

TIME AND PLACE IN NEW ORLEANS



The Crescent City in the middle of the twentieth century. *The Historic New Orleans Collection*, accession no. 1979.89.7289

TIME AND PLACE IN NEW ORLEANS

PAST GEOGRAPHIES IN THE PRESENT

Richard
Campanella



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To my wife, Marina

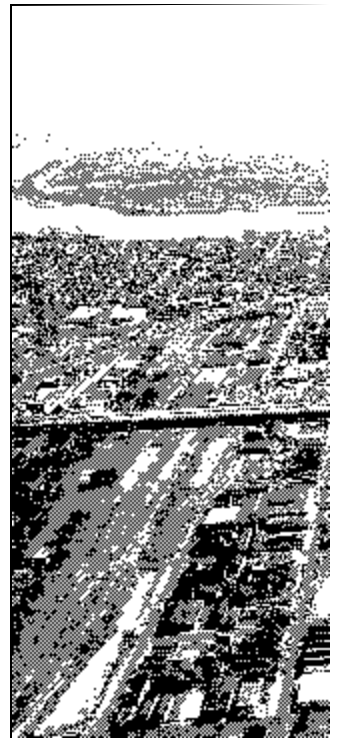
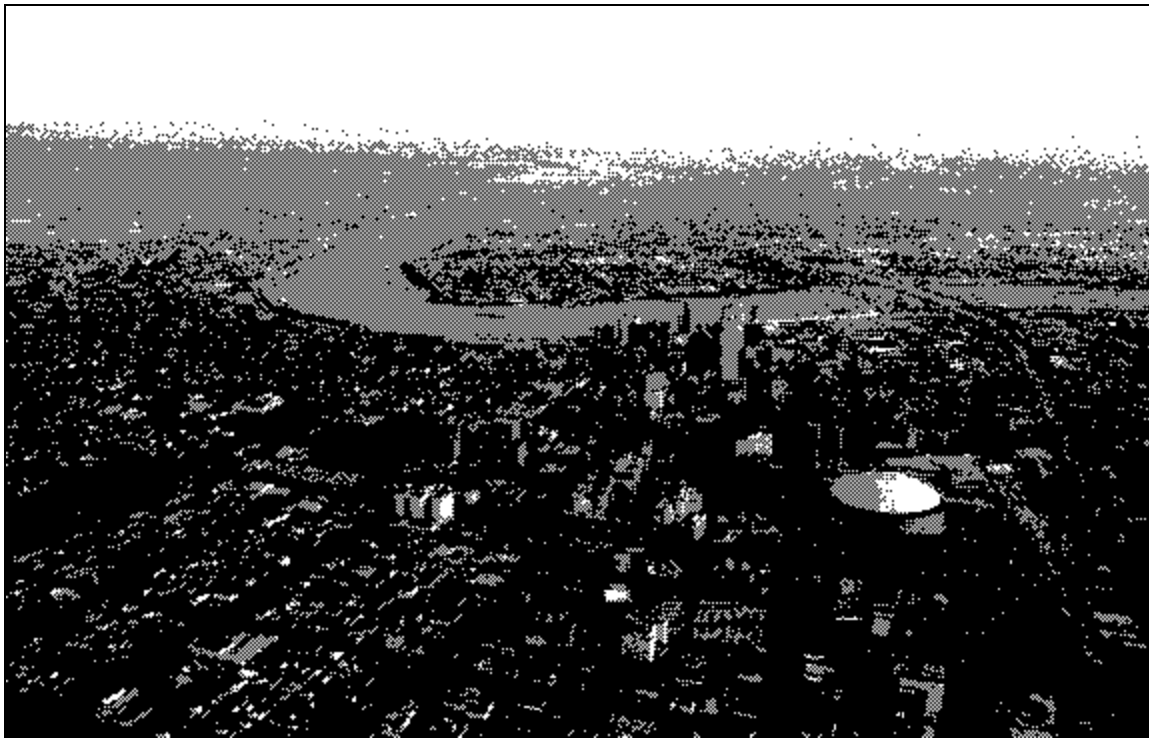
*To my parents,
Mr. and Mrs. Mario and Rose Campa
Brooklyn, New York*

and

*To Marina's parents,
Sr. and Sra. Ernesto López and Porfiria Mora
San Juan Trujano, Oaxaca, Mexico*



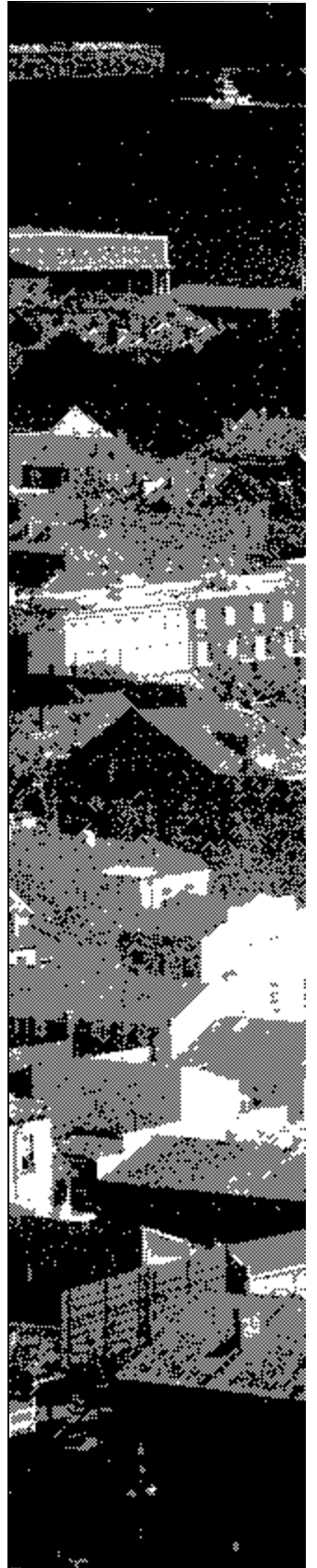
“By its commanding position in this vast country, New Orleans will assemble in its port commodities from the Torrid Zone for exportation along with products from the Temperate Zone, the most advantageous assortments of goods from European and West Indian cargoes. It is to become one of the richest markets in the New World.”



Above New Orleans in 1972 (top left), 1983 (top right), 1986 (bottom left), and 1987. *U.S. Army Corps of Engineers—New Orleans District*

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Roofscapes of the Vieux Carré, 2000. *Photographs by author*

Preface

Lofting through the Southern twilight on a connector flight from Dallas, I take note of passengers' reactions to the enigmatic deltaic geography below as we approach for landing in New Orleans. Many are business travelers anticipating tomorrow's convention; others are reading, asleep, or terminally oblivious. But an interested few gaze motionlessly out their scratched little windows on the world, peering through the subtropical haze into one of the most dynamic, precarious, and storied places on Earth. Ten thousand feet beneath us lies the watery lithosphere and earthy hydrosphere formed by a great river flailing methodically at its terminus, spilling sediments gathered from the western slopes of the Appalachians to the eastern ramparts of the Rockies into a gulf of a sea of a great ocean. It is a fantastic show, startlingly distinct from the familiar patchwork quilt of woods and fields characterizing most of our journey over the region. The rectilinear landscape of township-and-range America has disappeared; man has arranged things differently in this exceptional terrain. We are now south of the South.

To the west, what first appeared to be a stolid forest is suddenly intersected with orange rays of the setting sun, producing a blinding glint in the form of an enormous spoked wheel. It is the remnant cypress swamp of the Manchac wilderness; loggers a century ago extracted trees along canals radiating from a hub, creating the bizarre pattern. Through this swamp two centuries prior passed French explorers seeking a strategic toehold at the clutch of what would become the richest valley on Earth.

Directly below us is a large body of gray water that confuses some passengers. A bay? Gulf of Mexico? Hurriedly unfurled maps reveal it to be Lake Pontchartrain, a lesson to newcomers who knew since grade school that New Orleans was "on the Mississippi" but until now were unaware of this enormous and well-proportioned lake. Now we swing about and gain views of the swamps to the west, which bear a disconcerting resemblance to the northern *taiga* landscape for their cypress trees killed by salinity and bleached gray by the sun. A passenger on one side of the plane points out a flock of white egrets gliding in formation over the wild-looking terrain, a common scene in televised nature shows but incomparably beautiful from this perspective. By this time, the setting sun casts a golden glow from behind us, making the vegetation more verdant, the swamp water blacker, and every tree and stump salient. A futuristic superhighway, raised on pilings and penetrating the environs like twin laser beams, jars the prehistoric sense of the scene; the visitors will soon get firsthand knowledge of this highway as Interstate 10. An occasional camp deep in the swamps is the object of someone's marvel; *imagine* living out there. . . .

Suddenly, across the cabin, someone exclaims, "*There's the Mississippi!*" Heads bob up and turn toward windows; a murmur arises. Satisfied smiles cross once-perplexed faces. This they've been anticipating: the mighty Mississippi . . . steamboats heading for New Orleans . . . Dixieland. . . . A lifetime's worth of clichés and images registers. Even the preoccupied conventioneer peers out the window to see the great river. And great it is, absolutely unmistakable, meandering in magnificently yawning bends and clung to tenaciously by what appears to be all the human existence in the area. Roads, properties, industry, and agriculture all address the river in the way that ribs adhere to a snake's vertebrae. The passengers are witnessing settlement patterns first surveyed by French colonial engineers over a quarter-millennium ago. Now we start to follow the river, and a sense of confident satisfaction registers with our engaged passengers, some of whom turn about occasionally in the hope of sharing their discoveries with their apathetic seatmates. They have gained an initial geographical comprehension of life in this deltaic landscape: most human existence here clings to the Mississippi River. We have locked on to the homestretch of that river, wending toward the sea on a slurry plain of sediment and water. Inevitably there will be a great city near the mouth of this river, and in a matter of moments we will find that city, sprawled out in splendid isolation amid an inhospitable and ephemeral geography.

All eyes remain on the river. Smokestacks and grain towers shadow serene fields and densely canopied forests; linear communities of chimneyed shacks intersperse with the occasional columned mansion; vessels of various size and purpose engage at this fleeting moment in their ancient endeavor. A glance toward the southern horizon, through air pregnant with humidity, reveals an intricate labyrinth of marsh, water, and forest fraying out into a black infinity that says, *we are nearing the edge of the continent*. Finally, the aircraft swings into orientation with the runway, giving one side of the plane a concatenated vista down three or four meanders of the Mississippi, those in the foreground shrouded in dusk but a particularly spectacular crescent in the distance glittering in a million lights. "*There it is,*" someone says resolutely. "*There's New Orleans.*" Vivacious and sparking in its solitude,

cast upon a watery surface such Atlanta or anywhere else.

Truth be told, it usually encroaches upon the light milieu abruptly submits to the circumstances often, circumstances require a destination of which the commercial arteries of faded narrow streets and iron-laced cityscape, where some houses are ancient and sprawling, and where the old dow seat is now rapt with attention.

The scene intensifies as the streetscape of multifaceted silhouettes for wharves, industrial facilities, and another surprise to the observer the Superdome. The syllables of "*Square,*" "*see the cathedral?*" visitors get a sense that the symbolic city, New Orleans at its most The panoply of steep rooftops, larger in size and more uninterruptedly learned lessons in the local geography and parks are gained. As the city, looking directly into the Mississippi, the whisper of "*Crescent City*" invites passengers to absorb their knowledge and finally know this city on their

Time and Place in New Orleans City, and the geographical past examines the history behind the city on the Father of Waters and addresses the wonder and curiosity in those fortunate enough to fly from Dallas.

"I never could find out exactly enlightenment. It is dropped and lakes. It is below the surface and disappear. How the Mississippi town it is running east; at Crescent presently eastward, circles around avoid Algiers and reach the off again along the old French

A Note on Terminology

Local lexicon reflects New Orleans time. The following notes clarify

French Quarter: "French Quarter of the City), "old city," and "original Rampart Street, Esplanade Avenue between Iberville and Canal, the blocks between Barracks Street

Introduction

The Geographical Perspective

Many people perceive geography as a variation of geology or a collection of Earth facts, an antiquated discipline with little to offer in the modern world. This is unfortunate, because geography provides a perspective—a spatial perspective—fundamentally relevant to a wide range of interests, from the physical to the cultural. Geography is a broadly defined discipline that identifies, analyzes, and interprets the spatial distributions of phenomena as they occur on the surface of the Earth.² It addresses the questions of “where” and “why there,”³ complementing the historian’s questions of “when,” “who,” and “what impact,” or the physical scientist’s questions of “how” and “why.” This, of course, is oversimplification: there are branches within geography that ask all these questions and other disciplines that would be remiss in neglecting geographical dimensions. Nevertheless, the revelation and explanation of spatial relationships are fundamental to geography. “The geographic method is concerned with examining the localization on the Earth of any phenomena,” said Carl O. Sauer, a preeminent figure in cultural geography. “The Germans have called this the *Standortsproblem*—the problem of terrestrial position—and it represents the most general and most abstract expression of [the task of the geographer].”⁴

The academic discipline of geography is divided into the physical and human realms. Physical geography investigates the biosphere, lithosphere, hydrosphere, and atmosphere through specialties such as biogeography, geomorphology, oceanography, and climatology. Human geographers specialize in urban studies, economics, culture, history, and other areas, seeking to understand “the areal differentiation of human activities.”⁵ Geographers of any stripe may investigate at the regional level, in which numerous questions about one particular place are considered, or at the topical level, in which one particular question is studied across various places. Because the concept of spatial distribution is fundamental to all geographical research, the metrics and tools of the discipline, such as cartography, geographic information systems (GIS), remote sensing, geodesy, and spatial statistics, are considered specialties in and of themselves. Geography in general is interdisciplinary and synthesizing, and may be employed qualitatively or quantitatively. Broadness is its strength.

Time and Place in New Orleans is a historical geography—a history of past geographies—of New Orleans and its environs. Parts of it, namely the discussion of the siting of the city in chapter 1, may also be described as geographical history, in that “its aim is the better and truer explanation of historical events by reference to those facts of Geography which have influenced them.”⁶ Geography investigates both physical and human phenomena, hence this book is as interested in natural levees, battures, and subsidence as it is in Creole residential patterns, the rise and fall of the Cotton District, and why Audubon Park is shaped like a wedge. While traditional histories of New Orleans may identify the colonial era, Louisiana Purchase, and Civil War as major milestones, this historical geography views the subdivision of rural plantations, construction of the drainage system, and excavation of the Industrial Canal as watershed events (sometimes literally) in the city’s past. As the St. Louis Cathedral, jazz, Mardi Gras, and Creole cuisine figure prominently in other books about New Orleans, less-famous but equally important features such as the Esplanade Ridge, the St. Mary Batture, the Rigolets, and the New Basin Canal play starring roles here.

Historical geography emerged as a subfield within geography over the past two centuries and has proven both fascinating and enigmatic. The term has variously referred to the history of geography as a discipline; of exploration, discovery, and mapping; and of changing political boundaries. By the 1900s, as geographical thought grew more sophisticated, historical geography came to its current meaning, which is, in more or less words, the reconstruction of past geographies of a place.⁷ Represented graphically, historical geography’s realm of interest occupies the three-dimensional matrix formed by time (history) on one axis, location (geography) on another, and the phenomena of interest on the third axis.⁸ In a more utilitarian explanation, imagine a series of thirty maps depicting an important theme of a city, with each map showing the theme’s geographical imprint in 10-year increments

spanning the city’s 300-year history. Now imagine cycling through the expansion, contraction, dispersal, and ultimately understand the social geography. The subtitle of

The contributions of history to the evolution of land-use patterns are significant and unique. But some scholars while others see it as paradoxical variation through space, two different more reflections on historical geographic fields, but the yearning to putable fact that a cognizance standing of historical events, a appearance of a place. This is

The goal of *Time and Place* humans have exploited, enjoyed, and influencing the city we know to fundamental geographical circumstances, to its discovery by European Louisiana ca. 1720: the present Pontchartrain, and sites along the Orleans might have been like

In “Topography,” we examined built upon a deltaic plane through swamp, but the less there is, the and mapped in detail. Then we (the river levees, the Lakefront to create new land (the St. Mary New Basin Canal, Industrial impacts of these engineering projects

In “Culture,” a dauntingly identified by Dr. Kevin Lynch landmarks. For paths, we explored crescent of the Mississippi, and place from plantation days to the and debate the oft-heard legend populations. For districts, we re the Cotton District, the Sugar “geographical nodes” in the city a nexus between the exterior world River. Six sites are presented as tion of those quirky and majestic to observers traversing its storied historical geography is a series: perspectives, graphs, and charts of the thrills enjoyed by those from a careful analysis of a significant of a centuries-year-old influence

2. Haring, Lounsbury, and Frazier, 5.

3. East, 4.

4. Sauer, “Foreword to Historical Geography,” 6.

5. *Ibid.*, 7.

6. Fawcett, 7.

7. Smith, 84-85, 91-95.

8. Cant, 134-37.

9. Guelke, 3, 6, 7, citing the interpretation

That said, *Time and Place in New Orleans* is decidedly focused in its breadth. It is not by any means intended to be a comprehensive history or geography of New Orleans. It does not cover every square mile of Orleans Parish proportionally throughout all its history. Rather, it concentrates on selected aspects of the city's physical and human geography and examines their characteristics, influences, and transformations over time, with an emphasis on the older (pre-twentieth-century) part of the city. The book makes no pretenses of being a scholarly work, because it is based largely on secondary sources of data. Rather, it is a synthesis of secondary and primary historical data (in a ratio of roughly three to one) infused with descriptive and quantified geographical information and interpretations. The liberal use of footnotes is designed to direct the reader to additional sources of information.

City (topic of research)	Number of Geography Ph.D.s	Rank
Los Angeles	59	1
Chicago	48	2
New York City	36	3
Columbus	25	4
San Francisco	24	5
Detroit	22	6
Phoenix	18	7
Boston	17	8
Denver	17	8
Baltimore	16	10
Milwaukee	16	10
Wash., D.C.	16	10
Houston	15	13
San Diego	14	14
Portland	14	14
Austin	11	16
Dallas	9	17
Seattle	9	17
New Orleans	9	17
Oklahoma City	9	17
Memphis	8	21
Philadelphia	7	22
Cleveland	7	22
Nashville	7	22
San Antonio	5	25
Jacksonville	5	25
El Paso	5	25
Indianapolis	4	28
San Jose	3	29
Fort Worth	3	29

City (topic of research)	Geography Ph.D.s per 100,000 Population	Rank
Columbus	4.0	1
Denver	3.6	2
San Francisco	3.3	3
Portland	3.2	4
Boston	3.0	5
Washington, D.C.	2.6	6
Milwaukee	2.5	7
Austin	2.4	8
Baltimore	2.2	9
Detroit	2.1	10
Oklahoma City	2.0	11
Phoenix	1.8	12
New Orleans	1.8	12
Los Angeles	1.7	14
Chicago	1.7	14
Seattle	1.7	14
Cleveland	1.4	17
Nashville	1.4	17
San Diego	1.3	19
Memphis	1.3	19
El Paso	1.0	21
Houston	0.9	22
Dallas	0.9	22
Jacksonville	0.8	24
Fort Worth	0.7	25
New York City	0.5	26
San Antonio	0.5	26
Indianapolis	0.5	26
Philadelphia	0.4	29
San Jose	0.4	29

A Measure of Geographical Research on New Orleans
 Number of Ph.D. dissertations with keyword "geography," for the 30 largest U.S. cities (left), and same data normalized for every 100,000 population (right, 1990 population data). These data were derived from keyword searches of the city, state, and "geography" in the Bell & Howard dissertation database. The data show that, although New Orleans is widely recognized as a culturally unique city in a geographically exceptional area, it has not enjoyed a corresponding amount of attention from geographers. (Note: Both city and state were used along with "geography" as keywords, to minimize the number of false positives that would result from city names such as Phoenix or San Jose. To hold all data to the same standard, city and state were used consistently, even though this strategy undercounted some cities. This explains why New Orleans is listed with nine Ph.D.s in this table but fifteen in the text.) *Source: Bell & Howard Information and Learning. Dissertation Abstracts Online/OCLC FirstSearch (2000), Ann Arbor, Michigan*

Despite the plethora of his geographical analyses of the city's geography, from its exceptional port economy. It is the flatter America's oldest multicultural out in a fascinating urban destination. It is the gatekeeper of an enclave in the most dynamic powerhouse of the South and system, regional home to 1.34 would think that New Orleans does not seem to be the case.

An unscientific survey of the notion that New Orleans gets short Case in point: the 596-page *History* of five brief paragraphs, in the chapter on the South.¹⁰

The best geographical profile *Landscape*, a 115-page monograph its size. Dr. Lewis noted the geographers at the University of New Orleans at the University of New Orleans Urban and Regional Planning

Author, Year	
Murphy, Linda K., 1999	The Shift of the Final Development
Owens, Jeffrey A., 1999	Holding Back Levees of the
Hogue, James K., 1998	Bayonet Ridge and Flood
Komins, Benton J., 1998	A Reading of the
Kelman, Ari, 1998	A River and the History of
Choi, Youngeun, 1998	Urban Effects of American
Bixel, Patricia B., 1997	Working Time and Community
Cheek, Ronald G., 1996	The Development Risk Potential
Rohli, Robert V., 1995	The Association over the City
Knopp, Lawrence M., 1989	Gentrification of Orleans Neighborhoods
Kim, Soon Tae, 1980	A Quantitative Study of Sediments
Francis, Barbara M., 1975	Journey to the Inner City
Sauder, Robert A., 1973	Geography of New Orleans
Johnson, Eric S., 1968	The Latin Quarter
Campbell, Edna F., 1931	The Port of New Orleans
Ph.D. dissertations with key word "geography" in Baton Rouge. While the degrees conferred are not unified by the discipline. <i>OCLC FirstSearch (2000), Ann Arbor, Michigan</i>	

10. Ralph H. Brown, 40-41, 130-50.
 11. Lewis, 3. See also xiii.

Other geographical treatises on the city are hard to find: a query of the Bell & Howard dissertation database, which covers 1,560,000 studies written from 1861 to the present, yielded only fifteen Ph.D. dissertations with keywords “New Orleans” and “geography,” listed in the accompanying chart. (“New Orleans” and “history” produced 239 hits.) This is as much a statement on the paucity of New Orleans geographical research as it is on the lack of geographical research in general.

Perhaps this open niche is beginning to be discovered: from 1931 to 1980, an average of one dissertation on New Orleans geography per decade was written; from 1995 to 1999, the pace increased to almost two per year. Other sources of information on New Orleans’ spatial dimension are occasional articles in professional journals such as the *Louisiana Historical Quarterly*, *The Geographical Review*, and *The Journal of Southern History*, vignettes such as Tulane University School of Architecture’s *The New Orleans Guide* (1984), and government documents for civil engineering and urban planning projects that often do commendable research in historical geography without employing that term. Perhaps the reason for the lack of research on New Orleans geography is that there is only one academic geography department in the city, at the University of New Orleans, and, though an excellent department, it does not currently confer Ph.D.s in the field. (Louisiana State University’s geography program in Baton Rouge is nationally known but, until recently, has specialized in rural and folk geography rather than urban topics.) Geographers, plying a discipline predicated on location, tend to focus on their own stomping grounds, thus places with few geographers tend to get few geographies. There may also be the factor of exceptionalism: New Orleans is often viewed as an exception to the national norm, and thus may be eschewed by scholars intent on proposing unifying theories. Similarly, some researchers may assume that New Orleans is more anomalous from other American cities than it actually is, and thus may shy away from analyzing it through methods developed elsewhere.

Countering this scarcity of geographic work is the recognition by other students of the city, particularly in architecture and history, of the relevance of geographical factors and patterns in their areas of interest. The outstanding *Friends of the Cabildo New Orleans Architecture* series, started in 1971 with the landmark *Lower Garden District* and now eight volumes strong, is especially cognizant in this regard. Dr. Joseph Tregle’s research on Creoles and Americans in nineteenth-century New Orleans revealed residential patterns of these ethnic groups that countered conventional thinking. John Churchill Chase’s classic *Frenchmen, Desire, Good Children . . . and Other Streets of New Orleans!* (1949, now in its third edition) adeptly tells the history behind the city’s peculiar street names with equal doses of humor and keen geographical observation. James S. Janssen’s *Building New Orleans: The Engineer’s Role* (1984) is one of the few books to focus on this fundamentally important but underappreciated aspect of local history.

In the area of literary fiction, one must recognize the role of novelists and playwrights in instilling a sense of place in the mystique of New Orleans. Recall Tennessee Williams’ clever and poignant metaphor in his greatest play, in which a puzzled Blanche DuBois, upon arriving at her sister’s house from the L & N train station, recounts that “they told me to take a street-car named Desire, and then transfer to one called Cemeteries and ride six blocks and get off at—Elysian Fields!”¹² *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) “returned New Orleans to a preeminent place on the literary map of America,”¹³ and may have also placed a map of New Orleans (artistic license and all) in the mind of literary America, casting its streets and neighborhoods in an aura of mystery and poignancy. Other works do fine jobs of capturing sundry elements of New Orleans such as its Carnival traditions, music, food, politics, and society. It is hoped that *Time and Place in New Orleans* will add a tiny bit of the neglected geographical perspective to the wealth of literature on this city.

Analyzing the history of a place through the contours of its geography provides intriguing insights and hypotheses but sometimes leads to overstatement of the role of geography in history. Approached rationally, a geographical understanding imparts a spatial perspective in deciphering the history of a city or any human endeavor. How can one interpret New York City history without understanding its harbor? Or Dutch history without considering the country’s low seaside elevation? Or Jewish history without understanding the distribution of Jews throughout the world? Or the Appalachian region without its rugged terrain? To illustrate further, imagine a hypothetical city portrayed as simply a dot on a blank piece of paper. If viewers of this primitive map were asked to speculate on the history of that city, they would be guessing about everything except its existence. If lines indicating rivers and streams were added to the map, viewers may make slightly more informed speculations as to the city’s history: perhaps it was founded at the confluence of two rivers, where accessibility would make it an optimal trade center, or perhaps it used the river for irrigation. If topography were added to the map, the viewers may gain a better understanding of the “where” and “why” of the city, and

if soil types, transportation corridors, and other “overlays” of the city. This illustrates the importance of geography in that it provides a fundamental, nontechnical framework that play out upon them, but more importantly, the presentation of geography. The presentation of the siting and development of economic crash that impoverishes a geographical perspective is valuable but misleading when overstated.

Another fallacy in geographical analysis is that cemeteries are an adaptation to topography. The design of the city was designed to conform to the topography; designed to conform to the topography of the city. In fact, San Francisco’s topography is the bay. In fact, the city was subdivided independently of the topography to urban subdivisions. The design of the city is a deterministic, causal role in a complex and multifaceted, and one that is not easily understood.

A constant theme throughout the history of the city is the Mississippi River on New Orleans (dry ground for the city) that is a major factor in New Orleans’ fan-shaped street pattern. The street are rarely related in a linear, urban pattern, indirectly affecting any number of circumstances here, we itemize them as an ideal way to analyze the history of the city. Contrary to the contention of irreducible manageable subtopics to achieve a better understanding with semantics as we try to detect patterns, as it may be, is illustrated by the fact that a dozen or so data layers—roads, topographical areas—which are overlaid on the task of the cartographer. The characteristics, effects, and evolution of the city are complex and multifaceted.

And that is the goal of this book: to analyze the historical circumstances and patterns of three centuries, thus producing a better understanding of the city.

14. East, 2.

15. “If we imagine a series of air photographs of a city, cartographers would quite possibly consider it a map through both time and space dimensions. It is a relatively small region of restricted area.” (East, 49).

12. Williams, 15. In the 1951 movie, the character speaks these words in a memorable sequence filmed on location at the foot of Canal Street.
13. W. Kenneth Holditch, “South Towards Freedom: Tennessee Williams,” in Kennedy, 62.

