An Old House in the Quarter:

Vice in the Vieux Carré of the 1930s

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Starting in the late nineteenth century, the moral character of the French Quarter suffered a slow deterioration. In the 1850s, the Vieux Carré was a thriving neighborhood occupied by various ethnic groups. Historian Joseph G. Tregle, who has studied census records from that decade, reveals that the "1850 free population in the Vieux Carré [was] made up of 54 percent foreign-born, 14 percent American-born, and 32 percent Louisiana-born, with little more than a third of these last meeting the traditional test of 'creole' as set down in native, all-white, French-Spanish terms." <1> As the twentieth century neared, prosperous residents of the Vieux Carré increasingly migrated from the district into other parts of the city. The remnant of French Quarter Creoles who attempted to preserve their French-Spanish heritage and their historical neighborhood were soon assimilated. By "the 1890s what might be called 'creole society' was already an anachronism in the city where once it had been the vital present, more foreign even to the old quarter than were the swarming Sicilians now crowding into its streets and alleyways," writes Tregle. <2> Immigrants to New Orleans often rented the vacant French Quarter homes abandoned and neglected by the French Quarter's former residents. With the proliferation of vacancies in the Vieux Carré and the movement of the upper and middle classes outward along St. Charles Avenue towards the areas developed for the 1884 Cotton Exposition, the French Quarter soon became a slum. Poor blacks and newly debarked and equally poverty stricken Sicilian immigrants quickly settled into the area. With their arrival, narcotics, alcohol, and other vices common to blighted neighborhoods gripped the Vieux Carré, excepting for the most part the trade in carnal pleasure since Storyville, New Orleans' legalized red-light district from 1897 to 1917, bordered the French Quarter along North Rampart Street. The passage of time brought a depressing awareness among local residents that the formerly elegant French Quarter had descended into a seemingly hopeless slum and that the extinction of its graceful character threatened the entire historical district. <3>

By the start of the First World War, the structures within the French Quarter greatly reflected the neighborhood's social degeneration. Mark Twain, writing of his 1880s visit to New Orleans in *Life on the Mississippi*, complimented these same buildings when they possessed their groomed architectural splendor: "The houses are massed in blocks; are austerely plain and dignified; uniform of pattern, with here and there a departure from it with pleasant effect; all are plastered on the outside, and nearly all have long, iron-railed verandas running along the several stories." <4> Of particular notice to the renowned author was "the deep, warm, varicolored stain with which time and the weather have enriched the plaster. It harmonizes with all the surroundings, and has as natural a look of belonging there as has the flush upon sunset clouds." <5> The harmony Twain mentions carried a different connotation for an observer in 1911, less than three decades later.

Although bearing admiration for the area known to New Orleanians as "Frenchtown," <6> Aymar Embury noticed less the sundry hues coloring the plaster as the different plasters themselves. The stucco applied to structures in the Vieux Carré "was composed of poor materials, constantly falling off and being patched up, and as the custom of the country seem to prohibit tinting an entire building over again for the sake of a few dozen patches, so a single building will have upon it every variety of color of the most exquisite faded tints imaginable, from orange to salmon or vermilion." <7> Rot and disrepair, though romanticized by Embury, overwhelmed the French Quarter.

Furthermore, several structures disappeared from the Vieux Carré, changing forever the neighborhood's landscape. New Orleanians alive in 1915 witnessed the near collapse of the once prestigious St. Louis Hotel located on the 600 block of St. Louis Street. The heavy metal dome centered on the roof plummeted through the abandoned hotel during a hurricane, leaving the once famous St. Louis beyond repair. Four years later, a fire gutted the French Opera House, stripping the French Quarter of a landmark which had continued to attract New Orleanians to the mostly shunned neighborhood throughout the 1900s and 1910s. A bland parking lot subsequently occupied the site instead. Sundry other structures suffered as well. Eventually, the close of the European conflict allowed the question of preservation to rise to the fore. Not only were the structures in the French Quarter desperately needful of repair but the extent of such work also became an issue. Mindful of the dominance of an enhancing yet inferior grade green paint coating the district's doors and trim which, when corroded by the weather, changed "into many shades of green, blue and yellow," an essayist in a 1918 edition of *The Architectural Record* pondered the consequences should sweeping restoration projects such as repainting be implemented. <8> On the other hand, it was "especially true of all buildings that they should be kept in repair." <9> Frequently, however, "the architectural unity of a fine old building is spoiled by the heavy hand of the ruthless restorer, and so its original character is lost." <10> Yet, even as late as the mid-1930s, few preservation projects rescued the decaying facades of the historical neighborhood. One commentator expressed bewilderment at how the buildings at 908-10 and 912-14 Bourbon Street remained upright: "In fact one is not to be blamed for wondering why one brick clings to another and thus keep the walls standing, or why the roofs have not gone, long ago, under the whistle and sweep of September blows off the Mexic gulf." <11> The question of what to do with such decrepit old structures, however, would haunt the citizenry of New Orleans for the next twenty years. In the meantime, the sun would beat, the rain would fall, and the buildings continued to disintegrate.

The end of the First World War coincided with several significant events affecting the Vieux Carré. One of these concerned prostitution. The brothels and cribs existing within the vivacious Storyville closed after Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels decreed that no prostitution would be permitted within a five-mile radius of naval installations. The unemployed women who operated Storyville, rather than terminate their practices, simply relocated. Some, as W. J. Cash and other historians noted about prostitution throughout the South in the aftermath of the ban, conducted business from hotel rooms with bellboys serving as go-betweens with potential customers. In New Orleans, on the other hand, many ladies of the night preferred to resettle into the French Quarter where rents

remained low and sailors and tourists provided a steady and easily accessible cash flow. <12>

Moreover, since the war in Europe soon ended, the flood of doughboys back into the American job market prevented Storyville prostitutes from gaining legal occupations, even though many women had replaced men in so-called "male" jobs when these men were sent to the front. For the local prostitutes chased from the confines of Storyville, entrance into the legitimate work force was especially difficult given their lack of mainstream work experience. Instead, these women resolved to continue to prostitute themselves and to indulge in quite a few excesses at their new locations in the Vieux Carré. "Strangers in the city compared it all with the worst districts of Marseilles, of Honolulu, of Singapore," recounted Robert Tallant. <13> Tallant explained, "Women stood naked in doorways, behind drawn blinds, or sat in windows, calling out to passing men . . . . A few would even seize a man as he went by and try to argue him into doing business." <14> Though the blatant activities of prostitutes lessened as the 1920s passed into the 1930s, the sex trade remained a major business in the Vieux Carré through the harshest times of the Great Depression.

For French Quarter courtesans, bartenders and taxicab drivers substituted for hotel bellhops since operators of taverns and cabs had contact with male visitors to the area who might desire female companionship. <15> Robert Kinney, author of a tourist booklet entitled *The Bachelor in New Orleans*, even warned his playboy readers that a cab driver might approach with an offer to introduce them to prostitutes. First, the author jokingly explained that the girls the cabby mentioned, in all probability, were not as beautiful as described. Second, "there is something outrageously wrong: if he means what you think he means, that is, if he means what he says, then he is no doubt a ghost, for citizens of New Orleans, especially if they live uptown, assure us that the city has closed long since such places." <16> Besides his remark satirizing the ignorant opinions of prominent residents and city leaders about the lack of a carnal trade in the Vieux Carré, Kinney advised that bachelors should speak "kindly to prostitutes, unless they paw you" <17> and "when in New Orleans, don't allow yourself to be picked up too easily, if you can help it, and if you are carrying too much money." <18> These were practical suggestions from a man certainly in touch with the realities of life in the historic neighborhood.

In the early months of 1939, police records reveal the ample number of cribs and brothels open to business. Prostitutes concentrated in the blocks between Bourbon and Rampart Streets, particularly along Bienville, Burgundy, Conti, Dauphine, and St. Louis Streets. <19> At 410 Dauphine Street, six women and one man, apparently the brothel's operator, were arrested on December 30, 1938. On January 19, 1939, police raided two houses at 407 and 424 Burgundy Street, taking into custody seven and five prostitutes respectively. The six women operating from 912 St. Louis were arrested on January 27. Officers seized four females working at 1020 Conti Street on February 2. Finally, the twenty-first of the month sent police to 815 Toulouse Street where three prostitutes offered their services. Given the number of raids within the two-month span, prostitution was rampant. All these females were white except for the forty-nine-year-old black

madam running the house at 1020 Conti. The white female prostitutes arrested in these vice raids ranged from twenty to thirty-six years of age. The average age of these courtesans was a little over twenty-six with the majority either a couple years younger or older. <20>

Without question, prostitution permeated the French Quarter. The New Orleans police frequently apprehended street-walking prostitutes on Decatur Street, the avenue separating the Vieux Carré from the dock workers and sailors laboring along the Mississippi River. Furthermore, cribs at which police arrested only one prostitute existed at 531 Burgundy, 519 1/2 St. Philip, 308 North Rampart, 418 Dauphine, and 932 St. Louis Streets. Officers seized numerous other street-walking courtesans for loitering, drunkenness, or vagrancy. These women who worked from cribs or wandered the French Quarter's narrow passages were mostly white but tended to be younger in age, frequently in their very late teens or early twenties. <21> Apparently these women were newcomers to the French Quarter's sex trade, not yet assimilated into the more organized brothels to which cab drivers and bartenders directed customers.

An anonymous letter sent to the mayor of New Orleans Robert Maestri complained, "And what a filthy dirty sight [can be found] in French quarter especially Sundays - with bent, open and smelly garbage cans, paper, dirt all over sidewalks. (Bad enough to have the houses of prostitution and saloon dives studding the French quarters without mentioning other drawbacks [])." <22> Typically, bars and prostitutes went hand in hand. Clubs of less than reputable character crammed Bourbon Street in particular. According to Robert Kinney's *The Bachelor in New Orleans*: "Here are honkey-tonks and gilt-and-silver supper clubs; here are floorshows with dozens of lovely dollies and floorshows with a few boney old hags grinning through their routines in horrible travesty; here is the gamut of night life." <23> B-girls, "frequently of purchasable virtue," operated within drinking establishments and received "a percentage from the bar or club as her salary" based on the money earned on the beverages she induced patrons to buy. <24> Often, three generations of such women operated among the customers of a tavern. <25> Furthermore, many places employed taxi dancers, women whose function was similar to that of the B-girls. Males in attendance could dance with these women provided that they pay for each dance. Even a sensational instance of white slavery jumped into the headlines of local newspapers early in 1939. Law officers charged Richard Franek, operator of a tavern at 427 Bourbon Street, and Bertha Sanderson, who managed the adjoining rooming house at 425 Bourbon Street, with bringing, in January of 1939, two young girls from the rural hamlet of Hattiesburg, Mississippi, to New Orleans with the intention of employing them for certain "immoral purposes." <26> For citizens of the Crescent City, this simply affirmed previous suspicions of the French Quarter's complete decadence.

An abundance of bars, thankfully not all as immoral as the one at 427 Bourbon Street occupied the French Quarter of 1938 and 1939. Catherine Vidokovich, a visitor to the Vieux Carré, lamented the surplus of drinking establishments. The apparent teetotaler complained that she was unable to enter several buildings "because they were occupied (as taverns). It would have been a place of interest (since it did have history in it) to be

able to see these." <27> Although Prohibition dampened the spirits of the French Quarter, alcohol continued to flow in secrecy throughout the 1920s. The ban on liquor, however, brought coffee shops and tearooms into popularity. <28> These faded with the repeal of Prohibition, and bars returned to prominence. Police bookings from the period of Tennessee Williams' first stay in the Vieux Carré disclose alcohol as the drug of choice for visitors and residents in the historical district. A night hardly passed without an arrest for drunkenness or alcohol-induced rowdiness. Moreover, incidents frequently involved persons passed out on the neighborhood's sidewalks and in alleyways. On numerous occasions, officers even encountered intoxicated individuals openly relieving themselves on the crumbling stucco of French Quarter buildings. <29>

The Old Absinthe House at 238 Bourbon Street was a mainstay of the Vieux Carré, offering "night club entertainment . . . in the back rooms after dark." <30> Nevertheless, this veteran tavern did not lack wounds from the constitutionally imposed dry spell. The owners of the Old Absinthe House Bar located a couple blocks away on Bourbon Street had purchased the Old Absinthe House's counter during Prohibition and infringed upon the original establishment's famed name. <31> At the corner of Burgundy and Bienville Streets rested the Moulin Rouge, a club with a Parisian decor open all night. Four nocturnal floor shows entertained its patrons. La Lune, situated at 800 Bourbon Street, supplied its clientele with a Mexican atmosphere complemented by a Mexican band. <32> The "most popular Saturday-night bar in the French Quarter," Par O'Brien's Bar, rested off Bourbon at 716 St. Peter Street. <33> As with most taverns in the Vieux Carré, Pat O'Brien's furnished music, in this instance a team of female vocalists accompanied by a piano. From North Rampart to Decatur Street, drinking establishments pulsed with life. Other than Pat O'Brien's and those taverns situated on Bourbon, Tujague's Bar at 823 Decatur Street, the Monteleone Hotel Bar at 214 Royal Street, and the twenty-four hour Court Exchange Bar on the corner of Royal and Bienville Streets stood out as the most popular, not to mention most respectable, spots for the consumption of alcohol. <34> Close to the Mississippi River, longshoremen or sea captains often opened taverns after retirement from their demanding careers. <35> Some, such as Joe's Jungle at 209 Canal Street, even refused to serve women "except under very special circumstances," a custom dating "to the day of the bar of the old St. Louis Hotel." <36>

Granted the large number of unemployed, twenty-something males who ventured away from their homes for escape or adventure, male prostitution also manifested itself in the French Quarter. <37> According to the New Orleans prostitution ordinance ratified in 1936, anyone "who is a common prostitute, who has no lawful employment, whereby to maintain himself or herself . . . shall be deemed a vagrant." <38> The ambiguity of the term vagrancy masks the extent of male prostitution in New Orleans and its Vieux Carré and the number of young men actually seized by the police for selling their sexual services though booked on charges of loitering. That the ordinance admits such activities, however, nevertheless reveals the state of affairs within the city.

Illegal drugs complemented the sinister pleasures of sex and alcohol. Due to the high cost of contraband liquor during Prohibition, many persons increasingly adopted marijuana as a cheaper and more satisfying substitute. Considered a novelty throughout the 1920s and

used most commonly by individuals young in age, marijuana grew in popularity throughout the Great Depression despite the repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment. As for other substances, cocaine remained a favored drug of the time. Opium abuse declined and heroin replaced morphine as a popular stimulant. Drugs especially flourished in New Orleans because of the city's vital port, a hub through which smugglers distributed their wares throughout the country. <39>

The *States* reported that, from July 1937 to January 1939, federal officials racked 268 convictions out of 271 cases involving illegal drug possession, revealing the extent of substance abuse within New Orleans. In these police busts, 151,472 grains of heroin were seized valued at $75,736. Agents also confiscated almost 200 pounds of marijuana, enough to produce 65,765 cigarettes. The monetary value of this drug, estimating the price of a "joint" in 1939 at three for a dollar, totaled $21,922. Additionally, members of law enforcement took 1,022 grains of morphine worth $511 and 311 grains of cocaine approximately valued at $155. <40> Although these statistics apply to the city as a whole, the peddling of illegal substances mostly occurred within the confines of the French Quarter.<41> Arrests for possession of marijuana cigarettes or the carrying of hypodermic needles with which to inject certain drugs repeatedly appear in the records of the Third District police station headquartered in the Vieux Carré. <42>

Various types of illegal gambling also proliferated in the neighborhood, although lottery shops prospered more than any other form of gaming. *Gumbo Ya-Ya*, a social study of New Orleans produced by a collection of local authors employed by the Louisiana Writers' Project, reported, "Walk up Rampart Street in New Orleans any time, morning, noon or night. Stop in any restaurant, any bar, and you'll find a little corner devoted to policy writing [issuing lottery tickets]. These remain open until drawing time, then close, to reopen immediately afterward." <43> Though vendors sold tickets throughout the city, the drawings themselves occurred at one of the city's several competing yet scattered lottery shops. <44> Third District arrests for possession of lottery paraphernalia, as well as bets on horse races, happened with a fair amount of regularity, suggesting the abundance of such gaming in the Vieux Carré alone. <45> The *Gumbo Ya-Ya* segment concerning gambling continued, "All over New Orleans are opportunities for every sort of gambling. Behind barrooms and beer parlors, restaurants and poolrooms, races are 'booked.' This is almost as commonplace as Lottery. Numerous card games are always in progress in upper rooms. Yet all this is at least semi-surreptitious." <46> Few open spaces could be found in taverns or eateries as slot machines filled these sundry corners. Gambling, particularly in the form of slots, so enveloped the city that citizens mobilized to put restriction on it. When Mayor Robert Maestri campaigned in late 1937 against the positioning of such gaming devices near schools, Isabelle Miller, president of the New Orleans Business and Professional Women's Club, wished "to commend you [Robert Maestri] on the stand that you are taking against slot machines in school zones, and we trust that this plan will be continued." <47> Yet, what little accomplishments Maestri achieved in this matter paled when compared to what city officials and law officers ignored.

Whereas bars and prostitution went hand in hand, so did police corruption and illegal gambling. A legal brief prepared for the United States District Court grants a glimpse of police corruption in New Orleans and the Third District. The lawyers for a visitor from Boston expressed their accusations: "Naturally he [our client] drifts in gambling joints and houses of ill fame which are controlled and protected by the above mentioned police force." <48> These transgressions, however, were not the only ethical deficiencies of local numbers of law enforcement. "Usually the visitor is being robbed of his money and when he complains to the police he is immediately arrested on . . . framed up charges of vagrancy, drunkardness, littering . . . and deprived of his constitutional rights to communicate with his friends or attorney and in most cases beaten unmercifully then languished in precinct [sic] jails where there are no beds and very little food given," complained the lawyers. <49> Newspaper editorials echoed these same accusations of police corruption, particularly in the department's relation to illegal gambling activities within New Orleans. In the tongue-in-cheek *States* article entitled "Gambling? The Idea," U. P. Kelly declared, "But shucks, you say, these things [gambling] don't really go on. And how do you know? Because Mr. Reyer [the city's police superintendent] says they don't." <50> The commentator on law enforcement in New Orleans satirically ended: "And I used to believe that Mr. Grimm wrote the most fantastic stories!" <51> Without question, the Crescent City suffered from a tarnished and severely flawed police force.

The influx of servicemen who prepared for combat against the Nazis or the Japanese only exacerbated the vice problem in New Orleans. In conjunction, Reyer ignored various illegal activities. Under Louisiana law, for example, telephone companies were expected to terminate services to known betting parlors. Yet, the superintendent of police stubbornly rejected informing the phone companies about locations recognized or raided as gambling houses, saying that the communication businesses should examine the newspapers for such information. Reyer also ineffectively cracked down on slot machines, rarely destroying the confiscated devices. Typically, prior to police raids informants would warn gaming establishments of the imminent bust, thereby permitting slot machine owners to hide safely most of their equipment. <52>

"There ain't an old house in the Quarter that don't have roaches," shouts the landlady in Tennessee Williams' *The Lady of Larkspur Lotion*. <53> The roach imagery supplies a metaphor for the pervasive vice lurking in shabby taverns, dank bordellos, dark alleys inhabited by drug addicts and alcoholics, and poverty-ridden households. Decay and raw existence stripped the niceties of life from Vieux Carré residents. Yet, what seemed a hopeless atmosphere offered freedom for artists such as William Faulkner and Tennessee Williams to express themselves through their literature. Oddly, the animated yet less than reputable nature of the neighborhood fortified the influence of the French Quarter in shaping twentieth-century American letters. Moreover, the aura of decadence surrounding the historic district supplied a means for New Orleans businessmen to develop the tourism industry within the city. The pervasive vice stirred the imagination and offered an ample number of activities for free-spending, joy-seeking out-of-towners.

Notes

1 Joseph G. Tregle, "Creoles and Americans," *Creole New Orleans*, Arnold R. Hirsch and Joseph Logsden, eds. (Baton Rouge, 1992), 165-166.

2 Ibid., 184.

3 Harold Sinclair, *The Port of New Orleans* (Garden City, N.J., 1942), 316-317; Pierce F. Lewis, *New Orleans - The Making of an Urban Landscape* (Cambridge, Mass., 1976), 53-54; Robert Tallant, *The Romantic New Orleanians* (New York, 1950), 308.

4 Mark Twain, *Life on the Mississippi* (New York, 1961), 251.

5 Ibid., 251.

6 N. C. Curtis, "The Creole Architecture of Old New Orleans," *The Architectural Record* XLIII (1918) 436.

7 Aymar Embury II, "Old New Orleans: The Picturesque Buildings of the French and Spanish Regime," *The Architectural Record* XXX (1911) 89-90.

8 Curtis, 442.

9 Ibid., 442.

10 Ibid., 433.

11 Stanley Clisby Arthur, *Old New Orleans* (New Orleans, 1936), 228.

12 Phil Johnson, "Good Time Town," *The Past as Prelude: New Orleans 1718-1968*. Hodding Carter, ed. (New Orleans 1968), 249-250; W. J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York, 1941), 320; Francis Butler Simkins, *A History of the South* (New York, 1953), 395; Tallant, 309.

13 Ibid., 309.

14 Ibid., 309-310.

15 Lyle Saxon, Edward Dreyer, and Robert Tallant, *Gumbo Ya-Ya*. Louisiana Writers Project (Boston, 1945), 49.

16 Robert Kinney, *The Bachelor in New Orleans* (New Orleans, 1942), 57-58.

17 Ibid., 33-34.

18 Ibid., 56-57.

19 Tallant, 309.

20 New Orleans Police Department Third Precinct, *Arrest Records* (Dec 1938-Feb 1939), City Archives, Louisiana Collection, New Orleans Public Library Main Branch.

21 Ibid.

22 Anonymous to Staubits [Staubitz] (no date), *Maestri Papers*, City Archives, Louisiana Collection, New Orleans Public Library Main Branch.

23 Kinney, 98.

24 Ibid., 98.

25 Ibid., 98.

26 "Indict Two Here in Violations of White Slave Act," *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans: 4 Feb 1939) 3.

27 Catherine Vidokovich to Robert Maestri (not date [circa 1938]), *Maestri Papers*.

28 Tallant, 317.

29 New Orleans Police Department Third Precinct, *Arrest Records*.

30 Kinney, 23.

31 Arthur, 217.

32 Kinney, 23; 26.

33 Ibid., 25.

34 Ibid., 28; 22.

35 Raymond J. Martinez, *The Story of the River Front at New Orleans* (New Orleans, 1948), 163.

36 Ibid., 156.

37 Hale, 33.

38 New Orleans Commission Council, Ordinance #14477 (20 Oct 1936), City Archives, Louisiana Collection, New Orleans Public Library Main Branch.

39 Louis Vyhnanek, "'Muggles,' 'Inchy,' and 'Mud': Illegal Drugs in New Orleans During the 1920s," *Louisiana History* XXII (1981), 256; 278-279.

40 "Narcotic Unit Here Surpasses Records of G-Men and Dewey," *States* (New Orleans: 17 Jan 1939), 1; Amounts are given in grains (15.432 grains equals one gram).

41 Vyhnanek, 262.

42 New Orleans Police Department Third District, *Arrest Records*.

43 Saxon, 124-125.

44 Edward F. Haas, "New Orleans on the Half-Shell: The Maestri Era, 1936-1946," *Louisiana History* XIII (1972) 298.

45 New Orleans Police Department Third District, *Arrest Records*.

46 Saxon, 129.

47 Isabelle Miller to Robert Maestri (22 Sept 1937) *Maestri Papers*.

48 Legal brief (no date [circa 1939]), *Harold Newton Lee Papers*, Tulane University, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Department of Rare Books and Manuscripts.

49 Ibid.

50 U. P. Kelly, "Gambling? The Idea!" *States* (New Orleans: 17 Feb 1939) 6.

51 Ibid.

52 Haas, 306.

53 Tennessee Williams, *The Lady of Larkspur Lotion*, *The Theatre of Tennessee Williams*, vol. VI (New York, 1981) 83.

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