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The Twin Canals

Three centuries previous to the present moment, I would have watched this haunting sunset slowly crest the moss-swept boughs of a cypress marsh. Were I permitted to linger for the interim thirty decades, I could stand upon this very parcel of land and wallow in the reedy organic muck of Bayou St. John as Spanish Fort was garrisoned by Andrew Jackson for the war of 1812. I could sit dockside as Fulton's steamers churned and puffed past, skip along the railroad ties of the first completed rail line west of the Alleghenies, and watch car tires of families seeking leisure turn chalky from the shells they rode upon. As the eighteenth century passed into the twenty-first, this tract of land would not only change composition underfoot, it would change elevation: in spurts, the very earth beneath me would lurch thirty-odd feet heavenward. With every new road out of town, with every tie that the city of New Orleans forged with the Mississippi, and, in turn, with its vast and variegated hinterland, the shore of Lake Pontchartrain—both topographically, demographically, and socioeconomically—has had an attendant mutability.

Lake Vista, the neighborhood in which I spent the first eighteen years of my life, was at the bottom of Lake Pontchartrain three-quarters of a century ago. Bounded at its northeastern corner by Spanish Fort, the colorful fortress-*cum*-hotel and resort where I stand now, the neighborhood traces out its northern limits along the concrete-stepped shoreline of the Lake to West End, another old place of leisure—and the neighborhood's northwestern terminus. Following what was once the New Basin Canal, the western border lines southward and intersects the southwestern demarcation of Lake Vista after three-thousand feet, at what was once the previous shoreline of Lake Pontchartrain, now known as Robert E. Lee Boulevard. The Boulevard, noticeably less curvaceous than the current shoreline, delimits the southern reaching of the neighborhood until, after two and more miles east, it reaches Bayou St. John, part of the Old Basin Canal, the intersection of which is the southeastern-most point of Lake Vista, about

three thousand feet south from my current vantage. The entire quadrangular area is less than six-hundred and seventy-five acres, and it comprises the earliest of my mental map of my home.

A city ascending from the swamp or “reclaiming” a neighborhood from the bottom of a lake, boosterism and environmental determinism to the contrary, are never acts of fate. Though Bienville and Iberville could no doubt predict with relative assuredness that the city of New Orleans would thrive on the banks of the Mississippi River, they could not have foreseen the staggering undertakings, public, private, and personal, that were necessary to render life on the Mississippi possible and passable. Preordination, apparently, is never easy. Nor, as it were, is it Big and Easy. New Orleans is not entirely unpredictable and spontaneous, not even the *bon temps* of the *Vieux Carre* or the erstwhile resorts and amusement parks on the Lake. European leisure, grace, and casualness, and perhaps even uncouthness and haphazardness, pervade New Orleans’ romanticism. But underlying such representations of New Orleans is a seminal port city, existing because it is itself a road out of town, in continual limbo as transportation and the environment—first and second geographies, as some would call it—mutually shape each other.¹ Just what those roads look like has had profound implications on the types of connections that New Orleans has fashioned with its lakefront. Technological innovations, especially in transportation by water, rail, and road, have thus exerted deliberate transformations in the city’s relationship with its lakeshore, changes which are manifest in Lake Vista’s geographical and historical landscape.

At the turn of the eighteenth century, Iberville and Bienville selected the site of New Orleans not only for the natural levee (“lift up” in French) afforded by the Mississippi River, but because an inauspicious muddy stream barely ten feet deep flowed northward to Lake Pontchartrain from its “headwaters” two miles from the River’s bend. The Choctaw Indians first revealed to the settlers this overland portage and four mile water route, soon to be christened Bayou St. John. The immediacy with which the French established Fort St. Jean at the confluence of the Bayou and Lake Pontchartrain—a full seventeen years before New Orleans was formally founded—attests to both the strategic and commercial import of the Bayou. Renamed Spanish Fort after a renovation by the Spanish in 1779, only a brick and

¹ Cronon, *Nature’s Metropolis*

cypress-plank skeleton and a lone mortar fireplace remain, dwarfed by the idle oaks and looking nothing short of the part of a romantic European ruin. Tellingly, the fort that once stood vigilant against a flood of human soldiers has now been engulfed by a levee that protects New Orleans from inundation of a different sort.²

The twin waterways that New Orleans eventually extended to the Lake cemented the city's ties to Lake Pontchartrain's shoreline. The Carondelet Canal first connected the *Vieux Carre* ("Old Quarter") to Bayou St. John when it was completed in 1796, molding the lakefront initially into a commercial-industrial hinterland. Most of the shoreline of Lake Pontchartrain, however, remained an unsettled, marginalized cypress "backswamp" until the late nineteenth century, a place where mosquito-borne illnesses thrived, and where freed or runaway slaves were relegated under increasing population pressures and rising land values. Today, mid-city remains the lowest part of the city, as well as the poorest. Those who could afford or were forced to do so built elevated camps, some of the stilts of which are visible on the Lake's shore today, often mistaken for a lone segment of driftwood.³

Forty-two years after the completion of the Carondelet Canal, the New Basin Canal was hacked through cypress trees and jungles of reeds in a lane parallel to the older Bayou St. John, creating another water connection between city and lake. In doing so, the broad avenue on which I unwittingly have run since I was fourteen became the "main umbilical cord from the central and western United States."⁴ Built partly out of the necessity for modernization, partly out of the rival factionalism between the older *Creole* part of the city and the newer American City, and almost wholly of Irish immigrant labor, the New Basin Canal facilitated the settlement of some of the earliest permanent structures and residences on the lakeshore. From 1831 to 1838, thousands of laborers lost their lives to cholera, yellow fever, and malaria while digging the six-mile long, sixty-foot wide, and six-foot deep conduit. Partly as a result of the New Basin Canal, New Orleans was the only southern city with significant European immigration in the early

² Peirce Lewis, pp. 29-30

³ *ibid.*, p. 42

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 40

decades of the nineteenth century.⁵ Irish immigrants settled in a narrow swath of land stretching southward from the new turning basin to the River levee and came to be known as the Irish Channel. The area remains an Irish-Catholic working class neighborhood, to which I will attest: because my father's birthday is March seventeenth, every St. Patrick's Day we descend on Parasol's Pub to drink our fair share of green beer. Still visible at the Lake end of the New Canal is the reinforced shoreline of the defunct industrial port, along with a great many restaurants in Bucktown (just west of the canal) and West End built on stilts, vestiges of the once-common structures of mid-eighteenth century Lake Pontchartrain. Some of the oldest restaurants in New Orleans are located here, even going so far as to proclaim their role in the founding of Jazz. The Southern Yacht Club, the second oldest such institution in the United States, was built in 1849 and remains in its original location in West End Park, where the New Basin Canal meets the Lake. The New Basin Canal Lighthouse still operates at the entrance to the Canal as it did in 1838. These two Canals, the New Basin and Bayou St. John, were the only substantial connections that New Orleanians possessed with their lakefront until the mid-nineteenth century, and as such largely defined the use of the land that they bounded. The advent of new forms of technology induced new linkages from city to lake, and accordingly recast the landscape demarcated by the canals.

Railroads for the first time made the lakefront a place of mass-leisure. In 1831, only the second completed railroad in the United States was unveiled in New Orleans, running from the *Faubourg Marigny* ("Marigny Suburb") adjacent to the *Vieux Carre* northward to a terminus on the lake just east of Spanish Fort along the present route of Elysian Fields. Like much larger ventures undertaken by national railroad companies in National Parks, railroads acted as centralizing foci for visitors to Lake Pontchartrain. By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, rail lines connected the city along both Canals, emphasizing the literal path-dependency of transportation in New Orleans. Because high ground is at such a premium, and because constructing overland routes constituted enormous undertakings,

⁵ *ibid.*

transportation routes are often coterminous and coincidental, especially for north-south travel, where roads and railroads are often laid down in or upon prior canals.⁶

Resorts and amusement parks emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century on the lakeshore at the railroads alongside both the New Basin Canal and Spanish Fort on Bayou St. John. Commuter trains and shell roads for pack animals pulling barges on each canal brought increasingly middle-class multitudes out to the lakefront, first to a resort, auditorium, casino, and Pontchartrain Beach at Spanish Fort, then to the larger resort, hotels, and pavilions at West End. Pontchartrain Beach eventually came to be known as “the Coney Island at New Orleans” on postcards and advertisements.⁷ Rollercoasters and ferris wheels adorned the shoreline, which, although dismantled since the 1920s, the annual Back to the Beach festival fundraiser faithfully restores for two weekends out of the year. Many of the pilings which outlined the swimming areas are still visible just off the shore where I take Zeke (my dog) swimming. Mark Twain’s *Life on the Mississippi* recalls the “broad verandas” and electric lights, the dining and the “open-air” strolls of the fine resorts upon both canals; yet Currier & Ives’ bird’s eye “The City of New Orleans, and the Mississippi River,” from 1885, shows the two resorts far off on the Pontchartrain shoreline near the horizon, where only puffing locomotives alongside canals connect the small leisure outposts to the bustling city in the foreground, and only the famed cemeteries beginning to encroach northward into the mid-city swamps.⁸ For all of the leisure spaces that Lake Pontchartrain afforded in conjunction with railroads, shell roads, and the Canals, much of the backswamp remained a marginalized area even after the mechanical genius A. Baldwin Wood installed his pumps beginning in 1899. As late as 1920, the Census still showed a truly Crescent City, slightly elongated alongside the high ground of canal embankments or old river distributaries, but pinched nonetheless between the backswamp and the River.⁹

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 41

⁷ www.stphilipneri.org/teacher/pontchartrain

⁸ Currier & Ives, memory.loc.gov

⁹ Peirce Lewis, p. 63.

Only the automobile, in tandem with Wood's screw pump, provided the impetus that fashioned connections to the rest of New Orleans that truly upended the landscape between the New Basin Canal and Bayou St. John. In 1926, a massive reclamation project was initiated to deal with both flooding and epidemic diseases, fabricating a concrete-stepped shoreline three-thousand feet into the Lake, dredging drainage canals from the midst of the swamp to Lake Pontchartrain, in-filling and draining the intermediate land, and, not least, connecting an entirely newfangled lakefront levee system to that of the Mississippi River. The thumbprint of the WPA is everywhere on the built environment between the canals. Throughout the Great Depression, the lakeshore became known as the "Great White Way," perhaps for reasons more than a spectacularly well-lit Lakeshore Drive. Bridges, overpasses, shelters, playgrounds, and beach houses for both the white Pontchartrain Beach and the black Lincoln Beach persist almost entirely intact today.¹⁰ Lakeshore Drive, first built by the WPA traversing east-west between canals, became a place of leisure as cars increasingly became agents of dispersion: today the Drive is a main drag, but looks more like a vast parking lot. The New Basin Canal, initiated in the 1950s, was successively covered with Pontchartrain Avenue, Interstate Ten, and, just beyond the Celtic Memorial to the fallen Irish laborers, the Civil Defense nuclear fallout shelter, now overgrown and in disrepair. All are testaments to how new roads out of town, even ICBMs, are ever dependent on earlier roads in shaping our landscapes.

My neighborhood was conceived when residential developments were designed to defray the very costs of land reclamation and municipal works that had created it. Designed in the spirit of Daniel Burnham and the "City Beautiful" movement, Lake Vista was modeled after Radburn, New Jersey. Almost antithetically to the *Vieux Carre*, though not quite a tract development, the neighborhood has curving streets as opposed to the classical gridiron; cul-de-sacs instead of thoroughfares; inward-facing lanes instead of street-side sidewalks; sprawling lawns and parks versus intimate and nuanced courtyards; and avenues designed for automobiles, and not for people. With high ground in New Orleans comes high land values; nowhere is this more dramatically illustrated than in Lake Vista. From the courtyards of the

¹⁰ www.nutrias.org

French Quarter and the mansions of St. Charles along the River's natural levee, to Old Metairie's suburban gentility along one of the River's abandoned distributaries, the most expensive land in the city—and the most segregated—is the driest. “Lily-white” Lake Vista exists on land once occupied only by backswamp ghettos, squatter fishing camps, large commercial resorts, and commercial-industrial shipping, and upon soil that has been heaved and conjured skyward not by silting or tectonic forces, but by the calculated and deliberate intentions of New Orleanians.

A hundred miles upriver from New Orleans, at the town of Morganza, the Atchafalaya River headwaters being flowing south near the west bank of the Mississippi River. A crevasse there would forever capture the larger river, halving the distance it travels to the gulf while carving out a new delta; every five-hundred years, the Mississippi has done just that. The Mississippi maintains its present course because a vast network of levees has been constructed by the coffers of capital at the fingertips of both the New Orleans elite and the Army Corps of Engineers. Predestination and ordination by Nature are only ever half-truths: history is not teleology, but rather a series of infinitely complex contingencies that human beings, as actors within parameters that certainly include natural constraints, must choose to navigate. To fully realize that even a river as mighty as the Mississippi is malleable; that the land upon which my home resides was once the bottom of Lake Pontchartrain; that I stand atop a levee, on top of a railroad, on top of a shell road, on top of a ruined fort, with the recognition that one is no less artificial than the other, is to realize that inquiring whether river or lake, fort or neighborhood is “natural” is to deny both humanity and Nature their agency, and their place in environmental history. I have seen the sun set a thousand times over Lake Pontchartrain, yet learning the history of this place has made me see it anew.

Works Cited

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