

New Orleans: Catastrophe and the Art of Survival

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The prevailing French culture of New Orleans has been seen as an alternative to the Anglo American fascination with progress and materialism. Rebuilding the city will require the determination and technical ingenuity of the whole country. New Orleans will provide the soul.

New Orleans, like another great aquatic city, St Petersburg, has always flirted with disaster. The city owes its existence to America's greatest river, the Mississippi ('Father of Waters', according to the American Indians), yet that same natural gift has threatened New Orleans with extinction. And even though the threat of river flood is now remote because of many decades of water control projects, the city's subtropical geographic position near the Gulf of Mexico makes it particularly vulnerable to hurricanes, which gather terrifying strength in the warm waters of the Gulf. For the past few decades, New Orleans escaped a major hurricane, although there were several threats. Not since the staggering damage of Hurricane Betsy, in 1965, had New Orleans been hit with the full force of a powerful storm. Now, with the catastrophe of Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans has been pushed to the edge of annihilation.

Of course everyone who lived there knew that sooner or later 'the storm' would appear. For New Orleans is surrounded by water, not only from the river but also from Lake Pontchartrain, on the north shore of the city. (Because of the twisting path of the Mississippi, normal compass directions mean little in New Orleans. Residents speak either of 'toward the lake' or 'toward the river'.) The large, shallow body of water in Lake Pontchartrain poses a greater threat than direct damage from a hurricane's wind and driving rain, because the surge of a hurricane can literally push the lake into New Orleans, wiping away entire sections of the city.

This sense of looming disaster has much to do with the city's famous carefree attitude that has given it the nickname 'The Big Easy'. This means that nothing should be taken too seriously, except for good food and music. And the very waters that threaten the city with extinction – from the Mississippi River to the lakes, swamps, and bayous – provide New Orleans with a wealth of ingredients for its distinctive cuisine: crab, crayfish, oysters, shrimp, redfish, lobster and many types of fish. Indeed, there is more than one cuisine in New Orleans, for each of the waves of ethnic groups that passed through the city in the 18th and 19th centuries brought their own culinary traditions. The first to arrive were the French, at the beginning of the 18th century. The vast territory of the Mississippi River basin had been claimed for France in 1682 by the explorer Robert Rene Cavalier, Sieur de La Salle (usually referred to as La Salle), who named it Louisiana in honor of King Louis XIV. However, little was done in the area for the next three decades. Not until 1717 did the future site of New Orleans enter the notes of a French Canadian explorer,

Jean Baptiste Le Moyne, Sieur de Bienville, who noted that the local Indians used the high ground of the site as a portage between the Mississippi River and Lake Pontchartrain. The following year he brought 80 French convicts to clear ground along the river, thus establishing a practice of convict settlers in the early years of New Orleans. Just as in St Petersburg during its early days, few people wanted to live in New Orleans of their own free will.

If 1718 is considered the founding date of New Orleans, not until 1721 did it receive a street plan, designed by the French military engineer Adrien de Pauger, for a small district along the river now known as the Vieux Carre, or Old Quarter, or French Quarter. Thus both St Petersburg and New Orleans at approximately the same time acquired plans that were heavily influenced by the geometry of French city planning and military engineering. Because of fires and floods nothing has remained of the early French architecture, with the exception of the Ursuline Convent, begun in the 1730s and considered the oldest surviving building in the central part of the United States. All the other French buildings were destroyed in the fires of 1788 and 1794.

In fact most of the oldest buildings in contemporary New Orleans date from a period of Spanish rule that began in 1768, when Louis XV presented the Louisiana territory to his cousin Charles III of Spain. The Louisiana French, known as Creoles, were outraged by this cavalier transfer of power and drove the Spanish governor from the city. The rebellion – the first in North America against a European power – was quickly suppressed, but despite Spanish rule, New Orleans remained a French cultural enclave throughout the 18th century.

Although Napoleon reclaimed the Louisiana territory for France in 1803, military confrontations in Europe and the failure of a French army to suppress a slave uprising on the island of Haiti led the French Emperor in 1803 to sell this vast Louisiana territory to the young United States – one of the most fateful decisions in modern history. President Thomas Jefferson was well aware that to American pioneers, farmers and merchants, the acquisition of the Mississippi River was essential for prosperity and development.

The transfer of Louisiana and New Orleans to the United States initially had little impact on the traditional New Orleans Creole way of life. But after the defeat of a British army in the famous Battle of New Orleans in 1815, American influence strengthened, and New Orleans became a magnet for entrepreneurs, speculators and adventurers from Europe and the eastern part of the United States. The port expanded at a dizzying rate, and the city became one of the largest exporters in the country. During this period the traditional French and Spanish architecture of the French Quarter coexisted with American commercial architecture, both in the French Quarter and in the American district beyond the boundary of Canal Street – one of the widest streets in America and named for a canal that was never implemented.

Despite the strategic importance of New Orleans, however, the city faced a continued threat from the dreaded disease known as yellow fever, carried by tropical mosquitoes during the summer. Over 10,000 people died in the worst attack, in

1853. Only at the turn of the 20th century did improvements in public health measures and vaccines make the city completely safe from this scourge.

But even the difficult climate and the threat of disease could not prevent the rapid growth of New Orleans during the first half of the 19th century. The role of the Mississippi River as the country's main transportation route ensured the prosperity of New Orleans, which by 1840 became the third American city to reach a population of 100,000. The Irish and German communities were particularly large, and challenged the Creoles in economic supremacy. During this period the rising elite built their houses in the new areas of the city, such as the Garden District. These large mansions, built in brick and in wood, are yet another aspect of the distinctive attraction of New Orleans architecture. Their large colonnades not only suggest imposing architecture but also allowed greater circulation of air to relieve the summer heat – which lasts in New Orleans from May to November.

During the early 19th century New Orleans also had a large population of Afro-Americans, some of whom were free 'citizens of colour'. For the most part, however, the black population was held in slavery, and New Orleans had a large slave market. This situation could not continue in a democracy. In 1861 Louisiana joined the Confederacy, but New Orleans was soon taken by the Union armed forces, and remained under occupation until the end of the American Civil War in 1865. Although New Orleans was not damaged by fighting during the war, its flourishing economy and port were stagnant and bankrupt. America's economic destiny was now linked primarily to railroads in the centre of the country, not to the Mississippi River.

Yet despite the slow economic recovery and simmering racial conflict after the Civil War, New Orleans remained one of the most culturally diverse cities in America. In 1872 the famous French painter Eduard Degas spent several months in New Orleans, the city in which his mother had been born, with his Creole relatives, the Musson family. The city continued to attract writers, artists and musicians from many parts of the United States. The slow and gentle decline of the French Quarter interested American writers who saw New Orleans French culture as an alternative to Anglo-American fascination with progress and material development.

One of the most distinctive contributions of New Orleans to world artistic culture occurred at the turn of the 20th century with the rise of a new musical form known as 'jazz'. Evidence for the original meaning of the word is unclear (some local writers claim that it is related to a slang term for 'sex'). But it is obvious that the term, as well as the music itself, originated in the rich milieu of Afro-American culture in New Orleans. Jazz has always had many forms, but a major component is the rhythm and harmonic structure derived from African cultural traditions, which were particularly rich in New Orleans. White musicians also participated in the development of New Orleans jazz, particularly in the form known as 'Dixieland'. New Orleans music was also central to the development of rock and roll.

The cultural and economic base for this extraordinary musical activity was related to the city's deep love of music (the first French opera house in America was built in New Orleans), as well as to local traditions such as musical funerals and to a Latin-influenced culture that tolerated the existence of many 'gentlemen's clubs,' particularly in the area of Basin Street. For example, the great Louis Armstrong worked in this milieu as a youth.

This tolerance ended after America's entrance into the First World War in 1917. Public opinion in the rest of the country demanded the closing of the clubs as a threat to the young servicemen sent via the port of New Orleans to the front lines in Europe. Many jazzmen left for other cities such as St Louis, Chicago and New York. But the roots of jazz remained an undying part of New Orleans culture, and today the traditions of New Orleans jazz are reinvigorated by the great talent of musicians such as Ellis Marsalis and his son Wynton, the world-renowned master of the trumpet.

After the First World War, New Orleans remained an important port and commercial centre, but its significance was overshadowed by many other cities with a greater devotion to progress and industrial development. New Orleans and its often corrupt political organizations declined still further into a deep sleep, or torpor. Yet this stubborn refusal to confront the realities of modern life fascinated writers such as William Faulkner and Tennessee Williams, both of whom had long-standing connections to New Orleans. The work of these writers achieved acclaim throughout the world, including Russia, where the plays of Williams have been especially popular. For example, his masterpiece *A Streetcar Named Desire* is actually a play on words derived from a New Orleans streetcar line called Desire Street – originally a French name.

Although many New Orleans streetcar lines were closed in the mid-20th century, some of the oldest still exist and attract thousands of tourists each year. For example, one can take a leisurely trip on the St Charles streetcar line from Canal Street to Carrollton and Claiborne Streets (over 15 kilometres) and see some of the best examples of New Orleans' diverse architecture, from new office towers and old brick commercial buildings, to grand mansions built 100 years ago.

The St Charles line also passes by Tulane University, one of the most prestigious private universities in the southern part of the United States. Founded in 1834 as the College of Louisiana (including a medical school), the university expanded in the late 19th century after the donation of a large sum of money from Paul Tulane, a New Orleans merchant of French Protestant origins. At the end of the 19th century the university moved uptown and in 1894 built Gibson Hall, its first large stone building. This grand structure, designed in a romanesque style, is located opposite the imposing entrance to Audubon Park, named after the distinguished naturalist and painter who came to America from France and who lived in Louisiana during his most creative period. Today Tulane University attracts students from all regions of the United States and the world.

The role of this and other universities in New Orleans illustrates the continuing importance of the city as a cultural centre. Although other southern cities such as

Houston, Dallas and Atlanta have far surpassed New Orleans in wealth and population, New Orleans, with its great restaurants and music festivals, remained one of the most distinctive cities in America. Rebuilding the city will now require all of the determination and technical ingenuity that the country can provide. New Orleans will provide the soul.