

ITALIAN HEAVEN

THE SICILIAN
FRENCH QUARTER
BEFORE WWII

by Justin Nystrom

*Unloading bananas
in New Orleans,
c. 1903.*



SECOND ONLY TO CREOLE EXCEPTIONALISM

in its purposeful shaping of historical memory in the city has been the decades-long conscious construction of the antebellum period as the city's golden age, an implicit if unwitting celebration of the slaveholder's perspective so pervasive that even those who might otherwise reject such assumptions fall victim to its illusive power. I was invited to sit on a panel, "Before Katrina: The Decline of New Orleans from the Civil War to the Twenty-First Century," at the 2013 annual meeting of the American Historical Association. The panel was predicated on the fallacious notion of New Orleans' steady decline since the Civil War, an intellectual assumption bound by threads of culture and memory to the subtly powerful ideology of the Lost Cause. This was the first time that I consciously and publicly called this assumption into question, articulating a growing

belief in the need to construct a modern narrative that reflects all of New Orleans' people. A greater openness to the plurality of our shared historical narrative may finally be upon us, however. In 2015, the Historic New Orleans Collection's *Purchased Lives* exhibit attracted record numbers of visitors, challenging them to ponder the endemic nature of the internal slave trade's presence in the city's urban landscape despite the effects of a sustained program of civic erasure. Another indicator of a spreading reappraisal came with the 2014 opening of a slavery museum at Whitney Plantation. The contentious ongoing debate over the place of Confederate monuments in New Orleans and elsewhere has revealed the brittle edges of change, but it is clear that hoopskirt fantasies are no longer paradigmatic.

The same preservationist impulse that emerged in the 1920s French Quarter and birthed the fabrication of an antebellum architectural fantasy devoid of its slave underpinnings also steadily obliterated traces of the Sicilian immigrants who had taken root there in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Devoid of the imperative to construct a glorious past and to the dismay of nascent preservationists, Sicilian immigrants accelerated the industrialization of the French Quarter, while the poorer among them crowded into the neighborhood's run-down structures. The studied antebellum illusion in place today, codified by the Vieux Carré Commission, has left little trace of the former "Italian Colony" that thrived before the era of modern tourism.

A thoughtful investigation of the Sicilian migration and its impact on New Orleans also seems particularly relevant in today's postdiluvian era, a time of dramatic and fundamental change in the city. The pain of this ongoing transformation has been exacerbated by the historical disconnect represented by the

lived experience of those New Orleanians who came of age in the city in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Their youth may have borne witness to a long-deferred black political empowerment, but there is no denying that oil-bust New Orleans, punctuated by the financial disaster of the 1984 World's Fair, entered a period of long economic stagnation attended by a steady outmigration of jobs and residents. Members of this generation, now entering their sixties and seventies, reflect fondly on the cheap rents and vibrant anachronism-loving local culture that thrived here, skyrocketing crime rates of that era notwithstanding. The 1990s amplified notions of New Orleans exceptionalism and unwittingly reinforced Lost Cause narratives by doubling down on its Paradise Lost trope for reasons that were different yet somehow the same. Living amid such economic stagnation, the city's residents gazed warily at the hustling metropolises of Charlotte, Atlanta, and Houston, jealous of their wealth but inwardly thankful that New Orleanians possessed too great of a cultural sensibility to so unwisely succumb to such terminal sameness. Yet as much as the city's inhabitants like to tell themselves that their city is not like every other place, it is fundamentally a city like any other in that it is governed by thousands of daily human interactions, with the flow of commerce pulsing through its veins. It deserves a systemic analysis that holds such romanticism at arm's length.

With every passing day, the pre-Katrina epoch recedes into memory. Crime and studied anachronism may be with us yet, but many of the political and cultural assumptions that governed New Orleans for a generation or more before the storm have dissolved under the implacable pressure of human agency. Such pressures include escalating real estate



A corner of the French Market c. 1900–1910

PREVIOUS SPREAD: Library of Congress; OPPOSITE PAGE: Library of Congress



FOR MOST OF ITS LIFE, NEW ORLEANS HAS BEEN IN ETHNIC, SOCIAL, AND CULTURAL MOTION. THE STORY OF HOW SICILIANS, AN EARLIER TRIBE OF NEWCOMERS, CAME TO THE CITY AND LEFT THEIR IMPRINT OFFERS A HISTORICAL ANALOGY FOR TODAY.

prices driven by the arrival of moneyed outsiders and Airbnb, tourists crowding the sidewalks of Magazine Street, and hipsters orbiting Sixth Ward second-line parades like a cloud of mosquitoes as well as quieter yet no less profound demographic shifts in ethnicity and class. While upsetting for some, these transformative events are more in step with the historical processes that have characterized development in the city since Bienville first claimed the river's muddy bank for France. For most of its life, New Orleans has been in ethnic, social, and cultural motion. The story of how Sicilians, an earlier tribe of newcomers, came to the city and left their imprint offers a historical analogy for today.



IF THERE IS A GHOST OF THE CITY'S Sicilian past, it surely haunts the streets of the Lower French Quarter. Even if the dying echoes of spoken Italian fell silent over fifty years ago, and in spite of the Vieux Carré Commission's obsession with erasing what does not conform to its antebellum vision, impressions of the immigrant century remain visible on the landscape if one knows where to look.

For about a century beginning in the 1860s, the part of the Quarter lying below

St. Ann and fronting all of Decatur Street functioned as a landward extension of the busy waterfront, with people hauling, wholesaling, and peddling the commerce of the port. While Italian immigrants settled in every part of New Orleans, here in the Lower Quarter, an ethnic neighborhood that outsiders called the Italian Colony emerged by about 1875.

Photographers working at the turn of the twentieth century have bequeathed to us a wealth of images from this time and place, and these pictures have done much to shape our vision of the French Quarter from a century ago. Dilapidated courtyards where careworn immigrant women wait for laundry to dry in the breeze. An army of men unloads stalks of bananas from the hold of a large white steel steamship into a waiting refrigerated rail car, while a man of purpose stands atop the train in a dark suit, supervising the action, and stevedores in shirtsleeves shade their eyes against the afternoon sun and stare at the camera. Five shoeless, streetwise boys sit in a mule-drawn cart at the front of the French Market, four of them looking boldly into the lens. Two other boys gaze directly at us from the margins of a fruit stand, stalks of bananas yawning from rafters in every direction. Stark and real, a heartbeat scissored out of time, these images tell a story of shabbiness and poverty—an incomplete story,

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1133-1135 Chartres St.,
c. 1937-1938.





Sicilian Upper French Quarter

BOURBON CORRIDOR, circa 1900-1955

- 1**
724 IBERVILLE:
 Acme Oyster House, 1912–present. Purchased by grocer Felipe Sierra in 1913.
- 2**
739 IBERVILLE:
 Felix Oyster House, 1938–present. Named for original owner Felix Rando.
- 3**
201 ROYAL:
 Solari's Groceries, Wines, and Liquors, 1870s–1965
- 4**
214 ROYAL:
 Hotel Monteleone, 1886–present.
- 5**
441 BOURBON:
 Leon Prima's 500 Club, 1947–58.
- 6 & 7**
809 ST. LOUIS AND 501–507 BOURBON:
 Anthony "Antoine" Masera's Oyster Saloon and Restaurant, 1871–1944.

written from the perspective of outsiders. It is no accident that this geography is the source of the mythologies of the Sicilian experience in New Orleans—everything from the muffuletta and Brocato's cannoli to the assassination of Chief David Hennessey. Like the photographs, the mythologies both are grounded in realism and obscure the greater picture. The

French Quarter and the Sicilians who lived and worked there stood at the crossroads of a food-distribution empire. For several generations, Decatur Street and the French Market functioned as the drive wheel for the machinery that fed the city and region. While some men labored and fought on the docks for workmen's wages, others made enormous fortunes brokering

Maps adapted from Justin Nyström

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cargoes bought and sold in distant markets. The French Quarter of 1900 gave birth to the familial, cultural, and financial dynasties that shaped much of the coming century in New Orleans.

At the heart of the Sicilian Quarter stood the French Market, a place no informed nineteenth-century tourist dared to miss. For correspondents who arrived by ship, as John H. B. Latrobe did in 1834, the experience was literally unavoidable because the “vegetable market” stood near the bottom of the plank that took them from the ship to the wharf. From Mark Twain in 1857 to Edward King in 1875, everyone seemed to harbor an opinion about the market's charms and failings, and these written impressions contributed, for good or ill, to the city's exotic reputation. Few opined with as much derision as Lafcadio Hearn, who described the market's slovenly appearance to a Cincinnati audience in late 1877, a time when Italians had begun to make their presence felt: “Piles of cabbages, turnips and strange vegetables adorn each side. Monstrous cheeses smile from every corner; the walls are festooned with bananas, etc.; while fish, bread, flour, and even alligators, have each appropriate tables.” Hearn heard “every language—English, French, Italian and German, varied by gombic languages of every shade; languages whose whole

vocabulary embraces but a few dozen words, the major part of which are expressive, emphatic and terrific oaths.”

Photographs from the turn of the twentieth century show a very similar scene. Looking down Decatur Street where North Peters branches off to form a narrow pie wedge of ground at the tip of the vegetable market, one image shows the early morning sun just over the river, boiling from the lumpy, manure-strewn cobbles a warm-weather haze that clings indolently to a line of empty produce wagons and crates of the despised cabbages. Surrounded by stalks of bananas and bundles of pineapples hanging from the rafters, an Italian man in the first stall arranges oranges into tall pyramids. A few steps away, a young woman surveys a sad display of spotted bananas selling for a dime a dozen, while two nearby men survey her with significantly greater approval. Just across Decatur, where Central Grocery is now, white awnings stretch between the second-story balcony and the sidewalk in a valiant effort to repel the heat of the day. Today, all of this is gone, replaced by the decorative shrubbery in front of the Joan of Arc statue.

The French Market has operated in one form or another since 1789, when it became the first in a large number of public markets that supplied fresh food for New Orleanians. The city had a total



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PARTICULARLY IN THE FRENCH QUARTER.

of thirty-four markets before 1911, the most of any major American metropolitan area. Some still stand today: St. Roch, for example, was originally built in 1874 along St. Claude Avenue and was completely renovated in 2014 along the rim of the contemporary city's bohemia. Most are gone—the Prytania Market is now a grassy strip between Lyons and Upperline across from the Kingpin Bar—while others have been converted to other uses. They began as places where local health authorities could inspect and presumably guarantee the safety of meats, seafood, poultry, and fresh fruits and vegetables, and for much of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the city forbade private markets from operating within thirty-two hundred feet (roughly nine blocks) of public markets, all but guaranteeing them a monopoly on fresh food sales and making them neighborhood gathering places. None were as crucial as the French Market, which was always the largest and served as a distribution hub for the smaller neighborhood markets as well as for the corner groceries that dotted the city's landscape.

Many New Orleanians still retain some memory of the French Market before its 1970s transformation into a strictly tourist zone, but those memories are far removed from what existed in the late nineteenth century. As American cities are concerned, New Orleans is old, and land uses here have changed significant-

ly over time, sometimes more than once, particularly in the French Quarter. By the 1930s, the antebellum structures of the French Market had not only fallen into a state of disrepair but proved inadequate for distributing fresh produce around a modern city. Trucks and automobiles took the place of mules and wagons as the primary means of transportation, and the nineteenth-century footprint had simply become untenable. Meanwhile, the amount of land between the market and the levee had shrunk because of the river's encroachment.

Even though current memories document the twilight of the French Market's commercial relevance, the cultural processes that they describe reflect lifestyle patterns established over the course of a century. Salvatore "Tommy" Tusa, who today operates Central Grocery, remembers well the fruit market that used to operate outside the store's window: "Across the street was Sala fruit stand... all stacked up and decorated. What it was, was just stalls where they would pile crates of stuff to put their...fruit and nuts and dried fruit, but mostly produce. And each one would have their stall area. One stand was after the next. They were all in competition with each other, but [they all] had their calling, they had their draw."

"If you wanted a certain amount of something," explained Maria Impastato, "they'd let you take what you wanted, you didn't have to buy a whole bushel of



Sicilian Lower French Quarter
circa 1910-1955

- 1 **801 CHARTRES:**
Taormina pasta factory and wholesale grocery imports, built in 1890s and owned by the Taormina family, 1916-present.
- 2 **831 DECATUR:**
Salvatore Segreto's Saloon and Restaurant, c. 1908 or 1909-1940s.
- 3 **915 DECATUR:**
Progress Grocery, 1924-2001.
- 4 **923 DECATUR:**
Central Grocery, 1906-present.
- 5 **625-631 ST. PHILIP:**
Ruffino's Bakery, 1924-1940s; Ruffino's Restaurant, 1950s-1970s.
- 6 **1000 CHARTRES:**
Federico Brothers Macaroni Manufacturing, 1920s-50s.
- 7 **617 URSULINES:**
Angelo Brocato's Gelateria and Bakery, 1920-1981.
- 8 **1230 CHARTRES:**
Jacob Cusimano's macaroni factory, 1902-c. 1964.

whatever." Her father, who operated the Napoleon House, knew most of the vendors. "He'd after work a lot of times go get a crate of whatever was in season and go deliver it to my aunt on Dumaine, bring some over here, and then bring the

rest to us at home." Seafood and meat were just as important as produce in the French Market of that era. Meat has made a significant comeback at farmers' markets around the country today as consumer demand for



*French Market,
c. 1906.*

heritage breeds and ethically raised stock grows. Two generations ago, however, “the French Market was full of butchers,” observed restaurateur Joe Pacaccio. “You might have had a dozen butchers...all individual shops, hand-cut meat only. All the different families had a different butcher.” Fridays in the pre-Vatican II Catholic city were particularly busy: “They would come with the trucks of shrimp and these big baskets, all that you wanted,” noted Tusa. “That was 24/7. Come early, early in the morning, and they had two or three ice houses there, and the fishermen would come and bring their catches.” John Gendusa, who spent summers delivering bread with his father, remembered that “you’d be about two blocks away from the French Market, and you could smell it before you could see it.... Clean as it could be, but you could

smell the fish market.”

Either in the market itself or just adjacent to it were stands and restaurants that offered quick meals. Salvatore “Joe” Segreto, whose family roots run deep on Decatur Street, remembered many of these places from his youth. “Battistella’s had a restaurant, it was very prominent seafood and breakfast place. There was a man named Lala...an Albanese, who had the most famous barbecue place—barbecue pork and chicken. It was unbelievably delicious—sandwiches on a seeded loaf of bread, Italian bread.... He sold out almost every night. That’s how good it was. And...Roma Restaurant (1003 Decatur), was a tiny little restaurant next door to the French Market Bar that had the most delicious food and guys would come there every day for a special. Wednesday was tripe day...tripe special,

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it was so delicious I went there every Wednesday to get a big bowl of tripe.” But Segreto knew that the market had been even more fascinating in his father’s and grandfather’s time.



BY THE 1920S, ST. PHILIP STREET had emerged as the gravitational center of the Sicilian French Quarter, a cultural landscape all but disappeared today save for the presence of Matassa’s Grocery at the intersection of Dauphine and for Irene’s Restaurant, at Chartres, nearer the river, on the ground floor of what was the Federico macaroni factory. The Italian roots run deep on St. Philip, where both Peter Lamana and his son’s kidnappers lived, where Jacob Cusimano first manufactured dry pasta, and where Angelo Piaggio practiced law. Not only was the French Quarter far more densely populated than it is today, but 161 of the 171 souls who lived on St. Philip Street between Decatur and Chartres in 1920 were of Italian extraction, and 53 of them had been born in Italy. Sicilians were only slightly less dominant in the 600 block of St. Philip, where the residents included Sylvestro Carollo, known in later-day gangland lore as Silver Dollar Sam despite his stated profession as a wholesale fruit dealer. Not until one crossed over Bourbon on the way toward Rampart Street did the overwhelmingly Italian character of the Lower Quarter yield to an increasingly black and mixed-race neighborhood.

Echoes remain of the food culture that thrived here in the early twentieth century, when the aroma of freshly baked bread drifted over the old cobblestone pavers. In the middle of the 600 block of St. Philip, a one-story masonry carriage-way with the words “Ruffino’s Bakery” stretching above the lintel offers mute

Pabelleaux Johnson



ICONIC NEW ORLEANS GROCERIES

MOST NEW ORLEANIANS TODAY associate Central Grocery and Progress Grocery (closed in 2001) with the muffuletta despite the fact that the sandwich was merely incidental to both businesses for most of their institutional lives. For most of the city’s countless corner grocers, Progress and Central acted as the primary wholesalers of all manner of imported, dry, and fancy goods in the same way that the French Market operated as the hub for fresh produce, seafood, and meat. Indeed, for corner grocers—particularly, those operated by Italians—Decatur Street and the French Market represented a kind of one-stop wholesale food corridor. Perhaps as a result, many New Orleans Sicilians today cite Central Grocery as an institution that represents their community’s ongoing food traditions. Central is the sole survivor among the once numerous wholesale and retail grocers along Decatur Street that traded in imported goods, and returning there for a muffuletta or a pint of olive salad evokes memories of a time when Central’s core business lay in gallon cans of “flag” olive oil or entire wheels of cheese, when the clatter of the French Market could be heard just outside its doors.

testimony to the fabled muffuletta loaves that once issued forth from its ovens. Most devotees of New Orleans cuisine recognize muffuletta as the sandwich found on numerous city menus and identified around the world with the Central Grocery. But the name actually comes from the bread itself, a browned, airy, Sicilian-style loaf about ten inches across and topped with sesame seeds. Customers would buy the cheese and salami separately, explains former baker Nick Loguidice, “and the only bread they had was the muffuletta bread so they took it off the shelf, unwrapped it, cut it, put the stuff on it. Then they would put olive salad on it, ’cause that’s what their condiments were, and wrap it back up. Well, the American people see that and said, ‘Well gimme one like that.’ When they took it home, the wrapper on the bread said ‘muffuletta.’ . . . They didn’t have a sign saying that’s what they sold—that’s *all* they sold.”

Loguidice’s great-grandfather, Giuseppe Ruffino, came to New Orleans in the 1890s and began baking the muffuletta on St. Philip Street for sale to his countrymen. One can imagine a street peddler, his cart clattering slowly down Chartres or Ursulines, only blocks from the bakery, crying out, “Muffuletta! Caldo de caldo!” (Hot, hot! Muffulettas!). Bread was an essential ingredient in the Sicilian immigrant’s diet, and fresh bread like the loaves sold by Ruffino could be found in numerous storefronts in the Italian Colony. Lest we be too nostalgic, contemporary outsiders viewed this subculture as a problem in need of correction. One July afternoon in 1909, the city health officer made a sweep of shops in violation a recent law requiring that bread sellers protect their loaves from flies with wrappers, screens, or a glass case. A circumnavigation of Ursulines and St. Philip Streets resulted in fifteen violators, fourteen of them Italian.

Like macaroni, the muffuletta loaf eventually found its way into the diet of a broader spectrum of New Orleanians, but the bread took longer and did so only as the vehicle for layers of capicola and provolone and a generous heaping of olive salad. The story of its baking is akin to the narrative of Sicilian New Orleans writ large, a multigenerational endeavor whose objective lies at the intersection of commercial enterprise and cultural expression. In 1913, Nocolo Evola, a musician by trade, came to New Orleans and married Stephana “Fannie” Ruffino, one of Giuseppe Ruffino’s ten children, and entered the baking business with his brothers and father-in-law, who had started the enterprise in 1895. When the bakery at 625 St. Philip shut down in the 1950s and gave way to Ruffino’s Restaurant, Evola moved on. He and his son-in-law continued baking the muffuletta loaf, eventually establishing United Bakery at 1325 St. Bernard Avenue. For a half a century, United Bakery was the supplier of muffuletta loaves to the city’s most famous purveyors of the sandwich. The floodwaters that poured through the failed Corps of Engineers levees and filled the lower parts of the city with a stagnant murk in the days following Hurricane Katrina in 2005 not only drowned the machinery at United Bakery but also stole the will to continue from its proprietor, Sal Loguidice, Nick Evola’s grandson. Today, the sandwiches at Central Grocery, the Napoleon House, and other establishments come served on muffuletta loaves baked at the Gentilly bakery of John Gendusa, whose family made its own important contribution to the culinary legacy of New Orleans when it invented the poor boy loaf for Martin Brothers in the 1920s. Though Gendusa’s bread makes an admirable sandwich, old-timers often note that the United loaf was a difficult act to follow.



Unloading bananas in New Orleans, c. 1903.



THE SICILIAN FRENCH QUARTER that once existed now remains only in memories. What thrives in the Vieux Carré today is almost entirely the product of conscious changes implemented in the 1970s by the mayoral administration of Maurice “Moon” Landrieu. These plans constituted a reaction to the profound demographic, technological, economic, and social changes that had rendered obsolete the life patterns that had once governed the Italian-dominated

end of the Quarter. Some observers might criticize this effort to reimagine the life of the French Quarter as unchaining the storied neighborhood from its working past, but in reality, by 1965, most of that history had already gone elsewhere or evaporated entirely. The Italian kids growing up in the Quarter during the 1950s could not have known that they belonged to the last generation of New Orleanians to witness firsthand the commercial dialogue that had governed life in the city’s oldest sector since the day that Bienville first stepped ashore on the banks of the Mississippi. 🍷

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