Making of a Second-Class Citizen: a Case Study of the Institutionalized Oppression of Blacks in New Orleans

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The Making of a Second-Class Citizen:
A Case Study of the Institutionalized Oppression of Blacks in New Orleans

by
Andrew Stowe

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements of Senior Independent Study

Advised by:
Dr. Ibra Sene
History Department

Spring 2012
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I would like to start off thanking my parents who not only funded my education but also acted as mentors when I was struggling, advisors when I need guidance and parents when I needed a little extra loving. I want to thank my friends at the College of Wooster and at home for always being there to provide some semblance of sanity when coursework and I.S. did not leave time for it. Thank you to the College of Wooster History Department for providing the basics to accomplish the daunting task that is I.S. and for helping to foster my love of history further. I would like to thank the College of Wooster for creating the Independent Study program. I.S. has provided an excellent way to showcase the knowledge and growth we as seniors have achieved throughout our four year at the College.
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Introduction

“Sometimes it takes a natural disaster to point out a social disaster.”\(^1\) This quote by editor Jim Wallis relates Hurricane Katrina to the racial history that has been playing out in New Orleans since the foundation of the city. The social disaster he is referring to is the state of the poor black population in New Orleans. This is not a history of inequality and oppression that has popped up recently. Blacks in New Orleans have been subjected to these conditions since the foundation of the city in 1718. The neglectful policies, infrastructure, and attitude of the colonial, federal and local governments have turned the majority of the New Orleans’ inhabitants, the black population, into second-class citizens. This problem should have disappeared with the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 when blacks in the United States were given the equal rights that all U.S. citizens could take advantage of and discrimination was theoretically ended. Due to the unique situation in the black community which combines violence, environmental inequalities, and segregation, they have been unable to escape the discrimination of the old south.

The idea for this thesis was born out of a trip to New Orleans that I took my sophomore year in high school. Two years after Hurricane Katrina had ravaged the city, I went down to do service work with Habitat for Humanity building houses in the Ninth Ward and Alexandria, LA about an hour north of New Orleans. We were given a tour of the French Quarter and university district of town. It was beautiful and lively, exactly how I had pictured New Orleans. The next day we were given a tour the Ninth Ward before we started work and the sight of devastation that still remained astounding to me. I did not know how a place, so close to the hustle and bustle of Bourbon Street could be so opposite. I could never get the images out of my head of the X’s spray painted on houses marking where the National Guard had come through searching for bodies. I was very glad to be there helping those in need. These images of utter devastation were brought up again when I read *An Unnatural Metropolis* in a class at Wooster. This gave me more background into the history of the Big Easy and the inequities that were present in the city.

My Senior Independent Study will show how the black residents of New Orleans were placed in the position of being second-class citizens by the governments that controlled the city. The black community was disproportionately affected by Katrina. It is important to uncover the

reasons behind the disaster so that it can be prevented in the future. New Orleans has a deep history of racial tensions that are rooted in slavery that intensified overtime. The research will expose more of the truth behind the inequalities in New Orleans.

Craig Colten’s book, *An Unnatural Metropolis: Wresting New Orleans from Nature*, played an instrumental role in constructing the environmental argument in this paper. Colten covers a period that starts at the foundation of the city in 1718 and runs through 2005, just before Hurricane Katrina. He focuses on the struggles that New Orleans has had to endure in trying to control the two large bodies of water that would inundate the land naturally. While his focus is on the city itself and the taming of the natural world, he alludes to how the racial demographics of the city seem to illuminate the discrepancies between the black and white communities as they are affected by the harsh environment. The conclusions that can be drawn from his book are that the black citizens of the city are disproportionately harmed by environmental injustices.²

Following in Colten’s footsteps, there have been numerous articles written about the failure of the United States government to properly protect New Orleans from the environment. Fischetti, Duffy, and Reiter all talk about the different factors that affected the whole population. Paul Reiter’s article is about mosquito-borne diseases, such as yellow fever, and how they are affected by climate change. He describes the mechanism behind yellow fever and how New Orleans had the perfect conditions in their swamps which made their outbreaks of yellow fever so dangerous. His work is put into a racial context when combined with a *British Medical Journal* published in 1879 about one of these outbreaks. It details the medical reports of the Sanitary Inspector of the fourth district, Dr. Holt, who explains where the mosquitoes were breeding and how the conditions in the poor black areas of New Orleans were creating these spawning grounds for the insects.

John Duffy writes a comparative article on the yellow fever epidemics in New York and New Orleans. His article goes into the racial and class dynamics of the disease. Duffy argued that yellow fever was so crippling in New Orleans because rich people ignored the fact that it was more than just a normal fever and blamed it on the filthy conditions in which the poor were living. He described the upper class in New Orleans as much less aware of how the disease was spread than New Yorkers and the New Yorkers were able to look past distinctions of class and

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race to eradicate yellow fever. This negatively affected the public health of all living in the city. Duffy said that it was the apathy of the rich whites in New Orleans that slowed the installation of the improved drainage systems.³

Mark Fischetti’s two articles Protecting New Orleans and Stemming the Flood provide a modern context as to how the government, local and federal, knew the protective systems built around New Orleans were actually detrimental to the environment. In his 2001 article in Scientific American, he goes into exactly how the changes made to the landscape to protect the city New Orleans have destroyed the natural barrier islands that have been keeping the land safe since before the city’s foundation. He also goes through the arguments between localities and the federal government about who should pay to make the city a place that will not be damaged by impending natural disasters.⁴ This article is important in showing that the government knew that protection in the city was inadequate to protect against the strongest storms in New Orleans but did nothing to reinforce them. The U.S. government did not want to fund this extremely expensive project and the municipal government could not afford it. Coast 2050: Toward a Sustainable Coastal Louisiana was a report created in 1998 by the federal, state, and local governments that described all the different ways that they could restore the natural storm barriers and better protect the city. However, this was never put into effect because of the reasons that Fischetti stated, such as lack of funds.

These sources help to show that those in power believed that the majority black population of New Orleans was not deemed worth the government’s money to protect.⁵ Several other claims were made by the local government regarding their knowledge of the unpreparedness of the city to evacuate all residents of the city. Articles in The New York Times, “If the Big One Were to Hit The Big Easy, The Good Times Could be Over Forever,” and The Time Magazine, “The Threatening Storm,” both had quoted from high standing officials in the local New Orleans governments saying that those without cars did not have a chance to escape the city. These sources highlight that the black communities, which were often the poorest, were

being forced to live in the worst conditions, were blamed in the early years for the permeation of disease into the general population, and were unprotected by the US government from natural disasters.

The role of violence in the southern United States to keep blacks in a state of oppression played a pivotal role in New Orleans. This violence starts off with its roots in slavery. Gwendolyn Hall writes about the colonial governments and how they treated their slave subject in her book *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*. She provides a wide array of information from the languages that the slaves spoke to the laws that were put in place to regulate slave ownership. The sections of her book that were most helpful talked about the different styles of slavery that each colonial government had and how violent they were towards their slaves. Hall’s book helped draw comparisons to the United States style of slavery which was the final type to be represented in the city’s history.

The House of Representatives also documents violence against blacks in their hearings about the riots in New Orleans that took place on July 30, 1866. These hearings explored what the cause of the riot was and the conditions in the city that set it in motion. The document has detailed reports of those who partook in the riots and those leading the Constitutional Convention which provoked the riot. This document is crucial in understanding the feelings of whites in the city after the Civil War. Leonard Moore wrote *Black Rage in New Orleans* which highlights incidents of police brutality of New Orleans and black activism in the city from WWII up to Hurricane Katrina. Moore makes the argument that police brutality in the United States is a result of the increasing black presence and rights given to them. He argues that police brutality in New Orleans served as a measure to control the black population from attaining the same inclusion in American culture as whites. As a response to police brutality, Moore tells how the black community in the city fought back with activism that included non-violent movements like the NAACP and more aggressive movements like the Black Panther Party (BPP). The combination

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of police brutality and the black movements that were working together to combat it and other unfair governmental policies led to a very racially charged New Orleans as Moore explains.⁸

An important article was printed in the New York Times that interviewed the man who was hired to reform the New Orleans Police Department (NOPD) in the 1990s, Richard Pennington. In interviews with Pennington, the author, Paul Keegan, was truly able to understand and portray the situation that the NOPD was in. He wrote about the situations in the NOPD that made national news and was able to uncover documentation and reports of many other cases of police officers crimes that were committed.⁹ This article helped to form an argument against the credibility of the NOPD as law enforcement officials and how this affected the black population.

One of the monographs examined in this thesis is Showdown in Desire by Orissa Arend. This book uses interviews with members of the black community, Black Panthers, and whites who experienced the police attempting to shutdown the BPP in New Orleans. Without provocation, other than knowing the residents were armed, the police, numbering in the hundreds, had a shoot out at one of the two BPP headquarters when the police attempted to arrest the heavily armed occupants of the building. The second part of the “showdown” included a standoff between civilians and the police. Thousands of civilians from New Orleans projects came out and impeded the police’s progress when they were attempting to arrest more BPP members.¹⁰ This indicates the importance of civilian organizing against the white power structure and the extreme measure the police would go to in order to oppress the black population.

This “showdown” between the police and BPP is also shown with two pictures taken by photographers for the Time-Picayune. One is showing the standoff between the project’s inhabitants and the police when they are on their way to arrest the BPP members. The expressions on the faces of the residents make it clear that the police were not wanted and signified support for the Panthers. (See Figure 6.) The other photographer is of a police tank

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rolling through the projects on the way to the house where the BPP had their headquarters. (See Figure 7.) This picture serves to demonstrate the excessive force the NOPD was willing to go to stop this organization from spreading their highly politicized message of “Black Power.”11

Segregation plays an obvious role defining the injustices that were enacted upon the black community to make them second-class citizens. Arnold Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon describe the unique blending of races in the early days of New Orleans and how it changed when the United States took over control of the former French and Spanish colony. Their book, Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization, explains the roles white Americans who migrated to New Orleans after the Louisiana Purchase played in changing how blacks were treated in the city. They talk about how free blacks went from being valued for their skilled labor under European control to being pushed into similar jobs that they were required to do as slaves under the United States racist power structure.12 This source chronicles the new standard that the United States set for race relations in the city, which was completely different than under the French and Spanish colonies. Daphne Spain also looks at segregation and how the lack of socio-economic power prohibited blacks from being able to move where good schools were in the city, or out to the suburbs of the city like the whites did.13 The racial segregation that Spain talks about adds to the argument of whites being indifferent to the struggles of the black community.

John Ingham writes an interesting piece about how blacks used small business ownership in the early 1900s to combat residential segregation but also to show that blacks could be prosperous. He describes how black businesses that emerged in mostly unsettled territory served as a Mecca for the black residents in the city. A new mobility emerged with the expansion of the streetcar system and blacks could now travel farther distances to work rather than be forced to live in walking distance of their employers.14 This is important in showing the growing sense of

community amongst the black population. Ingham’s article also helps to explain, along with Spain, the residential segregation that was becoming more prevalent.

The inadequate conditions in the Ninth Ward and the New Orleans public school system were seen as permissible by the municipal government even though they had a negative effect on the blacks. That was the focal point of Juliette Landphair’s piece entitled Sewerage, Sidewalks, and Schools: The New Orleans Ninth Ward and Public School Desegregation. She goes into how the Ninth Ward was constructed out of the swamps for the blacks and poor whites’ in the city and how the city provided minimal upkeep for this area of New Orleans. She also researched the integration of the public school system which caused a lot of controversy in the white community. The Jennings Daily News ran a story about the integration of the school system which provided illuminating quotes about the white state legislature’s attitude towards the integration. The white mothers of students who had removed their children from these schools were a new surprising element that added to the racial discussion. This is the first time in New Orleans that white women got involved in racial protests.

William Sundstrom wrote a piece about the state of blacks in America during the Great Depression which was used to mirror the black population of New Orleans in this thesis. His piece adds a contradictory tone to the racial debate being presented in this paper. It is important to show the black community working together to labor their way up from the bottom of society at one of the most economic troubling time in American history. This article pairs with the Ingham piece as both articles agree that there were still harsh discrepancies between the white and black communities despite the best efforts of the African Americans. These sources helped to show some of the positives that were coming out of the racism and segregationist attitude of white New Orleanians.

Hurricane Katrina will be used to connect the negligence of the United States federal government and the local New Orleans government to keep its citizens safe. It is a very well documented disaster on the records of United States history. Aside from the Colten and Fischetti

pieces on the environmental inequalities of New Orleans, newspapers, and the mayor have come out to speak about the racialization of Katrina. A map created by a researcher at Louisiana State University is one of the most telling because it shows how it was mostly black neighborhoods that were still heavily inundated with water up to a week after the Katrina destroyed the levees. This storm and the media reports written after it proved to the United States public that there were still major class divisions between the white and black populations. This is exemplified in two pictures taken by the Associated Press describing the scene of two nearly identical scenes of people carrying food through the flood waters. One was of a black youth who was described as “looting” what he carried and one photo was of a white couple who was simply “carrying” their goods.

All of this research is important to compiling a detailed story of the oppression that was enforced by local and federal governments. The black inhabitants of New Orleans had been turned into second-class citizens because of federal and municipal actions that segregated them from enjoying the same safety that whites in the city benefitted from. This is the gap in history that will be filled. It is a large story that incorporates race-based violence, segregation, and the environmental injustices in black communities. Without one of these histories, the story of the blacks becoming second-class citizens in New Orleans would be incomplete.

The first chapter focuses its research on the foundation of the city. New Orleans has a significantly different history than most of the United States as it was under the control of three different world powers during its past. The French, Spanish, and Americans all participated in the practice of slavery but all had different methods of slave ownership which will be described. The chapter will look into how the Haitian played into the dynamics of slave’s relations with their master in New Orleans. The city’s roots in slavery help to construct how whites and blacks interacted while living amongst each other for the following three centuries.

The second chapter will follow the progression of New Orleans building its defensives against the forces of nature using slave labor, the expansion of the city, violence in post-Civil War New Orleans and yellow fever epidemics. In this chapter, the divide between black and white in the city begins to grow with an emergent immigrant and migrant community entering the city. As immigrants moved into New Orleans they began to assimilate into American culture. The whites that migrated to the city brought their racist ideologies that the immigrants began to absorb as well. More Americans moving to New Orleans helped to codify the segregationist attitude that was held by Americans nationwide in the city which had formerly been a melting pot of race and culture. The yellow fever epidemics were blamed on the poor,
black communities in the 1800s because they were living without access to proper sanitation and sewerage to remove water when the city flooded. This chapter will examine the Riot of 1866 and lynchings as a way whites used violence to keep the black citizens in their lower class positions. This continued throughout the city’s history.

The following chapter will focus on 20th century looking at how the expanding infrastructure of the city affected the black citizens. Looking at the public school system, a lack of sewerage in black communities, and the oppression of the New Orleans Police Department which led blacks to organize themselves to try to fight back against the white federal and local governments. The organizing of black citizens is exemplified by the NAACP and Black Panther Party who played crucial roles in trying to protect the black citizen’s rights and lives. Black citizens were feeling the wrath of the police department citywide but had no representation of the police force or in local government and they struggled to find someone who would hear their pleas for equality.

The final chapter will examine the late 20th and early 21st centuries and the effects of environmental inequality. A focus will be put on the examples of a federally declared Superfund site in the lower Ninth Ward and the disastrous effect Hurricane Katrina had on the population of New Orleans, specifically the black inhabitants. This time period is also important as blacks gained a greater foot in city politics taking control of the mayor’s office and the executive position in the police department. This section will show the attempted reformation of the most notoriously corrupt and violent police force in the United States as they try to control local gangs, drug trade, and a climbing murder rate in the black communities. The police interactions and the negligence of the federal government aided in creating one of the biggest natural disasters that the United States has had on its soil, Hurricane Katrina. These chapters will demonstrate how the black citizens of New Orleans were forced and kept in a position of being second-class citizens by the colonial, federal, and local governments that controlled New Orleans.
Chapter 1: A Colonial City Built by Slaves

This chapter will look at New Orleans and its history with colonial powers and how the French, Spanish, and American colonial governments impacted the black population since the foundation of the city in the early 18th century through the middle of the 19th century. New Orleans has a much different story compared to most American cities in the United States because of the many different European influences. The French founded the city, then ceded to the Spanish, who later returned it to French control, and then finally sold New Orleans to the United States. This has caused a blending of cultures and people that is seen nowhere else in the United States. It has created a unique story of the racialization of New Orleans from its very beginnings as a commercial empire on the continent.

New Orleans is one of the oldest cities in North America. It was founded by the French in 1718. There were many French settlers in the area of New Orleans before The Mississippi Company took charge of its construction and named it after the French regent, Philippe d’Orléans, who was in control of the territory. The company built New Orleans up on the natural levee that was created by the Mississippi River’s years of depositing sediment along its banks. They thought that the top of the levee would be the safest place that the growing city could be built. If they were up on the levee then all the flood water would drain into the lower lying basin where current day New Orleans lies. This area was a pestilential swamp that bred disease. Stopping the floodwater from poring over into this area was important to the health of the city.

Man-made levees, along with ones that had formed naturally with the flow of the Mississippi river, were used to try to subdue the constant flooding in the site where the city was being constructed. These levees were dug and fortified with the manpower of over one thousand prisoners that had been shipped over from Europe and a few other contractors. Using prisoner labor was common during the time and they were used much like slaves. Due to waterborne diseases and lack of other resources such as food, these prisoners died off and were replaced by

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2 Ibid., 19.
3 Colten, *An Unnatural Metropolis,* 17.
African slaves who were captured by the French. Along with African slaves, the French in early Louisiana used Indians as slaves but found them to be more difficult to ensnare and take hostage. The French “habitants complained that Indian slaves ‘deserted when hard pressed’ and that they could ‘not get nearly as much service from them as the negroes.’”5 The Indian slaves knew the land that they were being enslaved in and could escape with more ease than the African slaves who were in an alien environment. The Indians proved to be a more helpful ally because they knew the land and the agricultural potential. This benefitted both the French and Spanish colonies which had prosperous relationships with Indians as trading partners of grains and fur.6 This made Africans the slave of choice and most ideal for labor in the colony. The sickness that permeated from the swamps below the city plagued the slaves and many suffered the same fate as the European prisoners before them.7 A result of the growing population and economic status of New Orleans led the city to have to expand into the swamps. As stated, these were a breeding ground for diseases that thrived in stagnant water which was perpetuated by the constant flooding of the Mississippi River over the levees into this low lying territory. This meant that efforts needed to be doubled to keep water from entering the low lying parts of the city and new technologies for getting the water out of the city if it did flood.

The city could not have been built without the slave labor that the French employed. Throughout the first forty years that the French controlled the city, everything from agriculture and construction to child care were based upon slave labor. The French changed to a more agricultural economy that used slaves for labor in the tobacco and rice fields.8 As is typical of slavery driven societies, violence was used to motivate the slaves and prevent them from attempting to escape. In early New Orleans there was a law set down by the governing body that stated how the slaves are supposed to be treated and how in turn, they treated their masters. This law was called the “Code Noir” and was put into place in 1724.9 The Code Noir made it illegal to treat slaves in a “barbarous and inhumane” way. Capturing a person and putting them in captivity making them work for no wages is in itself barbaric and inhumane. These codes were rarely enforced by the government because the French recognized the ironic situation.10 Along with the

5 Spear, Early America, 54.
6 Hall, Africans in Colonial Louisiana, 302.
7 Fussel, “Constructing New Orleans, Constructing Race.”
8 Hall, Africans in Colonial Louisiana, 10.
9 Spear, Early America, 53.
10 Ibid. 53.
treatment of slaves during the early French colonial occupation of the city, the slaves also had to protect themselves from getting sick from the swamps that were exuding disease. One of the French settlers, James Pitot, described the wetlands surrounding the city as a, “‘pestilential fever that manifests itself in a most violent way’ during the late summer months particularly among ‘strangers.’”11 The strangers, in this case, were the slaves brought from Africa. All the putrid organic matter was rotting in the swamps releasing effluvia that no African slaves had ever come into contact with in their homeland. The savage beatings by the slave masters combined with the toxic fumes being released from the swamps and mosquito bites, which caused yellow fever, made New Orleans an inhospitable place for blacks under French control.

Conditions improved for the enslaved and blacks during the four decade period that the Spanish took control of the city. In 1763, the Spanish were given New Orleans in the Treaty of Paris. New Orleans was economically a disaster when the Spanish took control.12 There were only enough crops for the farmers to produce a sustainable amount of food for the city and little was being exported. In 1777, Spain reopened the slave trade and sought to turn around the economy with a plantation style of farming which had proven to be very lucrative in the Caribbean.13 Africans were being brought into the area by the boatload from the African continent and the Spanish had to lay down their own guidelines about slave ownership. Just before the slave trade in new Spanish territory was opened again, the Spanish court made an important ruling in 1773 that would open up a new opportunity for slaves to gain freedom. The court ruled in a decision that slaves were able to pay for their own freedom from their owners, for a fair price, by means of working a job on the side or from a gift from a friend or inheritance.14 These newly freed slaves were called “gen de couleur libres.”15

This was a monumental ruling that changed the way slaves thought of their captivity. Now there was a way out of the shackles of slavery if a slave worked hard enough, they could be free and no longer subjected to the oppression of the majority French owners. This created a “tripartite racial system” that consisted of Europeans at the top, freed blacks in the middle, and

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11 Colten, An Unnatural Metropolis, 33.
12 Spear, Early America, 101.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid., 100.
enslaved blacks at the bottom. While there may have been some French elites who did not agree with letting their slave’s buy their own freedom, it was a win-win situation for all involved.\textsuperscript{16} The price of slaves had dropped and it was easy to replace those who bought their freedom from their owners. The slave’s ultimately worked harder so that they could purchase their own freedom which boosted the New Orleans economy, which again benefitted the slave owners.

The Spanish were able to uplift a dying region in the south simply by giving the slaves more freedoms and opportunities than the French. Jennifer Spears explains in her book, \textit{Early America: History, Context, Culture: Race, Sex, and Social Order in Early New Orleans}, that the enslaved preferred being under Spanish rule compared to French because they were treated more fairly. The freed slaves agreed. In the 1790’s the governor of the Spanish Louisiana territory, Baron de Carondelet, was convinced that the revolution in Saint Domingue (Haiti) was brought on by the mistreatment of slaves and made efforts to “see to it that Louisiana slaves were not similarly provoked into rebellion.”\textsuperscript{17} Spears provided evidence that it was the opinion of some of the freed slaves that they would be treated better under the rule of the Spanish.\textsuperscript{18} “Within the first decade of Spanish rule, the number of free people of color in New Orleans tripled… and their numbers continued to increase significantly through the end of the century reaching 1,500 in 1805.”\textsuperscript{19} Carondelet banned the slave trade in 1796 which made the slave population in New Orleans decrease. In 1801, the Louisiana territory was returned to the French for a few brief years until it was sold by Napoleon to the United States in 1803.\textsuperscript{20}

New Orleans struggled with this predicament through its later history of classifying individuals. The city was a melting pot of French, Spanish, black, Native American and American people who had been intermingling for the first hundred years of New Orleans history and creating entirely new subclasses. These new subclasses were also supplemented by the influx of refugees from the Haitian Revolution. According to Elizabeth Fussel, who wrote \textit{Constructing New Orleans, Constructing Race: A Population History of New Orleans}, “the city

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\textsuperscript{16} Spear, \textit{Early America}, 101.
\textsuperscript{17} Hall, \textit{Africans in Colonial America}, 323.
\textsuperscript{18} Spear, \textit{Early America}, 104.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 128
\textsuperscript{20} Hall, \textit{Africans in Colonial Louisiana}, 278.
\end{flushright}
[New Orleans] more than doubled in size from the ten thousand refugees from the 1794-1804 rebellion in Haiti who found a new home in New Orleans.”

The Haitian Revolution resulted in white lower class citizens in Haiti wanting to ally themselves with the slaves because of what they stood to gain from the power that the former slaves were soon to have in Haiti. Seafarers were the first to bring the sentiments of the Haitian rebels over to the US and many of the multi-racial port workers played a hand in the spread of the news of revolt to New Orleans. This surge of people from Haiti saw many of the black immigrants returned to slavery in the United States and harsher restrictions for slaves under the Spanish regime. It is interesting to point out that it was also the lower class whites who were spreading the message of revolution. This was during the era of the French Revolution and the lower class French who allied themselves with the former slaves in Haiti wanted to support equality for all people, even if that included freeing the slaves.

The slave owners and Spanish did not want any of their slaves to get ideas from the Haitian slaves about rebelling against them so they imposed harsher punishments for insubordination. “Repressive measures were also directed at the large number of freed blacks, feared by whites as a potential source of insurrection. Laws were passed ‘to make it harder for masters to free their slaves, regulation after regulation attempted to control the movements of Blacks and to prohibit the assembly of, or indeed any contact between, free Blacks and slaves.’” The passing of stricter legislation against freed blacks made sense as they had the most mobility out of the growing, oppressed population. Paralleling the timeline of changes in regimes at the turn of the 19th century was the restriction of manumission. With the French returning briefly to power and then the United States buying the territory from France, the slaves were now governed by stricter slave laws that the United States had set in place.

The city’s expansion marked the opening of the 19th century. (See Maps on Page 16 and 17) From 1791 to 1820 the population grew almost seven times the size it was in 1791. This

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23 Hall, Africans in Colonial Louisiana, 348.
24 Ibid., 347.
26 Ibid.
was due to an increasing immigrant population coming in from Ireland, Germany, Americans seeking to relocate, and Haitians as was mentioned earlier. Immigrants and freed blacks were competing for the same jobs and immigrants had to show that they should be accepted as white too by becoming racist towards the *gens de couler libres*. The immigrants used the color of their skin to give them the edge up on the freed slaves in the labor market and used what they saw from Americans to discriminate against them. “The slave population was outstripped by that of the Irish who quickly became the bulk of the public workforce.” There was also a divide in the non-colored population. People of color and the Creoles, citizens of French or Spanish ancestry, did not get along with the Americans or recent immigrants. The Americans thought that any remnants of old colonial systems should be done away with and there should especially be no marriages allowed between Creoles and the freed slaves. There was also little interaction between the Americans and blacks in the city because of the demographics. New Orleans was divided into three sections. Two were where the Creoles and *gens de couler libres* lived and one was where the Americans and immigrants lived. The demographics in the city matched up perfectly with the divide into three municipalities. The population of the city in 1805 was about 33% black, a third white, and a third Creole.

In the early to mid-19th century, the white population of New Orleans began to fully embrace the American laws regarding slavery and how free blacks were to be treated. The city was becoming a more American city during this time and with the influx of Americans moving to this commerce capital of the south, they brought their money and their ideologies with them. Slavery had been a staple in the British colonies like it had been in the French and Spanish but their ideas paralleled that of the French more than the Spanish. In the United States, slaves were not allowed to buy their freedom and were only set free if they were freed by their owner directly, freed in their owners will when they died, or if they ran away and became a fugitive. The Americans who moved to New Orleans found it strange how many freed slaves there were in the city and did not want to associate with them because they still saw them to be in the same

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28 Ibid., 34.
31 Ibid.
class as slaves. The French and Spanish saw them differently, as a higher class because of their work ethic and the quality of their skilled labor.\(^\text{34}\)

How blacks were seen by the migrant American ruling class helped to set the scene for the next two centuries. Blacks were never given equal respect or rights during the colonial era in New Orleans but it was clear that some colonial powers treated blacks more respectfully, giving them more of a chance to advance in society. Slaves being allowed to purchase their freedom during the Spanish colonial period introduced a whole new class of blacks into American society in the south after the Louisiana Purchase. The United States never had to deal with a large population of freed black slaves before and in New Orleans they made up about 33 percent of the city. The racial tensions would continue to be seen as more blacks were freed from slavery and as the infrastructure was built in a way that did not positively affect the minorities in New Orleans.

![Figure 1](image-url)  
(Figure 1 shows the original plan of the city)

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\(^{34}\) Spear, *Early America*, 106.  
Figure 2.

(Figure 2 represents the immense growth of New Orleans from 1728-1816)

Chapter 2: Flooding, Yellow Fever Epidemics, and Post-Civil War New Orleans

Attempting to control nature plays a large role in the history of New Orleans as well as its racial narrative. Looking back on the natural disasters that have affected New Orleans and the amenities constructed to prevent them, it is often the black population of the city that is not protected from such events. The manpower to build the first levees was put on the backs of African slaves as was much of the construction of 17th and 18th century New Orleans. From then on, the levees needed constant reinforcement and extension as the city expanded and a system needed to be put in place to pump water out of the city should a flood breach the levees. The black communities were some of the last to receive these pumps and general sewerage systems. This chapter will examine the construction of the levees, the failures of New Orleans keeping the city from flooding, and why it was the black population of the city that was most affected. Going hand in hand with the flooding in New Orleans, were the epidemics of yellow fever that struck the city in the 1800s. This section will highlight the creation of the sewerage system, the constant struggle to drain areas of New Orleans throughout the 19th and early 20th century.

The construction of levees began in the 1720s by the French who used slave labor to propel the production. The French contracted the Company of the Indies to start building the levees in 1724.37 The first levees to protect New Orleans from the Mississippi River were about four feet higher than the old natural levee. This was a public works project and was not privately funded but the levee only protected the inner city, about 40 square blocks.38 However, “colonial laws enacted in 1728 and in 1743 required individual landowners to build levees.”39 The landowner’s levees were built to help protect the agricultural districts of New Orleans which the city did not have the funds to have built. Levees were a necessity as most of New Orleans’ economy at the time was agriculture based and the crops had to be protected from floods so that they were not ruined. The construction of levees was expensive and took a lot of manpower. It is because of this that only the biggest plantations were able to build sufficient levees using slave labor.40 While the construction of these levees were required by the French and then the Spanish,

37 Colten, An Unnatural Metropolis, 18.
38 Ibid., 19.
39 Ibid., 20.
40 Fussell, “Constructing New Orleans, Constructing Race,” 847
when the Spanish took over the territory in 1768, there was no standardization of what was required for the levees and many were ineffective in large floods.\(^{41}\)

When the United States took over the Louisiana Territory in 1803 and made Louisiana a state in 1812, they decided that it was best to keep the levees protecting the inner city municipally funded by taxing boats that made harbor there. At this point in the city’s history, the population of New Orleans was comprised of about one third whites, one third free people of color (\textit{gens de couleur}), and one third slaves.\(^{42}\) The city government claimed that some of the ineffectiveness of the levees was due to the fact that ships were constantly running into them when they were harbored along the river banks.\(^{43}\) The city continued to push for the construction of more levees to be built upriver so that the backwater swamps of New Orleans did not repeatedly get flooded. The constant floods allowed mosquitoes to breed which became were a factor contributing to the cause of yellow fever. According to the World Health Organization, New Orleans was plagued with 19 epidemic outbreaks of yellow fever between 1807 and 1905.\(^{44}\) In addition to the threat of sickness breaking out, if the back swamps got too flooded, water would inundate the city from the northern, unprotected side. This happened in 1816 when privately built levees on the northern parts of the Mississippi River outside New Orleans were breached and the back swamp flooded all the way up to the French quarter where it stayed for almost a month due to poor drainage systems.\(^{45}\)

Yellow fever outbreaks stemmed from breakages in poorly constructed levees that did not properly protect against flooding. “The first outbreak of yellow fever, the most pervasive bacterial threat to the city, occurred in 1796, followed by a second in 1799. A more devastating flare-up took some 500 lives in 1803.”\(^{46}\) “In 1812 the mortality rate for yellow fever in the city approached an alarming 70 percent.”\(^{47}\) Yellow fever is transmitted through a bite from a mosquito. Mosquitoes like to breed in warm stagnant water, like that lying in the flooded parishes in New Orleans after the levees failed. Improper drainage and the “decay of organic

\(^{41}\) Colten, \textit{An Unnatural Metropolis}, 21.
\(^{42}\) Fussel, “Constructing New Orleans, Constructing Race,” 847.
\(^{43}\) Colten, \textit{An Unnatural Metropolis}, 22.
\(^{44}\) Paul Reiter. "Climate Change and Mosquito-Borne Disease." \textit{Environmental Health Perspectives}, 2001: 154; hereafter cited as “Climate Change and the Mosquito-Borne Disease.”
\(^{45}\) Colten, \textit{An Unnatural Metropolis}, 24.
\(^{46}\) Ibid., 36
matter in stagnant water" led to the perfect breeding ground for mosquitoes to lay their eggs. Until New Orleans perfected its drainage and levee system, the goal being to eliminate its swamps, the city would have severe outbreaks of yellow fever through the 19th century. Yellow fever was not only affecting New Orleans but the whole southern United States. “In 1878 the disease spread northward [from New Orleans] along the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers, with an estimated 100,000 cases and 20,000 deaths. Worst hit was Memphis, Tennessee, where at least 9,000 died and many inhabitants fled, never to return.” In Memphis, the city was quick to respond the series of outbreaks and installed equal sewerage and water systems to all of its citizens, black and white. This was not the case in New Orleans.

Those who were most affected were those foreign immigrants and Americans migrating to the area. It rarely affected the Creole population or the black population anymore. Yellow fever is a disease that if you contract it once and survive, the human body builds up immunity to the virus. The worst epidemic to hit the city was in 1853 when it is thought that 11,000 of the city’s 150,000 residents died and around 30,000 to 40,000 were infected with yellow fever. The outbreaks of yellow fever continued in New Orleans into the 20th century with the last major United States outbreak being in New Orleans in 1905. About 5,000 New Orleanians were infected of which 1,000 died. Many New Orleanians thought that blacks were immune to the disease because they had a much lower mortality rate than other populations. Officials made a point to target the black community and let them know that just because they typically had milder cases of yellow fever did not mean that they were completely unsusceptible and they still needed to take proper precautions against it. This push for blacks to be more aware of the virus was the white population of New Orleans expressing that they believed that the virus was spreading from the black community because of their unsanitary habits. By the 1900s, most of

48 Colten, An Unnatural Metropolis, 36.
49 Reiter, “Climate Change and the Mosquito-Borne Disease,” 154.
52 Ibid., 34.
56 Ibid.
the standing water in the swamps had been removed and the levees became more effective resulting in less flooding in the city.

The residents of New Orleans realized that they needed to be able to effectively drain the city early on in its history. The excess water in the city and in the outlying swamps was a cause for real concern. The occupants knew that the stench from the swamps of rotting materials and stagnant water was not beneficial to their health. The Spanish governor of Louisiana in the late 18th century, Francisco Luis Hector de Carondelet, ordered that the Carondelet Canal be built to ease transportation of water and waste out of the city. It “linked the rear of the city to Bayou St. John. This artificial waterway functioned primarily as a link with Lake Pontchartrain but also as a sluice for runoff and sewerage when the lake levels allowed movement in that direction.”

There was a great need to remove human waste from the city as the population was spreading out into the lower, more dangerous parts of the city as it expanded. The technology of the time was unaccommodating of the cities needs. Unless a resident was located on the high ground above the Mississippi, it was hard to flush feces and other waste out of the city. Several more canals were built through the early and mid-1800s but none could stop the flow of water from going both ways. If the water levels rose in Lake Pontchartrain then water would rush back towards the city through the canals and would flood the city. This happened on four occasions between 1831 and 1846. Looking past these events, in the lower parts of the city, the canal water stood stagnant the majority of the time simply due to gravity. While New Orleans receives an average rainfall of about 62.1 inches of rain per year, that was not enough to constantly be flushing out the canals into Lake Pontchartrain.

In the 1830s, there was a change in the labor force building levees and canals to drain the city. There was a large influx of Irish and German immigrants, as talked about in the previous chapter, around this time. The Irish would work for long hours for low wages and became the predominant ethnicity in the working class of New Orleans. With each of the city’s municipalities taking charge of the levee reinforcement and construction in their area, there was a need for unskilled labor that the Irish would fulfill. The African slaves were seen as too

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57 Colten, An Unnatural Metropolis, 38.
58 Ibid., 39
60 Colten, An Unnatural Metropolis, 25.
valuable to be used for digging around in the pestilence found in the swampy canals and levees. If the slaves were to get sick and die, that would be an immense monetary loss for their owners but if the poorly paid Irish immigrants were to die while digging out the swamps then there would be no great loss for those financing the project. All the contractor would need to do is find another poor, desperate Irishman to take the deceased’s place. In this era of racial relation in New Orleans, the free people of color had accumulated considerable wealth and were famous for their skilled labor throughout the city. It is rare in racial history that a black male’s life would have a higher value than a white man like it was in this time. It is thought that over 6,000 Irishmen perished in building the New Basin Canal in New Orleans.

The efforts put into building the New Basin Canal proved futile when in 1849 the levees broke at Pierre Sauvée’s plantation and inundated New Orleans’s poorest parts of the city with 6 feet of water, where many free blacks lived. The high ground where the rich lived was barely affected by the flood but in the poor areas where 12,000 blacks and immigrants resided, they were forced to leave their completely inundated homes. This left a majority of the city homeless until the water receded more than a month later. New Orleans officials decided that the best course of action was to rebuild the levees taller and what they deemed to be stronger. The state engineer, A.D. Wooldridge, foreshadowed the future of New Orleans in 1850 when he said, “I find myself forced to the conclusion that the entire dependence on the leveeing system is not only unsafe for us, but I think it will be destructive to those who shall come after us.”

The levee system would continue to plague New Orleans throughout the rest of its history, the city’s protection always falling short of what is necessary to keep it safe. During the Civil War, the levee system was neglected due to the lack of funding and manpower and the upkeep of the levees stayed state controlled but was mainly a federally funded project. The plantation owners and farmers could not spare the resources needed to keep the city dry as the majority of their collateral was being spent on the war. New Orleans was captured by the Union Navy and the northern government took control over the city. Colten explains that in the post-

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64 Colten, An Unnatural Metropolis, 28.
65 Ibid., 29.
66 Ibid., 30-31.
Civil War period, much of the flooding actually comes from the breaches in lake side defenses and not the traditionally unsafe Mississippi River levees. In 1879, the United States Congress created the Mississippi River Commission charging it with making a consistently effective levee system in the New Orleans area. This Commission’s goal was to eliminate breakages in the levees, make the levees stronger, and keep the Mississippi River navigable for trade. There was a labor shortage in New Orleans ever since the slaves had been freed in the Civil War. The black population no longer wanted to work maintaining the levees so in 1867, the state of Louisiana authorized prison labor as the primary labor force maintaining the levees. That, combined with immigrant recruitment programs in Germany, Belgium, Mexico, and Italy helped to supply the menial jobs in post-Civil War New Orleans. Freed slaves were still limited to mostly working in agricultural positions because there was still a lot of anti-black sentiment and racism towards blacks that would pervade into the 20th and 21st century.

The racist attitude against blacks led to several bouts of violence in New Orleans after the Civil War. The free black population was being excluded from voting because of the “Black Codes” that were put in effect by the white governing body in the South. The Constitutional Convention of 1864 codified the expansion of black’s right in the United States but not their right to vote. Many blacks who served in the Civil War thought it unfair that blacks died for their country but were unable to vote. Some of these radicals reconvened the Convention on July 30, 1866, in the Mechanics Institute of New Orleans with the goal of overthrowing the states government. This was led by about 25 white men but the supporters who were in attendance included about 200 black veterans of the Civil War. During a break in the proceeding, there was an altercation between one of the black veterans and a former Confederate outside the Institute which resulted in an all out riot that pitted the police and Confederates against the black attendees. According to testimonies given before Congress, 38 people were killed and 46 were wounded in the events. The unprovoked attacks on the black citizens led to marshal law and a

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67 Ibid., 31.
68 Ibid., 31-32.
70 Ibid.
72 Ibid., 11.
24 hour curfew being instituted until August 1st. Mob violence was not uncommon during this time period.

Despite being viewed as skilled labor, freed blacks still had little power to control their surrounding because of the racism shown in the 1866 riots which was ingrained in white community. This is exemplified by the lynchings that occurred not just in New Orleans but all over the South. Ida B. Wells goes into great detail about lynching in her pamphlet, *The Red Record*. Lynching was used as a form of oppression to show blacks that while they may be free, they are still second class citizens. In the beginning of the fourth chapter she talks about lynchings in New Orleans specifically. She tells the story of a black man who killed a white judge while defending his home. The freed man ran leaving his family behind as a white lynching party formed to find him. The mob was unable to find him but his family had been arrested on the suspicion that they were hiding him. All three brothers were lynched and his sisters were flogged and banished from the parish. This highlights whites’ need to feel power over the black population. The mob did not need to kill the assailant’s whole family but they felt as though they needed to send a strong message to the rest of the black population that they had to stay in their rightful place below the white man.

A staunch racial divide was created when it came to the issue of installation of public amenities in New Orleans. In the mid-1800s, the New Orleans local government began to recognize the need for a sewerage system to be put in place to get rid of all the waste that had been piling up on the streets of the city. This required money and the ability to fix the system if it were to break down. As talked about in Chapter 1, the city was divided into specific zones mainly based on race and heritage. The Americans stayed together in their neighborhood and the Creoles and blacks stayed in their neighborhoods. After the United States gained control of the territory from the French, the American norm of a bi-racial society began to worm its way into New Orleans society. The tri-racial history that New Orleans pioneered on the continent was a

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76 Ibid.
now a society of the past and all non-whites were now being lumped together as one race while all those of European descent moved closer together, physically and socially.

The blacks who resided in New Orleans continued to experience the discrimination that was prevalent all over the United States to the people of their race.

“Racial geography in the urban South always exhibited some degree of segregation, particularly sequestering blacks into less desirable quarters. The most common form of African American residential cluster was a bottomlands settlement near the city boundary. Poor drainage, flimsy housing, and inadequate public services characterized such neighborhoods.”

Craig Colten is explaining how the black population of New Orleans is a reflection of the greater black population in the South. The difference between the black and white citizens was the blacks of New Orleans were living in parts of the city that were consistently sinking lower into the earth’s surface, exacerbating the poor drainage and flimsy housing that was characteristic of their neighborhoods. The combination of living in the lowest lying areas of the city and the poor construction of houses were leading towards disaster for the black community. Poor drainage led to flood waters lying stagnant for long periods of time making black neighborhoods the center for pestilence spreading throughout all of New Orleans. The whites in New Orleans began to place the blame on the blacks who lived in these neighborhoods rather than the topography of the land, reverting to their racist views of blacks as unkempt brutes who could not take care of themselves without white supervision.

New Orleans political powers did recognize the issues that were creating the blight in their city but were slow to implement the proper measures into the wards that needed them most, the blackest areas. Colten identifies the two factors that led to full blown segregation in New Orleans as, “(1) the systematic reorganization of public works and (2) methodical deprivation of equal treatment to one racial group.”

The city leaders knew that if they put more pumps around the city and continued draining the wetlands around the New Orleans that eventually the sickness and putrid conditions that infested the city would disappear. Drainage was always going to be a problem but the upper classes had the opportunity to avoid it by buying real-estate in the drier,

79 Colten, An Unnatural Metropolis, 80.
81 Colten, An Unnatural Metropolis, 81.
more desirable areas on the city. The poor and the blacks had to make the best out of the neighborhoods that they were confined to.

The first public works program was designed to benefit all members of the New Orleans community including black citizens. Those who conceptualized the plans put them into action in 1899 and conceptualized it to cover all areas of the city, even those that were not “built up.”\textsuperscript{82} The thinking behind this was that draining these areas would decrease the possibility of disease working its way into the city again while also creating new districts for the city to expand into. Those putting this plan into effect followed through with their plan but it ran short of funds making it impossible, initially, to serve all communities.\textsuperscript{83} The planners wanted to focus these new efforts into the main business district and the neighborhood surrounding it. This neighborhood was thought to be about 30\% black at the time, proving that New Orleans was making an effort to include its whole population and not just the whites.\textsuperscript{84} “The initial drainage effort encompassed two wards with higher than average African American population.”\textsuperscript{85} This was an important step for the city but they were unable to keep the forward momentum going to uplift the entire city out of the sludge it was built on.

After the initial installment on the drainage system, the divide between black and white populations expanded. While the city in general saw an overall decrease in the amount of flooding and sickness in the areas that now had proper drainage systems, those without them continued to struggle with diseases that came with living in swamp-like conditions. The black population of the city was still being hardest hit by malaria and typhoid in 1907 and the city health officials pointed the finger at the black community. “In keeping with prevailing medical views, public health authorities blamed this situation on African Americans. ‘Improvement in the colored death rate has been retarded by reckless and improvident ways of the race and their utter disregard for all hygienic and sanitary laws.’”\textsuperscript{86} The black communities referred to may have been disobeying the city’s waste dumping laws but it was because they had no other options. While the high value communities in the city were being properly drained and there was no longer pestilence breeding in the streets, the poor and black communities could do nothing about the fact that they were not receiving the same amenities. No community wants to live in squalor

\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., 85.
\textsuperscript{83} Landphair, “Sewerage, Sidewalks, and Schools,” 39.
\textsuperscript{84} Colten, An Unnatural Metropolis, 87.
\textsuperscript{85} Ibid., 90.
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid.
but if it does not have the resources to remove the waste and those who do have the capital are unwilling to share what they have, there is no chance for improvement.

The gap between black and white is again highlighted when major sewerage companies started connecting neighborhoods to its grid. Troesken pointed out that “the institutional and cultural norms that defined Jim Crow were pervasive, and there is no doubt that they extended, in some degree, to the provisions of local water and sewerage services.” Troesken, “The Limits of Jim Crow,” 734. These racial divisions in plumbing services were seen nationwide in Savannah, Georgia, where black neighborhoods were some of the last to receive connections to water mains and in Memphis, Tennessee, where sewerage companies were slow in making the connection as well. In Savannah, “88 percent of white-occupied addresses fronted streets with sewer mains; and only 59 percent of black-occupied addresses fronted such streets.” Both of these cities were also hotbeds during the yellow fever epidemic in the United States in the 19th century. The cost alone to have a sewer connection made to a private dwelling was impossible for many blacks and the poor residents to afford. The city sewerage company, the Sewerage and Water Board, charged anywhere from $25 to $50 to connect to the grid in the early years of the 20th century.

With the prices being so high to connect to the sewerage infrastructure, many poor blacks continued to use privies and outhouses contributing to unsanitary conditions in the city. According to an 1878 report by Dr. Holt, the Sanitary Inspector of the fourth district in New Orleans, privies and the “human filth” that they excrete were a major reason for the yellow fever outbreaks and unsanitary conditions in the city. As he describes it, “it may be properly stated that the people have a huge privy in common, and the inhabitants of New Orleans live upon a dung heap.” By 1910 the Sewerage and Water Board began to rethink the connection rates as less than 20 percent of the city connected to the system and in 1911, with the assistance of municipal funding, the board completely did away with connection fees and started expanding the network to all residents. As the city tried to expand its sanitation system, areas that were formerly unconnected and in large part uninhabited were now getting mediocre municipal services. The municipal funding, though, was unable to keep up with the expansion of the city.

87 Troesken, “The Limits of Jim Crow,” 734.
88 Ibid., 746.
89 Ibid., 743.
90 Colten, An Unnatural Metropolis, 90.
92 Ibid.
93 Colten, An Unnatural Metropolis, 93-94.
The attempted increase of these services led to more blacks moving into the uninhabited, cheaper, and again lower lying sections of New Orleans which quickly became overcrowded. For the most part, whites had no desire to move into such neighborhoods because they comprised the more affluent population of the city and were able to stay in the areas of the city with more reliable connection and better drainage.94

The American institution of segregation and Jim Crow era made it much easier for whites not to care about the poor conditions in predominantly black neighborhoods in New Orleans. “Segregation made it easier for local politicians to deny service to blacks because when neighborhoods were exclusively black, or nearly so, those neighborhoods could have been denied service without unduly affecting whites.”95 The unsanitary conditions that were stereotypical of black neighborhoods were the only concerns for whites. When the whites thought that there was a pestilence coming out of the black neighborhoods they would blame it on the race of the resident and not the situation that the person was forced to live in. Yellow fever was a result of the New Orleans climate and not the black community’s sanitary conditions. Even though the city tried to make surroundings more sanitary in all parishes of New Orleans, they fell short in the poor black neighborhoods. The anger of whites after the Civil War began stirred racial tensions that would lead to violence and this aggression would pervade into the following centuries. This attitude will continually be shown later on in the 20th century as the inner city of New Orleans becomes racially darker and as means of transportation to and from the suburbs becomes more readily available, providing greater mobility for whites move out of the city.

94 Ibid., 96
95 Troesken, “The Limits of Jim Crow,” 769.
Chapter 3: Segregation and Police Brutality in the Big Easy During the Civil Rights Movement

During the 20th century New Orleans became more segregated as the disparities between the white and black communities became more defined. The improved infrastructure, like the construction of the Lake Pontchartrain Bridge and the advancements to the street car system, increased the mobility of both the white and black populations of the city. Although both groups became more mobile, more of the city’s capital belonged to the New Orleans’s white citizens which made it possible for them to live further outside the city, away from the lower class black communities. Housing projects that had previously been occupied by predominately white communities became lower class black neighborhoods as the whites moved to the suburbs. This was the trend all over the United States as African Americans moved into large urban centers, whites fled to the suburbs where there was less possibility of racial mixing. This chapter will look at the position this left African Americans in. The chapter will also focus on oppression in the inner city against black population by the police and local government. Many organizations were created by the black citizens to counteract the oppression they were facing fueled by national organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Black Panther Party to local organizing groups. The extraction of white capital from the city led to the conditions creating a majority lower class black inner city in New Orleans and it will set up the unequal conditions for blacks that pervaded into the 21st century.

The Great Migration played a crucial role in the redistribution of blacks throughout the United States, including New Orleans. “In 1900, just under 740,000 African Americans lived outside the South, only 8 percent of the nation’s total black population... By 1970, more than 10.6 million African Americans lived outside the South, 47% of the nation’s populations.”96 The black population was migrating to the North in search of jobs that were being created by new industries such as steel mills, the new automotive industry, and war time factories. During World War I and II, jobs opened up in factories because the former workers were sent to Europe to fight. The job opportunities opening up to many blacks, along with the incentive of leaving a racist South, led them to head north to gain better employment.97 Those that did not have the

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97 Ibid., 20.
means to leave the South had even less of a chance to prosper because not only were they black but they were poor.

The Jim Crow era in New Orleans continued the tradition of blacks receiving unequal city services in their neighborhoods. Whites and blacks became more divided as segregation began to play a more active role in daily life. The former melting pot of Creole, blacks, and whites had degraded into separated bi-racial city as the color of a person’s skin began to show whether a New Orleans citizen was innately privileged or not. The city council of New Orleans passed Ordinance Number 8037 that segregated white and black neighborhoods in 1924. The ordinance stopped blacks from taking up residences in established white neighborhoods. In the newly drained areas of the city, developers made deed covenants that excluded blacks from being able to purchase residences in the neighborhoods and also priced the houses out of the price range of many black families. While there were new neighborhoods being erected to serve the white population in the city, as Daphne Spain argues in her piece Race Relations and Residential Segregation in New Orleans, the “Wood Pump,” which drained the swamps to make room for these new white communities, was a tool used to segregate the community. “The process of pumping excess water proved extremely expensive, and the drainage operation was consequently limited to the lakeshore area, where the affluent whites planned to settle.” Spain also points to the expansion of the street car system as another factor affecting the flight of whites from the city. The further the streetcar lines extended from the center of the city, the more the white population had the opportunity to live further from where they worked which had an encroaching black population.

Real-estate contracts disallowing blacks from living in certain areas were a contributing factor to not only the inequity of schools but the poor sewerage systems that predominately black neighborhoods received. The deed covenants forced blacks to buy or rent in lower lying areas of the city which were harder to drain and easier to flood. Colten describes this when he says that, “although the improved drainage system opened new areas to black residences, at the same time it contributed to the segregation, reflecting established patterns of the turning low-value land associated with environment problems over to minority populations. The development of

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101 Spain, “Race Relations and Residential Segregation in New Orleans,” 89.
lakefront property also requires expansion of the drainage system, and this improvement contributed to segregation in the higher-valued [and higher laying] area restricted to whites. This pushing of blacks to lower laying parts of the city put them in areas of the city like the Ninth Ward located right along the Mississippi River and in the industrial district in lower parts of the bowl.

The white people of New Orleans thought that zoning and comprehensive planning should be placed under the Jim Crow policies that were being used to separate the races. The lower lying parts of the city would continually have drainage problems through present day

These lower lying areas to the east and west of the city turned into havens of the black community. While they were susceptible to flooding, these neighborhoods were transformed into small business districts for the black citizens. Small black owned businesses sprouted up in these areas after the Civil War and grew from there. These businesses included lunch counters, saloons, groceries, and other little operations. These businesses helped bring money to the black business owners. The whites would not allow blacks into certain areas of the city and so they had to build their own amenities. This helped to uplift the black community slightly because they knew that the money they were spending was going to a black owned business and that they did not have to feel segregated against since they did not have to leave their neighborhood. These small neighborhoods brought in new black citizens from all over Louisiana who were also tired of the residential segregation. The black population of the city grew by about 50 percent during this time. The black community moving to the areas where black businesses were located actually increased the amount of residential segregation in the city.

The blacks who formerly had to live closer to their jobs and closer to basic amenities like food before the streetcar system was expanded could now move into neighborhoods where they were accepted.

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102 Colten, An Unnatural Metropolis, 106.
104 Ingham, “Building Businesses, Creating Communities,” 646.
105 Ibid., 664.
106 Ibid., 646.
While whites kept their jobs in the city and changed where they laid their heads at night, blacks in the city during the Jim Crow era were not able to find high paying jobs because they were still considered unskilled laborers by the majority of business owners in New Orleans. Most of the lowest paying jobs were taken by black and immigrant workers. Ninety percent of the work force in public works projects was black in 1900.\footnote{Spain, “Race Relations and Residential Segregation in New Orleans,” 89.} By the 1920s, several descendants of free black Creoles were leading the fight against racial restrictions such as disenfranchisement and segregation ordinances in housing, schools, and transportation. Black laborers were being specifically excluded from work in shipyards, one of the most lucrative businesses in the city. New Orleans also came to be one of the largest ports for the importation of oil into the United States. The oil business was the biggest industry in the city and the black citizens not allowed to break into that labor force as well.\footnote{Moore, \textit{Black Rage in New Orleans}, 10.} While they were not permitted to work in the shipyards loading and unloading boats, shipbuilding plants were constructed in the Ninth Ward that

\footnote{Moore, \textit{Black Rage in New Orleans}, 10.}
attracted a lot of African American workers to the area. New Orleans was the endpoint to most southern railroad lines and was where southern commodities, such as cotton, were loaded on boats to be exported around the world.\textsuperscript{111} Working in train depots helped provide some jobs but most looked to the boat building yards when looking for work.

During WWII era, New Orleans was one of the largest ship manufacturers in the United States. 1942 there were only 100 black laborers in the ship building industry but there were over 1,500 trained mechanics that were black.\textsuperscript{112} The Higgins Industries shipyard in New Orleans made a vow to make over 50 percent of their labor black but did not follow through due to protests from the white labor force.\textsuperscript{113} This would have created thousands of jobs for blacks in the city but due to the whites not wanting to have to work in close proximity to blacks, they found that they were not completely welcome in this industry. One of the reasons that blacks had such a hard time finding good jobs was their lack of representation in the local government.

During the Jim Crow era in the south, there was no possibility of a black person getting elected to any position of authority. One of the main obstacles that had to be overcome was that very few blacks were registered to vote at the time. In 1940, the population of New Orleans was around 500,000 people, about one third of the population was black; and only 400 blacks who lived in the city were registered voters.\textsuperscript{114} With no voice in the political community, there was little chance of improving the situation that blacks were living in. The small black voting bloc disabled them from being able to fight back against one of the most notoriously violent and corrupt police forces in the United States.\textsuperscript{115} In 1943, Pastor Abraham Lincoln Davis and Ernest J. Wright formed the Louisiana Association for the Progress of Negro Citizens to encourage blacks to register to vote and the local black paper, the \textit{Louisiana Weekly} pushed its readers to do the same.\textsuperscript{116}

The New Orleans Police Department (NOPD) has long been cited for their uncouth practices and for being a infamously corrupt office. All officers in the NOPD in the city were white for the first three decades of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. During World War II, the NOPD was

\begin{itemize}
\item[Ibid.]
\item[Ibid., 35.]
\item[Ibid., 35.]
\item[Arend, \textit{Showdown in Desire}, xvii.]
\item[Landphair, “Sewerage, Sidewalks, and Schools,” 44.]
\end{itemize}
infamous “for not cracking down on prostitution, gambling, and other forms of vice, as crime rose in the city.”\textsuperscript{117} This lack of discipline in the department made the black citizens of New Orleans want to push for the police force to be integrated so they would not be taken advantage of. The blacks formed a petition to be delivered to the mayor’s office asking that the blacks be given a chance to become police officers. The mayor from the mid 30s through 1946, Robert Maestri, was known for neglecting the concerns of the black community and did nothing to aid the passing of this legislation that pushed for equal employment practices in the police department.

The “municipal decay”\textsuperscript{118} in the WWII era New Orleans was somewhat attributed to the war effort which removed necessary resources to maintain infrastructure and resources from the city and the whole country but it was also due to the negligence on the mayor’s part. “Negroes and labor fared poorly during the Maestri years. Blacks held only the most menial jobs in the city government and had little hope for advancement.”\textsuperscript{119} The black community led by Pastor Abraham Lincoln Davis and the Negro Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance (NIMA), saw the lack of black police officers and took action. They went through with an investigation concerning the hiring process of the New Orleans Police Department. The conclusion of their research was that there was no law against blacks being hired and so Davis and NIMA swayed the mayor to the decision that he must allow blacks into the police academy if they were qualified. Maestri decided to let 25 blacks take the test to become officers in 1946 during his last year in office.\textsuperscript{120} The reason that the black community wanted black police officers in the city was because they wanted people of their own race patrolling their neighborhoods. They thought that it would prevent events of police brutality and unlawful arrests that had been associated with the historically white police force.

When Maestri was replaced in 1946 by Delessepps Story Morrison, a reformer who wanted to completely restructure the police force, the black community thought that they might have a chance to have blacks represented on the NOPD. They were mistaken. Morrison appointed a new police superintendent Adair Watter who was a former military man and was

\textsuperscript{117} Moore, \textit{Black Rage in New Orleans},” 18
\textsuperscript{119} Ibid., 305
\textsuperscript{120} Moore, \textit{Black Rage in New Orleans},” 18-20.
brought in specifically for the reason of reforming the police department.121 Four black citizens passed the police test in 1946. The applicants had to be cleared by the Superintendent Watters and Mayor Morrison before they could become police officers but they did not receive the approval from either.122 The concerns that were brought up with having black police officers were that they did not think that the white population of the city would obligingly take orders from black males, no matter what his official status was. Leonard Moore states in his book that, “one of the main concerns was the fear that African American police officers would harass and rape white women.”123 This leads one to believe that no blacks are to be trusted in positions of power because they cannot handle the duties in the same way a white man could. The whites seemed to be under the impression that all blacks would take advantage of their power to enact revenge on the white community for their ancestor’s participation in the slave trade. Ironically, these fears of the raping of white women by black police officers were the realities black women faced from white officers.124

By 1949, there had still been no appointment of black officers to the New Orleans Police Department and cases of police brutality were on the rise. On hearing of the despicable actions of the white police force when they were accused of hitting and then throwing a pregnant black woman to the ground, the NAACP stepped in to try and bring greater attention to the mistreatment and oppression that blacks in New Orleans were forced to live under. The NAACP wrote letters to the superintendent’s office explaining their discontent with the department and demanded that actions must be taken by him to control the police force. They must stop the beating of the city’s black citizens. The arguments presented by the NAACP were that if black officers had been present at the time of the arrests there would have been no use of unnecessary force against the black citizens.125 Watters responded saying that all offences by NOPD officers would be fully investigated and that if the mistreatment continued, the NAACP should direct their complaints to the District Attorney. Watters resigned from office two days after sending the letter. In 1949, after a civil lawsuit had been filed by Carlton Pecot, one of the individuals who had passed the police test and was denied a job, against the NOPD for discriminating against

121 Ibid., 20.
122 Ibid., 22-23
123 Ibid., 23
124 Ibid., 41.
125 Ibid., 43.
blacks in the hiring process, Mayor Morrison urged the new police superintendent, Joseph Scheuring, to appoint some black police officers to the force.\textsuperscript{126}

In 1950, Pecot and John Raphael were the first two black police officers to be appointed to the NOPD in the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. Many restrictions were put on these two officers that made their job difficult and completely different than most of the police force. A 1959 New York Times article described the role of the black officers in the NOPD. Black patrolmen were confined to patrolling black neighborhoods and dealt with all investigations that went on in those areas. They were also not allowed to arrest white citizens unless they were with a white officer.\textsuperscript{127} The small numbers of black officers were essentially useless outside their jurisdictions to stop blacks from being assaulted by whites. Another issue that also had to be addressed along with the lack of black officers in the police force was the poor quality education being given to young blacks in New Orleans. Without a good school system to nurture the minds of young blacks, there is little hope of them getting jobs in the police force or in any other more specialized field.

Police brutality was overlooked in many cases due to the white power structure in the New Orleans Police Department. Even as the NOPD began to recruit more black members throughout the 1950s, there was no indication that the brutality practiced in the past was going to end. Black children were being arrested for playing on unoccupied designated white playgrounds, black pedestrians were randomly shot at in the street, and black women were raped by white police officers.\textsuperscript{128} In the case of one woman, she was raped by a white police officer who was being watched by two other white officers. The young woman reported the officers and they were arrested. When they went to trial, there was an all white jury that did not believe the woman’s story and all three officers were acquitted.\textsuperscript{129} Police officers routinely made up stories about how blacks attacked them and they were forced to defend themselves in a brutal manner. Many arrests were conducted by the whites on the police force following this strategy as an example. The black community responded with the creation of the Committee to Prevent Police Brutality to Negro Citizens.\textsuperscript{130} The Committee met with Mayor Morrison, the district attorney and the councilmen who was the delegate for the district where the beatings took place. The

\textsuperscript{126} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{129} Moore, Black Rage in New Orleans, 40
\textsuperscript{130} Ibid., 41.
brutality by officers was denied by the city leaders when the citizens on the Committee called for an investigation. The Committee realized they were complaining to deaf ears and that a more radical style of protest would be necessary to get the message across that police brutality would not be tolerated. The 1960’s would bring about this new radicalism in the black community.  

Part of the radicalism was brought on by the gentrification of neighborhoods. Hurricane Betsy ripped through the city in 1965, dumping inches of rain and flooding the overwhelmed levees. Areas of the city, like the Ninth Ward began to empty of its white inhabitants and poor blacks began to move in. The Army Corps of Engineers started to play a much more active role in protecting the city and providing the illusion of safety to the citizens of the New Orleans. The schools that were built in the Ninth Ward for white children no longer received similar funding for the black students that now occupied them.

Black New Orleanians were subjected to poorly equipped schools around the city due mainly to overcrowding and lack of funding from the city throughout the early parts of the century. In the 1920s, the Orleans Parish School Board who oversaw the school district in the Ninth Ward instated a “platoon system.” This system had the student’s only going to school for a half day so that the teachers could teach a new group of students during the second half of the day. While WWII was a blessing for those searching for jobs, it wreaked havoc on the infrastructure of the city, i.e. the schools and housing. Thousands moved into the city when the war started in search of jobs. There were very few housing options in the city where the migrants could relocate to so the New Orleans city government decided to build low income housing projects in the marsh, an area now known as the Upper Ninth Ward. These projects were overflowing with new citizens which created overcrowding in the school system. Not only were the schools overcrowded but they were unfit for human use as a school board member stated after touring one of the facilities. There was no space for the children in the classrooms and resources such as books, school supplies, and the buildings were over used and quickly became dilapidated.

131 Ibid., 42.
133 Ibid.
135 Ibid., 44.
136 Ibid., 45.
137 Rogers, Righteous Lives, 63.
In 1948, a dock worker named Wilfred Aubert Jr., grew tired of his children getting an inadequate education and decided to file a law suit against the school board for discriminating against black children. He approached lawyer A.P. Tureaud who took the issue up with the school board. Tureaud warned them that if they did not improve the conditions in the black schools that he would follow through with the law suit that had been purposed by Aubert. The all white school board said that they would devote a majority of their funds and time into making the black schools more suitable. Tureaud did not believe the school board and filed the suit under the name *Rosana Aubert v. Orleans Parish School Board*. This case was filed under the premise that the actions of the school board were going against the ruling of *Plessy v. Ferguson* which stipulated that it was legal for whites and blacks to be segregated but they must have all the same amenities at their disposal. This was clearly not the case in the Ninth Ward. The education was sub-par and insufficient for the needs of New Orleans’ black population. The only reason that this case was not brought to the Supreme Court was because *Brown v. Board of Education* was deemed a more solid case for NAACP to show support for.

The 1960s was not just an era of change for blacks in New Orleans but for the whole black American population. The movements that came out of the 1960s were geared towards changing the social and political structure of the United States to include the black populace as equals to the country’s white citizens. With passage of *Brown v. Board of Education*, schools slowly started integrating throughout the United States. It took four years for the first schools in New Orleans to desegregate but on November 14, 1960 four young black girls started their first days of school in an integrated environment, the most famous of which was Ruby Bridges.

Ruby was the only black student attending William Frantz Public School that November and was constantly under the guard of U.S. Marshals who were assigned to make sure no harm came to her. Large crowds showed up to protest the integration of the schools, William Frantz and John McDonough No. 19, and the NOPD did a good job of upholding the law and not letting the mob turn violent. The demographics of this mob were completely new to the New Orleans history of violence. This group of protestors was shockingly comprised of almost all women as

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140 Ibid., 50.
Time Magazine reported.\textsuperscript{143} A local newspaper quoted a white mother saying, “They ought to take Judge Wright [The judge who ordered New Orleans schools be integrated] out and hang him by his toes.”\textsuperscript{144} According to the article, state troopers also tried to present the principal of Frantz Public School with legislative documents to shut down the school for the day but the school administrator refused.\textsuperscript{145} The Louisiana State legislature was up in arms about the matter as well. Many representatives said that they would “rather go to jail then see the schools integrated.”\textsuperscript{146} The police’s response of keeping the crowd in control was of the last harmonious visions a lot of blacks would see from the New Orleans police for some time.

![Figure 4](bridges-entering-william-frantz-public-school.png) ![Figure 5](mothers-of-former-students-protesting-rubys-presence.png)

One of the organizations spearheading the civil right movement was called the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and they instituted a plan of “direct action” all over the southern United States. This plan non-violently brought the plight of black citizens to the door step of white America. Direct action employed strategies like sit-ins at restaurants and convenience stores where blacks were not allowed to patronize and boycotted businesses or institutions that segregated against blacks. This radicalism shown by the black community scared and infuriated many whites. The combination of the integrating of the schools and the more proactive stance by

\textsuperscript{143} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{145} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{146} Ibid.
the city’s black population made whites want to move out of the city, contributing to white flight.\textsuperscript{149}

In the early stages of integrating the schools, many whites removed their children from classes until they could find a new school that was more exclusive and did not allow blacks such as private schools. In some cases, those parents who took their children out of the schools went and vehemently lobbied other white families to do the same by harassing them as they walked their children into the schools. An example of the favor police showed to whites; the police let this behavior from the whites persist but when a black person from New Orleans peacefully participated in a sit-in, they would be subjected to the full, violent force of the law.\textsuperscript{150} The NAACP and CORE continued sponsoring peaceful sit-ins and helping those who were still being brutalized by the NOPD while the police sustained their practices of arresting and, when possible, manhandling black citizens for breaking minor laws such as driving with a broken headlight or being congregated in the street without a parade permit. As the Black Panther Party declared, an individual can only take so much abuse before they decided to fight back.

The Black Panther Party (BPP) was founded on the tenants of the black community coming together and embracing their black identity. They wanted good shelter, education, and opportunity for blacks to thrive, along with full employment and healthcare for blacks and the oppressed in the U.S. The BPP also had a special focus on ending police brutality nationwide that blacks suffered under the white majority police forces.\textsuperscript{151} The BPP named these goals The Ten Point Plan. One of the ways the BPP carried out their objective of putting an end to police brutality and violence against blacks in general was by openly exercising their right to bear arms as written in the United States Constitution. The intimidation factor created by black private citizens carrying guns scared the police officers and made them think twice before assaulting a black person. The Panthers governed the organization based off these covenants and locally focused on the issues that were of greatest concern to the black population they were serving.\textsuperscript{152}

The BPP in New Orleans tried to serve the community using both violent and non-violent strategies. It set up breakfast programs for hungry children before school, opened free sickle-cell screening facilities, taught classes on self-determination, and the Panthers made it clear to drug

\textsuperscript{149} Gregory, \textit{The Southern Diaspora}, 21.
\textsuperscript{150} Moore, \textit{Black Rage in New Orleans}, 48.
\textsuperscript{152} Moore, \textit{Black Rage in New Orleans}, 71.
dealers that they would not be allowed to peddle their product around neighborhoods with lots of black children. The BPP saw drugs as a substance keeping blacks oppressed. It took their money and inhibited their true mental capacity.\textsuperscript{153} The community reaped many benefits from the presence of the Panthers but the white power structure did not like what the BPP was doing. One former Panther, Malik Rahim, thought that the New Orleans city government did not like the Panthers because of the effect they had on municipal funding. The federal government awards funding to cities based on the crime and poverty rate of a city. The Panthers goal was to eliminate both in the black community and this would have resulted in less funding for the local government.\textsuperscript{154} The BPP made their headquarters in the locality of Desire, New Orleans north of the French Quarter and on the waterfront along the Mississippi River. These were areas where many black residents lived in housing projects so they set up in a house on Piety Street and Apartment A of Desire Project House #3315.\textsuperscript{155} These buildings were the center of operation for the Panthers and were the ground zero sites for two massive confrontations between the NOPD and the BPP. As described in Leonard Moore’s book, \textit{Black Rage in New Orleans}, Desire was one of the youngest, most dangerous, and poverty stricken areas of New Orleans. “Desire was a time bomb waiting to explode.” \textsuperscript{156}

On September 15, 1970 the NOPD sent around one hundred police officers to raid the offices of the BPP on Piety Street who had been served eviction papers a few months prior but did not comply. When the officers arrived in armored vehicles the BPP members had barricaded themselves into the house. The police opened fire on the house that contained 14 BPP members. The reports of Malik Rahim, who was in the house, stated that the police officers fired on the house with high powered rifles and pistols for close to 20 minutes before ceasing fire. All fourteen occupants were arrested and surprisingly unscathed.\textsuperscript{157} The NOPD forensics teams found 887 shell rounds at the scene.\textsuperscript{158} In October the Panthers made 3315 their headquarters and on November 19, 1970 the police showed up to evict them again. This time 250 officers were deployed to the scene to arrest all those in the building.\textsuperscript{159}

\textsuperscript{153} Arend, \textit{Showdown in Desire}, 17.
\textsuperscript{154} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{155} Ibid., 224.
\textsuperscript{156} Moore, \textit{Black Rage in New Orleans}, 71.
\textsuperscript{157} Arend, \textit{Showdown in Desire}, 70-71.
\textsuperscript{158} Moore, \textit{Black Rage in New Orleans}, 75.
\textsuperscript{159} The Times-Picayune, “1971.”
in the projects saw what was going to happen, thousands of them took to the streets to stand in front of the building, effectively stopping the police from conducting their raid that day.\textsuperscript{160} Seven days later, police officers disguised as priests and postal workers raided the building arresting six of the Panthers on suspicion of attempted murder and firearms violations.\textsuperscript{161} The story of these police raids alludes to the overzealous nature of the NOPD in all acts of restricting the black population. The black population of New Orleans had to think more about defending themselves as the police department began to do less and less to protect and serve their community.

Figure 6.

(Officers attempting to get through neighborhood civilians to raid the Black Panther Party headquarters)

Figure 7.

(Officers moving in behind the “war wagon” to arrest Black Panther Party members in Desire Projects)

\textsuperscript{160} Arend, \textit{Showdown in Desire}, 102-104.
\textsuperscript{161} Ibid., 224.
\textsuperscript{162} The Times-Picayune, “1971”
\textsuperscript{163} Ibid.
With the police department not making the necessary efforts in black communities, individuals joined “watchdog” groups like the Soul Patrol to police their own neighborhoods.\(^{164}\) This group of young black males threatened to beat up anyone they saw doing wrong in their neighborhoods, black or white. Many black community members did not approve of the Soul Patrol and wanted the police to stop this radical group from imposing its own law and order on the public.\(^{165}\) A more focused group also came out of necessity of more protection of black citizens. The Black Organization of Police (BOP) was created in 1973 to try to combat the acts of police brutality occurring in New Orleans, provide greater protection for black neighborhoods, improve relations between black citizens and the police, and encourage more blacks to join the force.\(^{166}\) This group knew that public relations would be the best way to reach the black community and performing their jobs to the best of their ability and serving greater numbers in the black community was the best place to start.

The BOP’s efforts did not inspire the community to apply to be one of NOPD’s finest. The statistics of police brutality and homicides committed by the NOPD against blacks was a large reason for this. “Between 1974 and 1975, the NOPD continued to kill black civilians at a higher rate than any other police department in the country.”\(^{167}\) Blacks in the city at that time were statistically more violent than other African Americans around the United States. New Orleans had one of the highest rates of black on black violence in the country.\(^{168}\) This can largely be attributed to the conditions that the black population was living in. It was everything that the BPP and the NAACP were fighting against. They did not have proper education systems set up for blacks to thrive in. Where there was a police force, it was set up as a means of oppression and not to protect the people. These issues continue to persist today as it will be shown in the next chapter.

From the beginning of the 20\(^{th}\) century, New Orleans truly began to be defined as a troubled city in the United States. From boasting one of the highest crime rates and the highest rates of police corruption and assaults to enduring being a city with deeply-seated racist tendencies, the black population found itself trying to escape the discrimination by any means

\(^{164}\) Moore, *Black Rage in New Orleans*, 113-114.
\(^{165}\) Ibid.
\(^{166}\) Ibid., 116.
\(^{167}\) Ibid., 122.
necessary. For some, this meant literally fleeing the city in search of work and a less racist climate elsewhere in the United States. For others, it meant that the black citizens of the city had to join up together and make it a better place to live. The NAACP and the Black Panther Party played important roles in organizing the black people of New Orleans to better their lives through numerous programs and initiatives set in place. A black person becoming a first class citizen in the Big Easy is a hard thing to overcome and as the next chapter will show, it has yet to be accomplished.
Chapter 4: Reformation in the NOPD, Environmental Injustice, and Hurricane Katrina

The previous chapters have discussed the neglect and mistreatment of the black citizens in New Orleans. This chapter will focus on the same issues that have been troubling the Big Easy, from the 1980s on. These factors have made it one of the least desirable cities in the United States to live in, especially for blacks. There are four elements that will be focused on in this chapter. First is the continued police brutality and corruption in the justice system that ran rampant since the early 20th century. This era is when blacks being to obtain real positions of power in New Orleans. The first black mayor and police chiefs in the city were elected and promoted into their positions and made respectable efforts to improve the life of blacks in the city without interrupting the status quo. Second is gang life that sprouted and flourished in New Orleans and surrounding parishes. Gangs had a different dynamic in New Orleans than they have in most of the country. New Orleans gangs were almost exclusively local, meaning that they have no affiliation with national gangs like the Bloods, the Crypts, or MS13.169 Third, a culture of poverty was pervasive in the poor black neighborhoods of New Orleans. Insufficient facilities and poor upkeep of the neighborhoods on the city’s part played a role in maintaining the poverty levels in these communities. Finally, this chapter will discuss the environmental factors that plagued the city. Areas of New Orleans predominantly black neighborhoods that were built on former garbage dumps were declared Superfund sites and caused high cancer rates in those areas. The mismanagement on the barriers protecting the city led to the catastrophic failure of the levees when Hurricane Katrina struck. Ironically, the defenses that were put in place by the government to protect the city helped destroy the natural defenses that were already in place. Hurricane Katrina epitomized a breakdown in the system that negatively affected the lives of all New Orleanians, particularly the poorest black population.

Police brutality and corruption stand at the forefront of black citizens’ minds when they are looking for protection. The effectiveness of the police force to prevent crimes from happening plays a major role in this era. The black community felt as though they had caught a break when the first black mayor was elected in 1977. Ernest (Dutch) Morial made history that day turning out the largest number of black voters in a mayoral election to date.170 Mayor Morial

would be fighting an uphill battle to reform the Police Department.\textsuperscript{171} The former New Orleans judge stood in an excellent position to turn around the history of police brutality in the city and made great efforts to do so. Morial wanted branches of the local government to be held accountable for all their actions so he pushed for the creation of the Office of Municipal Investigation (OMI) in 1979. This commission was made up of civil servants who were charged with investigating acts of malfeasance in the local government and Police Department to end the police misconduct in New Orleans.\textsuperscript{172} They were supposed to fill the gaps that internal investigations could not. Despite a large backing from the black community, OMI was shut down because of a lack of police support.\textsuperscript{173} The group was seen as anti-police by the white officers of the NOPD and combined with a lack of publicly releasing files on their effectiveness; the OMI did not receive the funding to continue operations.\textsuperscript{174} The checks and balances created by OMI seemed to deter many officers from abusing their power, but it was not able to stop them all.

An issue that gained national attention in 1980 was the killing of three black males and one black female by NOPD officers. Two of the men killed were suspects in the case of a cop killing. Those killed were shot to death by officers who were investigating the killing of white police officer Gregory Neuport in a New Orleans housing project. A mob of white police officers stormed a black area of town killing the four individuals and injuring 50 others.\textsuperscript{175} Seven of the fourteen officers involved in the beatings and killings were brought up on criminal charges.\textsuperscript{176} This brought civil rights groups in New Orleans together to push the mayor to do more about the inappropriate actions of the police in predominately black neighborhoods.

In 1984, Morial took further steps toward a stronger anti-brutality, more proactive Department when he promoted the first black police officer, Warren Woodfork, to be the city’s police chief. Woodfork had been on the NOPD for twenty years and knew the history of a black officer’s role in the police department that has been discussed in the previous chapters. He wanted to make the police an element of the New Orleans infrastructure that all citizens could trust once again. Unfortunately, he was limited by economic factors from increasing the number of officers on the streets to ensure the safety of all citizens. At that time New Orleans had the

\textsuperscript{171} Moore, \textit{Black Rage in New Orleans}, 139
\textsuperscript{172} Ibid., 187.
\textsuperscript{173} Ibid., 196.
\textsuperscript{174} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{175} Keegan, “The nes Line.”
\textsuperscript{176} \textit{The Boston Globe.} “7 NEW ORLEANS OFFICERS INDICTED IN RIGHTS CASE.” July 10, 1981: 1.
fourth highest homicide rate in the United States.\textsuperscript{177} According to the \textit{National Criminal Justice Reference Service}, in 1985, out of the 156 homicides, 79.5\% of homicide victims in New Orleans were black.\textsuperscript{178} This statistic shows a large discrepancy in the population being affected by the crime rates. The not so hidden message is that the black community was living in fear and it was up to the new police chief to make them feel safe.

(Figure 8. Mayor Ernest “Dutch” Morial) (Figure 9. Police Superintendent Warren Woodfork)

Budget cuts were a result of whites moving out of the city into the neighboring to Slidell and St. Tammany cost the New Orleans Police Department the employment of almost 200 officers between 1985 and 1987. This was because of the effect that black communities had on property taxes. When neighborhood demographics switched from being majority white to majority black, statistics say that the property taxes drop.\textsuperscript{181} This would negatively affect the

\textsuperscript{177} Moore, \textit{Black Rage in New Orleans}, 199.
\textsuperscript{181} Landphair, “Sidewalks, Sewerage, Schools,” 45.
municipal funding to all facets of the infrastructure in the neighborhood from the schools to the roads.

As Moore talks about in his book *Black Rage in New Orleans*, there was very little that could be done in terms of stopping crimes from being committed in the three most dangerous predominantly black housing projects. In the Desire, St. Thomas, and Fischer projects, the black occupants lived in such close quarters with such large numbers that it would be nearly impossible to police with a full-staffed police force.\(^{182}\) Woodfork wanted to improve conditions in those crime ridden areas but the greater population wanted the manpower of the police force that was available to be used in the areas of the city that attracted business to New Orleans like the French Quarter. A larger police presence was sought in the high crime areas, but as a New Orleans citizen, and president of the local chapter of the NAACP, Shirley B. Porter said to the *New York Times*, “We can’t have the police acting as arresting officers, lawyers, prosecutors, judge and jury, and deny people all of their civil rights.”\(^{183}\) Porter’s statement brings up the tactics that officers in the NOPD use to apprehend suspects and whether they are truly necessary.

Unfortunately for New Orleans, as drug use and violent crime began to spike around the city in the 80s and 90s, the officers did not demonstrate their power to make the city safer. Between 1970 and 1995, the homicide rate in New Orleans skyrocketed 329 percent making it one of the most dangerous cities and earning the title “Murder Capital of the United States.”\(^{184}\) That astounding statistic reflects poorly on the Department. Being undermanned and inadequately funded caused gaps in the police’s effectiveness. As special FBI agent Jim Bernazzani was quoted saying, “When a community feels the judicial system has failed, a second system kicks in, and killings beget killings beget killings.”\(^{185}\) One citizen’s critique of the NOPD was that they were only present when something was going wrong. They never saw them just patrolling neighborhoods making sure everything was safe.\(^{186}\) This style of policing changes the way people think about their police force. If officers are only around when there is a crime being committed, that creates a negative association with seeing police. However, in highly policed areas, like the French Quarter for example, where police are always present, it gives the illusion

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\(^{182}\) Moore, *Black Rage in New Orleans*, 207.


\(^{186}\) Moore, *Black Rage in New Orleans*, 207.
of safety to those in the area because they are always present.\(^{187}\) If more focus was put on having police put in the poor black neighborhoods and projects, it could have changed the way people saw and acted toward the police.

A study conducted in 2004 by Susan Howell, Huey Perry and Matthew Vile researched the differences between approval ratings of police in cities known as mostly black versus cities with a majority white population. Their research shows that blacks have negative opinions of the police due to the nature of their encounters. They cite the Bureau of Justice saying that “African Americans and Hispanics were more likely to experience a threat of force, or the actual use of force, by the police as a result of contact with the police.”\(^{188}\) They make the argument that it is because crime rates are higher in black neighborhoods that police are overly aggressive.\(^{189}\) There is no middle ground between over-policing and under-policing.\(^{190}\) This can certainly be applied in the context of New Orleans. The NOPD are either not present, causing extremely high rates of crime, or they are being overly aggressive and causing harm to the black community that they are supposed to be protecting. This can cause a bad cycle of violence between the community and police. The blacks who are involved in crime would respond more aggressively to a police presence because they are used to living in an uncontrolled environment, which in turn causes the police to respond in a harsher manner. The overall outcome of the study was actually to find that whites have a more staunchly negative opinion of the police in black cities when they are victimized by a black person because they feel that they should have been better protected. Black citizens feel the same oppression from police no matter whether the city is classified as black or white and are not as outwardly negative about their encounter.\(^{191}\)

Many of the crimes that were causing epidemic crime rates in New Orleans could be attributed to the expansion and development of drug use and trade in the city. Local gangs were the main pushers of drugs in the city. Crack cocaine hit the drug market hard in the 1980s.\(^{192}\) This highly addictive drug was seen being used from coast to coast in the United States and New Orleans was no exception. The crack was cheap which made it appealing to those using drugs in


\(^{188}\) Ibid., 47.

\(^{189}\) Ibid.

\(^{190}\) Ibid.

\(^{191}\) Ibid., 62.

the predominantly black neighborhoods and projects. New Orleans did not have a big narcotics unit but they were specially trained in how to deal with drug dealers and drug related arrests. Dealing predominantly with drug busts in the projects, officers were taught to “stick and move.” This strategy was a focus on arresting the suspect quickly and getting out of the area as fast as possible. With all the negativity felt towards police in these neighborhoods, some of the black citizens tried to make the officers jobs harder by attempting to fight officers who were arresting suspects. This “stick and move” strategy, along with not retaliating against the citizens trying to impede officers, helped to cut down on incidents of the police having to use excessive force against innocent citizens.

As drugs became more pervasive in society, they also filtered their way into the Police Department. There were always drugs going in and out of police stations in New Orleans with drug related arrests being made which made them easily available for officers to get their hands on. In 1994, the FBI set up faux drug running rings and employed corrupt NOPD officers as security for the drug warehouses they set up. According to a 1994 New York Times article, “the nine officers accepted more than $97,000 in bribes and protected a sham drug trafficking ring.” The FBI confiscated a total of 286 pounds of cocaine from the arrested officers. The article also alleges that as many as 20 other officers could have been indicted if the case had been allowed to run its course. This crackdown by the FBI was allowed by the new Superintendent of Police Richard Pennington. The title of a 1996 report perfectly describes the state of the NOPD at the point when Pennington took over. The title is as follows, “The nes Line: Richard Pennington, the newest chief of police in New Orleans, has to deal with organized drug rings, execution-style murderers, bank robbers and rapists. And that’s just the cops.” The Pennington era was yet again supposed to mark the start of stricter reform in the New Orleans Police Department.

One incident that made national news which also highlights the situation that Pennington was entering into was the story of Antoinette Frank. Frank was a young member of the New Orleans Police Department that shot and killed a fellow officer who was moonlighting as a

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194 Ibid.
196 Keegan, “The nes Line.”
197 Ibid.
198 Ibid.
security guard at a Vietnamese restaurant. Along with two accomplices, Frank robbed the restaurant and executed both of the Vietnamese owners before killing officer Ronald Williams II.\textsuperscript{199} According to a \textit{New York Times} article, Frank used to work at the restaurant and was considered to be a close friend of both the owners and officer Williams.\textsuperscript{200} Frank was one of four officers in the NOPD who were arrested for murder that year and one of 50 who were convicted of felonies between 1993 and 1996. Some of the other felony convictions committed in this time period consisted of bank robbery and several counts of rape.\textsuperscript{201}

Pennington wanted to do more than just improve the Department itself; he wanted citizens to feel involved with their safety. He wanted to increase the amount of citizen patrols that walked the streets of New Orleans along with increasing the number of foot patrol officers. According to an interview done with the \textit{New York Times} he planned on building a new substation in the Lower Ninth Ward, a predominantly black neighborhood and focusing a majority of his resources on the other high crime neighborhoods like the parishes of “Desire, Florida, and B.W. Cooper – the site of 26 percent of the city’s 421 homicides last year [1994].”\textsuperscript{202} Getting rid of the stigma of New Orleans being the “homicide capital in America in 1992 and 1994” and “also [ranking] near the top of brutality complaints since 1980,”\textsuperscript{203} was Pennington’s fated duty. Pennington was unsuccessful in his attempts and the failures of the police force resulted in the breakdown of civil society in New Orleans during the 1980s and 1990s allowing drug dealers and local gangs to take over the streets in the absence of police. Paired with a culture of poverty being bred amongst the black population in the city, either a miracle or complete destruction was needed to aid the new Superintendent in his goal.

A culture of poverty had overtaken the poor black neighborhoods in New Orleans. Oscar Lewis, the man who coined the term “culture of poverty”\textsuperscript{204} used it to describe a class that could not elevate out of the dregs of society. In his research in Mexico he found that in some cases, it was a not for lack of trying that individuals could not escape the lowest echelons of economic

\textsuperscript{201} Keegan, “The nes Line.”
\textsuperscript{203} Keegan, “The nes Line.”
stability. Lewis found that a large part of whether this group was able to rise out of poverty was related to their government’s responsiveness to their pleas for help. He believes that there is a direct correlation between the parents living in poverty and the children remaining in a state of poverty when they become adults.\textsuperscript{205} As it relates to New Orleans, a culture of poverty seemed to have developed due to the poor education system in predominantly black neighborhoods, an oppressive police force, and a lack of government involvement that will be discussed in the next section.

Environmental hazards have plagued New Orleans since it foundation, as alluded to in the previous chapters, but were especially detrimental to the black population beginning in the late 20\textsuperscript{th} century. Craig Colten writes an illuminating piece on the Superfund sites in New Orleans that is a result of garbage dumps being covered and then built upon for low income families. Colten shows an extreme demographic change in New Orleans from a majority white to majority black population between the 1950s and 1990s.\textsuperscript{206} This growth in the black population resulted in a need for more public housing. The place the federal government chose impinged on was a former landfill that had been closed since the 1970s. Colten cites that between 1950 and 1980, the population living near the former dump, what is now known as the Ninth Ward went from 50 percent black to 99 percent black occupants.\textsuperscript{207}

With the growing black population in the Ninth Ward and Agriculture Street area, new infrastructure had to be built to keep up with the spike in residents. The Orleans Parish School Board wanted to build a new school to support the community but ran into a road block when they found out that the area where they intended to build it, which was very close in proximity to old Agriculture Street dump, tested very highly for toxins in the soil. With pushing from the local black community who thought that the Board was trying to avoid building the school for them, the School Board started construction in 1986.\textsuperscript{208} The residents of the parish did not know the long lasting effect that the toxic soil could have on their children or themselves. “Tests conducted by the Louisiana Environmental Action Network found soil near the [former] dump to contain 13 times the EPA standard for arsenic and high levels of carcinogens benzopyrene,

\textsuperscript{205} Ibid., 8.
\textsuperscript{206} Colten, An Unnatural Metropolis, 113.
\textsuperscript{207} Ibid., 114.
\textsuperscript{208} Ibid., 119.
barium, chromium, lead, benzene, and toluene.” As Dr. Beverly Wright, founder of the Deep South Center of Environmental Justice, explains, “[the] landfill was shut down and the housing was built. Thirty years later, we find out it’s a Superfund site – that people there have 35 percent breast cancer rate. Children are sick and many people have died from living on top of a landfill.” The site was not declared a Superfund site until December 16, 1994, almost 20 years after the Superfund Act was put in place by the Environmental Protection Agency.

The majority of black citizens in this neighborhood did not receive what was promised to them under the Superfund Act. There was a split in the community as Colten describes the situation; some of the community wanted the city to buyout their properties at full price and others wanted the site to be cleaned up so they could continue living there. Both fell under provisions of the Superfund but the lack of unity amongst the residents to decide which course of action should be taken left them vulnerable to the federal government making their own decision. At first the EPA said that they would follow remediation protocols to clean up the site and make it safe for habitation once more. Due to the protests of some citizens, they compromised and said that those who wished to relocate would be reimbursed for their property and the remediation plans would continue forward. The city of New Orleans, the responsible party in this situation, did not have the funds to relocate the citizens so they took the middle ground on the issue. The mayor, Ray Nagin, announced that he wanted to see those negatively affected to get what they deserve but that the money cannot come from the city’s budget. The EPA footed the $20 million dollar bill and did a poor job remediating the area because they did not want to interfere with the underground infrastructure already in place. This particular grievance of the black community in the Ninth Ward was fairly localized. The issues with drinking water in the city and the communities between Baton Rouge and New Orleans became a much larger problem.

The stretch of the Mississippi River that ran between Baton Rouge and New Orleans was aptly given the name “Cancer Alley.” In 1993, there were more than 100 toxic sites along the
Mississippi river and doctors began to research the correlation between the industrial waste outlets and the increase in cancer rates among the black communities that lived on this part of the river. As of 1999, there were between 175 and 375 heavy industrial plants along the Mississippi River on this stretch of land. In the early to mid-20th century, the Mississippi River was used as a way to dispose of the waste communities made. Everything from garbage to bio-hazard material was thrown into the River without any regard for those living on its banks or those drinking the water downstream. Petrochemical plants began to be built along the Mississippi in the 1940s between Baton Rouge and New Orleans because of the ease of access to the Gulf of Mexico. As big oil companies began to set up shop along the Mississippi they were required to apply for discharge permits that meant that they had to turn in detailed reports to the Stream Control Commission (SCC) of what chemicals and possible toxins they were pumping into the River. This commission did not keep track or enforce the companies turning in the reports and negligently allowed the dumping of unknown amounts of harmful chemicals into the River. As Colten states, “The SCC’s cooperative posture did little to discourage use of the Mississippi River as a waste sink.”

After the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) was formed in 1970, they had the opportunity to take a more proactive stance to protect the waterway from pollution that was pouring in from both industrial and municipal sources. They did not. In 1992, the Southern Organizing Committee for Economic and Social Justice met to discuss their concerns about the EPA’s failures in the South.

“The EPA came under fire for: (1) allowing poisonous industries to locate and hazardous wastes to be disproportionately located in people of color communities and (2) for having different cleanup standards for people of color communities than for white communities…African American communities are the United States primary dumping grounds for hazardous and radioactive wastes and for sitting poisonous industries.”

This quote reflects both areas of the black population talked about in this section; the black population in New Orleans proper and those living along the River between Baton Rouge and New Orleans who received their potable water from the polluted Mississippi River. All the

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215 Lauran Neergaard, "South Called the Nation's Dumping Ground." Philadelphia Tribune, July 16, 1993: 5B.
217 Colten, An Unnatural Metropolis, 128.
218 Ibid., 129.
219 Ibid.
pollution in and under black neighborhoods would become a bigger problem in 2005 with the storm that would inundate 80 percent of the city leaving all the pollutants to rise out of the ground and rest on the streets of the city.

The history of protecting the city must be explained before the story of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina that devastated New Orleans is told. The city has had to deal with issues of flooding since it was founded by the French in the early 18th century. As Adam Cohen explains in his article in *The New York Times*, “The French explorer who founded the city was so enraptured by this crescent-shaped stretch of the lower Mississippi that he ignored many naysayers.” They tried to explain that the constant flooding would not sustain a well structured city. This is a similar comment that was echoed in Chapter One of this piece. The Army Corps of Engineers took over the flood protection of the city in 1879. Before that, the levees that were built up as barriers to protect against the Mississippi flooding were marginally funded by New Orleans but mainly left up to the individual landowner who lived on the river. Since then, again with small amounts of funding from the municipal government and federal funds, the Corps has tried to protect the city by building levees taller and stronger every time they are overrun by floods. When Hurricane Betsy struck the city in 1965, 18 parishes were flooded, 72 people were killed, and about 17,600 New Orleans citizens were injured. The Corps response was again to build the levees and flood walls higher and stronger. The infrastructure protecting New Orleans is only drastically improved when it has been over ridden, a seemingly ineffective strategy.

There is constant maintenance that must be done to keep water from flooding the city. The Corp and the city’s Sewerage and Water Board had to build canals to remove flood waters from the city and deposit them in Lake Pontchartrain. The problem with the canals is that the land that the city is built on was formerly a marsh, which has higher water content than most soil. Every time it rains the soil absorbs all of it but when it is drained, the unsaturated soil compresses easily under the pressure exerted on it by the weight of the city. The pumps in these canals are meant to pump rain water out but also to remove the water that it being pressed out of

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221 Adam Cohen, "If the Big One Hits the Big Easy, the Good Times May Be Over Forever," *The New York Times*, August 11, 2002: C12; hereafter cited as “If the Big One Hits the Big Easy, the Good Times May be Over Forever.”
the ground by the pressure of the city. When water is removed from the soil under the city, the deeper the city sinks below sea level, which in turn makes it more susceptible to flooding.225

Along with the levees protecting the city, there is also the natural barrier from the Gulf of Mexico formed by marshy freshwater wetlands. These are the same wetlands that the city was built on three centuries ago. Freshwater wetlands are home to plants like marsh grasses that can help buffer storm surges and slow wave speeds significantly before they hit the city.226 Since the 1960s, the Army Corp of Engineers has conducted a significant amount of dredging on the Mississippi River to clear out the sediments collected that could impede boat traffic from going up river. These sediments formerly would have deposited at the base of the River to create barrier islands that could slow storm surges.227 The dredging has also caused a direct flow of salt water to travel up the Mississippi and into the marshes that cannot grow if exposed to copious amounts of salt water. Mark Fischetti estimated in 2001 that annually, about 25 to 30 square miles of wetlands disappear, that is about an acre every 24 minutes.228 Luckily, since Katrina, the Corps has made it a priority to restore this natural barrier and is striving to make it a healthy freshwater marsh once again.

A critical component that makes the travesty of Katrina even more devasting is that the Corps and the city leaders knew that they were not prepared to protect against a storm like Katrina. Terry Tullier, the head of the New Orleans Office of Emergency Preparedness was quoted in 2002 saying, “When I do presentations, I start by saying ‘when the Big One comes, many of you will die…”229 The projections for the “Big One” were not exactly accurate as they were predicting that it would take a Category 4-5 storm to breach the levees on the Mississippi and Lake Pontchartrain but it only took a Category 3 hurricane. The death toll estimates if this perfect storm hit flooding this sinking city were tens of thousands dead. Even if a total evacuation of the city was called for, there is a population of around 100,000 residents of New Orleans that did not own cars, mainly the poor and black people. Tullier was echoing remarks by Mayor Walter Maestri who spent Hurricane Allison in a bunker deploying emergency services from there. Allison dumped 5 inches of rain of the city and caused massive problems for

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225 Ibid., 83.
229 Cohen, “If the Big One Hits the Big Easy, the Good Times May Be Over Forever.”
emergency personnel. Maestri said, “Even though we have a plan for it, I don’t even want to think about the loss of a life a huge hurricane would cause [to New Orleans].”230 This loss of life that he was referring to and a massive loss of property were felt by all citizens of New Orleans but particularly in the black community when Katrina hit.

Of those 100,000 immobilized by a lack of transportation out of New Orleans, many of them were the poor, black residents in Orleans parish. Hurricane Katrina’s impact served the purpose of highlighting the inequalities that are still prevalent to the African Americans in New Orleans. The residents of New Orleans East and the Lower Ninth Ward (named this because it sits further below sea level than the section that was closer to the levees) were predominantly black. In 2000, New Orleans East was 86 percent black,231 the Lower Ninth Ward was 98 percent black, and Gentilly was also around 98 percent black.232 These were three of the neighborhoods that were inundated with the most water from Hurricane Katrina.233 Patrick Sharkey, a professor at Harvard University, conducted a study of the individuals who died in the storm and found that the majority of them were black and that they were the most affected racial group in terms of death toll.234 He concludes that due to racial segregation of neighborhoods in New Orleans that have slowly divided over the centuries, that a large majority of the black population lives in areas that are prone to natural disasters.235 This idea was mirrored by the blacks who were most affected was also shown in the evacuees present at the New Orleans Super Dome, which housed almost 30,000 New Orleans residents after the storm. They were poor and majority black citizens that were unable to evacuate because they did not have nor were they offered the means to do so.236

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230 Fischetti, “Drowning New Orleans,” 85
235 Ibid., 499.
236 Fletcher, “Katrina Pushes Issues of Race and Poverty at Bush.”
The dichotomy of race relations in New Orleans was portrayed in two photographs that Associated Press took in wreckage of Katrina. The associated press published two pictures taken from a helicopter when covering the devastation of Katrina. One was of a young black male carrying a plastic bag full of unknown items and a case of soda and the other picture was of two white survivors with backpacks on carrying food. The two captions to the photo read very differently despite the similarity in the scenes. The black male was described as having “looted the food” and the white couple “found the food.” These are two telling images because they reflect the white demographics feeling towards black community in New Orleans. The situation could be reversed and the whites could be the looters and the black youth found the food or they could all be looters. However, based solely on bias shown by the photographer of these pictures, the black male was called a looter, placing him in the position of being assumed a criminal because of the color of his skin.

(Figure 10 shows the black youth “looting”) (Figure 11 shows a couple “finding food”)

An outcry from the national black community over the slow response of the United States government to send aid to New Orleans prompted racial debates over whether the racial makeup of the city was the reason for the lackadaisical response. Media mogul Kanye West openly came out on national television and said, “George Bush (the president) doesn’t care about black

238 Ibid.
239 Ibid.
240 Ibid.
people,” at a benefit concert for Katrina victims. At the time Katrina hit, the city was a majority black, about 66 percent of the population fell under that racial distinction. While all of New Orleans was flooded by Katrina, the neighborhoods of Lakeview, St. Bernard’s parish, the Lower Ninth Ward, Gentilly, and New Orleans East accumulated the most standing water.

Figure 12.

(Figure 12 shows where in the city there was the flooding and how deep the water was four days after Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans.)

Lakeview and St. Bernard’s were predominantly white and the other three were almost exclusively black. Over 1,200 residents in the city died in Katrina and its aftermath. *Time Magazine* explains why the poor black population felt as though they were the most affected by


242 Greater New Orleans Community Data Center, “Lower Ninth Ward Neighborhood.”


244 Greater New Orleans Community Data Center, “New Orleans East.”
the storm. “While Katrina made victims of just about everyone in New Orleans, poor black residents have had the hardest time restoring their lives, with many evacuees still living outside the city and others in FEMA trailers, waiting for promised help to arrive.”\footnote{Russel McCulley, "Healing Katrina's Racial Wounds." \textit{TIME}, August 27, 2007.} The author interviewed the executive director of People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond who explained, “Before the storm, poor schools, inadequate health care, low wages, high unemployment and substandard housing were the norm for a vast number of New Orleanians, especially poor blacks.”\footnote{Ibid.} Due to the conditions that this group was living in before the storm, they did not have the means to rebuild the houses that they lived in before or to relocate to another part of the country so they were caught living off the government.

There are counter arguments that attempt to show that the black population was not singled out by the government. As stated earlier, the Lakeview district and St. Bernard’s parish were white neighborhoods and they shared in some of the worst flooding.\footnote{Tate, “Hurricane Katrina History and Numbers.”} This statistic alone shows that there was no intentional discriminating based on the dispersal of the flood waters or weakness in the dams. However, as stated, there was an economic difference between these neighborhoods and the black areas that flooded. Referring back to the argument about mobility of the blacks, these white neighborhoods were able to rebuild if they wanted where the poor blacks had to wait for government funding to come in. As of 2011, about half of the population of St. Bernard’ returned to living there and only about one quarter of the occupants of the Lower Ninth Ward have returned.\footnote{Greater New Orleans Community Data Center, “Lower Ninth Ward Neighborhood.”}

In analyzing the sources, the issue that was being most closely examined by the African American population in the United State was not one of looking to blame where the levees broke on the government. They were looking at the state of the black population in the city that put them at a disadvantage to survive when Hurricane Katrina struck. New Orleans’ struggle to maintain social order caused not only the infrastructure in black neighborhoods to fail but also the city to be unsuccessful in protecting its citizens. The corruption that ran rampant through the police force led to a distrust of police officers in the black population who were also dealing with violence imposed on them by the same force. The local government made few strides to improve the schooling in these areas which helped a culture of poverty and gang life to take over. Without

\footnotetext[245]{Russel McCulley, "Healing Katrina's Racial Wounds." \textit{TIME}, August 27, 2007.}
\footnotetext[246]{Ibid.}
\footnotetext[247]{Tate, “Hurricane Katrina History and Numbers.”}
\footnotetext[248]{Greater New Orleans Community Data Center, “Lower Ninth Ward Neighborhood.”}
proper education, it is harder to be gainfully employed and be seen as equal to the whites who are receiving a better education. The environmental inequality in the city also emphasized disrespect from the local and federal government. The Superfund site was not properly remediated and the pollution being consumed by black communities along the Mississippi pointed to a lack of concern for this population. Hurricane Katrina was the perfect storm. Its overall effect has pointed out to the greater American community that blacks are still being treated as second-class citizens with New Orleans as an example. Returning to the quote from the introduction, “Sometimes it takes a natural disaster to point out a social disaster.” Jim Wallis was correct. The plight of the black citizens of New Orleans was noticed after Katrina but it was too late for many of them. The aftermath of Hurricane Katrina was just an example of the government trying to rectify the situation it had created.

249 Fletcher, "Katrina Pushes Issues of Race and Poverty at Bush."
Conclusion

Over the history of New Orleans, the black population has had to endure being a part of the slave society in the southern United States, being segregated against after the Civil War, and were made into second class citizens that had little hope of promotion through society. The socio-economic status of blacks in the city has been negatively affected by the role colonial, federal and local governments have played in structuring New Orleans. This is shown by the violence, environmental inequality, and segregation demonstrated by the white ruling class.

The colonial governments placed blacks from Africa into slavery in the territory and used them as free labor to construct the city and area surrounding it. While the Spanish did allow slaves to buy their freedom, freed blacks were not afforded the same rights as the European population living in New Orleans. The French treated the slaves savagely and when the territory was sold to the United States, the extreme violence persisted in the form of lynchings, prejudicial attacks by whites, and police brutality. Since the United States took control of New Orleans, the city has seen race riots and race based attacks make the streets run red with the blood of black citizen’s. The city has been home to black power groups that butted heads with the police serving to highlight the violence that black civilians had to deal with on a daily basis. The New Orleans Police Department’s corruption and violent police style brought national organizing groups like the NAACP into the city to conduct peaceful rallies and sit-ins to enact a change in the city government.

Black action in the city propelled New Orleans to the forefront of American news when they attempted to desegregate schools. The schools for black children in the city, and nationwide, were underfunded and undersupplied. This caused uproar in the black community resulting in the legally mandated integration of all public schools in the United States. Ruby Bridges was the first black child to attend William Franz Public School, an all-white school. This did not occur without the protest of many white citizens. The schools in predominantly black neighborhood of New Orleans remained poorly funded as redlining became a common custom of state governments. This, combined with white flight, led to a social stratification of neighborhood in New Orleans, further segregating the city. The poorest black populations were forced to live in the lowest lying parts of the city while the whites lived in the suburbs or in higher areas.

Environmental inequality was shown in many ways in New Orleans. It was demonstrated early on when black communities were blamed for the yellow fever bouts that struck the city.
from the late 1700s to the early 1900s, but mosquitoes were the main culprit in spreading the yellow fever. New Orleans is the lowest lying city in the United States sitting 6 feet below sea level. The levee and pumping systems had yet to be perfected and constant flooding of the lower lying areas of the city, where mostly blacks lived, coupled with the warm climate made them the major source of mosquito spawning grounds. Black neighborhoods were the last to receive services from municipal sewerage companies which also helped pervade the image of the black citizens living in unsanitary conditions. New Orleans built low income housing on a former garbage dump that had toxic chemicals disposed of in it. The majority of the people who moved into that area were poor families who had to deal with the negative health side effects of living on this toxic Superfund site. Cancer rates sky rocketed in that neighborhood in old and young alike.

All these problems were emphasized by Hurricane Katrina hitting the city in August 2005. Around 1,500 people died in New Orleans because of the storm and the poor black neighborhoods were the greatest effected. They did not have the means to rebuild or relocate so many were forced to live in government trailers for months or even years in some cases. The poor engineering of the levees was blamed on the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers but the racist attitude prevalent in New Orleans was to blame for the disparities of those who were affected by Katrina. The black population had less of a chance to survive the storm due to the circumstances they were living in. Despite the diverse cultures and melting pot New Orleans has been depicted as by most of the United States, there are distinct socio-economic differences in the population that are based on race. The majority of New Orleans’ black citizens have not been able to overcome this economic gap to escape the poverty they have been forced into. All the evidence above points to the fact that New Orleans municipal, state, and federal governments that have control over what happens to the city have failed the majority of its black inhabitants. They have failed in protecting them from bodily harm, from impending floods, and from a culture of poverty that spread through the poor neighborhoods black neighborhoods. These reasons have effectively made the black population of New Orleans into second class citizens.
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Primary Sources


Orissa Arend, a journalist and psychotherapist from New Orleans, wrote this monograph about the Black Panther Party in 1970 New Orleans. This book uses interviews with numerous New Orleans residents to tell the story. The interviewees include BPP members, priests, the mayor and more to weave the tale of the war between the BPP and the local government. This book was critical in the research on police oppression taking place in New Orleans.


Cohen, Adam. "If the Big One Hits the Big Easy, the Good Times May Be Over Forever." The New York Times, August 11, 2002: C12.


This article is important as it shows that the U.S. government was being held liable for the neglectful upkeep of the levees and dams protecting New Orleans. A judge ruled that the United States government must pay all those who have lost property for said property and the cost of emotional damages as well. This is important in that it shows who is to blame for Katrina but also that it is the federal governments fault for not paying the poor
citizens of New Orleans back in a timely fashion so that they could attempt to get their lives back on track.


This article was written the day after four black girls became the first to be integrated into the white school system in New Orleans. It talks about how the state legislature tried to stop it from happening, mothers were protesting in the streets and outside the schools against the integration, and how children were removed from school by their parents. This helps to grasp the severity of the racial situation in New Orleans. Blacks could not even sit in the same classroom as whites without an armed guard of U.S. Marshals.


This was a short biography about Ruby Bridges. She was the first African-American student to enter into an integrated school in the United States and this is the story of that day. This is instrumental in the section of segregation in the city and how whites reacted to having a black student enter into their school. This was an equivalent reaction to when
blacks tried to move into white neighborhoods. The whites would get very angry and move away to where there were no blacks.


This article talks about the struggles that the new Police Chief in New Orleans, Richard Pennington, would be faced with in attempting to reform the police department. The title really tells a lot of the story. He would not only have to figure out how to discipline the officers in New Orleans but also get a hold on the astronomical crime rate in city. This article explains most of the strategies he planned to implement and how they would help the people of New Orleans.


In his research in Mexico he found that in some cases, it was a not for lack of trying that individuals could not escape the lowest echelons of economic stability. Lewis found that a large part of whether this group was able to rise out of poverty was related to their government’s responsiveness to their pleas for help. He believes that there is a direct correlation between the parents living in poverty and the children remaining in a state of poverty when they become adults. As it relates to New Orleans, a culture of poverty seemed to have developed due to the poor education system in predominantly black neighborhoods, an oppressive police force, and a lack of government involvement that will be discussed in the next section.


This document published by the Louisiana Department of Natural Resources tells of the plans that could be put in place to better protect New Orleans in 1998. This document is
used to show all that was known to be wrong with the current protection system and what could be done to rectify it. This serves to highlight despite the federal government knowing the city was ill-equipped to last a large scale hurricane; the funds were not given to protect the city.


A quote from this article "George Bush doesn't care about black people," was one that influenced the writing of this paper. After Hurricane Katrina hit the city in 2005, there was a benefit concert for the victim's where Kayne West said that quote, criticizing the federal government's reaction to storm. West was echoing the remarks of a large part of the black population in the United States as the Presidents stance on race and poverty were called into called into question. This helped show the attitude of the United States black population after Hurricane Katrina.


This article tells the story of NOPD officer Antoinette Frank who was arrested for killing three people, one off-duty officer, in an attempted robbery. She knew all her victims as she used to work at the restaurant she robbed and still carried out their murders execution style. This highlights the poor quality of individuals that were being hired onto the force and what Pennington would be forced to try to reform in his tenure with the department.
This article is important as it helps to chronicle the corruption of the NOPD. The author writes about the specific occasion when the FBI set up a fake drug running operation and attempted to hire members of the NOPD to guard their warehouse. Nine officers were arrested for taking bribes from the FBI and for protecting the warehouse. Many more could have been arrested if the set up had continued. This article shows that the officers of the NOPD in the 1990s were willing to do anything if they were paid enough.

This article had quotes from black citizens expressing their opinions of the NOPD. This was printed in the wake of several instances of police shooting black citizens in black neighborhoods. This caused uproar in the black community and the article provides their responses.


This was an incredibly detailed and through report of what happened during the Riot in New Orleans. Congress investigated what were the mechanisms that started the riot and interviewed many of those involved. This record helped to create a timeline of the riots and who were the guilty parties. This was good for showing the violence enacted on upon the black citizens of the city after the Civil War.


This book tells the story of 20th century New Orleans through the eyes of 25 of the city's leaders. The leaders interviewed were both black and white, allowing both sides of the racial divide to be represented. The section on the desegregation of the school system was especially helpful in pointing out the larger national debates that were going hand in hand with the local one in New Orleans.


Sharkey, a professor at New York University, researched those who died in Hurricane Katrina and his data was able to help prove the fact that blacks were disproportionately affected by the storm. Sharkey mainly focused on death rates and saw that the elderly and the black populations of the city were most likely to die during the storm. He mentioned that blacks’ not having the same mobility as whites was one of the contributing factors to their loss of life. This article helped show evidence for the argument that blacks were the largest population affected by Katrina.


This article was written to show that the efforts of black police officers were limited to majority black neighborhoods but that they were effective where they were stationed. This was written in a time when many police department nationwide were still staffed by mainly white males and blacks were just starting to break into the field of police work. New Orleans took a long time to integrate it police forces and followed the same strategy of confining these new officers to black areas of the city. The effectiveness of their work should have translated into them getting promoted through the ranks and into the larger metropolitan areas but that was not the case. This is used to show the biases shown by the majority white police force in New Orleans and the struggle that was involved in gaining job equality for blacks.


This article was written closely after Ruby Bridges had her first day of class in an integrated William Frantz Public School. This article writes about the reactions of both the whites and the blacks of New Orleans on that day.


This pamphlet was written to explain the causes of lynchings in the southern United States. Ida B. Wells was very accustomed to mistreatment of whites and seeing these
lynchings take place and she wrote this to bring about awareness to the black and white population about what atrocities were going on in the south. The is a section where she tells of an incident that takes place just outside of New Orleans that will be used to show the attitude of whites in New Orleans towards blacks at that time. This was in a post-Civil War south and lynchings were used to keep blacks in their place as second class citizens and New Orleans was certainly no exception.


**Secondary Sources**


Craig Colten, a professor of geography at Louisiana State University, writes about the failures of the New Orleans to defend itself from natural disasters. His research goes back to the foundation of the city and chronicles the problems with flooding, environmental justice, and the sewerage/engineering problems the city has been plagued with. The societal factors that Colten discusses are blacks being forced to live in the lowest lying areas of the city were most helpful. His research helps to demonstrate the lives as second class citizens black residents have been forced to lead.


This article, written by John Duffy, Professor of History at the University of Maryland (College Park Campus), examines the similarities and differences in the yellow fever epidemics that stuck two of the country’s biggest metropolitan areas in the 1800s, New York City and New Orleans. Duffy argues that the rapid expansion of both cities was one of the contributing causes that sent the stage for these epidemics to occur. In the case of New York, the influx of immigrant who might be infected were quarantined off the coast until they were deemed safe to enter society. Duffy said that it was the apathy of the rich whites in New Orleans that slowed the proliferation of the improved drainage systems.


Edward Haas of the University of Maryland wrote this article about the Maestri mayoral term between 1936 and 1946. This article was important in showing the local governments decline in funding during the WWII era that would never return again. It goes into the ineptitude of the police and Mayor Maestri in dealing with crime in the city. Maestri showed little interest in helping out the large black population or protect them from the police.


Hirsch and Logsdon, professors of history at the University of New Orleans compiled essays written to show the unique ethnic composition of New Orleans of New Orleans as the city ages. The third section is particularly helpful. It focuses on how the city's race relations digressed through the 19th and 20th centuries. This source helped to form arguments about the racial divisions in New Orleans as they relate to socio-economic condition.


Landphair goes into how the Ninth Ward was constructed out of the swamps for the blacks and poor whites' in the city and how the city provided minimal upkeep for this area of New Orleans. She also researched the integration of the public school system which caused a lot of controversy in the white community. This was an important article on the integration of the school system in New Orleans and provided a good amount of background into the status of black schools versus whites schools before the integration.


Leonard Moore, a professor at the University of Texas, describes the post-WW II state of New Orleans. He focuses on the police brutality and activism that stemmed from it in the African American community. This book helped to put names and faces with the organizations and the people who were leading the black activist. The timeline of this book also aids in the structural outline. Moore's research also helped lead to other interesting sources that helped progress the thesis.


Reiter is a professor of medical entomology at the Pasteur Institute in France. His article helps provide a timeline of the yellow fever epidemics that hit New Orleans. He also explains the mechanism behind the virus that is carried in mosquitoes. This was important in showing how New Orleans was a prime breeding ground for the virus and can relate to the racial aspect by showing that it was the fault of the white people in the city for not draining all the land to get rid of the virus.


This collection of essays was compiled to discuss the effects of urban planners and the local government had on the African American community. The essay by Christopher Silver, a professor of Urban Planning at Virginia Commonwealth University, goes into racial zoning laws in the United States. He talks more specifically about how New Orleans tried to defy Supreme Court rulings that racial zoning was illegal and how they created their own legislation under the premise of Jim Crow southern laws.


Amy Sumpter, of Louisiana State University, writes about the construction of race in post-Civil War New Orleans. She writes about the hostility towards free blacks and the local and state legislation that affected the black population throughout the 20th century. This article was important in documenting the legislations that put blacks in the role of being second class citizens in New Orleans.


