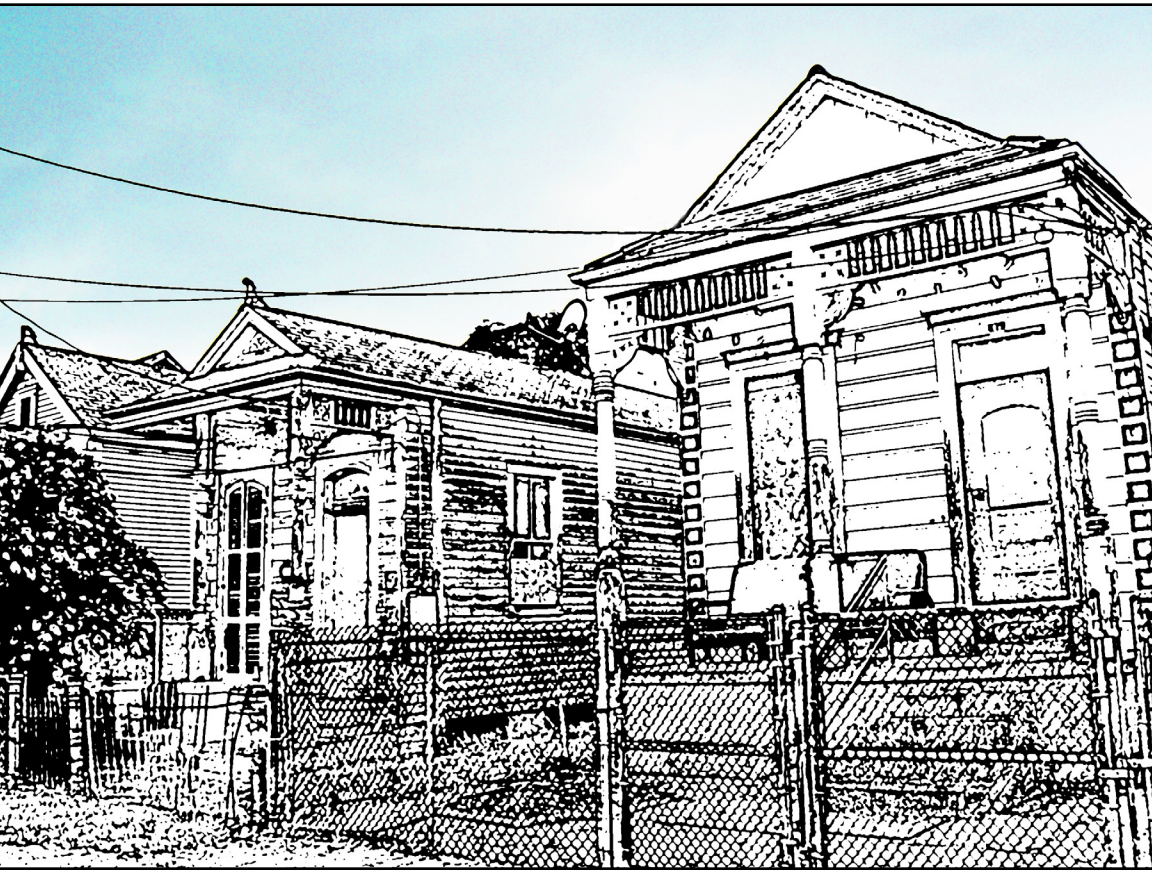
Becoming New Orleanians

Archaeology of Lower Mid-City New Orleans



by Katie L. Kosack and R. Christopher Goodwin

VA | U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

INTRODUCTION

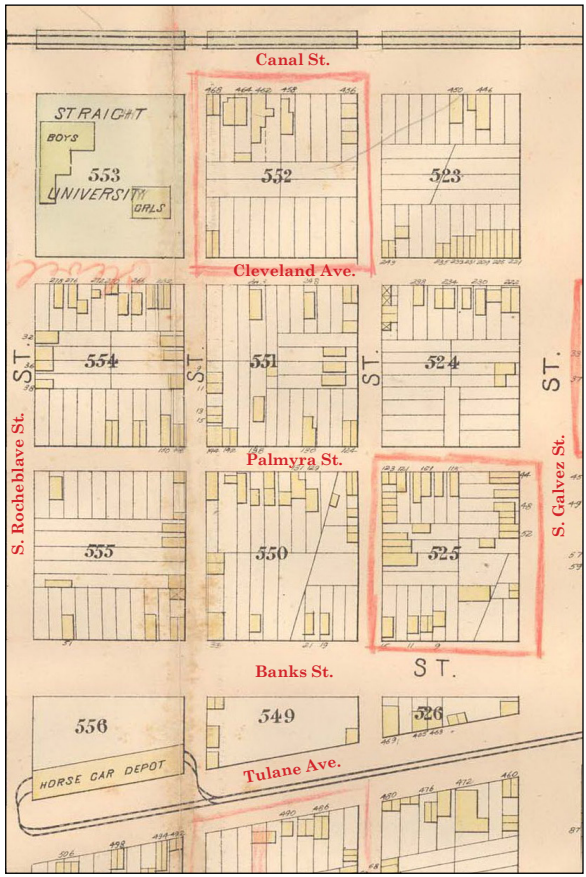
After Hurricane Katrina damaged the New Orleans Veterans Affairs Medical Center (VAMC), a new location for a replacement hospital was selected in Lower Mid-City. Before construction started, archaeologists researched and excavated house lots in the historic Lower Mid-City neighborhood. The neighborhood once covered 12 city squares. Archaeologists found nearly 300,000 artifacts and many features (remains of privies, cisterns, and foundations).

This area developed in the 1860s and 1870s as a working class neighborhood in a part of the City that was home to many immigrants. In the 1900s, the neighborhood continued to grow and modernize as more people moved into the community. Residents of the neighborhood lived, worked, and played at their homes, and they left behind items that they used every day. Eventually, many of these objects became buried and preserved in the soil. These objects form part of the archaeological record and help archaeologists learn about the lives of early residents.

The VAMC project provided a unique opportunity for in-depth study of homes, families and individuals from the past using a combination of written records and archaeological remains. This booklet describes what the archaeologists discovered about the history of Lower Mid-City, and how artifacts from the past brought personal stories of the past to life. Thanks to their work, the histories of the people of this historic neighborhood are preserved for future generations of New Orleanians!

ESTABLISHING AN URBAN NEIGHBORHOOD

Lower Mid-City, which lies in the center of New Orleans, was a soggy swampland until the 1860s, when the land was drained and the city squares subdivided into house lots. Soon thereafter, residents began to move to the neighborhood and build homes.



This map shows how the neighborhood looked in 1883. The project area included these 12 city squares bordered by Tulane Avenue on the southwest, South Galvez Street on the southeast, Canal Street to the northeast, and South Rocheblave Street to the northwest. (Source: Robinson & Pidgeon 1883).

People without indoor plumbing often used chamber pots. Archaeologists found this chamber pot in a wood-lined privy at 2405 Palmyra Street.

Life was hard for the early residents of Lower Mid-City, and its first families lived in unsanitary conditions. The City did not collect waste from this part of New Orleans, so residents threw trash into their backyards and the streets. Homes in the neighborhood also did not have indoor plumbing or running water. Instead, residents used privies (outdoor bathrooms) and used cisterns (circular wooden water storage tanks) to collect rain water for drinking. Their kitchens were typically backyard sheds, often with dirt floors, separate from the houses. Privies, cisterns, kitchen residue, and piles of trash attracted pests and spread disease.

People continued to live without indoor plumbing or trash collection until the City expanded water, sewer, and trash collection services to the neighborhood around 1908. The City then ordered residents to tear down their privies and cisterns. Some homeowners also took the opportunity to tear down old buildings and build new homes with indoor bathrooms and kitchens. Residents also installed gas-powered lights. Not long after, electricity was brought to the community. After trash collection began, people started to use their backyards for leisure. New services had a huge impact on daily life! People were healthier and day-to-day life was easier.

PURCHASING POWER

As the nineteenth and twentieth centuries advanced, rising wages and mass-production of goods allowed more people to participate in the American marketplace. With more money in their pockets and lower prices at the store, families could purchase more goods than ever before. They bought dishes, drinking glasses, medicine, clothing, and other household items

New Orleans ceramic importer marks on the bottom of dishes from the excavations.

Drug store bottles recovered in the neighborhood were marked with the names of local New Orleans drug stores.

Community Health

The residents of Lower Mid City faced the constant threat of disease in the days before public services. A study of nearly 200 glass medicine bottles found during excavations in the area gave archaeologists a way to study health in Lower Mid-City. Residents purchased "patent" medicines, similar to modern over the counter medications, at local drug stores. At that time, patent medicine frequently contained high amounts of alcohol and even cocaine or other dangerous drugs. Some were very addictive. From the medicine bottles, archaeologists learned about the different illnesses people suffered. Outbreaks of yellow fever, bubonic plague, cholera, and influenza were common. But even more common were everyday digestive, respiratory, and rheumatic complaints. Among the bottles found by archaeologists were those that once contained Dr. J. Hostetter's Stomach Bitters and Udolpho Wolfe's Aromatic Schnapps. Residents used these medicines to treat upset stomachs and a wide range of aches and pains. Researchers found that households of Irish decent in Lower Mid-City used more patent medicines. However, families of all ethnic groups regularly used patent medicine to treat themselves.

Dr. J. Hostetter's Stomach Bitters

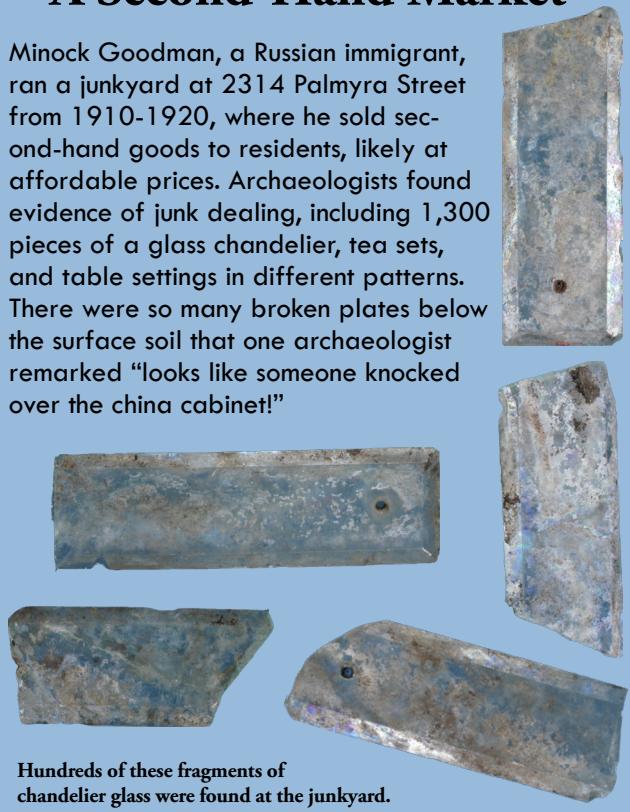
Rat-catching squad during the bubonic plague outbreak, New Orleans, 1914-1920 (Source: U.S. Public Health Service ca. 1916)

from traditional, small, neighborhood "corner" stores, from new downtown department stores along Canal Street, and from the relatively new national mail order catalogs of companies like Montgomery Ward and Sears, Roebuck, & Company. People could order specific items from specialty catalogs like Hammacher Schlemmer, a hardware company, and Spiegel Home Furnishings, a home décor retailer.

Residents discarded some of their used objects in privies or trash pits. Archaeologists recovered these everyday objects, known as artifacts, in their excavations. Some of these objects had marks that provided clues about who had made the object, where it had been made, and even where it had been sold. Some artifacts, like drugstore bottles and ceramic dishes, had marks of local New Orleans stores, and the archaeologists quickly learned that many of these everyday products were sold in the Canal Street commercial district. Families and individuals could walk or ride on the new streetcar to shop in the downtown stores. Not surprisingly, archaeologists also learned that residents made many of their decisions about what to buy based on their level of income.

A Second-Hand Market

Minock Goodman, a Russian immigrant, ran a junkyard at 2314 Palmyra Street from 1910-1920, where he sold second-hand goods to residents, likely at affordable prices. Archaeologists found evidence of junk dealing, including 1,300 pieces of a glass chandelier, tea sets, and table settings in different patterns. There were so many broken plates below the surface soil that one archaeologist remarked "looks like someone knocked over the china cabinet!"



Hundreds of these fragments of chandelier glass were found at the junkyard.

A COMMUNITY OF WORKING CLASS FAMILIES

The many immigrant families who called Lower Mid-City home came from Ireland, Germany, Italy, Cuba, and Haiti, among other countries. Some of them had moved to New Orleans in the years before the Civil War. Families of immigrant heritage, white, and African American Louisianans lived together in this working class community. Men worked as carpenters, in print shops, as policemen, delivery men, clerks, and laborers. Women typically "kept" house, but some worked as servants, seamstresses, or cooks. A well-known cigar manufactory owner, John Vega, also lived in the neighborhood.

An archaeologist carefully excavates a unit.


Brick cistern bases uncovered at 2309 Cleveland Avenue.

A typical excavation unit. Archaeologists identified different activities in the past by studying different layers of soil and discarded materials in the unit.

But even in this working class neighborhood, many families lived in homes that they owned. Other folks were tenants who rented homes or rooms in the neighborhood.

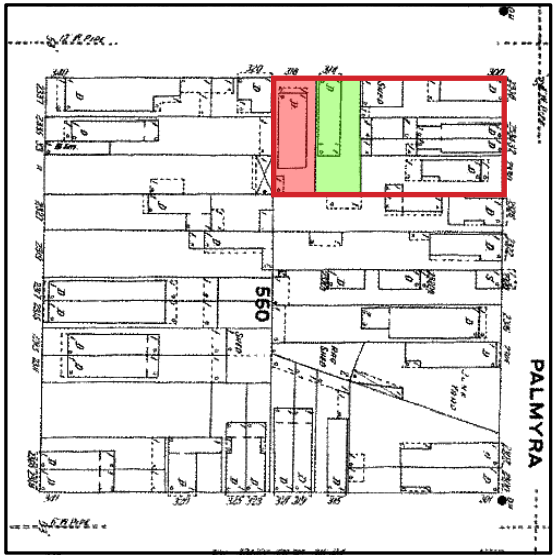
EXCAVATING A LOWER MID-CITY NEIGHBORHOOD

For two years, professional archaeologists from R. Christopher Goodwin & Associates, Inc. researched the neighborhood's history and excavated there. First, researchers looked at historic maps and identified areas likely to have archaeological materials. Next, they dug test pits, small excavation holes used to determine whether archaeological materials were present. At some house lots, archaeologists found many artifacts from the 1850s-1900s. They then completed larger excavations in some of these places. Digging in square excavation blocks, archaeologists removed soil one layer at a time. As they dug, they recorded features and collected artifacts. Research into U.S. Federal Census records and New Orleans City directories helped the archaeologists learn who had once lived in these homes. Archaeologists used both what they found in the ground and historical documents to tell the story of the neighborhood's former residents.

2338 PALMYRA STREET, 314 SOUTH TONTI STREET, AND 318 SOUTH TONTI STREET

The Irish American O'Brien family lived at the corner of Palmyra and South Tonti Streets. William O'Brien, a recent immigrant, purchased his lot in 1866 and built a single "shotgun"-style house

there. He worked as a cart or delivery man, and he and his wife Mary had two children, John and Elizabeth. In the 1890s, the O'Briens divided the rear of their property and created two lots - 314 and 318 South Tonti Street. Their son John married but he and his family continued to live with his parents. Elizabeth married and moved into a new home at 314 South Tonti Street.

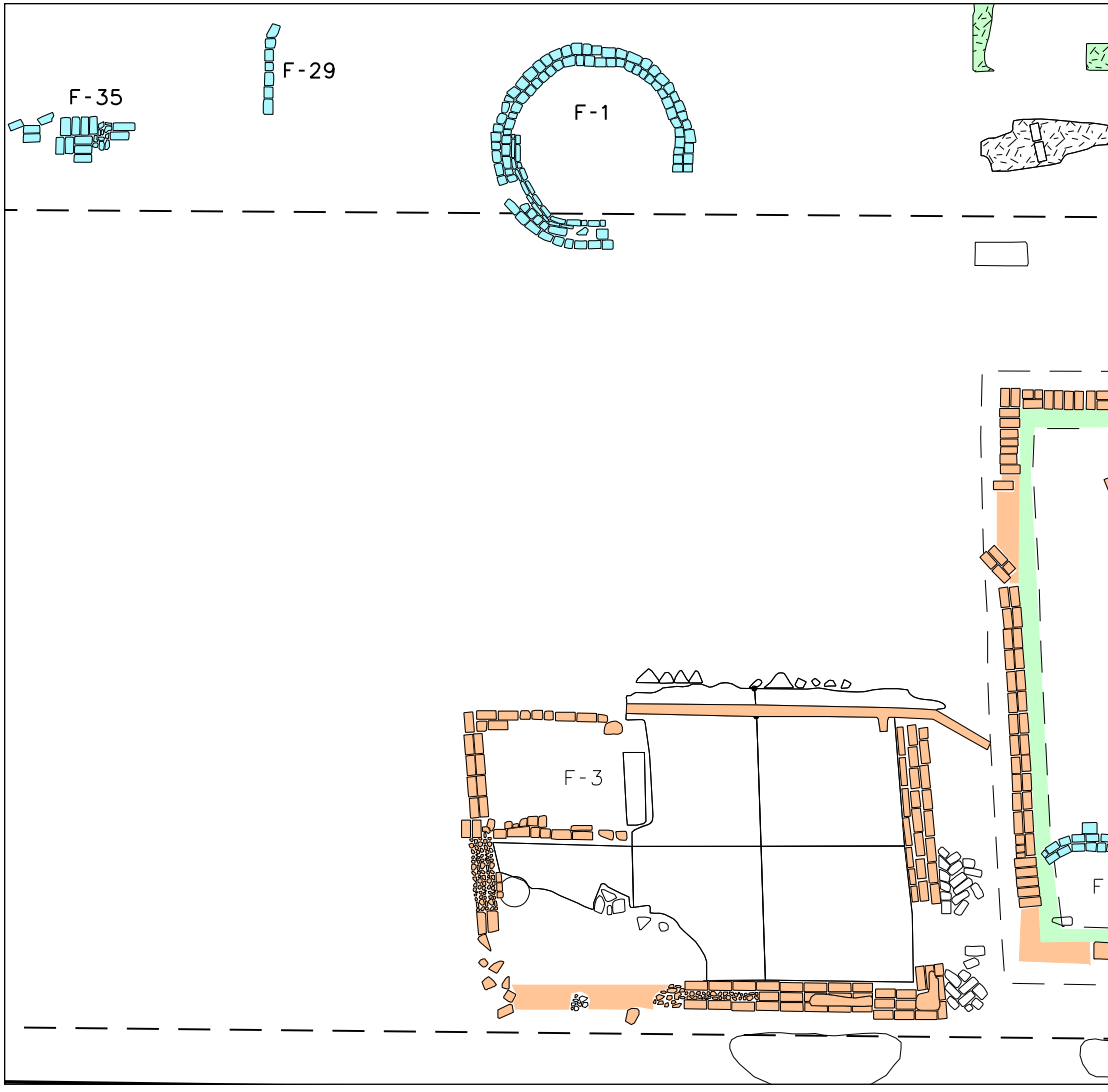


The lot Mr. O'Brien purchased, highlighted in red, is in the upper right hand corner of Square 550 at the corner of Palmyra and South Tonti Streets. The highlighted blocks show the later subdivision of the rear of the original lot into 314 and 318 South Tonti Street (Source: Sanborn Fire Insurance Company 1895).

Archaeologists looked at historic maps and noticed a stable behind the O'Brien house. In the stable, William O'Brien kept his horses and the cart he used for making deliveries. When he died in the 1890s, his family no longer needed the horse stable and turned it into a shed. Archaeologists uncovered a collection of artifacts that the family disposed of when they cleaned out the stable. Those artifacts dated from the time of William O'Brien's death and included items used by Mr. O'Brien. For example, the archaeologists cataloged a high number of stoneware storage crocks, stoneware ginger beer bottles, Van Den Bergh & Co. gin bottles, and tobacco pipe fragments. Archaeologists think the stable was where Mr. O'Brien chose to relax after a long day of work!

Fragments of ceramic dishes thrown out in the 1890s that likely belonged to Mr. and Mrs. O'Brien.

Successive generations of the O'Brien family lived at this property for nearly 140 years! Archaeologists were able to see differences between the household goods of the elder O'Briens and their children. Mrs. O'Brien, an Irish immigrant like her husband, threw out her old dishes after her husband's death. She clearly liked decorated dishes. Her daughter, Elizabeth, also discarded some dishes years later. She chose plain,

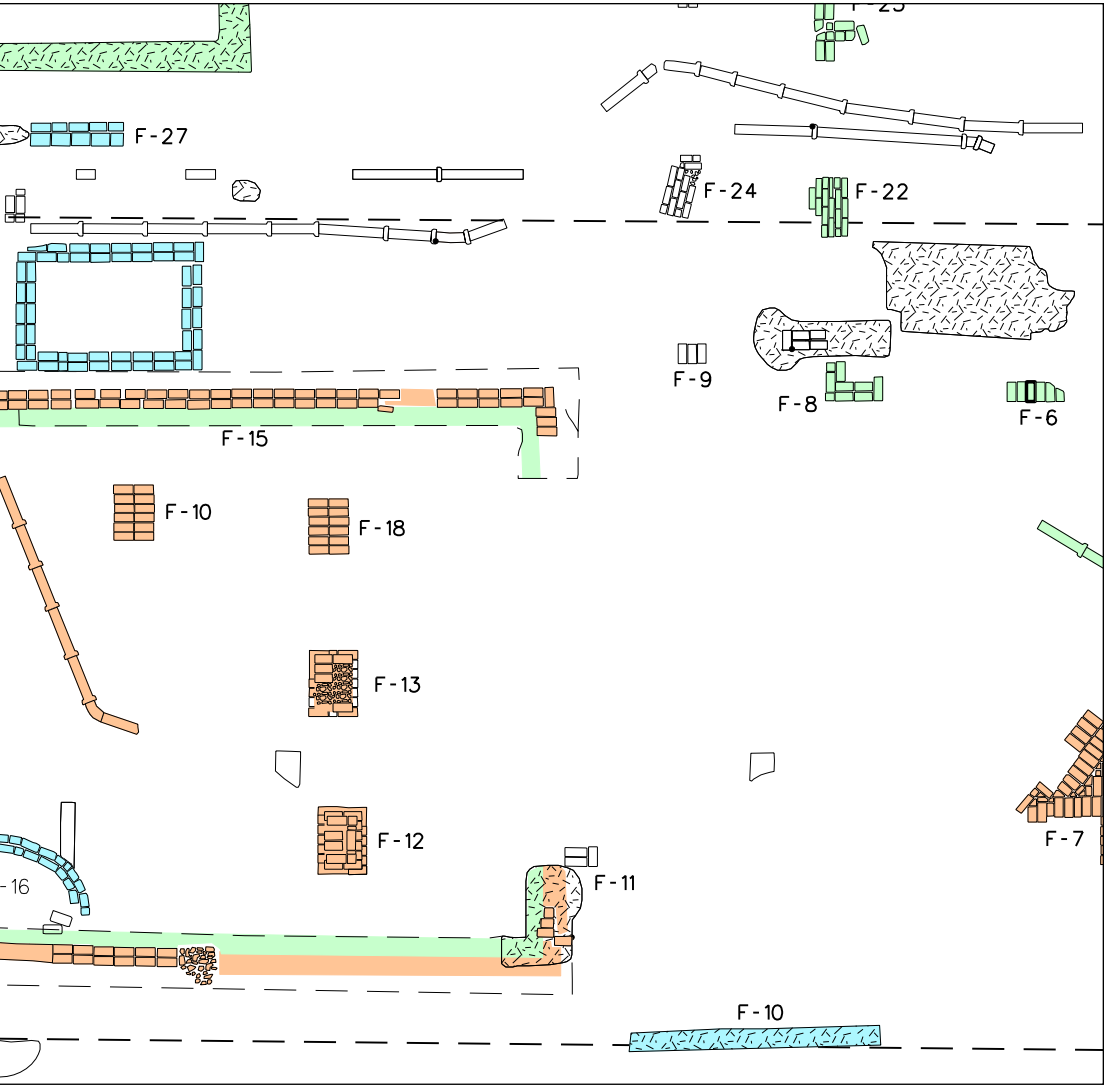


This map shows features archaeologists identified at 219 South Miro Street. Early features related to the tenants are shown in bl

white-molded dishes. Each woman chose to set her table in the style that was most popular at the time.

219 SOUTH MIRO STREET

At 219 South Miro Street, archaeologists studied how the house lot changed as owners built, tore down, and constructed new buildings over time. The first buildings were homes built by landlords as rentals. In the early 1900s, the renters were African Americans of Haitian descent. Davis Roché, a stonemason, rented with his wife May. Joseph Rinker, a blacksmith, and his wife Celestine, a cook, also rented at 219 South Miro Street. The rental properties did not have running water or in-



ue, while later features associated with the Vega family residence are shown in orange.

door plumbing and the tenants used cisterns for water and privies for bathrooms. John Vega bought 219 South Miro Street in 1906. Mr. Vega was Cuban American and owned part of a cigar company. The company was located on Poydras Street. He lived here with his family until the 1920s. He demolished the rental homes and in their place built a modern home with indoor plumbing and gas-powered lights. The last owner of the property was the African American philanthropist Smith W. Green. Green tore down the Vega family house in 1928.

The renters and the Vega family left behind many artifacts. In the bottom of a pair of wood-lined privies, archaeologists found a small collection of artifacts that

Brick-lined privy inside an outbuilding with a concrete floor at 219 South Miro Street.

White molded ceramic dishes in the Cambridge pattern that belonged to the Vega Family. Tablewares like these were popular during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

had belonged to the renters. Those artifacts included ceramic dishes such as a milk pan and pudding pan; kitchen ceramics made of ironstone and yellow ware; stoneware beverage bottles; and fragments of beer, liquor, and wine bottles. The archaeologists studying food remains, animal bones discarded as waste from past meals, learned that the Rochés and Rinkers ate pork, mutton, and goat meat. They also occasionally ate fish, turtles, chickens, turkeys, and ducks.

Among the large number of artifacts found by archaeologists there was a set of British ironstone dishes once owned by the Vega family. The set included multiple place settings and serving pieces. The dishes were plain white with molded rims, a style popular in the early 1900s. Archaeologists also found glass fragments from bowls, stemware, and tumblers. The Vega family likely used these items on their dining table. Evidence of the meals the Vega family ate included glass bottles and jars that once contained food and drinks like Lea & Perrins® Worcestershire sauce and French wine. Animal bones showed that they ate a varied diet that included pork, lamb, beef, and assorted species of fish, turtles, and ducks.

217 & 221 SOUTH TONTI STREET

What is now 217 South Tonti Street was formed from what originally were three different lots (217, 219, and 221). Both James Diggs and the Sheridan family built houses and lived on these lots. In 1897, James Diggs, an African American slate roofer and carpenter, built a double creole cottage at 221 South Tonti Street. He worked out of a carpentry shop on the property. Diggs also rented rooms in his house to older African Americans. The tenants were Pricilla Jones, Matilda Thomas, and Henry Nelson. The Neal family, Elmore and Mamie, also rented from Mr. Diggs. Elmore Neal worked as a plasterer. All of the tenants had moved on by 1901.

Archaeologists found items belonging to James Diggs and his renters. Over time, the renters threw trash into a pit in the yard. Despite their relatively low income level, the tenants owned a large number of dishes used for cooking and preparing food. For example, a set of matching yellow ware mixing bowls

was found in a layer at the top of the pit. Archaeologists think the female tenants cooked meals for others, and maybe even for the Sheridan family. Archaeologists also found discarded tableware and household items like lamp glass and an ink bottle. They identified bottles that contained food, beverages, and medicine, including Horlicks Malted Milk, Coca Cola©, and Saxlehner's Stomach Bitters.

The Sheridan family built a single "shotgun"-style house at 217 South Tonti Street in the 1870s. Patrick and Mary Sheridan were Irish immigrants. They had a large family with six sons. Patrick Sheridan served as a City of New Orleans police officer. His sons worked in other skilled jobs. The family lived at 217 South Tonti Street until 1906. In 1906, Patrick died and Mary moved around the corner to live with one of her sons.

The most interesting artifacts archaeologists unearthed at 217 South Tonti Street were "small finds." Small finds are rare artifacts like buttons, coins, tobacco pipes, beads, and other lost personal items. Archaeologists found Patrick Sheridan's police uniform buttons! They also found lead spacers used by type-setters to set print type for newspaper printing. Two of the Sheridan's sons worked in a print shop and must have

An Archaeological Point of View: What do Archaeologists Do?

Archaeology is the study of the past as seen by what people left behind! Archaeologists are trained to find, excavate, analyze, and record sites. Archaeological sites are locations with archaeological materials – artifacts and features. Since excavation is destructive, archaeologists prefer to preserve sites by recording their presence without excavating them. But professional archaeologists often have to excavate sites when a site cannot be left in place, for example when a new building or highway will destroy it. As they dig, archaeologists record features and collect artifacts. Features are remains or ruins of structures or artifact concentrations. Features can include things like building foundations, privies, cisterns and even trash pits. Artifacts are objects made and used by people in the past. Together, artifacts, features, and their contexts in the soil form the archaeological record. The archaeological record helps archaeologists learn more about the daily lives of people in the past.

Archaeologists carefully screen for artifacts while excavating at a historic house lot.

Cuff and coat buttons from Officer Patrick Sheridan's NOPD uniform.

Vessels with a matching rose pattern that belonged to Mrs. Sheridan.

Layer of yellow ware dish fragments. The dishes may have been used by tenants to prepare food.

either accidentally dropped or purposefully discarded the spacers.

Archaeologists found other artifacts used in the past by the Sheridan family. The Sheridan family threw out some of the same kinds of items as the renters, but in higher numbers, and the dishes that belonged to the Sheridan family were more expensive than the ones owned by the renters. The Sheridan family's dishes were more decorative and were used to serve fancier meals along with tea. Many of those dishes matched, indicating that Mary Sheridan bought them as a set.

CONCLUSIONS FROM A LOWER MID-CITY NEIGHBORHOOD

Archaeologists were able to answer questions about earlier life in Lower Mid-City from what they found in the ground.

How did the neighborhood develop? Some of the earliest buildings were rental properties like those at 221 South Tonti Street and 219 South Miro Street. At the same time, other families built the neighborhood's first family-owned homes, like the Sheridans at 217 South Tonti Street and the O'Briens at 2338 Palmyra Street. Early residents used cisterns, wells, and outhouses for their daily needs. Sometimes people worked out of stables or workshops in their

Foodways in Lower Mid-City

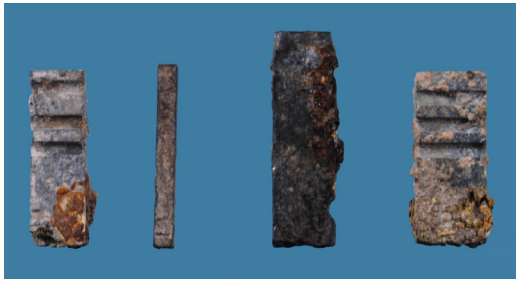
The term "foodways" describes the way people acquired, prepared, and ate their meals. Archaeologists study foodways through the remains of food, like animal bones, nuts, and seeds thrown out by people in the past. Residents shopped for food at local markets. The Claiborne Market, located near the neighborhood, offered a variety of meat, fruits, and vegetables at low prices. Animal bones uncovered by archaeologists showed that residents purchased cuts of meat at the market. People ate beef, lamb, pork, and chicken; sometimes they ate duck, wild game, turtles, and fresh- and salt-water fish. In fact, archaeologists found turtle shell and bone fragments at multiple homes in the neighborhood. It is likely that vendors sold turtles at the nearby Claiborne Market. New Orleanians continued to dine on sea turtles until they were placed on the endangered species list around 1975. Most households in Lower Mid-City ate similar types of food, but families with more money clearly could afford more expensive cuts of meat and enjoy a greater variety of food.

backyards. In about 1908, public services like water, sewer, and trash collection were introduced to this part of the City, and the City ordered residents to tear down and fill-in privies and cisterns. After that time, some people built new homes with indoor bathrooms and kitchens, as the Vega family did. Life was easier for residents after public services were brought in. During this time, the look of the twentieth century neighborhood took shape.

Double "shotgun" house at 2318 Cleveland Avenue when the project began.

What was daily life like for urban residents in New Orleans? Artifacts tell the story of daily life, since people leave behind used or discarded objects from their everyday lives. For example, at 217 South Tonti Street archaeologists found print type that members of the Sheridan family used for their jobs. Fragments of ceramic dishes give researchers an idea of what families' dining tables looked like, and food remains tell a lot about what was for dinner! Medicine bottles help archaeologists understand how people were feeling and how they treated common illnesses. Residents walked or rode the street car to shop in the Canal Street commercial district, bought items from corner stores, or ordered from catalogs.

How did ethnic background or income level affect individuals' daily lives? Archaeologists uncovered many of the same objects throughout the neighborhood, and, as a rule, households of different ethnic backgrounds bought the same items as their neighbors. For example, families bought the same patent medicines, mineral water, plain white dishes, food, and even turtles! But the residents had different income levels that affected what they could afford to buy. Families with higher incomes could buy more than their poorer neighbors. Not only could they buy higher-priced meat cuts, but they could also afford more decorative dishes.



Print type spacers dropped by John or William Sheridan. Both worked for printer L. Graham & Son on Baronne Street.

Professional archaeologists documented the people and places of Lower Mid-City using the archaeological record, which provides a very different perspective than written records do. The artifacts and remains they found allow them to tell the stories of Lower Mid-City's historic residents, and to paint a picture of this neighborhood's archaeological history in words and photographs. The people that called Lower Mid-City home were working-class folks who over time built a modern New Orleans neighborhood. That neighborhood and the descendants of those first residents remain an important part of life in New Orleans today!

Crescent City Soda & Mineral Water Mfg. bottles were common in Lower Mid-City. The manufacturer was located at 270-274 Royal Street from 1878-1920.

INTERESTED IN LEARNING MORE?

Check out these links for more information about Historical Archaeology & Archaeology in Louisiana:

- Louisiana Office of Cultural Development, Division of Archaeology. Visit https://www.crt.state.la.us/cultural-development/archaeology/
- Louisiana Archaeological Society. Visit https://www.laarchaeologicalsociety.org/
- Society for Historical Archaeology. Visit https://sha.org/

Acknowledgments

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Dedication

This booklet is dedicated to the memory of ***Kathleen Schamel*** (September 15, 1959 – June 17, 2017), the former Federal Preservation Officer for the Department of Veterans Affairs and a leading advocate for historic preservation in the federal arena. As the Veteran Administration's technical lead for cultural resources for the replacement hospital project in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina, Kathleen worked tirelessly, effectively, and persuasively to save historic buildings and to document and preserve for posterity the historical record and artifacts of Lower Mid-City New Orleans. She studiously, effectively, and with equity approached the need to balance concerns for preservation of the past with those of needs for the future. She cared. Kathleen authored the Scope of Work for this project, and she was instrumental in its success. We miss her greatly.