

Conversations with
SAMUEL WILSON, JR.

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*Dean of Architectural
Preservation in New Orleans*

Edited by
Abbye A. Gorin

Forewords by
Ronald C. Filson
& **Ann Masson**



A Louisiana Landmarks Society Book



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*To our ability to assess the past and present
so that we can anticipate the future.*

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Fig. 3. Delord-Sarpy House, 1955.

**Anyone desiring
to study America's historic buildings
can find an immense quantity of books on the
subject, but this literature includes very
little material on the history of the people
who have saved these buildings
for posterity.**

— Charles B. Hosmer, Jr.

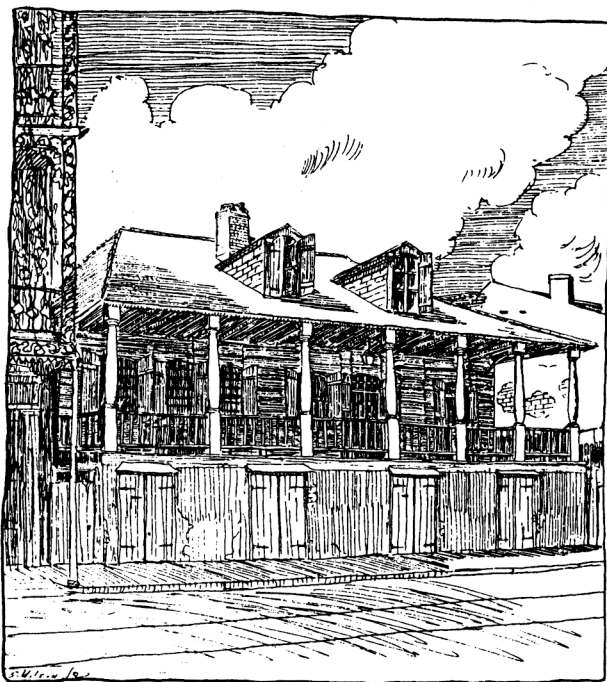


Fig. 4. Madame John's Legacy, 1930.

FOREWORD

This volume, the second by Ms. Gorin regarding the life and works of Samuel Wilson, Jr., offers new and insightful information to the reader interested in topics related to Historic Preservation, the Architecture of New Orleans, Architectural Education in the twentieth century, and the professional life of a fascinating architect.

Ms. Gorin's earlier work, "Samuel Wilson, Jr.: A Contribution to the Preservation of Architecture in New Orleans and the Gulf South," a dissertation on the work of Wilson completed in 1989 at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, explored a wide range of projects and the research undertaken by Wilson during his career. This volume offers a much more intimate glimpse of what was involved in carrying out all that research and executing all of those projects so carefully delineated.

As is usual, this makes for probably a much more fascinating and readable book.

In conducting her research for her dissertation and this volume, the author has been able to conduct numerous interviews with the subject, Sam Wilson, and with many involved with his work during his career. As a result, she has been able to expose many of the intricate and complex workings of the architectural profession and the hundreds of tasks, steps, phases, and complications involved in any architectural project, especially those which necessitate historical research and adaptation for their execution.

Abbye Gorin's first association with Sam Wilson dates to 1961 when she took his Louisiana Architecture course. Sam Wilson has had a long and extremely successful teaching career at Tulane University (thirty-eight years beginning in 1946) where he influenced three generations of would-be architects, preservationists, historians, and dutiful citizens interested in their city. Ms. Gorin's research laid the ground work for a tremendously well received nomination for the honorary degree that was conferred upon Sam Wilson in 1990.

The importance of this work is not to be underestimated both in terms of its documentation of Sam Wilson's career, or perhaps more importantly, its ability to put the efforts and the work of one man along (with his associates and professional colleagues) into a larger cultural and professional context at work throughout the twentieth century. Sam Wilson's career spans a most significant period of architectural thought from the 1930s until today, and as a result of Ms. Gorin's work, we understand much better the forces at work and the possible interpretations and reactions to them made by architects over the last fifty years.

Any single research effort and publication is but one tile in the mosaic of culture and thought. This is an important piece of the fabric and a work that will help us know and appreciate the achievements of a significant figure of the twentieth century and better understand our culture and its efforts to express itself physically.

Ronald C. Filson
Dean, School of Architecture
Tulane University

Foreword

Conversations with Sam Wilson were always a pleasure. With his courtly manner, dry wit, and encyclopedic knowledge, he shared his love of architecture with anyone wise enough to listen. Generations of students attended his acclaimed Louisiana architecture classes, which were filled to overflowing for decades. Many had never studied the built environment, but each left the classroom with a newfound appreciation of the extraordinary collection of historic buildings that is New Orleans. Sam's love of the city manifested beyond the classroom—in restorations and writings, in research and advocacy, and in private and professional life. This small volume encapsulates his thoughts on many aspects of his career and the buildings and lives he touched.

Sam's scholarship began as a student at what is now Tulane University's School of Architecture, from which he graduated in 1931 when the country was in the depth of the Great Depression. During his freshman year, his interest in historic buildings was sparked by a project to complete measured drawings of three French Quarter doorways. He went on to make sketches and watercolors of important structures, a complement to his study of architectural theory and history with Nathaniel Cortlandt Curtis (1881-1953), Tulane's first full-time architectural educator. Jobs for newly minted architects were scarce, but Wilson found employment with Curtis and Moise Goldstein (1882-1972), one of the city's premier architects.

In 1933, as part of the Works Progress Administration initiative

to end the economic crisis, the Historic American Buildings Survey was created. A joint project of the National Park Service, the American Institute of Architects, and the Library of Congress, the program engaged architects throughout the country to make measured drawings of historic buildings. HABS, as it is still known, brought Wilson into the office of architect and project district officer Richard Koch (1889-1971), with whom he formed a partnership in 1955. Koch and Wilson Architects remains one of the region's most respected specialists in historic architecture.

While researching, measuring, and examining the finest buildings of Louisiana's past, Wilson developed an abiding enthusiasm for the forms and history of these treasures, many of which are now gone or irreparably altered. He traveled the state with Richard Koch, whose evocative photographs are perhaps the finest images of early Louisiana buildings captured at the moment just before they were overtaken by change. Thus Wilson's knowledge was based on an intimate relationship with the buildings themselves, an experience only rarely possible today. He coupled this insight with an archivist's love of historical research. He read old newspapers at the Howard Library near Lee Circle, discovered the treasure trove of drawings in the Notarial Archives, and began exhaustive research in old records, often taking notes on small rectangles of white paper. Combined with his architectural ability, these experiences were the basis of Wilson's later work in restoration, design, and writing.

Remaining in Koch's office, Wilson gradually assumed more responsibility for a new project—the reshaping of City Park, for which the firm designed bridges and other structures. In 1938, he received an AIA travel scholarship that enabled him to venture abroad for the first time. A visit to the French Colonial archives, then housed in Paris, brought an astounding discovery. There among the thousands of documents were original drawings sent from Louisiana by eighteenth-century French military engineers—depictions of buildings that had long ago disappeared in fires and hurricanes and demolitions. An important find was that the Ursuline Convent, the only remaining French Colonial building in New Orleans, was not the one completed in 1734, as had always been assumed, but another built in 1750 to replace the earlier, crumbling building. His European trip, colorfully recounted in this

volume, inspired the young architect to begin a serious study of the architecture of Colonial Louisiana. Wilson wrote on many other aspects of Louisiana's history, and he skillfully edited two journals by nineteenth-century architects—Benjamin Latrobe and T. K. Wharton. The list at the end of this volume guides the reader to his published works, an impressive body of scholarship that remains the bedrock for today's studies.

This is only one aspect of a legendary career that spanned six decades. As a restoration architect, he worked on many notable buildings, including the Cabildo, Hermann-Grima House, Gallier House, Ursuline Convent, San Francisco Plantation, and Shadows-on-the-Teche, to name only a few. He lectured widely, hosted a television show about local architecture, served on innumerable boards and committees, and consistently advocated for the preservation of historic Louisiana. In 1949, he helped found the Louisiana Landmarks Society, still housed in the building he worked to save—the Pitot House—and served as president for six years. The lists of architectural works, civic involvement, and honors bestowed by grateful organizations comprise another useful section of this volume.

When the “Dean of Historic Preservation” in New Orleans died in his Garden District home, he was involved in fighting the 1993 demolition of a landmark of the modern era, the Rivergate (1969), which stood at the foot of Canal Street where Harrah's Casino is today. Some were surprised by the eighty-two-year-old's enthusiasm for such a recent structure, but Wilson was not limited in his approach to preservation. Part of his training had been in modern design, and he appreciated good buildings from any era. While he could be exacting in a restoration, he was not always a purist. He knew that not every building could be saved. He understood how to be sensitive in adapting buildings to new purposes, and he was interested in preserving the character of old neighborhoods years before it became fashionable.

The beauty of *Conversations with Samuel Wilson, Jr.* is that its candid tone reveals his opinions about historic preservation, along with unique insights into issues and projects. One conversation recounts how the granite piers of the old St. Louis Hotel came to be preserved on the Chartres Street side of the Royal Orleans

Hotel. Another discusses the demolition and rebuilding of the Spanish Colonial Orue-Pontalba House. The conversations touch on the history of local preservation efforts, document details of important projects, and present a preservation point of view that remains relevant. Concerning the current topic of infill in older neighborhoods, Wilson states with characteristic directness, “New architecture in old areas, I don’t think it should be anything exotic, ought to be simple and direct, good proportions, good design.”

The book was first published in 1991, when one could just call Mr. Wilson and ask his opinion about a building or a bit of research or a preservation issue. He was always generous with his time and patient in his responses. His curiosity about architecture never waned, although it was nearly impossible to find something he had not already seen. With kindness, he mentored a generation of preservationists who are still carrying on the work of saving buildings and preserving neighborhoods. Reading *Conversations with Samuel Wilson, Jr.* is like having him in the room offering history, philosophy, and wit in his humble and gracious way.

Ann M. Masson

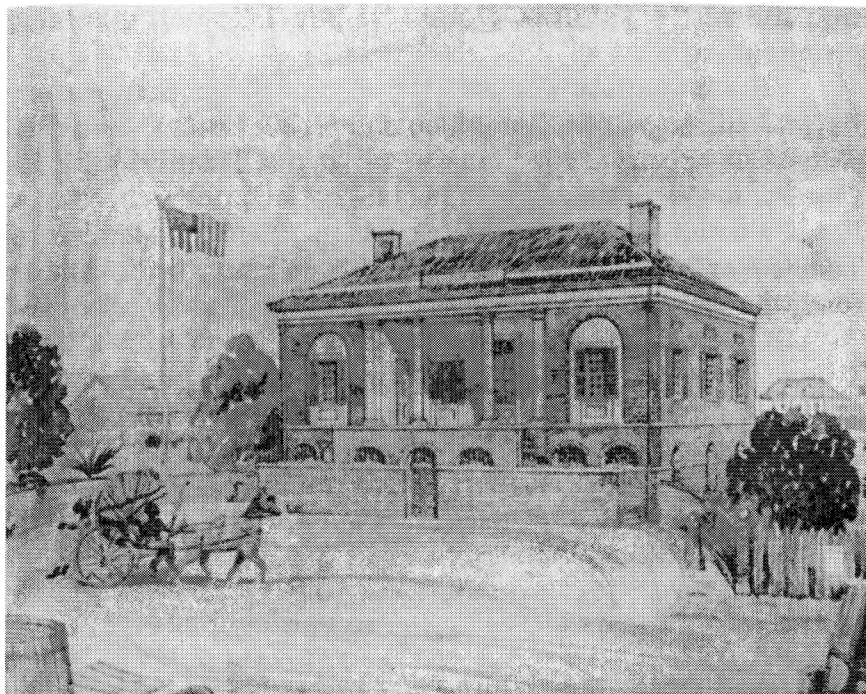


Fig. 5. Perspective view of Latrobe's U.S. Custom House, 1954.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

One of Mr. Wilson's outstanding characteristics is his willingness to share his research. It is in the Wilson spirit of sharing that I proposed *Conversations* to the Samuel Wilson, Jr. Publications Fund of the Louisiana Landmarks Society. My gratitude to the Board for their commitment to publish this manuscript.

To Friends of the Cabildo Oral History Program for permission to publish portions of Dorothy G. Schlesinger's excellent conversations she had with Mr. Wilson.

To the bookmaking crew, Dr. S. Steven Gorin, my husband, for his computer technical assistance in the four programs that were used in the writing and production of this book and for his help in computer typesetting the text; Franklin Adams for his cover design and art direction; Rhoda Seligmann for her portrait of Mr. Wilson; Helen Malin for copy editing; Dr. Wilbur E.

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To Ronald C. Filson, Dean of the School of Architecture, Tulane for his support of *Conversations* when it was only an idea and his contribution of the Foreword.

And to Mr. Wilson, a special thanks for the many conversations that it has taken to sort out his career thus far.



Fig. 6. Dufilho House, 1930.

INTRODUCTION

The official founding date of Louisiana Landmarks Society, 1950, marks the institutionalization of historic preservation in New Orleans. The founding president was Samuel Wilson, Jr. This event, actually an outgrowth of Wilson's first class in Louisiana Architecture (1946), signified his clear leadership of the New Orleans family of preservationists — a position he held for the next twenty years. Wilson's influence has been felt locally and regionally, especially in the area of Natchez, Mississippi. He is also part of the larger national circle of architects, academics, and administrators who coalesced scattered pockets of preservation activity in America into a national movement.

Although Wilson perceives himself simply as an architect, he has conducted his career in three realms simultaneously — practicing architect, scholar, and civic leader. If one laid out

Wilson's career in a linear manner, it would appear that he was always the right man in the right place, at the right time, with the right set of skills. He was perhaps lucky, but more probably, it was his position in the sequence of an architectural and social phenomenon that presented the opportunities for him to develop his talents.

Wilson entered Tulane University in 1927. The classical tradition — derived from the French Ecole des Beaux-Arts, the root of American architectural teaching philosophy — was near the end of its life cycle and a new cycle was in bloom, modernism. Wilson was trained in this overlapping period of change, and as a result, he worked in both schools of thought, the old and the new. The old French Quarter of New Orleans, also called the Vieux Carré, was his laboratory where he began to build his vocabulary of eighteenth and nineteenth century Creole forms and to develop an appreciation for old buildings, the people who created them, and the use of these old structures. At the same time, he also admired the work of the modernists.

About 1929 a renaissance began to save the old French Quarter. Three architects who were instrumental in the creation of this interest were Nathaniel Cortlandt Curtis, Moise H. Goldstein, and Richard Koch. They were the trio of architectural minds who taught, inspired, and employed Wilson. The Koch and Wilson relationship, which began as prodigy to mentor, developed into a collaborative team. In large measure it was the work of Richard Koch and Samuel Wilson, Jr. Architects that made New Orleans a respectable center of historic preservation in the United States.

By an examination of the coming together of the old and the new in Wilson's career, one can define the very meaning of the modern preservation movement. It is where a new use is found for an old building; new technology and new materials are used to repair an old building; new designs are created out of old parts; old designs are reconstructed with new materials, and old forms are perpetuated in modern buildings.

The old and the new came together in Wilson's life during the Great Depression (1931) when he participated in the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) — the beginning of a collec-

tion of a new body of knowledge — a national inventory of historic American buildings in graphic and textual form. Wilson not only perfected his art of measuring and drawing buildings, but he developed research and writing skills to unravel and tell the story of an old structure's life. The HABS experience coupled with his 1938 European travels was the foundation on which he developed his interest in architectural history and historic preservation, both young fields in the 1930s.

The intent of *Conversations* is to allow the dean of architectural preservation in New Orleans to explain in his own words the social milieu out of which he came, some of his philosophies and principles of historic preservation, research methods, and origins of his designs. The conversations plus the Catalog — Historic Architectural Projects, Literary Works, Honors And Awards — demonstrate the breadth of the historic side of Wilson's practice which includes new designs with an historic memory.

Conversations offers the reader an experience of a simulated personal contact with this quiet and unassuming architect. In an effort to preserve Mr. Wilson's down-home personality through his speech, *Conversations* has been edited only for clarity. Notes, inserts, and examples of Mr. Wilson's documentary architectural art have been added to enrich these vignettes. For reading ease all historic buildings are printed in bold type. Included in the Bibliography are Suggested References to guide the reader to some New Orleans resources as well as general information concerning the modern preservation movement. This work is derived from the author's dissertation "Samuel Wilson, Jr.: A Contribution to the Preservation of Architecture in New Orleans and the Gulf South."

Conversations is about a native son who has made a substantial contribution to saving our architectural heritage for posterity. This book is, in reality, a chapter in the history of American architecture.