

Part One

MEET MR. WILSON



Fig. 7. Rhoda Seligmann, drawing, Samuel Wilson, Jr., 1985.

MEET MR. WILSON

I never knew where the Vieux Carré was until I was practically out of high school. We didn't call it the Vieux Carré, we called it the French Quarter. I'd never even been near the place. My mother was always interested in the opera. When the Opera House burned, she was all in a tizzy. My father said, "The whole place ought to burn down. It would be the best thing that could happen for the city."

— Samuel Wilson, Jr.¹

Biographical Facts

*Schlesinger:*² *The Friends of the Cabildo Oral History Program is an on-going project which compiles cultural history by means of interviews recorded on audio tapes. We would like to hear recollections of your way of life, significant people in your life, interesting occurrences. Let's begin with some biographical information. Please tell us when you were born and give some family background.*

Wilson: I was born in New Orleans August 6, 1911. My father's family had been in New Orleans since 1824. My great grandfather, who was Samuel Wilson, was a native of Ireland. He was born in 1799. He was only twenty-five when he came to New Orleans. I don't know if he had been here before, but when I edited Benjamin H. B. Latrobe's New Orleans Impressions, his journals (Wilson 1951), among the passengers on the ship with Latrobe coming to New Orleans in 1819 was Samuel Wilson.³ If it was my great grandfather or not, I've always been curious.

My great grandfather was in the wholesale meat business, and he had a place in the French Market.⁴ It was advertised on the cover of some of the city directories in the 1840s and 1850s.

My father was born here also. He went to the University of the South at Sewanee, Tennessee and Tulane. He graduated in law at Tulane. Unfortunately, he only practiced for a short time. Things would have been much better if he had remained with the law instead of in business.

My mother was born in St. Paul, Minnesota. When they were first married, they lived in Chicago where my brother was born. Then they came back here and built a house at 7730 Burthe Street. The house is still there. We lived there until about 1925, when I was in high school.

I went to school at what was then McDonogh 23 on the corner of Carrollton Avenue and Maple Street, which was a Greek Revival building by the architect Henry Howard.⁵ It had been the old **Carrollton Courthouse**.⁶ I had very good teachers. I skipped two half grades, and when I was twelve years old, I went to Warren Easton High School which was the only public boys' high school in the city. It was quite some distance away. I'd usually take the streetcar. The St. Charles-Tulane belt car ran all the way around in those days. I used to take books along to read.

I never seemed to study much. I don't think it was required. One of the earliest things that affected me was joining the Boy Scouts. My father was always interested in politics, although he never really participated. He used to take me out to political meetings. I remember hearing Huey Long's harangue.⁷ In those days we didn't have radio or TV reports on election returns, so we'd walk over to the corner store. I remember going over to a store on Carrollton and Poplar, which is now Willow Street. They would post the returns on the glass on the front window of the store. It was the mayor's race between Martin Behrman, the old line politician, and Andrew J. McShane, the reform candidate.⁸ We went to hear the election returns and ran into Mr. Charles Macmurdo, an old friend of my father's, and who happened to be a Scout Master of Troop 46 at the St. Charles Avenue Presbyterian Church.

My mother, brother, sisters, and I were Catholics. We went to Mater Delorosa Church on Carrollton Avenue. Mr. Macmurdo gave me such a sales talk that I went over and joined his scout troop. I think I was thirteen. I enjoyed it very much. I became an Assistant Scout Master, because nobody else would do it, then Scout Master because nobody else would. About 1933 a Sea Scout unit started. I think a lot of boys who were in the program with me or under me, many of them I am still very friendly with, knew me as a Sea Scout leader rather than an architect. I

took a bunch of my Sea Scouts to a Scout Jamboree in Washington in 1937. Some of us went on to Williamsburg at that time. I took another bunch up to the New York World's Fair in '39.

Schlesinger: Did you always envision going into architecture?

Wilson: Yes. I don't know how I knew what an architect was but when I was a kid, I used to like to build model cities and model houses. We had a set of books, the *Book of Knowledge*, that had patterns for making a model of Ann Hathaway's cottage at Stratford. I'd put these little things together and made villages. I think my mother said, "Maybe you ought to be an architect."

I had a friend, Pete Livaudais, who lived around the corner, whose father was an architect, Mr. L. A. Livaudais of the firm Favrot and Livaudais. My father and I went over and had a chat with him one day to see what would be the best approach to this thing. I was then in high school. Where would be the best place to go to college? Mr. Livaudais said, "I never went to college." He had just grown up in the profession and he said, "Tulane is probably as good a one as any place else."⁹ When I finished high school, I went to Tulane. I finished in architecture there in 1931.

Tulane University

Schlesinger: When did you get interested in the Vieux Carré?

Wilson: It was when I got into Tulane that I began to be interested in the Quarter. One of my freshman projects was to make a measured drawing of three doorways. I measured a doorway like the one on Matilda Stream's house but at the next corner, an apartment house now.¹⁰ I drew another doorway on Rampart and St. Peter Streets which is gone. The doorway was ripped out and thrown away. From my drawing I based the doorway I put on Fritz Ingram's house.¹¹

In my second year we had to make a study on Louisiana

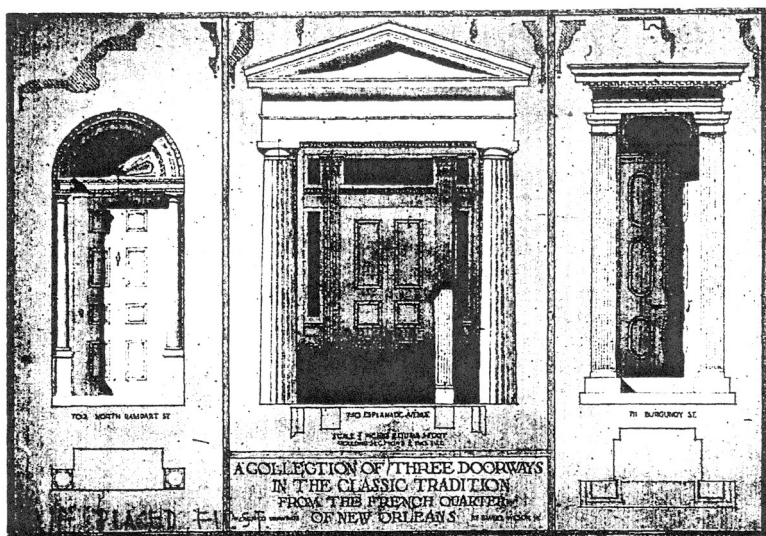


Fig. 8. Three Doorways from the French Quarter, circa 1928.

architecture for which there was a prize, the Labouisse Prize, that had been established in memory of Mr. S. S. Labouisse of the firm De Buys, Churchill, and Labouisse, who did Holy Name of Jesus Church [6367 St. Charles Avenue, Loyola University campus]. He was the grandfather of young Monroe Labouisse [Jr.] who is following in that same way.¹² I did not win the prize. Bill Gilmer, who was in the class, and I worked together and made measured drawings of the old Ursuline Convent.¹³ I got terribly interested in that building and the history of it. I guess that was the real beginning of any interest in historic architecture.

The next summer I made a whole sketchbook of sketches — houses, plantation houses — I still have the book.¹⁴ I remember making a watercolor sketch of the René Beauregard House in Chalmette [Louisiana], houses on Bayou St. John, the Quarter. By that time, I had gotten to know the Quarter fairly well. That project was for the Churchill Prize. I didn't win the Labouisse Prize, but I did win the Churchill Prize.

When I was in Tulane, Nathaniel Cortlandt Curtis was one of my teachers.¹⁵ He taught me history and theory of architec-

ture. I admired him very much, and he seemed to think I might have some ability. He was with the office of Moise Goldstein. During the summer of my junior year I worked in Mr. Goldstein's office. In those days you considered it a privilege to work in an office like that. You weren't paid anything. It doesn't seem to work that way any more. At the end of the summer Mr. Goldstein gave me a beautiful book on the Tudor homes in England. I'm sure it is something I will have and remember long after I would have remembered the ten dollars a week I might have been paid.

In my senior year, I finished all my design courses by mid semester. I did a thesis. Everyone was terribly interested in Mayan things at that time.¹⁶ Franz Blom was the head of the Middle American Research Institute [at Tulane], and they were sending expeditions to the Yucatán and Central America. I got all hepped up about the Mayas, and I did some kind of a fanciful design for a museum, a Mayan museum. I don't know whatever happened to the thing.

When the Chicago Century of Progress was being planned for 1933, one of the exhibits was to be a reconstruction of the whole Nunnery Quadrangle at Uxmal [Yucatán, Mexico]. There were two architectural students selected to go down and measure the complex, Herndon Fair and Gerhardt Kramer, and Professor Thompson went.¹⁷ If they had taken three students, I was to be the third one, but I missed out on that. I've never gotten to Uxmal. Actually, a Mayan style temple was built in Chicago for the Century of Progress.¹⁸ I went to Chicago for the fair. I took a troop of Boy Scouts. We camped in a beach club on the south side.

Richard Koch — The Historic American Buildings Survey and City Park

Schlesinger: After you graduated, did you have a promise of a job?

Wilson: When I graduated, I spent the summer in Moise Goldstein's office. I started to say, when I got off on the Mayan expedition, I had finished my design course by the end of the first

semester. Then I went into Mr. Goldstein's office almost on a full-time basis. I had only one eight o'clock class two or three mornings a week at Tulane. I took the morning off to graduate. Seems to me I went back into the office that afternoon after graduation. It was a horrible bore. Old Dr. Dinwiddie was the president. It was at the Municipal Auditorium. Everybody sat on the stage. It was hot as blazes, no air conditioning.

I stayed on with Moise Goldstein, and of course with Cortlandt Curtis. Their offices at first were in the Hibernia Building. They were building the American Bank Building [200 Carondelet Street, 1928-1929] across the street, next corner. When that was finished, they moved over there. They were also doing the buildings for Dillard University [2601 Gentilly Boulevard, begun in 1930] and Flint Goodrich Hospital [2425 Louisiana Avenue, 1931]. When the hospital was being completed, I had to receive all the furnishings, including surgical instruments, and see that they got into the right places.

Mr. Goldstein was personally interested in the hospital and Dillard University. He was such a close friend of Edgar Stern who was the angel behind these projects.¹⁹

Nineteen thirty-one was the very bottom of the depression. Things couldn't have been worse. You were just lucky to have any sort of a job. Nothing paid very much, but nothing cost very much either. I could go over to the Holsum Cafeteria and get red beans and rice for lunch for ten or fifteen cents. Things didn't get better. They got worse.

When Roosevelt was elected in 1933, he started the WPA projects, Works Progress Administration, to bring us out of the depression — first was the ERA, the Emergency Relief Administration, then the NRA, the National Recovery Act. There were eagles all over signs. One of the programs that was started was to make measured drawings of historic buildings in the country, the Historic American Buildings Survey [HABS]. It was a joint effort between the National Park Service, and the American Institute of Architects [AIA], and the Library of Congress. The AIA was to furnish the starving architects to make the measured drawings. The rules and procedures were set up by the National Park Service. In fact, it was their idea. It was Charles

Peterson who was then the chief architect for historic structures. He dreamed up the idea and still considers himself the father, and is still fighting tooth and nail to keep the National Park Service from wrecking the thing which has gone on ever since.²⁰

Mr. Goldstein, I can't remember if he was the Regional Director of the AIA, but he was at one time. At an AIA meeting he told that the HABS had been set up and each state was to name an architect as the District Officer. He said he would like to nominate Richard Koch.²¹ I had met Richard Koch only casually. He had been on the jury that judged one of my senior design projects that won a prize. I went down to his office, and he gave me the prize, a book, and that's all I knew of Richard Koch. Mr. Goldstein said Richard Koch would be ideal to be the District Officer, and I have two men in my office that I'd like to give him. One of them was myself and the other, Monroe Labouisse [Sr.] who had finished Tulane the year after me and came to work in the office when he finished. We went over and started working with Mr. Koch on the HABS.

That's when I really got into doing research on historic buildings. I'd go up to the old **Howard Library** on Lee Circle and read old newspapers. I remember that's how I got interested in Benjamin Latrobe, looking up stuff on the **Louisiana State Bank** building which is now Manheim's [401 Royal Street]. It really had a great influence on my life. In fact, it just set the whole direction.

I used to go out with Mr. Koch. We'd drive all over the state. He was an excellent photographer. We photographed plantation houses. Of course, he had been interested in that sort of thing for years. He had done the restoration of the **Shadows on the Teche** for Weeks Hall and **Oak Alley** for the Stewarts. He had built the Little Theater building [Le Petit Théâtre du Vieux Carré] in the Quarter, renovated **Le Petit Salon**, the Christian Woman's Exchange [**Hermann-Grima House**]. Charles Armstrong (died 1947) was his partner then.

Mr. Koch was also interested in City Park. He was on the City Park Board. He and the Weiss, Dreyfous, and Seiferth office designed the City Park Stadium. In fact, he did most of the design. Then they set up a big WPA project to enlarge City Park.

They took in all the area back of the railroad tracks all the way to Robert E. Lee Boulevard. Mr. Koch was very influential in getting the design of the whole park done by a landscape architect named Bennett. Mr. Koch set up another office in the City Park Casino. Armstrong and Koch had an office at 604 Audubon Building. The Historic American Buildings Survey also had an office in the Audubon Building at 614. When the WPA began working up the big City Park project, a lot of it was done in that office.

I dropped the HABS, except for making trips to the country with Mr. Koch, and spent most of my time on the City Park project. We designed all of the bridges, shelter houses, rose garden, the fence around the stadium. Enrique Alférez did the sculpture.²²

By that time Charlie Armstrong and Mr. Koch decided to break up their partnership. Dave Geier, who had finished Tulane the year after me, was the chief draftsman for the office in City Park. He went on to work with Charlie Armstrong who became the Supervising Architect for the State Hospital Board when Sam Jones became governor.²³ Sam Jones was a friend of Mr. Armstrong's. Mr. Armstrong took Dave, and Mr. Koch kept me in his office. Eventually I became a partner.

Schlesinger: You were really into the historical part of architecture from a long way back.

Wilson: Any serious research started with the Historic American Buildings Survey. That's when we found out about the Notarial Archives, the drawings. Boyd Cruise (1909-1988) worked with us. There was no place in the program for an artist, but Boyd needed a job. Boyd and Mr. Koch were friends and both were very active in the Arts and Crafts Club. Mr. Koch thought we ought to have a record of the colors of these buildings. Boyd made hundreds of watercolor paintings of buildings around the countryside and in the city. Mr. Koch had him go to the Notarial Archives and copy drawings in the plan books. Boyd got so intrigued with these records that it changed his whole approach to painting.

The European Experience and the Paris Archives

Schlesinger: What was the attitude toward historic preservation at this time?

Wilson: Historic preservation, there just wasn't such a thing. When I was in school, there was almost a reaction against anything old. Anything that was old was no good. We were on Art Deco, but we didn't call it that, we thought it was modern architecture. Nobody thought about preserving anything. It just wasn't the in thing, even after I went with Mr. Koch.

Colonial Williamsburg had come along [1927] and people began to get interested in that. Things were just beginning then to be oriented to historic architecture. Mr. Koch's work had almost always been in the traditional style with a Louisiana feeling. The first Sunday I was in Paris there was an exhibit in the Museum Jeu de Paume from the Museum of Modern Art. I went in. There was an architectural section. I heard this great booming voice in the next alcove, "Why Richard Koch took that photograph." I ran around, and it was Fiske Kimball who had done a book on American architecture and had borrowed a photograph of one of Mr. Koch's New Orleans [new] houses in traditional style. It was so funny, the first day in Paris to run into Fiske Kimball, who didn't know me from Adam!²⁴

I was always very friendly with Moise Goldstein, I stayed very close to him. Mr. Goldstein got me a scholarship with the American Institute of Architects to go to Europe in 1938. That's when I did research in the Paris archives and found out that the **Ursuline Convent** hadn't been built in 1727, not until 1750. The nuns were horrified but they finally accepted it. We had all the documentation, the plans, everything. I found out about a lot of other buildings that had been built in the French Colonial period.

My trip to Europe was quite an event for me. It went on for about six months. This was 1938. The AIA held its national convention here in New Orleans. In connection with the architect's convention Mr. Koch and I and others planned the tours for the visitors. I scheduled my departure after that meeting was over in April.

I sailed from New York on an Anchor liner called *Transylvania*, which subsequently landed on the bottom of the ocean somewhere during World War II. We landed in Glasgow [Scotland]. They were having a big exposition in Glasgow which I enjoyed seeing some of the architecture. I went to Edinburgh [Scotland], Newcastle and York [England]. Then I took a ship to Bergen [Norway] which at that time was great with modern architecture. I took a train to Oslo [Norway] and on to Stockholm [Sweden].

I had the opportunity of meeting Ragnar Ostberg (1866-1945), architect of the Stockholm Townhall which was one of the great buildings of that period. He gave me a book which he autographed. I still have it. I took another ship to Finland.

I went to Helsinki because I was anxious to see some of the work of Eliel Saarinen (1873-1950) who was then living in the United States. He was the hero of modern architects at that time. I went to Göteborg [Sweden] and Copenhagen [Denmark] where the family of a New Orleans engineer, Jens Brae Jensen, lived. He was the engineer who did most of the work for Moise Goldstein's office when I was there. His family took me to their house where they were celebrating his mother's eightieth or ninetieth birthday. It was at that birthday party that I smoked my first cigarette. Everybody smoked cigarettes. It didn't really take.

I made a trip all through Germany. Germany then was under the Nazis. I had to buy my ticket in Copenhagen. I wanted to go to Vienna and Munich, and to Stuttgart where Mr. Koch's family had come from, and on to Paris. I wanted to go to Prague but at that time Czechoslovakia had not fallen to the Nazis. In Denmark they advised me not to go. You could get in, but to get back into Germany to go to Vienna would be difficult. Vienna by that time had been taken over by the Germans. The train into Vienna was full of Nazi soldiers.

I remember walking around Vienna that afternoon and finding the Blue Danube which wasn't very blue. I was walking across the bridge and I noticed that there were crowds of people gathering all along the road and the bridge. All of a sudden this motorcycle caravan came dashing by, big automobile, and everybody, "Heil Hitler!" I stood there with my arms folded. I wasn't

about to heil Hitler. They had the townhall all draped with red banners and swastikas. All very dramatic looking.

Schlesinger: Did you have any feeling at that time that there might be a war or not?

Wilson: Yes, everybody thought there might be war, except the Germans you'd meet would say, "Oh, that's ridiculous. We have no idea of war." The Austrians for the most part, they thought it was probably good for Austria. Vienna was a great big city, nothing really to support it. To be tied to Germany would give them a much bigger field of commerce and industry. But the ones who were really suffering were the Jews. There were Judaic signs and yellow stars and all that kind of business going on. It was really a sort of terrifying time.

I guess it was in Nürnberg where they had the Olympics. Finland never got them because the Russians invaded Finland before the war really started. That cancelled the Olympics in Finland. Hitler had built all these stadiums. I think some were in Nürnberg and some in Berlin. They had huge stadiums where they'd have huge Nazi rallies, things we used to see on the newsreels. In Berlin on the Unter der Linden, Hitler had mock-up monuments that he was going to build up and down the street. They were just sitting there. In Nürnberg, I think, they were going to build a huge stadium. They had a whole section of it built out of plaster. Hitler was really a frustrated architect.

I finally got to Paris and spent about four months doing research in the Archives Nationales. Everybody was terribly nice to me once I got in. I remember, when I walked into the office of the archivist of the Ministère des Colonies, hanging over his desk was a view of New Orleans in 1726. I almost collapsed. He brought out a box of Louisiana documents, drawings of buildings in New Orleans from the earliest days, maps and all sorts of things.

In France everything closes down in August. The archives closed, Ministère des Colonies, the Archives Nationales, I was working in both places and the Bibliotheque Nationale. I took a train trip around France. Went from one town to the next, got off, looked around, got back on, went to someplace else. Finally

ended up in the south of France — Bordeaux, Carcassonne, Marseille, Arles, Avignon.

When I was in Arles things really began to get very touchy about Czechoslovakia. I took the train back to Paris. It was a night train. They came through and pulled the shades down in the coaches at night. It was a black out. When I got to Paris, the street lights were all shaded. When I got to my hotel, there was a pile of sand in the front. Everybody had a pile of sand that you were supposed to throw on the bomb when it came through the roof, almost silly.

It was September, overcast, drizzly rain, miserable. It was the time Chamberlain and Daladier went to Munich and gave away Czechoslovakia and came back with peace in our day. They had a parade down the Champs-Élysées, everybody yelling, “Vive Daladier, Vive Chamberlain.” The sun came out and everything was beautiful. Anything would be better than war, and to think of a bomb coming through the dome of the *Invalides* was unthinkable. I guess that’s the way most people thought about it at the time.

I had gotten a letter from my brother saying to come home at once, but on an American ship. They just thought that war was going to start any minute. People were lined up at the American Express to get reservations on ships to come home. I had reservations to sail from Liverpool in October. They put on extra ships. People were just fleeing.

Schlesinger: This was nearly a year before the war.

Wilson: It was almost a year. When I got to England, they had mobilized their armed forces. In London everybody went around with a gas mask over their shoulder, terrifying. I took a Canadian Pacific liner home. I landed in Quebec because I was anxious to see some of French Canada.

The European trip was a very important thing in my life because that was where I really found so much that I’ve used since in my writing and study of early architecture in Louisiana.

Schlesinger: Do you think you are one of the few people who have used these archives?

Wilson: There were a lot of people who have used them, but I don't know of any architectural studies that have been made. In fact, Dr. Waldo Lealand, Head of the American Council of Learned Societies, had worked on the catalog of documents in the Paris archives, *Surrey Catalog*, which I used before I went over there trying to pinpoint things I really wanted to investigate. I went to see him a few years later to see if the council might be interested in publishing. He knew everything in the Paris archives, but he was surprised when I showed him all the drawings.

Schlesinger: I should have phrased my question, I meant, architects from New Orleans?

Wilson: No, I don't think.

Schlesinger: You really pioneered in that study.

Wilson: Yes. The most exciting, when the archives reopened in September, and after the Munich peace — before, if I wanted to have any thing photographed I would have to write a letter saying exactly what I wanted to photograph, kiss your foot letter. I think I had to get a letter from the American consul. When I got back, I went to see the archivist, and he had found another box of Louisiana documents. This was the box that contained the plans of the old **Ursuline Convent** in New Orleans and proved that the present building was not built in 1727 [construction time 1727 to 1734]. There were other things. He said, "Get a photographer here as soon as you can. I wish I could give you these things to take back because we might have a bomb through the roof any day."

I had photographs made. They were all on glass negatives. I still have this box of glass negatives. It weights a ton. I had to drag it home. I had to pay duty on them when I crossed from Canada into the United States because they had been profes-

sionally made. The war started the following September of 1939. We didn't get into it until '41.

Schlesinger: You must have had an excellent knowledge of French to work in the archives.

Wilson: Actually, I didn't. I never did learn to speak French. I had taken French all my life. I took French the three years I was in high school at Warren Easton. When I went to Tulane, French was required in architecture. But none of it was conversational French. I knew how to conjugate a verb but to speak it or understand it, I just didn't at all. I could read the stuff pretty well. In fact, by the time I got finished in Paris I could read eighteenth century French much better than I could read the Paris newspaper.

World War II Years

Schlesinger: When did you become a partner with Mr. Koch?

Wilson: Not until 1955.²⁵ I had been an associate architect with him. During the war things were pretty slow as far as building was concerned except for defense work. For a while I worked with Mr. Armstrong. Dave Geier and myself set up an office in Pineville, Louisiana and made a study of the central Louisiana hospital there. We lived up there all week and came home for the weekends. I remember having to go through military convoys on the highway. My sister was in the Army Nurse Corps at Camp Claiborne which was near Pineville so I could go visit with her sometimes.

My brother, he was an older brother, had graduated from West Point. When the United States was trying to help the Chinese keep the Japanese out, we shipped things to them over the Burma Road. My brother was out of the army but in the reserve and in the trucking business in New York state. I think it was Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Hopkins who wanted somebody to try and straighten out the traffic on the Burma Road so

they asked some of their friends in the trucking business, and they recommended my brother. He was going to go over for the Chinese government until they found out he was an army officer, then put him in the army again. He went over and unfortunately he was killed in Burma [in 1942].

I wanted to get into the service, in the navy. I was very active with my Sea Scouts at this time and didn't want to be in the army. My brother had been killed, that wasn't the reason. My sister was in the army. She had been sent to Australia as soon as we got into the war. I was subject to the draft. They deferred me temporarily after my brother's death.

I tried to get a commission in the navy. I wasn't fat enough. My eyes weren't good. I didn't know my eyes weren't good. I had never worn glasses. The navy doctor said my eyesight was terrible. I did get glasses. I hardly ever wear glasses except to drive, watch TV, a movie, or a play. Otherwise I don't need them. Reading, I do use reading glasses. The navy wouldn't waive eyesight. I ate bananas and drank milk, but I couldn't put on enough weight to make the navy.

I took a course in navigation and took an exam for a commission in the Coast Guard. Some of my Sea Scouts had done that and got into the Coast Guard, but I couldn't pass the physical so I joined the temporary Coast Guard reserve [1942-1945]. One of my brother's best friends was a personnel officer in the Coast Guard, and he arranged for me to go to Gulfport for a couple of months on a pilot boat. We'd go out every night to patrol Ship Island Pass to keep the German submarines from coming in. We didn't have a radio. We didn't have a pistol on board. We didn't have a thing. If the German navy had come steaming in, all we could have done was to wave, and say you can't come in here. Faithfully every night we would be out patrolling the pass. The Coast Guard took over a lot of yachts and put depth charges on some of them. There were submarines out there, and they would drop a depth charge but they weren't fast enough to get out of the way and would almost blow themselves out of the water. They'd come back the next morning with all the caulking cotton streaming out of every seam in the boat. Well, we won the war!

One of the first articles I wrote and had published was in the *United States Naval Institute Proceedings* (Wilson 1944) when I was a sailor in the Coast Guard. I was in the engineering office in New Orleans. The friend of my brother's had me transferred back into the engineering office here where I stayed for the rest of the war, but as an enlisted man. I never got a commission.

Schlesinger: What was your paper about?

Wilson: It was on early aids to navigation.²⁶ I used to go around inspecting aids to navigation all over the Eighth Naval District. I took my Sea Scouts out sometimes on a cruise and stopped and inspected a lighthouse here, a beacon or buoy there. In fact, gasoline rationing then, they gave us gasoline for our boats.

Before I went into the Coast Guard I worked for a few months with Mr. Koch's brother, Mr. W. E. Koch [an engineer], for the George Glover Company at the Algiers Naval Station. He used to pick me up and we'd go over every morning.²⁷ One morning when we crossed on the Canal Street ferry, that was before we had the Mississippi River bridge, there were all sorts of ambulances on the ferry. When we got to the Naval Station, ambulances were coming in and there were buses with survivors from a ship that had been torpedoed right in the mouth of the river. I know these things were never in the paper but these people were burned, injured. You really knew that the war was right outside there.

Some Origins of Wilson's Preservation Philosophy

Schlesinger: Your name is attached to many of our old and new buildings. Would you like to talk about any of them?

Wilson: I've worked with Mr. Koch all those years. When his partnership with Charlie Armstrong ended, he swore he would never have another partner, but he did ask me to be a partner. He had a lot of friends. My interest came from him. Mr. Koch had been in that field long before I even knew him. In the 1920s,

'30s, and '40s we weren't thinking of restoration. We were thinking of saving the old buildings. We now call it "adaptive use" which was to make them comfortable houses to live in. If the building required changes, we didn't hesitate to make them. We never thought about archaeology.

Mr. Koch made drastic changes to the plan of **Oak Alley** [plantation house, Vacherie, Louisiana]. It was before my time. The stairway was in an alcove off the hall. Sort of like the one at **Ashland**, now called **Belle Helene**. He did all kinds of things, but he was very careful to follow all the details of the old house in things he did. The dormers in the roof at **Oak Alley** were entirely designed by Armstrong and Koch. There were some funny big dormers in the building before that which may have been later additions, I never could figure that out.

Schlesinger: Now, in your restoration work, you are a purist?

Wilson: The idea of restoration has changed so much. Again it depends on what the building is being restored for. **Gallier House**, at first was bought by the Freemans to live in.²⁸ So we remodeled it for them to live in, and they were quite a progressive young couple with interest in modern art. After a few years, when the little ones became nursery school age, they figured the Quarter was not the place to live, and so they bought a house up on State Street. Then the family foundation took over **Gallier House**. We had to undo all the things we had done for them. Fortunately, we had kept the old service stair and stored it up in the attic when we took it out and put in an elevator. We had to take all that out again.²⁹ By that time, historic archaeology had come into being, and we had an archaeological study made. The research was done in a much more scientific way.³⁰

At **San Francisco** [plantation house, Reserve, Louisiana] we did a tremendous lot of research and archaeology before we even started any work. But as I say, it was not always that way. There were some buildings we didn't hesitate to remove things that we thought were not done well. Now, there is a great deal to do about it, no matter how bad it is, if it's part of the history of the building everything ought to be preserved. Well, I still don't quite

feel that way. The building ought to be presented in its best form. If somebody has come along and mutilated it, I don't have any sympathy for that. I like to unmutilate it.

Schlesinger: There seems to be a feeling throughout the country of preserving.

Wilson: Yes. In some cases there may be a reason for it. We have been for the last few years working on William Faulkner's house, **Rowan Oak**, in Oxford, Mississippi. There was a nice 1850s Greek Revival house which had been modernized when Faulkner lived there. He did all kinds of things. He built himself a little study on the back of it, a carport, other things. He might have been a great writer, but he wasn't a great architect. Those things were pretty bad. The house is preserved purely as an architectural monument associated with Faulkner and not restored to an earlier period.

Schlesinger: As a shrine.

Wilson: Practically genuflect when you go in. The idea was to restore and preserve it as it was when Faulkner was there. The things that we might consider bad that he did to it have a significance that is not architectural at all, but the association with him. In one of the rooms, Faulkner's office, he wrote the outline of one of his works [*A Fable*, 1954] on the wall. That's all been preserved. In fact, just recently we were cleaning off another wall and found that he had written some more on the walls. We uncovered those writings. I'm not quite sure whether that's the thing to do or not since he covered them up.

Schlesinger: He painted over and you were able to remove that?

Wilson: Yes, we had the archaeologist up there too.

Schlesinger: You have even named an historic district.

Wilson: Yes, the Lower Garden District. Nobody ever looked at

that area. I remember one Sunday afternoon Louisiana Landmarks Society decided to have a walking tour of that area with the **Grace King House**³¹ and some others. I wrote a little folder that we handed out. We said if we could get a story in the *Dixie* magazine in the Sunday paper that would help. I remember the reporter, "What do you call this area?" I said I don't know, we call it the Coliseum Square Area, but we're also going over to the Annunciation Square. A lot of the architecture looks like the Garden District. "What should we call it?" Maybe we should call it the Lower Garden District. It has kind of a connotation of being a little bit down the social scale as well as in the architecture. And so the reporter thought it was a great idea. It became the Lower Garden District through this article in the *Dixie* magazine.

Schlesinger: I felt that "lower" meant it was closer to Canal Street.

Wilson: It did. It had kind of a double meaning. It was physically below the Garden District. It was at that time almost a slum. When the Friends of the Cabildo did the first volume of the *New Orleans Architecture* series [1971], and called it the *Lower Garden District*, that really started a revival of the area.

Schlesinger: You've had a wonderfully fascinating career.

Wilson: I've enjoyed it. We've had some awfully good people working with us who've been interested in what we've been interested in.

Schlesinger: Thank you, Mr. Wilson.