

Nels Abrams  
HIST 6001  
Professor Mitchell  
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### **The Archives of New Orleans Public Library**

The New Orleans Public Library (NOPL) is located downtown at 219 Loyola Avenue. This location is easy to remember: Loyola and Tulane are places of learning, as is the library. The building itself is unattractive from the outside, three stories tall, and identifiable by a modernist interpretation of New Orleans' trademark ironwork covering the upper third. As a pleasant surprise, the inside is very open, well-lit, and inviting. The NOPL was built in 1958 and designed by the same architectural firm that designed the Superdome.

For cost-conscious researchers, the best place to park is at the free parking lot at Tulane and Claiborne. This is about four blocks away from the library entrance. Upon entering the building, the visitor will notice a large circulation desk on the left and an information desk through the glass doors on the right. To reach the city archives, take the elevator in between these two desks to the third floor. From the perspective of the elevator doors the archive room is shaped like a number seven filled with bookshelves, desks, and microfilm stations. The best way to begin exploring this area is to stop at the help desk directly in front of the elevators and to ask for the main archivist, Ms. Irene Wainwright. She is slender, about fifty, wears glasses, dresses in wool, and appears a bit frazzled from the incongruence between work to be done and the staffing and funding to do it. In short, she looks just like you would expect. A warning: this cat has claws; Ms. Wainwright is equally comfortable dressing down an employee or bending over backwards to help. The wise researcher facilitates the latter by coming prepared with specific questions and a pleasant disposition.

When asked about the organizational system of the city archives, Ms. Wainwright laughed. Clearly, the best strategy is to inform the help desk what topic you are researching and allow yourself to be led by their experienced hands. Before arriving at the library it is recommended to spend some time on the NOPL's excellent website, <http://www.nutrias.org/~nopl/spec/speclist.htm>. It is important to note, however, that items in the collection dated after 1862 are not completely represented on the website. Most materials can be photocopied at the public copier. Items in the Special Collections are generally done by the staff. Archival materials do not circulate and the standard registration for use is applicable. The archive is open from 10:00am to 6:00pm Monday through Thursday and 10:00am to 5:00pm on Friday and Saturday.

Women's history is a particular strength of the Louisiana Division, due to its records of "women's professional organizations such as the ERA Club, the Local Council of Women in New Orleans, and the New Orleans Business and Professional Women's Club."<sup>1</sup> Cultural and urban histories are also well served by the extensive property records, civil and criminal court records, old maps, and newspapers. As an added bonus, the Division displays exhibitions of its holdings whenever possible. At the time of this writing there was an exhibit featuring photographs and manuscripts from prostitutes and criminals in the early 1900's. These exhibits can help inspire researchers to construct new histories from New Orleans. The City Archive has many sources to explore similar projects. The City Archives, however, are just one of five six collections that comprise the Louisiana Division of New Orleans Public Library. The others are

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<sup>1</sup> Tulane University, "Guide to Archival and Manuscript Collections Relating to the Lives of Women in New Orleans," <http://www.tulane.edu/~wc/guidetocollections/nopl.html> (accessed Feb. 4, 2009)

Special Collections, Genealogy, Property Research, Newspapers/Serials, and Vertical Files.

Together, these collections provide a wide range of useful records.

The Louisiana Division is the best collection for students of Louisiana, the Mississippi River, and the South in general. Included in this collection are “books by or about Louisianians [*sic*]; city, regional, and state documents; manuscripts, maps, newspapers, periodicals, microfilms, photographs, slides, motion pictures, sound recordings, video tapes, postcards, and ephemera of every sort.”<sup>2</sup> The Louisiana Division also has several vertical files that house idiosyncratic sources such as posters, advertisements, and bumper stickers. These are filed under the following categories: main, travel, business, and genealogy.

The City Archives were created in 1769 by the Spanish Cabildo and were later consolidated under the public library’s administration in 1946. Today there are over “1,200 manuscript volumes and 3,500 cubic feet of maps, plans, photographs, videotapes, and sound recordings.”<sup>3</sup> The incredible diversity and range of these sources precludes the possibility of discussing even a fraction of the collection in this paper. Cultural historians can access records from the Arts Council of New Orleans and also the Alcoholic Beverage Control Board. Both of these sources are primarily administrative, but they could provide an interesting perspective on the management of culture. For political historians, the City Archives offers an exhaustive collection of mayoral records. Marc H. Morial (mayor, 1993-2002), for example, contributed over 700 linear feet of materials to this NOPL. The “Digest of the Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo, 1769-1803” is another highlight of the City Archives. Students of the often-neglected

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<sup>2</sup> New Orleans Public Libraries, “General Information about the Louisiana Division,” <http://www.nutrias.org/~nopl/info/louinfo/louinfo1.htm> (accessed Feb. 6, 2009)

<sup>3</sup> New Orleans Public Libraries, “New Orleans City Archives Finding Aids and Inventories,” <http://www.nutrias.org/~nopl/inv/invlist.htm> (accessed Feb. 6, 2009)

Spanish era of New Orleans have the WPA to thank for organizing and translating these records in 1939. Perhaps the “home-run” of the Cabildo Digest is the paperwork used to formally transfer New Orleans back to France in 1803. Beyond this obvious gem is a wonderful categorization that allows researchers to explore varied aspects of Spanish New Orleans; topics such as animals, dance halls, and gunpowder can’t help but compel exploration.

The Special Collections are comprised primarily of photographs, manuscripts, maps, ephemeral items, sheet music and vinyl records. Among these, the Early Recording Collection stands out as a valuable resource. Jazz legends like Etta Fitzgerald, Fats Waller, and Benny Goodman are recorded on vinyl records. At this time, unfortunately, the NOPL does not have the appropriate equipment to play this music, so the collection is unable to reach its full potential. Hopefully with time and resources this obstacle can be cleared. If there is anything that can compete with Jazz for the hearts of New Orleanians, it is Mardi Gras—okay, maybe food—and there is something special for Mardi Gras lovers in the Special Collections. Famed costume and float designer Léda Plauché donated a large compilation of her designs in 1958 to the Carnival Collection. Plauché’s vivid drawings capture the fantasy of the Carnival; indeed, her artistic vision helped create that atmosphere for generations. In addition to these wonderful drawings, the Special Collections houses 40,000 photographic prints and slides. The subjects include musicians, Mardi Gras parades, aerial New Orleans, and my personal favorite, snow.



The Genealogy Collection is extensive, with card indexes of over 650,000 people and books of train passenger lists, ferry records, and more filling the shelves on the Loyola St. side of the room. Not only New Orleans, but Nova Scotia, France, and Spain are well-documented in this collection as well. *Genealogical Materials in the Louisiana and City*

*Archives of the New Orleans Public Library* (1988), a book published by the NOPL to help people research, is currently out-of-print but can viewed in its entirety on the website.

Researchers interested in African-American history should take note of the Free People of Color Registers 1840-1864 and Emancipation Records 1827-1851. Perhaps the most endearing attribute of the Genealogy Collection is the free annual seminar. Sponsored by the Genealogical Research Society of New Orleans, these seminars feature presentations by experts in the field of family research.”<sup>4</sup> For more information on these events check the NOPL publication,

Footnotes.

The Property Research Collection is useful for both urban historians and inquisitive home-owners. To access this collection, it is best to look through the online publication of *How to Research the History of Your House (or other Building) in New Orleans*—the link is located under Property Research on the archive home page. The index to building plans is arranged by street name. These drawings demonstrate the architectural diversity of the city. For non-urban historians, the highlight of this collection is the alphabetical index of changes in street names because it is helpful finding accurate locations with New Orleans for any history. A final contribution of note to the Property Research Collection is James Harrison Dakin’s (1806-18520) 184 drawings and lithographs. Dakin was a famous architect of his era who sculpted a significant part of New Orleans’ skyline. His designs include St. Patrick’s Church, the Arsenal, and The Old State Capital in Baton Rouge. The drawings housed by NOPL are beautiful, and worth seeing with non-research intentions as well.

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<sup>4</sup> New Orleans Public Library, “Sources for Family History Research in the Orleans Parish Civil Court Records,” <http://www.nutrias.org/~nopl/inv/cdcdemo/text2.htm> (accessed Feb. 6, 2009)

The Newspapers/Serials Collection is a valuable resource that includes a card index of New Orleans' newspapers from 1787 to 1974. And, thanks to the efforts of volunteer Randy Bibb, that index is now available online as well. Keep in mind that there are more newspapers that have not yet been catalogued, however, so the best thing to do is ask a Louisiana Division staff member for assistance if a desired newspaper is not listed. Historians of the French era will appreciate the multiple publications from this time--most notably "Le Courier de la Louisiane." "The New Orleans Bee" and other early American newspapers are available as well. Most of this collection has been recorded on microfilm. The serials component of this collection is too vast to accurately depict here. Serials are periodic publications and they were prolific throughout New Orleans history. When the National Hemophilia Foundation has a serial in the collection, it is easy to imagine the range and specialization of these works. The Rider's Digest publication also merits inclusion in any discussion of the Newspapers/Serials Collection at NOPL. In 1947 the New Orleans Public Service began publishing this the Rider's Digest and placing them in streetcars for public consumption. Through this medium, company information, community events, and educational material reached thousands of people every day. The Digest could be an important resource for a variety of historical research.

In conclusion, the Louisiana Division of the NOPL manages a wealth of sources for the potential researcher. The internet is the best place to begin exploring these sources. After determining a specific topic for focus, a visit to the help desk at the archives will enable you to navigate through the byzantine organizational system. Historians of women, African-Americans, cities, and colonial France will easily encounter useful material, but there is potential for histories of all kinds to be told by someone with enough imagination.

