

New Orleans Around 1900

The dramatic changes in fin de siècle America had a tremendous influence on New Orleans. As the twelfth largest city in the country, New Orleans fully participated in the process of urbanization which played such an important role in ushering in the modern era. Typical of large cities, New Orleans was divided politically along reformer and “machine” lines, and the city shared in the nationwide fervor for sports. New Orleans, however, has always marched to the beat of a different drummer. The “Big Easy” was unique from the majority of major American cities because of its European heritage, complex race relations, and location as a Southern port city. Two of the most pertinent local factors for the development of Audubon Park were the deepening racial divide after Reconstruction and the city’s long-standing aversion to taxation for public services.

New Orleans stretched along twelve miles of the Mississippi on the east bank of a crescent-shaped bend. Although an old city, the population stayed nestled alongside the river for the most part, and the remainder of the metropolitan area was fairly wild. Duck-hunting and farming were common within city limits. There were stories of men being lost for days and places “which have never been visited by man, and as unknown as the centre of Africa.”¹ The developed part of town was a different story. Colorful and full of sounds, New Orleans was “a vast, confusing, unpaved thoroughfare of shifting humanity.”² Canal Street, which acted as the cultural and financial hub, split the city into its American and Creole halves. The Creole district was older and featured elegant European architecture. The American district was newer and its centerpiece was the row of mansions facing St. Charles Ave.

¹ New Orleans *Daily Picayune*, July 11, 1881

² Jackson, 6

Tucked behind the wealthy residences throughout the city were dilapidated tenements housing the city's poor, largely Italian or Irish immigrants and African-Americans. Drug use and prostitution were commonplace in these communities. Cocaine, which the locals began to call "coke," was widely available, along with other drugs such as opium and morphine. For ten cents you could buy a mixed drink of coke and wine; disapproving citizens thought the drink turned "a stupid, good natured negro into a howling maniac." Thousands of prostitutes made New Orleans "the red-light capital of America." In an effort to keep the degrading effects of prostitution from spreading to the rest of the city, Alderman Sidney Story set aside thirty blocks entirely devoted to brothels and saloons in 1897. Here in "Storyville" was a full spectrum of illicit pleasures, from beautiful and elegant octoroons entertaining in mansions to ugly, elderly women working in their "cribs." From within this underbelly of New Orleans emerged one of America's greatest cultural contributions: jazz. Influenced by many different traditions of music—rag time, brass, and blues among others—jazz matured in the cafes of Jackson Street and the brothels of Storyville. The term itself, "jazz" was not coined until 1915, and it was originally an insult from Chicago bands who felt jazz was amateurish.

Visitors to New Orleans during the late 1800s were amazed at the complex racial relations existing in the city. Unlike most of the country, a large population of prominent, French-speaking Creoles precluded the differentiation of the populace into neat categories of "black" and "white." The Creole citizens established a privileged status within the city during the days of slavery, when they enjoyed relative prosperity as "freedmen," and they had a strained relationship with the community of rural blacks who migrated to New Orleans after the Civil War. The tension between the two groups was not based on shade of color—the Creoles being generally more light-skinned—but differences of culture, as demonstrated by their distinction as

“Latin” Creoles and “American” blacks.³ Although they would be considered “black” in other cities, many Creoles identified themselves as “self respecting, good citizens, who claim no affinity with the colored race.”⁴

Another nuance in understanding race relations in New Orleans is the oscillation between relative goodwill and racism throughout the years. African-American history in New Orleans is not a linear development from slavery to equality, but rather a convoluted narrative of harmony and hatred. The early 1800s were characterized by a tolerance for interracial mixing unthinkable in other American cities, followed by an increase in racial tension during the build-up to the Civil War. Similarly, the 1880s were an “unprecedented era of good feeling” between races before the assault on Victorian values created a conservative backlash of nativism and racism.⁵ For black New Orleanians, this meant the introduction of Jim Crow segregation laws, disfranchisement, and the terror of lynching.

The time period of Audubon Park’s greatest development, which was between the 1884 Cotton Exposition and the death of John Charles Olmsted in 1920, witnessed a steady deterioration of goodwill toward the black community. In fact, the *Southwestern Christian Advocate* concluded in 1895 that “there are few places in this country where the life of a Negro is held in less [sic] contempt than here.”⁶ Most whites summed up the black population as the “Negro problem,” and some thought they had the solution. The most benign answer swirling amid the racial hatred

³ Logsdon, Hirsch. 203

⁴ Joseph Leveque. “That Star Car Bill,” *Harlequin*, I (June 23, 1900), 3

⁵ Sterling D. Spero and Abram L. Harris, *The Black Worker: The Negro and the Labor Movement* (1931; rpt. New York: Atheneum, 1969), 44

⁶ *Southwestern Christian Advocate*, July 25, 1895

of the era was the back-to-Africa movement. A number of both blacks and whites felt the return of African-Americans to their “homeland” would benefit all involved. Others, perhaps those who recognized that black labor formed an indispensable component of the economy, advocated more sinister solutions. Dr. Gustav Keitz, author of the *Times-Democrats*’ series of articles titled “The Negro Problem,” claimed that the medical community was united in their support of sterilization of black people during their infancy.⁷ And it got worse. Henry Hearsey, editor and publisher of the official journal of the city government, believed he had the final solution: extermination.⁸

As pleasant as murdering the black population would have been, it’s a logistical nightmare. So white New Orleanians turned to politics as a way to marginalize their darker counterparts. In 1890 began the “Jim Crow” laws, an attempt to separate the races through legalized segregation. First, railroads within Louisiana were segregated. And then, in 1894, legislators outlawed interracial marriages.⁹ Eventually the entire city was divided along racial lines. In 1897 the black population began to be disfranchised through a number of clever laws. Literacy and property requirements eliminated large numbers of black voters, while protecting poor and uneducated whites through the “grandfather clause.” In only three years the number of blacks registered to vote dropped from 130,344 to 1,493. By 1922 only 598 black voters remained in the entire state of Louisiana.

The attack on civil liberties galvanized black intellectuals and activists. Rodolphe Desdunes, a Creole radical, emerged as the primary figure in the resistance. Recognizing the need for a

⁷ New Orleans Times-Democrat, July 7, 17, 1900

⁸ Hair, 91

⁹ Jackson, 200

central authority with the ability to disseminate information, he helped organize the formation of the radical newspaper, the *Crusader*. Edited by Louis A. Martinet, the *Crusader* was the only black daily newspaper in the United States during the 1890s and it served “as the organ of an assertive civil rights effort.”¹⁰ The leadership of the paper agreed that the federal courts provided greater opportunities for success than corrupt local politics; therefore, they immediately filed suit when the state legislature began to pass “Jim Crow” laws. Daniel Desdunes, the son of Rodolphe, was the first plaintiff in the case against train segregation. However, his case was dismissed (the train was crossing state lines and therefore exempt from state law) and the weight of fighting segregation fell on the shoulders of Homer Plessy.¹¹ When the Supreme Court ruled against Plessy in 1896, the black community was forced to accept segregation and subsequently turned inward towards “uplift ideology” and Booker T. Washington’s economic empowerment. Although unsuccessful in the highest court, the black activists’ decision to avoid local politics is understandable considering the state of political affairs in New Orleans at that time (or any time, for that matter). The Democratic-Conservative Party, known colloquially as the “Ring,” dominated municipal politics from the mid 1870s through the early 1920s. The Ring was a “tightly knit, well-organized hierarchy with power firmly entrenched at the ward level.”¹² In other words, a “machine.” The Ring depended upon patronage and ethnic loyalty to maintain power, but did not shy away from corruption or violence if thought necessary to win an election. This is because Ring politicians saw politics as a means to concrete personal gains and not the

¹⁰ Creole, 256

¹¹ Jackson, 201

¹² Arnesen, 75

manifestation of abstract principles such as “democracy.” Politics was a dog fight, and you did what had to be done to win.

Throwing away opponents’ ballots and adding fraudulent voters were standard procedures for the Ring. Six thousand votes were “lost” in 1882. In 1884, an estimated fifteen thousand votes for the reformer candidate were “thrown into a wash kettle under the table.”¹³ During this same election a famous deceased evangelist also somehow managed to vote for the Democratic-Conservatives. When reformers challenged the Ring’s corrupt practices, violence erupted. In addition to fighting at the polls, the New Orleans *Daily Picayune* reported “stories of a coroner who bit off the tip of his opponent’s nose in a street fight, a deputy sheriff who fatally gouged out the eye of an enemy with an umbrella, and a keeper of the Parish Prison arrested for petty larceny and attempted murder.”¹⁴ The culture of violence began at the top: John Fitzpatrick, Ring mayor from 1892 through 1896, had his brother shoot a rival, and mayor Guillotte had someone murder the Commissioner of Police, Patrick Mealey, on New Year’s Day in 1888.¹⁵

In New Orleans, Progressive reformers repeatedly tried to take power from the Ring. Between 1880 and 1920 they managed to succeed three times, with the elections of Shakspeare (1880), Flower (1896), and Capdevielle (1900). For the most part, reformers represented the city’s elite. They hoped to not only wrest control from what they saw as incompetent and immoral leadership, but to restructure the government in such a way that crass “machine” politics would no longer win elections.¹⁶ The Australian ballot was an important goal because it was seen as a

¹³ Jackson, 20

¹⁴ New Orleans Daily Picayune, January 6, 13, July 7, 8, 1881

¹⁵ Jackson, 27, 168

¹⁶ Arnesen, 80

way to neutralize election-day intimidation. When reformers managed to implement the Australian ballot in 1896, Progressives enjoyed a brief era of leadership. Another important goal was to centralize power in the hands of the mayor. The Ring had solid control over many wards, so a single, city-wide election provided the best opportunity for decisive control. In the end, they were unable to implement a charter that accomplished mayoral control, but the reformers were able to undermine patronage to an extent by implementing civil service requirements.

Public services were a major casualty of the Ring's inefficient governance. As a public space, Audubon Park was largely dependent on city taxes for revenue, and the Ring consistently left the park without adequate funding. This is not surprising upon examination of other, more essential, public services at the time. In 1884 New Orleans "had no sewerage system and no adequate garbage collection. Drinking water was secured from cisterns...The streets were mainly unpaved, littered with stinking debris, and pock-marked ruts. Drainage pumping machines were outmoded and ...flooding of the streets was frequent."¹⁷ Garbage frequently gathered in smelly heaps on the sides of roads and, when taken away, often dumped in the middle of the river. Streets were so poor that the fire department refused to respond to calls in some parts of town.¹⁸ In 1899 a sanitation expert informed New Orleans that "You are dirty. Nature has not been kind to you in topography, and you have returned the compliment, and with interest."¹⁹ Education suffered perhaps the worst. Consider that between 1860 and 1893 no schools were built with city funds. None. Cash-strapped administrators slashed teachers' salaries and schools did not

¹⁷ Jackson, 95

¹⁸ Jackson, 103

¹⁹ New Orleans *Daily States*, March 9, 1899

even open for the Fall semester in 1883. Predictably, the illiteracy rate in New Orleans was twice the national average.

To be fair, the blame for the city's horrible infrastructure cannot be laid completely at the feet of Ring politicians. The city struggled under the weight of debt incurred by "carpetbag" regimes during Reconstruction.²⁰ Governor Warmouth, for example, increased the state's bonded debt from six to one hundred million dollars during his term in office. Further, the ideology of laissez-faire governance dominated the local political perspective; many felt the private market could do a better job and for less money than the government. Even though the city was unsanitary, "the public was hostile to any improvements that meant raising taxes."²¹ New Orleans was at or near the bottom of the list in per capita expenditures for the following services: education, police, sanitation, fire, sewers, and streets.²² Fortunately, the city climbed out of debt towards the end of the century and this new wealth, combined with the election of Progressive mayors, allowed some significant advances to be made in public services.

Concurrent with the reformers' struggle to remake municipal politics in the Progressive image, the middle-class struggled to incorporate the new "strenuous" culture of sport into their lives in a manner that didn't challenge their traditional beliefs. One sport in particular, boxing, exemplified the ambivalence of many Progressives to the social implications of athletics. For one, although Progressives wanted to strengthen the white, Protestant middle-class, they did not want to adopt the "barbaric" values of the working class, and boxing seemed to do just that. The *Picayune* reported, "The better elements of our city view with disgust and shame the rallying of

²⁰ Jackson, 3

²¹ Jackson, 96

²² Jackson, 97

the crowd here that attends upon a prize fight, and every good citizen must regret that there is no legal remedy to avert the disgusting spectacle.”²³

Interracial boxing created additional complications. At a time when many were concerned with asserting white superiority, two men of different races fighting as equals was very disconcerting—especially if the white boxer lost. One spectator at “Little Chocolate” Dixon’s championship fight commented “A darky is all right in his place here, but the idea of sitting quietly by and seeing a colored boy pummel a white lad grates on Southerners.”²⁴ Eventually, changes were made to the sport which mitigated the anxieties about class and race. To make boxing more respectable, New Orleans promoters adopted the Queensbury rules. These rules required gloves and eliminated wrestling from the ring. To ensure white superiority was not threatened, boxing became segregated—although blacks and whites had been boxing together for years.

Women and sport presented another challenge for Progressives in New Orleans. The “strenuous life” was supposed to reassert male authority, but women’s active participation in sports served as an example of female strength and competence. And while male reformers did want their women to be vigorous, it was in a manner that emphasized, not undermined, traditional gender roles. The strength men looked for in women was the strength to raise a large family. Women at this time, however, eagerly sought to escape the domestic confines of the Victorian era, and in increasing numbers they shed their corsets to go play in the outdoors. By the mid-nineties “hundreds of women could be seen riding daily” in the streets of New Orleans.²⁵ Tennis was

²³ New Orleans *Daily Picayune*, February 5, 1882

²⁴ Chicago Tribune, September 7, 1892

²⁵ Somers, 234

another popular game for women. The New Orleans Tennis Club, faced with unrelenting demand for access to courts, reluctantly allowed women to play on certain days. In an effort to frame the success of women's efforts in patriarchal terms, members of the club described "Ladies' Days" as a "generous sacrifice."²⁶ Eventually, male reformers found a "solution" to the dilemma of women in sports: by designating certain sports as "feminine," women found the athletic outlet they were searching for, and men still had activities where masculinity was unchallenged.

Despite the difficulties of race and gender, New Orleans caught the "sports fever" sweeping the nation at the turn of the century. To be clear, both the upper and lower classes of New Orleans had been playing sports for generations. The wealthy distinguished themselves through yachting, horseback riding, rowing, and cricket, while the poor typically enjoyed "bar room" sports such as billiards, bowling, and prize fighting.²⁷ What made the 1890s different was the participation of the middle class. Accepting the call of the "strenuous life," they sought to strengthen themselves through sports.

Sporting clubs proliferated to accommodate the new demand. The League of American Wheelmen (1889), Southern Amateur Rowing Association (1893), West End Tennis Club (1890), and Audubon Golf Club (1898) all catered to a clientele interested in an athletic experience that also reinforced their status as gentlemen. The middle-class began to see sports not as the wasteful leisure of the elite and the poor, but as an integral component of an individual's development. Tulane University, which served as the "finishing school" for local leaders, built its own track in 1895, and in 1898 held its first intercollegiate baseball game

²⁶ New Orleans Daily Picayune, December 1, 1896

²⁷ Somers, 21

against Louisiana State University.²⁸ As sports became more accepted throughout the community, public spaces began to change. Beginning in 1898 Audubon Park started incorporating athletic facilities into the pastoral design.

The transformation of national culture during the 1890s played a large role in the development of Audubon Park; however, this role was filtered through unique circumstances in New Orleans. Audubon became disproportionately “white” because New Orleans—although traditionally more heterogeneous than other major cities—established strict divisions between blacks and whites due to increasing racism at the turn of the century. Sports, once viewed as a distraction to the intended tranquility of the park, emerged as a major attraction. And while corrupt politics and poor public services did not have a direct affect on the park, the lack of municipal funds meant Audubon was developed over a long period of time and therefore subject to generations of planners and administrators.

²⁸ Somers, 210