of family law stretched on: his brother Earl was a two-time governor, and his son Russell served in the U.S. Senate from 1948 until 1986.

The growth of industry, particularly oil and natural gas, has been a boon to the state economy, if not the ecology. By 1980 more than 40 countries maintained consular offices in New Orleans, an indication of the power of a trade port that accommodated more than 5,000 international vessels every year. But in 1984 the massive World's Fair Exposition, set up along three wharves with an eye toward the rejuvenation of the Warehouse District, ran heavily into debt and, combined with the collapse in world oil prices, came perilously close to bankrupting the city. What resulted was symbolic: the harder industries turned to the softer tourism industry for partnership. The wharf areas that were renovated for the World's Fair are now the site of the Riverwalk Marketplace and the vast and expanding Convention Center, which brings in more than a million people a year by itself. The luxury hotels along Canal Street and in the burgeoning Warehouse District owe their existence primarily to the face-lift connected to the fair. And the legalization of gambling has brought in some money to the state (although the on-again, off-again construction of the massive Harrah's casino near the foot of Canal Street bankrupted many smaller subcontractors along the way). The Morial Convention Center was the biggest and busiest in the United States. New Orleans was booming into the 21st century.

And then came Katrina.

## WHEN *the* FLOODGATES OPENED

THERE IS NO UNDERESTIMATING THE IMPACT that Hurricane Katrina had, and continues to have, on New Orleans and the surrounding area. (Although much additional damage was caused by Hurricane Rita less than a month later, including the reflooding of the Lower

Ninth Ward and Gentilly neighborhoods, “Katrina” is often used as a shorthand for both calamities.) Even in a city that has withstood three centuries of plagues, fires, floods, wars, and horrific storms, August 29, 2005, looms as terrifying as September 11, 2001, in New York.

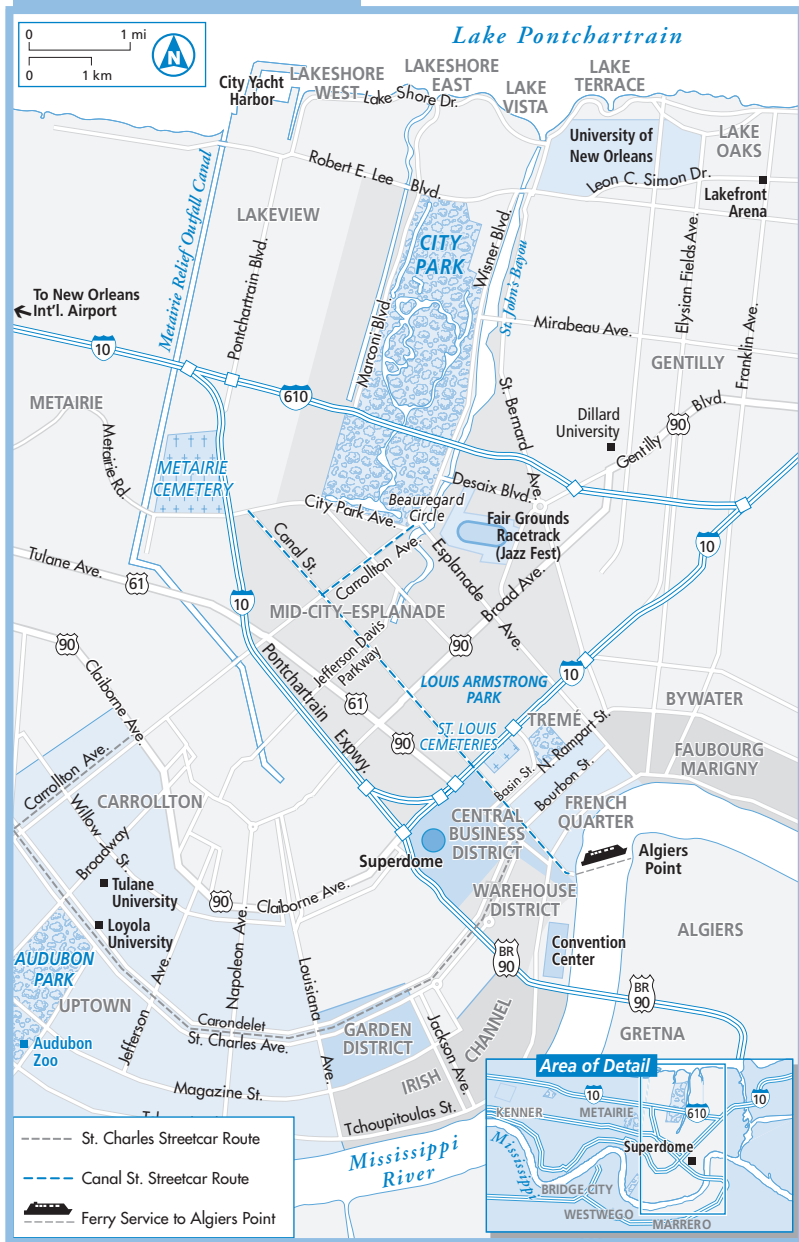
With the closure of the train stations and airports on August 28 and the fumbled fueling of school and commercial buses expected to transport locals, tens of thousands were trapped in the city. On the highways, already gridlocked traffic was immobilized as gas stations ran dry. Staffs at hospitals and health-care centers that were to have been served by those same buses were forced to evacuate as many patients as they could, and many stayed behind in shameful and rapidly degenerating circumstances. Mayor Ray Nagin’s mandatory evacuation order on the 28th, many hours after the danger of a cataclysmic strike was clear, only added to the chaos.

When Katrina finally struck—and she actually made landfall three times, once as a relatively mild Category 1 in South Florida, then at near-Category 4 force and again at Category 3 in Louisiana—she brought 8 to 10 inches of rain to the city, 15 inches to Slidell. Four-fifths of the city and surrounding areas were flooded, St. Bernard Parish entirely so. As the water rose, the Interstate 10 bridge to Slidell collapsed, and the Lake Pontchartrain Causeway was limited to emergency vehicles. Nearly a million people were without power or manner of escape, and as the water rose, hundreds struggled to hold on for rescue from attics and rooftops and boats.

If the Vietnam War was the “television war,” Katrina was the broadcast catastrophe, with scenes of devastation, hunger, panic, heroics, faith, and governmental fumbling at all levels played out day after day in the public eye. The once highly efficient Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), which had been incorporated into the Department of Homeland Security after 9/11, became a national laughingstock. Only days after being reassured by President Bush that “Brownie, you’re doing a heckuva job,” FEMA head Michael Brown was out of work. The 26,000 people shoehorned into the Superdome, designated as the city’s official “refuge of last resort,” quickly overwhelmed its facilities (and the roof was peeled back by the storm, causing more panic). Another 20,000 took shelter in the Morial Convention Center. Families were separated, children lost, the elderly and disabled in dire straits, the dead unmoved. Not until September 3 were buses sent to the Superdome, and it was another day before the Convention Center was completely evacuated.

So terrible was the film footage that nations around the world immediately promised money, relief workers, and supplies. Among the countries that came to America’s aid were Mexico, Canada, Germany, Russia, China, India, Pakistan, the none-too-affluent Bangladesh, Sri Lanka (which was itself still reeling from the tsunami of December 2004), and even Cuba and Venezuela, along with the wealthy Arab

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states of Kuwait (which pledged \$500 million) and Qatar (which gave \$100 million).

All in all, an estimated two-thirds of the city's pre-Katrina population, a disproportionate percentage of it black, was displaced by the storms. Of the more than 1,900 persons reported dead or missing afterward, nearly all were from Louisiana. One of the New Orleans area's incorporated parishes, St. Bernard, downriver to the east, lost 95% of its pre-Katrina residents. And a year later, fewer than 40% had returned.

At the same time, Katrina and Rita made clear the widening gaps between the well-to-do and working-class constituencies of New Orleans. (It is widely believed among many black New Orleanians that the levees were not breached but intentionally blown up, because the noise of the floodgates breaking was so explosive.) New Orleans residents in exile found it nearly impossible to claim what aid was forthcoming, many without fixed addresses or Internet access, or to acquire elaborate permits for razing or rebuilding. As many as half the transplanted former residents told surveyors they were better off in their new homes and had no plans to return.

A year after Katrina, the issues of what and how to rebuild were as raw as ever. Little of the promised federal aid had actually been delivered, and revelations that at least \$2 billion of it had been siphoned off by fraud or lost to incompetence added to the debate. Nearly half the mobile homes that were to house hurricane victims stood empty on an airfield in Arkansas while FEMA paid \$250,000 a month in rent; the trailers were finally given away to other aid organizations. Practically the entire Lower Ninth Ward and the Mid-City, Lakeview, and Gentilly neighborhoods remained gutted scenes of devastation; the "belts" (high-water marks) and spray-painted notes from rescue workers were still vivid, some on roofs and second floors. Whole blocks still lacked electricity. Some areas were even "highlights" of Katrina-themed bus tours—and as macabre as that may sound, it was a necessary shock for those who otherwise might have seen only the usual, and seemingly recovered, French Quarter and Garden District.

Even in better-off neighborhoods, the continuing economic problems could be glimpsed behind the gloss of new paint. Tourism and convention business was so diminished that airlines were only offering half as many seats to New Orleans as they had before the storms. Perhaps only a third of the city's restaurants had reopened, and many of those restricted their hours, partly because of slow business but also because of a critical shortage of workers (and of the employees who remained, many warned that skyrocketing rents might drive them away as well). A similar percentage of businesses were believed to be operating, with more trickling away.

Close to two-thirds of hotels had reopened, and most were expected to be up and running again by the end of 2006, but the ripple effect of closures, which was clear in New York after 9/11, was clear here as well. Produce suppliers, dishwashers, day laborers, laundry services, janitors, delivery drivers, shrimpers, and bartenders had fewer places to ply their wares and skills—and tips, which often account for a fair percentage of their earnings, were harder to come by.

Landscape companies and construction firms were doing good business, but even they complained of widespread theft of materials; the black market for stolen copper pipes, electrical cords, and power tools was particularly strong, making it even more difficult for victims of flooding to rebuild. Street crime and the police department's continuing manpower shortage forced the state to ask for help from National Guard troops and reservists.

Medical facilities were not only overwhelmed during the crisis but also fatally contaminated by the breakdown of facilities even before the flooding. Of the five hospitals just outside the French Quarter, five were still closed a year later; one, Tulane University Hospital, offered only emergency services. Doctors continued to warn of long-term effects from exposure to sewage-heavy flood waters along with mold and allergens remaining in the environment. Many schools, churches, community and social-services centers, and strip malls remained unoccupied and unrepaired.

The oil and grain industries took a serious hit for several months, as did the casinos, which not only employ hundreds of workers but also provide a substantial portion of the state's tax revenues. The buskers, street artists, and fortune-tellers who once lined Jackson Square and Royal Street became few and far between, and the queue of mule-driver carriages was much reduced.

There were, however, some better omens: by October of 2006, the 90,000-square-foot Erato Street Cruise Terminal had opened, the Julia Street Cruise Terminal was nearly completely renovated, and port officials were optimistic that the cruise-tourism industry would be at 75% of prehurricane business by year's end.

But even the size of the region is radically reduced. Prehurricane erosion of the Louisiana wetlands—thanks as much to the ill-conceived redirecting of the Mississippi River by the Army Corps of Engineers as anything else—already amounted to the loss of an entire football field every 38 minutes, or 25 square miles per year. (Wetlands are essential to braking the force of wind and storm surges.) In three-quarters of a century, Louisiana had lost 1.2 million acres, or the equivalent of the state of Delaware; Katrina and Rita together stripped another 75,000 acres. Within New Orleans itself, estimates of tree loss begin at 40,000, many of them the magnolias and live oaks of legend, while the rows of palms that had long languished along Canal Street revived, making it look more like Beverly Hills

than the Big Easy. In the bayous, the death of cypress trees has been epidemic.

It will take many years for New Orleans to completely recover, and it is unlikely that it will ever be quite the same. The French Quarter, which many already believed had become a simulacrum of itself, has lost even more of its longtime tenants. (Indeed, prior to Katrina and Rita, some locals had disputed the addition of a statue of Bourbon Street nightlife fixture Chris Owens to a park honoring Louis Armstrong, Pete Fountain, and Al Hirt; afterward, when Owens declared she would not consider moving out of the Quarter, the grumbling ceased.)

Some of the older mixed-race neighborhoods that were gentrifying, such as Faubourg Marigny and Tremé, are increasingly white; the debate over razing or redeveloping the Ninth Ward rages on. Many scientists even suggest that massive rebuilding may be a waste, since the city continues to sink, and that global warming means the Mississippi River and Gulf of Mexico will continue to rise. If New Orleans's soul was at stake before, it faces public judgment today.



## PARISHES, NEIGHBORHOODS, *and* DISTRICTS

IT MIGHT SURPRISE THOSE WHO THINK that “old” New Orleans is limited to the Vieux Carré and the Garden District, but metropolitan New Orleans has 16 National Historic Districts, including Tremé and Faubourg Marigny as well as the Warehouse District and the now critically and perhaps permanently altered Ninth Ward.

These are all within Orleans Parish (the central portion of greater New Orleans), which is roughly defined by the U-shaped bowl of the Mississippi River—the eponymous “crescent”—and lines running more or less north to Lake Pontchartrain. Many of these neighborhoods were originally laid out along fairly regular street grids, easily negotiated by newcomers, but because of the snaking of the Mississippi, the overall pattern of the center city now resembles a spider's web: sets of parallel streets occasionally are “pieced out” or head off at wider angles, and a few great, long, curving thoroughfares, such as St. Charles and Claiborne avenues and Magazine Street, follow the curve of the river. It takes a little getting used to.

Greater New Orleans also incorporates Jefferson Parish to the west beyond Audubon Park and St. Bernard Parish downriver to the east. (*Parishes* are to Louisiana what counties are to the rest of America.)

Only a few of New Orleans's neighborhoods are of real interest to tourists, but a quick overview of them may help you plan your trip. These are the same areas we have used to cluster special attractions, restaurants, nightlife, entertainment, and hotels.

## THE FRENCH QUARTER

ALTHOUGH *VIEUX CARRÉ* LITERALLY MEANS “Old Square,” the French Quarter is, of course, not perfectly square, as it rides a hump of Mississippi sidesaddle. And because it’s tilted, it’s actually closer to the shape of a diamond. (Ironically, considering the Creoles’ long rivalry with their American governors, the Quarter is a fair mirror image of Washington, D.C., only in miniature.) Nevertheless, it’s the easiest neighborhood to grasp logistically, because the streets do proceed in a perpendicular grid, most of them one way in alternating directions.

The boundaries are Canal Street to the southwest, North Rampart Street to the northwest, Esplanade Avenue on the northeast, and the concave line of the Mississippi to the southeast. (The legal border on the southwest is Iberville Street, but we have used Canal Street as the border throughout this book.) If you look at the neighborhood square-on, with Rampart running across the top of the grid, Jackson Square and Artillery Park are in the center at the bottom, like a stem.

This is tourist central, the neighborhood of **Bourbon Street** and all-night beignets, **St. Louis Cathedral**, **Preservation Hall**, and **Pat O’Brien’s** Hurricanes. It includes the oldest architectural examples in the city, the most inexhaustible souvenir vendors, and the finest antiques shops, plus a handful of franchised star-power hangouts à la the Hard Rock Cafe and House of Blues. The French Quarter is something of a year-round party, justly famous for strip joints and street drinking. It has also developed a second kind of “street life” in recent years, with some of the longtime street musicians giving way to groups of punk-styled teenagers and young adults, panhandlers, and vagrants, so you may want to be less freestyle with your partying. From experience, we can tell you that the no-smoking rules, though they do not affect bars as they do restaurants, nevertheless send more smokers out on to the sidewalk, and not all are too careful with their butts. There are still full-time residents here, but in general they have withdrawn to the quieter edges of the neighborhood.

For a full description, see the walking tour of the French Quarter in Part Eight, Sightseeing, Tours, and Attractions.

## CENTRAL BUSINESS DISTRICT

THE CENTRAL BUSINESS DISTRICT, generally shortened to the CBD, is a cleaver-shaped area adjoining the French Quarter on the southwest side of Canal Street and also bordering it on the northwest side of North Rampart. The CBD also includes two historic neighborhoods: the Warehouse District and the Tremé neighborhood, which itself is incorporated in the Warehouse District. On our map, the area is defined by South Claiborne Avenue/Interstate 10 on the northwest side, Business 90/Pontchartrain Expressway on the southwest, and the Mississippi on the east, with a jag from Canal Street across Rampart

to Esplanade. This is also the beginning of “Uptown” New Orleans, that is, upriver from Canal Street, as opposed to “Downtown.”

The CBD includes the **Ernest N. Morial Convention Center**, the **Louisiana Superdome and Arena**, **Riverwalk Marketplace**, **Harrah’s Casino**, the **World Trade Center**, and **City Hall**. In the beginning, this neighborhood was known as Faubourg Ste. Marie and was the site of some early sugar plantations. However, when the Americans flooded in after the Louisiana Purchase, they chopped up the old plantations and began settling on the “other” side of Canal Street. Though it was begun long after unification, the **U.S. Customs House** on Canal Street sits as a sort of hinge between the two neighborhoods. The heart of the CBD is **Lafayette Square**, the Americans’ answer to Jackson Square just as St. Patrick’s Cathedral was their version of St. Louis.

**Tremé** is one of the old Creole neighborhoods, part of the plantation of Claude Tremé that was bought by the city for residential development in the early 19th century. (The reputation of the same Claude Tremé was somewhat elevated when St. Claude Avenue was named after him.) Tremé is where the famous Storyville red-light district was established, now the site of a disgracefully decrepit housing project. Tremé is also the area where you’ll find **Louis Armstrong Park**, the **Mahalia Jackson Theatre for the Performing Arts**, and the famous **Congo Square**, home of jazz; **St. Louis Cemetery** (Nos. 1 and 2); several small museums of African American culture; and **Our Lady of Guadalupe Chapel**.

The **Warehouse District**, on the other hand, is a fairly recent concept. The huge old storehouses, light-industrial hangars, and factories on the streets south of Lafayette Square and west of the Convention Center originally had easy access to the docks. Many had been abandoned or allowed to fall into disrepair in the 1960s and 1970s, and the neighborhood was ripe for redevelopment. But when plans were made to transform the dock area for the World’s Fair, artists and performers began moving in, turning the old structures into lofts, studios, and display galleries. Now it’s a trendy area, with several hot restaurants, hotels, many of the city’s best galleries, most of its museums, and more coming in around Lee Circle. A strong campaign was mounted in the early 21st century to preserve and restore the buildings rather than raze them.

Hurricane Katrina set the neighborhood back substantially—the cult favorite Confederate Motorcycle Company, which had just moved into the District, had its home so mangled that it has relocated permanently to Birmingham—but it is recovering. And Donald Trump, who owns the famously battered Hyatt Regency Hotel near the Superdome, has proposed creating a serious jazz center in his restored multiuse project, much like the one he built for the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra in his huge Columbus Circle project in New York.

The trendiness of the Warehouse District is one of the factors that encouraged the revitalization of Canal Street not merely as a shopping strip but as a haven for high-profile hotels. These include the Orient-Express–owned **Windsor Court**; the **Ritz-Carlton**, constructed behind the facade of the old Maison Blanche department store; and one of two **W hotels** in the neighborhood. Even the old streetcar rails have been restored down the middle of Canal Street. (Unfortunately, much of the development near the foot of Canal was slowed by the ongoing financial travails of the huge Harrah's Casino.) For more information, see the walking tours of both the CBD and Warehouse District in Part Eight, Sightseeing, Tours, and Attractions.

### UPTOWN AND THE GARDEN DISTRICT

UPTOWN IS BORDERED ON THE NORTHWEST by Monticello Avenue, which strikes off from the rim of the river's "cup" and marks the line between Orleans and Jefferson parishes. So in one sense the area is at the far end of the Crescent City. (Some residents of suburban Metairie and Kenner would say that New Orleans's older families seem to think so, too.)

This area is also called University, sort of shorthand for the "university neighborhood," because of the adjoining campuses of **Loyola and Tulane universities**. It is split virtually down the middle by the St. Charles Avenue streetcar, which makes it, like the Garden District, easily accessible from the French Quarter or hotel district. Its most famous landmark is **Audubon Park**, which stretches from the universities right to the spot where the Mississippi River turns back north, with a fine view of both banks.

At the northwest edge of the area is the neighborhood called **Riverbend**, which is sort of Uptown's own counter-French Quarter, with boutiques and art galleries, bookstores, and a booming restaurant scene. See Part Ten, Shopping, for more information.

The **Garden District** is New Orleans's second-most famous neighborhood, the upper-class residential portion of the old American sector, and visually as well as historically a world away from the French Quarter. Originally there were some Creole plantation homes here, but after the turn of the 19th century, as Americans moved in above Canal Street, it became incorporated as the City of Lafayette (hence **Lafayette Cemetery** at its heart). It was annexed into New Orleans in 1852. Real-estate promoters and area residents constantly stretch the description, but the true Garden District is generally considered to fall between St. Charles Avenue and Magazine Street, Jackson Avenue on the northeast, and Louisiana Avenue on the west.

Although the area's streets occasionally shift a little as the Mississippi curves back up, the Garden District is fairly gridlike within its borders and a fine residential neighborhood for exploring (see the

walking tour of this area as well). **Magazine Street** had become somewhat run down, but its ongoing revitalization has made it a popular shopping area (see Part Ten, Shopping).

## FAUBOURG MARIGNY

THIS AREA, WHICH ADJOINS THE FRENCH QUARTER'S east side, has suffered a great deal more than the French Quarter from the vicissitudes of time and industrial development, but it contains many fine old houses (which are rapidly being rediscovered and restored).

Blanche DuBois's famous directions—"They told me to take a streetcar named Desire, transfer to one called Cemeteries, ride six blocks and get off at Elysian Fields"—owe most of their charm to streets in or near Faubourg Marigny, although in truth the routes wouldn't intersect. The area is named for one of the greatest charmers and greatest wastrels in New Orleans lore: Bernard Xavier Philippe de Marigny de Mandeville, who gambled away an immense fortune and gradually had to sell off his vast holdings to land developers. In 1807 Marigny subdivided his own plantation (*faubourg* means something akin to "suburb" or "cluster development"), which would become the second-oldest neighborhood in the city, and it was he who named Elysian Fields Avenue. He also gave the name Rue d'Amour, or "Street of Love," to what is today the far-less-poetic Rampart Street.

These days, the western part of Faubourg Marigny, from the edge of the French Quarter past Washington Square to Elysian Fields, is a mixed but lively neighborhood of artists, gays, hip straights, musicians, and young couples working to renovate the rambling old homes, something like the downtown Riverbend, but funkier and dicier. In fact, thanks to the number of jazz clubs that have taken root, especially along Frenchmen Street, it is in many ways the closest thing to the Bourbon Street of the true good old days. On the other hand, though it suffered less direct damage from the hurricanes than did other neighborhoods, the critical drop-off of tourist business and even local traffic has caused some smaller restaurants and businesses to close; so it is currently a little unevenly populated.

## MID-CITY-ESPLANADE

WITHIN THIS AREA ARE THE **Fair Grounds** racetrack, where the Jazz and Heritage Fest is held; the **University of New Orleans** and **Kiefer Lakefront Arena**; lovely **City Park** (which includes the **New Orleans Museum of Art** and **Botanical Gardens**); and **Bayou St. John**, the original passage the French took moving in from Lake Pontchartrain toward the Mississippi (and a Native American route long before that). The stretch of Esplanade Avenue near the Fair Grounds and bayou, known as **Esplanade Ridge**, makes for a nice mini-walking tour.

## The FICTIONAL CITY

THE STUNNING SEQUENCE OF EVENTS IN 2005 obviously inspired scores of books, many by respected local historians. Of the less voluminous tomes is our favorite, a collection of *Times-Picayune* columns written by our friend and sometime collaborator Chris Rose, titled *1 Dead in Attic*. Still, fiction always seems to convey more of the atmosphere and is more fun to take along on a vacation. Some of our personal favorites (not all currently in print, but widely available in secondhand stores and libraries) include the following.

Anne Rice's books about the Vampire Lestat, the Mayfair Witches, Lasher, and other characters have New Orleans settings, but far more gripping is her historical novel, *The Feast of All Saints*, about the free people of color and their culture in the years leading up to the Civil War. (For a list of New Orleans sites that figure in Rice's novels, see "Queen of the Damned," page 149.) And if you enjoy the old-fashioned style of murder mysteries, John Dickson Carr's *Papa La-Bas*, set amid the era of Marie Laveau and the quadroon balls, is as good as a voodoo tour of the French Quarter.

The posthumously published black-humor masterpiece *A Confederacy of Dunces*, by John Kennedy Toole, contains some of the best dialect and Bourbon Street camp of all time. Ellen Gilchrist's interrelated short stories of Garden District life in "Victory over Japan" and "In the Land of Dreamy Dreams," and the contemporary crime novels of James Lee Burke and his Cajun hero, Dave Robichaux, are quite different, but all first rate.

If you can find the books of George Washington Cable, you will love his late-19th-century stories of Creole romance and adventure. One of his stories inspired the name of **Madame John's Legacy**, a historic house in the French Quarter. The same is true of the novels of Frances Parkinson Keyes, notably *Dinner at Antoine's*, *Steamboat Gothic* (set at San Francisco Plantation), and *Madame Castel's Lodger*, about the house she and General P. G. T. Beauregard both lived in. (See a description of this house and Madame John's Legacy, now museums, in Part Eight, Sightseeing, Tours, and Attractions.)

Walker Percy might be the city's foremost "serious" novelist, edging out William Faulkner by dint of long residence (Faulkner only stayed a few years). Percy had an almost unequalled sense of the minute degrees of social distinction, coming as he did from one of the area's most prominent clans. Most of his novels, among them *The Moviegoer* and *Love among the Ruins*, are set in the New Orleans area. Faulkner's novel *Pylon* and several of his short stories have New Orleans backgrounds, as do Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *The Rose Tattoo*, and *Suddenly Last Summer*, among others. The residences of Williams, Faulkner, and several others are pointed out in the walking tour of the French Quarter described in Part Eight.

In recent years, Kate Chopin's works, particularly *The Awakening*, one of the first great feminist novels of the late 19th century (set in New Orleans), have been rediscovered, and deservedly so. William Sidney Porter, better known as O. Henry, lived in New Orleans for a little while before the turn of the 19th century, and some of his stories, including "Cherchez la Femme," are set in the city. In fact, local legend has it that he borrowed his famous pseudonym from a popular bartender, whose services were routinely summoned by a call of "Oh, Henry!" The city also makes several cameo appearances in Mark Twain's *Life on the Mississippi*, the sketches he wrote about piloting a steamboat.

Finally, if you'd like to raise a toast to your favorite writer, O. Henry fans should head to **Tujague's** (823 Decatur Street). For almost everyone else—Hearn, Twain, Walt Whitman, William Makepeace Thackeray, and even Oscar Wilde—go to the **Old Absinthe House** at 240 Bourbon Street. Ask for a Sazerac.

