

REPORT FROM NEW ORLEANS



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Post-Katrina Assistance Team**

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Katrina Flood Map of New Orleans. Areas in red are historic districts. Areas with blue-green overlay indicate flood water depths with darker colors representing deepest flooding.



“Katrina is a bitch”



I arrived in New Orleans Sunday afternoon, November 6, 2005. The main thing I noticed from the air was the blue roofs everywhere – tarps provided by FEMA for storm damaged roofs. The first thing I noticed in the airport was that all the shops were closed. It looked like when you arrive on a redeye at 5:00 AM, except it was the middle of the afternoon.



Huge debris piles in a park in the Lake View District

I rented a car but immediately got lost because so many road signs had been blown down. Those that weren't destroyed were all twisted 90 degrees so that you couldn't see the cross streets – only the street you were on. The only traffic lights working were those in areas without flooding. All other intersections were treated as four-way stops.



National Trust Team New Orleans

We spent all day Monday in orientation at the Preservation Resource Center learning about New Orleans' historic districts, the current recovery situation and mold. Later in the afternoon, we took a driving tour of Lake View, one of the deeply flooded areas where debris removal has resulted in piles household goods, building materials and trees thirty feet high and blocks long in a linear park.

New Orleans has eighteen historic districts listed on the National Register of Historic Places with 37,000 individual contributing structures. Some are in upscale areas like the Garden District, but many are in struggling neighborhoods.



House in the deserted Lakeview District showing high water line.

The good news for preservationists is that the pioneers knew the value of the higher ground. New Orleans' oldest neighborhoods, which date to the city's founding in 1718 and were largely built out by the mid-Nineteenth Century, are located along the river on the higher elevations. However, beginning in the mid to late 19th Century, developers found the technology to pump and drain the lower lying areas between the Mississippi River and Lake

Pontchartrain, and the City expanded north. Many of those “new suburbs” are now 100-year old plus historic districts with collections of predominantly modest but exquisitely detailed historic homes that most cities would kill for.

The historic character of these neighborhoods is the glue that holds many of them together and attracts people who are willing to invest and live in areas that are remarkable for their economic and racial diversity.



Typical flood damaged home interiors



The National Trust for Historic Preservation is working with the local Preservation Resource Center to provide information and resources to flooded historic neighborhoods to discourage the razing of historic buildings and encourage owners to return and

reoccupy them as soon as possible after repairing flood damage.

Our team consisted of about a half dozen architects and historic preservation experts from around the country, including the states of Colorado, Pennsylvania, Michigan, Georgia, and California. We were assisted by National Trust and Preservation Resource Center Staff, including HTHP Program officers Mary Ruffin Hanbury and Joseph McGill, Jr.

- Nancy Finegood, Executive Director, Michigan Historic Preservation Network, Lansing, MI
- David Anderson, AIA, Architect, Andrews and Anderson, PC, Golden, CO
- Deborah Rouse, AIA, Architect and Attorney, Schnader Attorneys at Law, Pittsburg, PA
- Jennifer Gates, Community Planner, RBF Consulting, Irvine, CA
- Erin Christman, AIA Architect, Surber, Barber, Choate & Hertlein, Architects, Inc., Atlanta, GA
- Sara Lewis, Historic Preservation PhD candidate, New Orleans, LA

On Tuesday, we worked in the Mid-City Historic District, which straddles Canal Street north of the Vieux Carre (French Quarter). The high water mark was about six feet above ground level, and the extent of the damage to individual structures varied depending on the height of the floor above grade. Most were submerged to about half the height of the first story.

There were no utilities turned on yet, but many owners had stripped the buildings of furnishings, carpets and interior wall finishes such as gypsum board or plaster. FEMA contractors were moving through the neighborhood scooping up and removing great piles of debris heaped along every street. Abandoned cars were everywhere.

Although not overwhelming, the stench of rotting food was pervasive.

Everybody left in a hurry with a full refrigerator. Weeks without power ruined every refrigerator in New Orleans, whether flooded or not. Some exploded from the pressure of gases from rotting food, but every single one had been carted to the street for pickup. We handed out information from the Preservation Resource Center and provided expertise for the few individual homeowners who were already back working on their buildings.



Our 'home away from home,' the Bywater B&B is the burgundy colored "shotgun" house in the middle on the left hand side of the street



On Tuesday night, the power went off about 7:30 PM, so we decided it was time to go out and eat. We found a delightful local eatery named Elizabeth's down by the levee operating on candlepower. The power was still out when we left the next morning after cold showers.



Refrigerator in the Vieux Carre with a little humor, "Bush inside, don't open."



Typical street scene in Mid-City. Many houses have been emptied of furnishings that will be hauled away by Corps of Engineers contractors.



On Wednesday, we began working in a historic district called Holy Cross in the now infamous Lower Ninth Ward. Holy Cross is the part of the Ninth Ward nearest the river on the highest ground, but it still suffered flood damage because it is adjacent to one of the levee breaks on the Industrial Canal. The water line in Holy Cross was typically about five feet above floor level for the historic homes that sit above crawl spaces. For homes built in the 1940s and 50s on slabs, the water level was up to the roof line. Other than damage to roofs by wind and to interiors by flood waters, the historic Holy Cross homes were mostly intact and salvageable. The neighborhood was totally deserted except for patrolling police and National Guard. The entire day we saw fewer than a half dozen homeowners working on their buildings. We left information at all the historic homes and provided consultation to the few homeowners who had returned and were stripping out their homes.



All of the individuals we encountered in Holy Cross had flood stories. The man in the photo below was in the process of cleaning out one of two homes his family owned in the neighborhood. He had ridden out the storm but was in his home when the water began quickly rising from the Industrial Canal levee break. He climbed into his attic, and as the water kept rising, he exited through a gable window onto his roof.



Survivor tells his story



One of the few homes in Holy Cross being worked on by owners

Left, Typical Holy Cross neighborhood of late 19th Century shotgun houses.

He saw a boat float by, upside down with a dog on it, so he jumped in and retrieved it. After leaving the dog, which he said clung to him like Velcro, on his roof, he proceeded to rescue nine other people, bringing all of them to the second floor balcony of a nearby home. After three days, they were rescued by the National Guard and taken to a school on higher ground. He spent two weeks at the school and then was sent on an odyssey that included several states.

Eventually, his employer caught up with him and persuaded him to return to New Orleans to resume his job as a cook in a restaurant.



One of several dead dogs we encountered. Although there was a huge effort to provide food

After finishing our work in Holy Cross, We drove north across St. Claude to the 9th Ward area nearest The Industrial Canal levee break. It is an area built out predominately in the mid Twentieth Century, has a large percentage of homeowners, and was largely African-American. There is really nothing left. There is no question that it will be bulldozed; however, what happens next is the subject of heated debate.



Top and below: Devastation in the Lower 9th Ward





Top and below: Devastation in the Lower 9th Ward



The Lower 9th Ward is off limits to the public. All street access is cordoned off and controlled by National Guard checkpoints. Special buses provide tours through the area for property owners. They let us go along when we told them we were with the National Trust.

On Thursday, we went back to the Mid-Town. There was lots more activity than we had seen two days before, sometimes

in as many as a couple of homes per block. A lot of these homes are duplexes, where the owner lives in one unit and rents out the other. Sometimes it was just contractors working, but at least half the time it was the owners who had returned.

We made it a point to meet everyone there, and they all seemed to be welcome. Many of them had structural concerns about their homes, but most we were able to alleviate. We solved a few problems where some component had been knocked askew by wind or by a falling tree. Sometimes, houses had shifted on their typically meager foundations, which called for more serious attention. Typically, homes in New Orleans seem to be perched on rows of pier blocks that are intended to let air flow freely under the structures. The older ones have pine floors that are salvageable once they dry out. Every now and then you see an infill house of mid-Twentieth century or later construction that is built on a concrete slab, which is not the best design in a flood prone area.

On Thursday afternoon, we returned to the Preservation Resource Center and sat in on one of an ongoing series of workshops for returning homeowners. This particular one focused on working with architects and contractors and was attended by some of the people we had met earlier in the day.

That night, I met up with an old friend, Ken White, from Fayetteville, Arkansas, and had dinner with him, his wife and another couple. They have lived in the French Quarter for maybe some 15 years and had rehabilitated a 19th Century courtyard townhouse. Ken is a couple of

years younger than and the younger brother of Togar White, who played quarterback while I played center on the Fayetteville High Scholl football team. Ken is a psychiatrist and headed the Psychiatric Department at Charity hospital, the city's main public hospital.

Although only the basement flooded at Charity, they lost their power due to a malfunctioning generator and were stranded for six days. They had enough food and water, but the hospital's windows are not operable, and the heat was deadly. Ken said they broke out windows wherever they could to provide natural ventilation.

Ken had about 90 locked down psychiatric patients under his care, and the windows were thick Lexan (plastic) in the psychiatric wards for security. When they were having no success trying to beak them out, a patient who had once been employed installing such windows offered to help. Using special techniques he had once learned, the patient was able to extract the Lexan from the frames. Ken said the reports of people firing guns at the hospital were exaggerated, probably resulting from the sound of breaking windows.

They were finally rescued by a motley flotilla of air boats assembled from a variety of official and unofficial sources. The staff and patients were taken to a staging area where buses picked them up and distributed them to hospitals in other areas. Ken is now working temporarily in Baton Rough where his patients were taken and renting an apartment in nearby St. Francisville.

On Friday morning, our group assembled at our bed and breakfast to

brainstorm about lessons learned, make recommendations about how subsequent teams could be most helpful and to assemble information to be passed on to the Preservation resource Center, the national rust and to government agencies.



Medical clinics and Red Cross facilities are set up throughout the city

On the way out of town, I stopped by Charbonnet-Labat Funeral Home at the request of Betty Reid Soskin to check on its condition. It was founded by one her New Orleans family members and is famous for those hose jazz funerals that wending to and from burials at St. Louis Cemetery as they have for the past century. The building sustained four feet of water, and the utilities were still off, but it was open for business. Betty has a

fascination blog at
<http://cbreaux.blogspot.com/>.



It was always sad to find the dead pets left behind.
 This dog expired right on his front porch.

Speaking of ancestors, my great-great grandmother, Sidney Welch Smyth Norment was born in New Orleans in 1840, where her parents, James Smith and Elizabeth Jones Smith were living at the time. James Smith's mother and my great-great-great grandmother, Elizabeth Miller Norment was born in 1812 at Bayou Sara (near present day St. Francisville - once the second busiest port on the lower Mississippi, only to New Orleans) and died in New Orleans in 1894. She was buried with some 30,000 others dating back to 1822 in the old Girod Street cemetery, which now lies under the Superdome. Legend asserts the New Orleans Saints' end zone rests atop old graves, and a voodoo curse is the reason for the team's unenviable record over the years.

Here are some of my impressions of New Orleans.

The "tourist areas" including the French Quarter, suffered little flood damage, although there is wind, water and fire damage. There is no discernable change on Bourbon Street, for example, except that many, many businesses are not yet open. Many of those that are will take only cash. Restaurants typically have limited menus, and some are serving on paper plates with plastic utensils. Most of the customers are either locals or from FEMA, the Corps of Engineers or out of town contractors. During the week I was there, however, I estimate there was a tenfold increase in businesses of every type opening.



Bourbon Street looking west from the east side of the French Quarter looks almost normal

The neighborhood where we were staying, The Bywater Historic District, which begins about a dozen blocks east of the French Quarter, had electricity, water and sewer but no gas until the day I left. Cold showers were the order of the day. Mail service came back only last Friday. About half the residents have moved back. Electrical power was still intermittent.

The French Quarter and the Central Business District have been pretty well

cleaned up, but comparatively few businesses have opened. Most of the hotels are still closed, and we had to drive clear to the Garden District to find a grocery store the first night we arrived.

Cops from all over the country, contractors and the National Guard are everywhere. There are few children to be seen.



As you travel north toward Lake Pontchartrain, the city is still deserted, and trash is piled high everywhere. It is pure devastation and kind of reminds me of driving through villages in Vietnam after the Tet offensive. The one constant you look for is the high water mark from the flood that can be seen on buildings throughout the city like a continuous bathtub scum ring. On Canal Street just west of the French Quarter, the water mark starts a few blocks north of the river and rises to many feet between Downtown and Lake Pontchartrain. See http://www.c-ka.com/new_orleans_historical.html.



Above, sign reads "Trespassers are considered looters are shot dead." Below, help wanted signs are all over downtown New Orleans.



Restaurants are desperately looking for employees. Burger King was offering a \$6,000 signing bonus



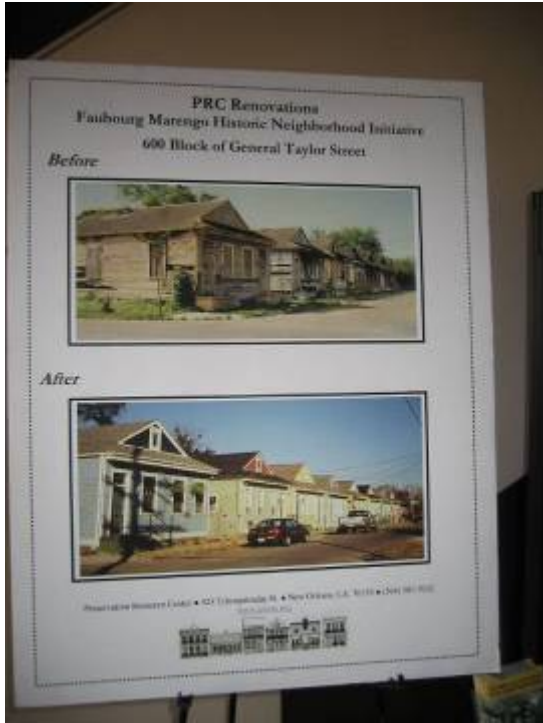
Top, homes in Mid-City District.



Final day rehash



Workshop for returning homeowners



Before and after projects sponsored by the Preservation Resource Center (PRC)

(where he died). Present were the president of the National Trust for Historic Preservation and the president of the American Planning Association, along with dozens of historic preservation supporters from New Orleans.



Introducing Richard Moe, president of the National Trust for Historic Preservation



Example of code from search teams on all buildings. The top is the date searched; the left is the agency searching; the right is the number of occupants found and the bottom is the number of human or animal bodies found. In this case, one human body was found on September 16.

Perhaps the most enduring feeling is the eerie sensation of whole parts of the city that are totally deserted – blocks and blocks of homes and absolutely nothing moving in any direction. All the front doors of the houses are open, and all the occupants belongings – their whole lives are just strewn along the street.

On a happier note, there was a major conference Thursday through Saturday to discuss the future of New Orleans. On Thursday night, we all attended a dinner party at a Garden District mansion known as the Jefferson Davis House

