

# The Preservation of the Vieux Carre and its Grassroots Beginnings

by *Marsha Bourgeois*

Until only a very few years ago there was a real danger that New Orleans would lose its character completely through mindless tearing-down of its classic architecture, but it is a vigorous city, and once the danger was apparent, thousands of its citizens came forward to defend it. Just as Andrew Jackson stopped the British, the preservationist associations stopped another kind of defeat and insured that henceforth there would be constant vigilance against the vandalism of wreckers. <1>

Residents of New Orleans had little recourse against the many decades of unrelenting disasters and ills visited upon its natural environment. Hurricanes, floods, and fires seemed to follow each other in devastating fashion with each one leaving its distinctive mark on the city and the inhabitants.

However, in the early 20th Century it was soon to be discovered that the greatest threat to the city and its architectural heritage was to be its own human residents. New Orleanians' insensitivity to the irreplaceable richness of their heritage as cast in columns, ornamental grillwork, and millwork, was evident throughout the port city. European style abodes and buildings were being torn down rather than repaired. New buildings were being constructed for capital investment and/or pure functionary usage with little regard for architectural design and richness. The remaining buildings were not renovated meticulously -- instead they became replicas of buildings found in other American cities. The ambiance of New Orleans was being remade into just another version of Mainstreet U.S.A. Few people noticed that New Orleans was being stripped of those romantic, quaint, historic, and distinctive scenes that made it strictly New Orleans.

There had been isolated and haphazard attempts by neighborhood groups throughout the city's history to prevent the demolition of a particular building. However, the group traditionally disassembled following its success or failure ... and, unfortunately, the majority of the drives were failures. Owners found it financially more rewarding to sell their properties to outside investors who were benefiting from the increasing tourist and port traffic. A failure worth noting occurred in 1916 with the demolition of the stylish Royal Hotel in spite of numerous efforts by N. Courtland Curtis, Dean of the Tulane School of Architecture, to prevent it.

Nonetheless, successes did occur during this time. Lyle Saxon, brothers William and Ellsworth Woodward, and Lafcadio Hearn unified the local artists in 1926 in an effort to educate the public and elected officials to the immediate need for preservation. These preservationists were joined by various historical societies who had earlier laid the foundation for this concern in the New Orleans' 1884 World's Cotton Exposition. At that time Grace King and D. Clive Hardy, both historians and photographers, created displays depicting the scale, texture, and design inherent in the Vieux Carre. Hardy pointed out in

his monograph on the exposition that "what the local citizens had taken for granted was in fact their own unique and rich culture." <2>

The joint efforts by these groups were invaluable as they prevented the unthinkable - the purposeful demolition of the Cabildo by the New Orleans City Council. John Kemp in *New Orleans* observed that "the growing appreciation of architecture as an element deserving preservation was allied with visual images, letters and later the theater [sic]." <3> Artists and historians had combined emotional appeal with significant facts in order to gain support for this drive. Even with the success of saving the Cabildo, the members were ineffective in getting a commission formed, laws passed, and capital invested in their cause. They recognized that time was becoming an invaluable commodity in the futile battles against the deterioration or demolition of the architectural treasures in the Crescent City.

Movements continued to emerge with varying degrees of success and impact. Groups such as La Renaissance du Vieux Carre, Garden District Florist Clubs, La Petit Theatre du Vieux Carre, and the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Tombs were formed, each with its own special agenda. Individuals and groups were beginning to advance the simple idea that "once our architectural heritage is lost it is lost forever." <4> Unfortunately many of these groups functioned in a passive mode -- reacting to a proposal rather than initiating action that would prevent such proposals from even reaching a legislative agenda. The organizations were confronted with apathy, capitalistic greed, and buildings in massive disrepair. That which nature had not destroyed in earlier decades, man was now allowing to deteriorate needlessly or to be demolished through actions or inaction.

A few prominent citizens were beginning to realize that more than a coat of paint was needed to halt and reverse the deterioration that was occurring throughout New Orleans. They also realized that the "purpose of preservation is to mediate sensitively with the forces of change and not to arrest time. It is to understand the present as a product of the past and a modifier of the future." <5> These interested parties recognized that preservation of an historic site could not be haphazard or without detailed plans. Preservation had to be directed, long-term, and meaningful.

John Laurence, the late dean of the Tulane University School of Architecture, had remarked that "the preservation of historic sites is viable only if it adds to the richness of the lives of citizens when it is seen as the only way this dimension may be achieved, and that there is no substitute for it that can be provided by contemporary society." <6> And to some New Orleans residents, the movement to repair and preserve the Vieux Carre was indeed necessary to ensure that richness for its citizens and tourists. It was no longer desirable or noble to save or preserve a single building without reverence to the entire area. Citizens acknowledged that the loss of one structure was detrimental to all the others in the immediate surroundings. Therefore, the Vieux Carre was classified as a major area of concern in its entirety to be addressed immediately.

It had been stated frequently that the Vieux Carre was primarily a slum as the 20th Century unfolded. Martha Robinson, noted civic leader, wrote that with the "coming of the 1920s and 30s there was a rebirth of feeling for the Vieux Carre, and New Orleans at long last began to realize that unless something was done to preserve what was left, that soon the whole section would disappear." <7> That renewed feeling of pride as a contributing factor in the grassroots development for the preservation of the Vieux Carre ... "they say little acorns give birth to giant oaks." <8>

The movement finally received assistance in 1924 from the City Council. It was recorded that the movement began when:

There were some people, four or five people, who lived in the Vieux Carre who became interested in setting up a regulatory commission of some kind. They did succeed in getting a preservation ordinance passed when Martin Behrman was mayor. But they had no police power, they couldn't enforce anything. It was just an advisory body ... not much of anything, except a step in the right direction. <9>

This particular legislation created the first historic district preservation law in the United States. Nonetheless it was just that, a law with little judicial, public or financial support. It was written later that the "main objective of exercising controls on the Vieux Carre is to continue it as a living, functioning community. There would be no attempt to turn back the clock, to recreate the life and environment of a past era, a la Williamsburg." <10>

The City Council assured the community that the Vieux Carre would not become stagnated or creatively sterile. The Council wanted it to continue as a place with a vibrant personality in which to live. As Robinson, Louisiana Landmarks Society's first lady, wrote: "one of the great charms of the French Quarter is that it is a living, breathing, integral part of our city in which thousands of our citizens live and in which many more thousands enjoy both the historic sights and the quaintness of the buildings." <11> The writers of the Ordinance addressed this concern and reassured the public that the Vieux Carre would be more than a landmark of yesterday. "The barn door is locked now and no more horses can be stolen - or, at least, not easily." <12>

Two particular individuals, neither one a New Orleans native, were determined to see that even the barn was kept in proper order. Mary Morrison, wife of former mayor Chep Morrison, insisted during a 1982 interview that it was not New Orleanians who saved the architectural landscape, but these individuals who should be credited with this important accomplishment.

Elizabeth Thomas Werlein (originally from Michigan) was one of these individuals whose enthusiasm and love for the Vieux Carre can be accredited with greatly contributing to its preservation. It was at this time that the city leaders, responding to Werlein's unceasing efforts, recognized the need to begin gathering data about New Orleans' past, conceding that "unlike other historic areas with a predominant architectural style, the Vieux Carre has a diversity of styles, reflecting its multinational, cultural, and

historical evolution." <13> New Orleanians were beginning to acknowledge that their home and heritage were different and the preservation of that uniqueness was vital.

Werlein was determined to do just that, either as a member of a public group or single-handedly. She "virtually policed the Quarter urging property owners to restore their buildings, persuading others to remove trash and litter and inspiring many creative and influential people with her drive and spirit." <14> She fought to improve the lax fire protection in the Vieux Carre and campaigned against the modernization of the Quarter. She wrote numerous letters to officials and organizations throughout the region regarding her concerns. Werlein frequently called groups throughout the nation to receive suggestions and information.

Mayor Robert A. Maestri named her the "mayor to the French Quarter" and the "mayor" used this title whenever it advanced the cause. Her cause was the Vieux Carre. Her son, Philip, recalled that "she used to say that the French Quarter was built by individual artisans; that every door and Window, every hinge and chimney, every archway, everything on every building, in fact, was unique." <15> Werlein battled relentlessly with city architects when they attempted to replace the wrought iron grillwork with another material. She won the battle.

After years of perseverance she finally convinced the Louisiana Legislature in 1936 to pass a constitutional amendment authorizing the New Orleans City Council to create the Vieux Carre Commission. The Commission was to stir a new spirit of interest in preservation, while not hindering "worthy" progress. It was to prevent the Vieux Carre from being remodeled with each passing decade's architectural whims and style. The Vieux Carre Commission and its guidelines were to become a model for preservationist groups throughout the nation. This organization gave preservationists the "corporate structure necessary to maintain not just their own property but the entire character and appearance of their neighborhoods." <16> The Commission had the legal right and obligation to exercise its powers encompassing signs, exterior alterations, regulation of materials, and basic decision making. It could also impose fines against violators and levy necessary taxes.

Still the Commission members allowed certain violations to be overlooked and were not always consistent in their dedication to the law. Werlein could not understand, nor would she tolerate, the politicians' utter disregard of the Quarter's historic importance, potential value, irreplaceable beauty, and contributions to the region. She continued to fight the commissioner, bars, and brothels through the 1930s and 40s. She frequently called on the mayor for assistance in her battles against the vices existing in the Quarter. She explained to Mayor Maestri that the Vieux Carre was one of New Orleans' most valuable assets, "but could only be preserved if people would put money into preserving it, and no one would improve a piece of property if, as soon as they did, a house of ill repute would open next door." <17> She insisted that the red light district would have to be moved and it was ... to Julia Street. In her final years her big four-poster bed was viewed as her command post to protect the Vieux Carre from anyone endangering it.

For all her successes she did encounter failure, "Werlein -- and consequently the city -- lost several skirmishes against businessmen whose encroachment caused gerrymandering of the French Quarter to exclude their project from the Vieux Carre Commission controls." <18> Unfortunately the Montelone Hotel, the riverside of Decatur Street, and the lake side of North Rampart were the gerrymandering victims. There were numerous demolitions in this vicinity before litigation took place declaring these exclusions unconstitutional. However, it was too late -- "enough has been lost to make what is left seem very precious." <19>

In addition to Werlein, William Ratcliff (originally from Virginia) was an important contributor to the cause. He was a pioneer preservationist and philanthropist during the mid-twenties. Ratcliff purchased Vieux Carre properties, restored them, and bequeathed them to different institutions within the region. He donated the Bank of Louisiana and the Old French Opera House to Tulane University in 1927. Another example of his concern was the donation of the Lower Pontalba Building and the Jackson and Creole houses to the Louisiana State Museum.

Ratcliff set a precedent for other prominent New Orleanians to follow. He urged them not only to purchase properties but to reside in the newly restored homes. He emphasized that it was vital to keep the Vieux Carre as a living and functioning neighborhood:

The Vieux Carre has a unique character as a cohesive area which must be preserved as an asset to New Orleans and the nation - it is an entertainment center, a unique example of the American architectural heritage, a historical center where important local, regional, and national events took place; a residential center, a cultural center of religion, literature, and fine arts; a specialty retail area. <20>

And so it was ... or more correctly, so it is! Today there are more than sixty social, governmental, business, and historical organizations in the New Orleans region - each one helping to preserve the character of the Crescent City. This is a far cry from the early days of the 20th Century.

Fortunately, partly through innate conservation and resistance to change, partly through lack of capital, and partly through a very successful preservationist movement, New Orleans has been able to avoid much of the destruction of the urban environment caused by post war city planning practice. <21>

A mere sixty years ago the majority of New Orleans residents had little regard for its rich architectural heritage. They were neglectful in fulfilling their obligation to the architects of the past. They were reluctant in meeting the needs for the preservation of irreplaceable buildings. As Patricia Stevens wrote: "Architecture reflects the deep beliefs of an age, it bears witness to current feeling about nature, about society about the very possibilities of improving the human condition. Architecture also acts as a catalyst, influencing use and taste " <22> And the residents during the 1920s and 30s preferred a different taste -- contemporary, and a different use of space and time. It seemed apparent that it was easier to demolish a structure than to struggle with its "aged" architectural character.

Fortunately there were some individuals who thought differently. They saw the necessity to combine the past, the present and the future. It was this combination and sacred balance that makes New Orleans -- New Orleans. And with that in mind, the grassroots foundation for the preservation of the character of New Orleans was set in motion. Humans could not control the fates handed them by natural disasters, but they could direct their own actions to the future of their own architectural heritage.

### Notes

1 Mary Cable, *Lost New Orleans* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1980), p. 210.

2 John Kemp, *New Orleans: An Illustrated History* (California: Windsor Publications, Inc., 1981), p. 200.

3 Kemp, p. 200.

4 Christine Moe, *Preserving Historic Buildings and the Human Scale in New Orleans and Louisiana* (Illinois: Exchange Bibliography, 1976), p. 1.

5 Samuel Wilson Jr. and Bernard Lemann, *New Orleans Architecture*, vol. 1 (Baton Rouge: Moran Industries, 1971), p. v.

6 Wilson, p. v.

7 Martha G. Robinson, personal papers, Tulane Univ. Archives, New Orleans, La.

8 Robinson papers.

9 Mary Morrison, interview, *New Orleans Magazine* (August 1982), p. 56.

10 Marcou, O'Leary and Associates, "Will Success Spoil the Vieux Carre?" *Planning and Urban Development* (Washington, D.C.: June 1969).

11 Robinson, papers.

12 Cable, p. 82.

13 Richard O. Baumbach Jr., and William E. Borah, *The Second Battle of New Orleans* (Alabama: Univ. of Alabama Press, 1981), p. 51.

14 Stella Pitts, "French Quarter was Love of Activist Elizabeth Werlein," *Times-Picayune*, 9 May 1976, sec. 3, p. 2.