

## CHAPTER I

*Swamp City**Anthony Wilson*

One of the most succinct and often-quoted assessments of the city of New Orleans comes from Peirce Lewis, who called it, in his 1973 study *New Orleans: The Making of an Urban Landscape*, an “inevitable city on an impossible site.”<sup>1</sup> This fundamental contradiction echoes throughout subsequent studies of the city and its origins. The swampland at the mouth of the Mississippi was both an ideal and a terrible place to build a city. Richard Campanella, as the title of his collection *Bienville’s Dilemma* indicates, frames the origins and history of New Orleans as a series of responses to the geographical and geological problem of New Orleans’s location. Other studies emphasize the city’s resistance to intentionality, comprehension, logic, and even nature: *Unfathomable City* (Solnit and Snedeker, 2013); *Accidental City* (Powell, 2013); *An Unnatural Metropolis* (Colten, 2005). New Orleans is a stubborn problem; a site of continuous conflict with nature; a space, it seems, imperfectly claimed from the swamps and ever on the verge of returning to them.

In their recent collection *Unfathomable City*, Rebecca Solnit and Rebecca Snedeker emphasize the city’s contradictions: “New Orleans is all kinds of unfathomable, a city of amorphous boundaries, where land is forever turning into water, water devours land, and a thousand degrees of marshy, muddy oozing in-between exist; where lines that elsewhere seem firmly drawn are blurry; where whatever you say requires more elaboration; where most rules are full of exceptions the way most land here is full of water.”<sup>2</sup> While this remains true in even present-day New Orleans, the line between swamp and city, land and water, was even less certain in the colonial era and through much of the nineteenth century. As Ned Sublette explains, “Until the advent of electrical pumps in the 1890s made the swamp drainable, it slurped up to the edges of the city, constraining expansion that otherwise would have stretched outward from the crescent-shaped riverbend.”<sup>3</sup> Swamps both blurred and created boundaries, thwarting development and expansion but creating endless



Figure 1.1 “Vadia,” December 2014, by Frank Relle.  
Reprinted with permission from Frank Relle Photography.

opportunities and hiding places for pirate commerce, a perpetual reminder of the limits of the order-imposing philosophies of Europe and an eternally renewed invitation – actually, imperative – to improvise (see Figure 1.1).

These contradictions and conflicts take on a new dimension when we understand them in terms of attitudes toward swamps in general among colonists, Southerners, Europeans, and other cultures, dating back long before Bienville faced the prospect of creating a settlement on a crescent of semi-high ground at the mouth of the Mississippi. To understand New Orleans, we must understand the swamp. More accurately, we must understand the ways that people understood and to some extent continue to understand swamps, both as practical obstacles and spurs to the myth-making imagination. In some ways, New Orleans is the archetypal Southern swamp city, embodying the fundamental conflicts and contradictions of civilization versus swamp more intensely than other Southern spaces. In others, of course, it is anomalous, unique, marked by intersections of nature and cultures without true parallel elsewhere. Since the first interactions of Native Americans with colonists, it has been a city built up of layers of settlement, and thus layers of culture, like layers of alluvia – each

blending with and complicating more than obscuring, burying, or washing away what came before: Native Americans, the colonial French, Spanish, and Anglo-American eras, the waves of slave importation and immigration of free people of color from Africa and Haiti and Havana, followed just a few generations later by the Irish, the Sicilians, and then most recently the Vietnamese. With this heterogeneous cultural mix, of course, comes ambiguity in terms of any dominant cultural identity. Many New Orleans writers have found this ambiguity fascinating, worthy of celebration. For others, steeped in a broader Southern culture obsessed with race and caste, purity and categorization, even – and perhaps especially – when insistence on such categories flies in the face of reality and borders on the absurd, it has been a source of anxiety. As the anonymous author of *New Orleans as It Is: Its Manners and Customs* (1849), describes it,

A portrait of the city of New Orleans is a living picture of the world, and in this particular, it differs from every other city: for here the world is concentrated, in a living spectacle of almost every nation, kindred, and tongue, and from whom are poured out the baser passions that dictate the actions of men, in all the variety of shade and color, that can come up from the darker recesses of the human soul.<sup>4</sup>

This swamp-made city, both practically and symbolically, represented a threat to European and subsequently to white Southern sensibilities that valued and relied upon clarity and division. As Campanella puts it, “for these societies, the dynamism of the deltas represented intolerable problems that had to be solved. And the premier tool to resolve these problems was the one feature utterly absent in the deltas: the hard line.”<sup>5</sup>

Adding another layer of complexity and contradiction is the fact that New Orleans swamps cannot and could never, at least since the beginning of the colonial era, fit the easy, reductive binary between civilization and untamed nature that informed much swamp discourse. Such divisions are nearly always overstated, of course: as William Denevan and others have pointed out,<sup>6</sup> myths of a non-humanized precolonial landscape belie indigenous peoples’ extensive interactions with and modifications of the landscape, but in New Orleans, the very underpinnings of the settlement relied on the soil – and refuse – washed down the Mississippi. Solnit and Snedeker capture the mix of old and new, nature and culture, evocatively, describing the river-borne sediments as “newborn mud through which the last dinosaurs, the alligators, creep.”<sup>7</sup> These swamps, very early in the era encompassed by even the broadest assessments of the Anthropocene, were products of nature and culture, shaped by a top-down pattern of urban development that saw the city expanding outward from high ground into

lower and lower-lying areas, as well as by whatever alluvia (and waste) the river deposited. Rod Giblett explores a contradictory anatomical dichotomy in discussing New Orleans as depository for a nation's waste as he parses Kelman's observation that New Orleans residents had come to see the river by the late 1860s as "an alimentary canal, filled with raw waste and decaying animal carcasses."<sup>8</sup> As Giblett explains, in this "very depleted and poverty-stricken view of the river and of the body of the earth," an essential shift has occurred. "The river and the body of the earth need the other internal organs of the kidneys or liver of wetlands in order to be viable and vital. By viewing the river as an alimentary canal for the import of nutrients and export of wastes . . . the delta had ceased to be womb and had become bowel."<sup>9</sup> Nature and culture, in New Orleans as in any developed area, are inextricable, and the New Orleans swamps must be understood as a combination of both.

In order to understand New Orleans as colonial-era Europeans and Americans imagined it, it helps to know how they saw swamps in general. As I have explained at length elsewhere, swamps have always been contradictory spaces in the popular imagination, in both culturally specific and cross-cultural ways. One way to understand them is as eminently natural spaces – meaning that, at least until the mid-to-late nineteenth century, they represented the wild and the untamed, resistant to clearance, cultivation, and transformation to fit the European ideal of imposing human order on natural chaos, or the burgeoning American ideal of urbanization and progress. A culture's attitudes toward swamps, then, tend to mirror its attitudes toward wildness and nature in general. Swamps become a kind of Rorschach test, so overdetermined and loaded with layers of vivid and often contradictory meaning that they signify profoundly differently depending on the viewer's perspective and prejudice. Puritans feared them; pragmatists, entrepreneurs, and developers abhorred them; Romantics celebrated them. Slaves and refugees saw in the swamps opportunity and haven. Dante and Bunyan cast them in indelible moral topographies, using them to mirror moral trials and failings (in Bunyan's Slough of Despond) and to figure a circle of Hell. Thoreau celebrated swamps as places of pure, unsullied nature, sites of psychic and spiritual rejuvenation. They gave rise to all manner of folktales and ghost stories – from the spirit-haunted bog burials in England, to Native American swamp burials in Florida to tales of monsters, oversized saurians, and primordial serpents lurking in their depths.

Like New Orleans itself, swamps have always been associated with contradictory, even paradoxical notions. While swamp lore associates the

spaces with death, undeath, and the underworld, they actually teem with all manner of life, serving as homes to countless species of flora and fauna. They have also provided, for cultures not averse to adapting to rather than clearing and dominating them, ample subsistence and even bounty. In the area that would become New Orleans, as Richard Campanella explains, natives “mostly . . . adapted to fluidity by shifting their encampments to higher, drier ground when floodwaters came. Given technological limitations, they viewed deltas as conditions to which one conformed rather than as problems that demanded solving.”<sup>10</sup>

This was not a philosophy that fit the world view of the colonizers. Indeed, there is a long history of European colonists deriding those who “adapted” to swamps rather than charting, mastering, or draining them. William Byrd II, an early prototype of the cavalier gentleman who would figure powerfully in white Southern myth and self-representation, exemplifies this judgment in his 1728 *History of the Dividing Line*, his account of his quest to traverse the Great Dismal Swamp and delineate the boundary between the Virginia colony and North Carolina. Byrd heaps scorn on the laziness of the “lubbers” who sate themselves by partaking of the bounty that the Great Dismal Swamp offers. While the women would, at least, sew, “their husbands, depending on the bounty of the climate, are slothful in everything but the getting of children, and in that only instance make themselves useful members of an infant colony.”<sup>11</sup> Byrd also attributes to the swamp a deleterious, wasting effect on those who dwell near it, blaming it for agues that “corrupt all the juices of their bodies, give them a cadaverous complexion, and besides a lazy, creeping habit, which they are never rid of.”<sup>12</sup> An archetypal cavalier gentleman, Byrd, in his *History of the Dividing Line*, promulgates the idea that the swamps not only attract the slothful, but also infect those who dwell among them with sloth as a disease both of body and of character – a stigma associated time and again with New Orleans in the popular imagination. Swamps were enemies of industry in every sense of the word, from business endeavor to individual virtue. They made things simultaneously too difficult and too easy: too difficult to affect large-scale change by clearing, draining, and reclaiming, and too easy to subsist on the small bounty easily gotten through adaptation.

Swamps were practical as well as moral problems, due not only to intractability, but also to pestilence. Miasma, or the vapors exhaled by swamps themselves, has been blamed for malaria and other ailments at least since the age of Columella, a Roman agricultural writer of the first century CE who described marshlands as “[sending] forth plagues of

swimming and crawling things deprived of their winter moisture and infected with poison by the mud and decaying filth, from which are often contracted mysterious diseases whose causes are even beyond the understanding of physicians.”<sup>13</sup> Ailments like yaws, malaria, yellow fever, and others, which we now know were generally brought to America by colonists from Europe or by slaves from Africa or the Caribbean and then spread by mosquitoes, were ascribed to and blamed on the swamps themselves, with their decaying soil and mysterious exhalations. New Orleans, of course, was chronically plagued by epidemic disease throughout the colonial era and beyond, as human-made issues of improper waste and sewage disposal compounded the illnesses associated with other swampy areas.

The story of Henry Latrobe, a developer and engineer who designed and implemented New Orleans’s first municipal waterworks in the 1820s, underscores the practical challenges posed by the swamps. Vexed by “the spongy soil of the city, which instantly filled trenches with water to within a few inches of the surface,”<sup>14</sup> two generations of Latrobes grappled with the drainage project. First, the younger Henry, who took on the project at the age of 18, saw his progress slowed by the war of 1812 and died of yellow fever before he could see his work come to fruition. When his father, Benjamin Henry Latrobe, continued the work, he was plagued by yellow fever yet again. It decimated his work force when he took over the project: due to the severity of the epidemic in the summer of 1819, “on 3 July Latrobe employed thirty-two men, but by 17 September only five of them were still working. Ten men died, six were sick or recovering, and eleven had left the city or quit working for Latrobe.”<sup>15</sup> Latrobe himself succumbed to yellow fever, as his son had, in 1820.

Unruly, pestilential, and mysteriously malignant, swamps took on particular symbolic force and significance in the colonial and plantation-era South. As I have argued elsewhere, swamps were particularly intriguing and problematic in relation to the ideology and mythology of wealthy planters and cavalier gentlemen. These erstwhile latter-day knights and lords, inspired and informed first by a desire for legitimacy and respect in the eyes of a judgmental Europe and later by Sir Walter Scott’s novels and the romanticized vision of feudal Europe they evoked, tended to understand and represent themselves as bringing order to chaos, as taming the wild land in accordance with their will and the march of civilization. Swamps, as the greatest obstacles to such taming, were a bane to this mythic construction – reminders of the limits of the cavalier gentleman’s will.

Swamps, then, have long been associated with a moral topography from which American colonists, and particularly Southerners, fought to dissociate their lives and reputations. In New Orleans, all the stigmas and negative associations of swamps more broadly were intensified. While many Southern cities had swamps at their edges, haunting the periphery of their mythic plantation idyll, New Orleans was inextricable from the swamp. Value judgments attached to upland and lowland, in New Orleans, came down to a matter of a few inches of elevation, even as did matters of security and safety. As Campanella points out, in New Orleans and other regions vulnerable to flooding, “topographic elevation is a scarce resource that is in high demand for the protection it affords. A few inches here are as valuable as ten or a hundred feet might be in a hilly city.”<sup>16</sup> Perhaps because of the scant but all-important physical distinction between high and low, “Urban civilization in historic New Orleans was existentially correlated with topographic elevation; higher land meant relative safety, security, salubrity, beauty, comfort, even morality.”<sup>17</sup> The high ground was for the wealthy, the civilized, the morally worthy. To the swamps with the rest.

Elsewhere in the South, this topographic distinction would have clear and unambiguous racial overtones. Whiteness would be assumed as a prerequisite for occupying that physical and metaphorical higher ground. In New Orleans, of course, due to the different codes and laws associated with different slave regimes and to the large number of free people of color immigrating to the city, such distinctions could not always be taken for granted. Certainly, lower-lying areas like Congo Square were associated with and frequented primarily by people of color, and none but the lowest-class whites dwelt within the swampy “quarter of the damned,” but among the privileged who did occupy the high ground, the color line was less clear. Viewed metaphorically, this scant but all-important topographical difference characterizes the drive for distinction, categorization, and clear division that New Orleans’s geography and culture persistently vexed. Insistence on purity of race and lineage became complex, and the source of great fascination and often ire among New Orleans writers, particularly in the eras of the Civil War and Reconstruction.

Racial lines in New Orleans blurred for a variety of reasons. Perhaps the earliest was the tendency of the Canadian adventurers who accompanied Iberville and Bienville to take wives from among the Native American population. Some of the earliest interactions between Native Americans and colonists came about as the latter sought advice on how to navigate the swamps and protect themselves from the perceived dangers of snakes and

alligators that dwelt therein. Spanish slave customs such as *coartacion*, which allowed slaves the possibility of buying their own freedom, and later the French Code Noir, with its combination of brutality in some areas, like punishments for escaped slaves, with unusual lenience in others, like conditions under which slaves might be manumitted and protections for slave families, meant that in the majority-nonwhite colonial city, “lines between slave and free were less absolute . . . than elsewhere in the South.”<sup>18</sup>

As the city developed and grew, its physical topography reflected a moral one. The brothels and houses of ill repute were located “back of town,” in the lower, swampier areas associated more with non-European inhabitants and people of color than with upper-caste white Creoles. The nearer one drew to the areas of town least reclaimed from the surrounding swamps, the stronger the association with license, criminality, and, not coincidentally, non-whiteness. In New Orleans in particular, the combination of cultures, religious practices, and the traditions of hoodoo and voodoo cast the surrounding swamps as picturesque settings for all manner of occult practices. Throughout the South, as Tynes Cowan and others have argued, swamps represented havens for escaped slaves and other refugees, spaces beyond the dominion of white law and ownership.<sup>19</sup> Through the practice of marronage – both petite, or temporary, and grand, or permanent – slaves would escape into the swamps and find either temporary shelter or permanent community. The Haitian revolution at the end of the eighteenth century made the threat of the dangerous, self-liberated black male slave particularly salient in New Orleans.

If unmasterable swamps hiding menacing maroons shook white Southern gentlemen’s sense of control, the eroticized, exoticized female quadroon brought allure to New Orleans’s heterogeneity and contributed to the city’s racialized reputation for erotic decadence. As Emily Clark explains in *The Strange History of the American Quadroon* (2013), “The foreign female of color who migrated to the United States from the blood-soaked shores of Haiti could be mastered and controlled by white American men. This fantasy of sexual triumph supplied an antidote to the terror inspired by the image of Haiti’s virile black men poised to export their war on slavery to the American mainland.”<sup>20</sup> As Clark points out, “the subjection of eroticized women of color by white men is one of the key mechanisms and metaphors of colonialism”<sup>21</sup> – thus, situated among wild swampland full of dangers, New Orleans offered an erotic, colonialist fantasy of sexual subjugation that contributed greatly to its reputation for moral decadence even though, as Clark goes on to argue, the actual lives and situations of

New Orleans's women of color did not conform to this myth of subjugation and concubinage.

New Orleans's reputation for devil-may-care immorality has roots going back to its very inception. Swamps, historically, have been associated with society's rejects and refugees. They are domains of criminals, poachers, pirates, and fugitive slaves, as well as fanciful settings for voodoo or other black magics. The exigencies of the French colonial period, overseen by John Law and his colony-building efforts, made this another dimension in which New Orleans both echoed and amplified traditional assumptions about the swamp. As Ned Sublette explains, French authorities addressed the problem of populating Louisiana by, essentially, rounding up undesirables and shipping them overseas between 1719 and 1720, in effect rendering Louisiana a penal colony. Authorities exiled prostitutes and bootleggers as well as "tobacco smugglers, thieves, beggars, vagabonds, orphans, the unemployed, the incorrigible, the vicious, the depraved, the wrongly accused, and bystanders. People denounced their enemies, or their neighbors, in order to get rid of them. The *forcés* included '160 prostitutes and 96 teenaged *débauchées*, from Paris's La Salpêtrière house of correction for women; by 1721, this group had come to constitute 21 percent of the colony's female population."<sup>22</sup>

While there is no record of a New Orleanian claiming descent from any of the prostitutes brought over in this wave of emigration, this influx of prisoners and undesirables fed a culture of libertinism that has long defined Louisiana in general and especially New Orleans. As Carl Brasseaux explains, "Embracing the moral code forged in the wilderness by [the Canadian] *coureurs des bois*, Louisiana's independent, anticlerical, and hedonistic pioneers effectively resisted the limited moralizing influence of the Catholic clergy while creating a frontier society that reflected their newly acquired values." Brasseaux uses the term "libertines" to describe these pioneers, and claims that they "had a lasting impact on colonial Louisiana."<sup>23</sup>

Haven for refugees, hotbed of immorality, incubator for disease: as one might expect, given the host of practical problems they represented and the stigmas – fair and otherwise – they had come to bear in the dominant cultural imagination, responses to New Orleans's fundamental swampiness tended to be overwhelmingly negative. Charles Gayarré – the famed New Orleans historian often called "the father of New Orleans history" and author of the most influential and prominent early efforts to fathom, explain, and catalog the origins of the city as it passed through three colonial regimes – explicitly rails against the slanderous assumptions

heaped upon New Orleans in the early days of colonization. In so doing, he provides as neat and encompassing a catalog of swamp stigmas as one could ask for. As opposed to the Eden promised in early accounts of the settlement, meant to attract settlers from France, New Orleans gained the reputation as “a terrestrial representation of Pandemonium. The whole country was nothing else, it was said, but a vile compound of marshes, lagoons, swamps, bayous, fens, bogs, endless prairies, inextricable and gloomy forests, peopled with every monster of the natural and of the mythological world.” Compounding the dangers of the swamps were the devastating floods of the Mississippi, composed of “a muddy and thick substance, which hardly deserved the name of water, and which was alive with every insect and every reptile,” and which supposedly each year drove the natives into the treetops, “where they roosted and lived like monkeys, and jumped from tree to tree in search of food.”<sup>24</sup>

Gayarré continues his catalog of slanders heaped on New Orleans by focusing on the inhospitability of climate: “The sun was so intensely hot, that at noon it could strike a man dead as if with a pistol shot: – it was called a stroke of the sun. Its fiery breath drew from the bogs, fens, and marshes the most pestilential vapors, engendering disease and death.” Those who did not die faced a kind of environmentally driven degeneration: “In such a country, the European race of men rapidly degenerated, and in less than three generations was reduced from the best-proportioned size to the dwarfish dimensions of misshapen pygmies.”<sup>25</sup> Exposure to the atmosphere of the New Orleans swamps meant that “man lost the energies of both his body and mind, and through the enervating and baleful influence of the atmosphere, soon became stultified into an indolent idiot.”<sup>26</sup> The idea here reflects the writings of the influential French scientist George-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, who argued in his *Histoire Naturelle, Generale et Particuliere* that the American colonies, being “filled with moist, unhealthy vapors, where ‘everything languishes, decays, stifles,’”<sup>27</sup> had smaller, less developed animals than did Europe and that its environment drove its people to sloth and dullness. Certainly, the detrimental environment that LeClerc ascribed to the New World as a whole would be, in New Orleans, at its most dire.

Finally, Gayarré’s account turns to the indigenous inhabitants of the area as imagined by skeptical Europeans: “As to the natives, they were cannibals, who possessed all the malignity and magical arts of demons, and waged incessant war against the emigrants, whose flesh they devoured with peculiar relish.”<sup>28</sup> Gayarré calls all of these “malignant misrepresentations” – and