

Hollywood Cleans Up Vice District in *New Orleans*

By John Magill, Curator/Historian, The Historic New Orleans Collection

The 1947 motion picture *New Orleans* is a Hollywood interpretation of the birth of jazz set partly in a sanitized Storyville. The infamous and legal Red Light District flourished in New Orleans between 1898 and 1917 and was on the site of today's Iberville Housing Development. In the 1940s, Storyville — or the District — probably had to be made a bit more palatable for Hollywood's censors, since the full reality would have been too risqué for the time's movie standards.

Arturo de Cordova's role as Nick Duquesne, a casino owner and "King of Basin Street," is not unlike Tom Anderson — dubbed the Mayor of Storyville — a real saloon owner whose thriving business, Anderson's Annex, was at the corner of Basin and Iberville. As a casino owner Nick seems less tainted by the real business of the District, while the casino still adds some pre-World War I flamboyancy and gaudiness — something associated with the big Basin Street houses like LuLu White's and Josie Arlington's.

The young lady in *New Orleans*, Dorothy Patrick's Miralee, is a nice

the 1940s and '50s often told the viewers how modern they were by living in the mid-20th century where one understood jazz — and women could show their ankles.

Even so, vice districts were frequently cleaned up for movies in the '30s and '40s. In MGM's 1936 film classic *San Francisco* — with its depiction of the 1906 earthquake and fire — Jeanette McDonald's Mary Blake is the daughter of a Colorado minister as well as an aspiring opera singer. McDonald's several forays into lavish operatic arias add a luster of decorum to this story centered in the depraved Barbary Coast. Clark Gable's Blackie Norton owns a popular concert saloon where Mary is hired to sing non-operatic numbers. Blackie falls in love with Mary, and really isn't too bad — he has political aspirations, is friends with a priest and even finds religion in a tent city while the real city lies in ruins.

The birth, death and ultimate destruction of Storyville, the last two covered in *New Orleans*, are all akin to attempts at social reform. There were several other legal red light districts in the United States as well as in Germany and the Netherlands. These examples were said to be the inspiration for Alderman Sidney Story's regulated district — nicknamed Storyville in his honor and to his embarrassment. Some people today may chuckle at Storyville as a product of a sinful city shrouded in the hypocrisy of 19th-century blue laws, but it is argued that Storyville was an effort to limit and control prostitution, which, conversely, it seemed to promote.



This postcard view of Storyville is seen from the top of the Grunewald (Roosevelt) Hotel Annex on University (Roosevelt) Place about 1908. The railroad sheds and Southern Railroad Station were under construction at the time along Basin Street. (HNOC # 1979.362.16)

It has been suggested that there was more to the establishment of the District than just to control vice. Influential New Orleans brewing interests to provide themselves investment opportunities, as well as to

push the sale of motor buses and cars, or the tobacco industry's attempts to hook people on smoking.

National published reports argued that unregulated prostitution could invade respectable residential and



Architect Julius Dreyfous took this image of Gipsy Shafer's house on Villere at Iberville in the late 1930s. Like many buildings in former Storyville by this time the building was used for legal businesses and apartments. (Gift of Mr. F. Lee Eiseman, HNOC # 1990.2.6)

upper-crust girl who can only go wrong because of her love of jazz, which is what takes her and her African-American maid played by Billie Holiday to Storyville. With jazz as the focus and the presence of beloved 1940s jazz legends like Louis Armstrong, Storyville becomes still less scandalous. This plays on the 1947 attitude towards jazz, contrasted with the prudish feelings held by many people for the music just thirty years before the film was made. Nostalgic "good-old-days" movies of



Tiny one room "cribs" such as these on Villere Street were an integral part of the poor side of business in Storyville. When Julius Dreyfous took this photograph in the late 1930s many were being used as inexpensive rental housing. (Gift of Mr. F. Lee Eiseman, HNOC # 1990.2.7)

promote and increase the sale of beer, may have promoted it. This may not be far-fetched in light of the automobile industry's alleged schemes to destroy urban streetcar systems in the 1940s — along with inner cities — to

business districts, and in pre-Storyville New Orleans there were instances of brothels opening where they were not wanted. An example of red light activities running amuck can be found in pre-earthquake San Francisco. Like New Orleans, it was a teeming port with freewheeling attitudes, its vice district was the Barbary Coast. Various entertainments flourished here from restaurants to dance halls, honky tonks and saloons. There were also grand brothels a la Basin Street, as well as infamous multi-story "cow houses" where numerous prostitutes lived and worked. They were like high-rise "cribs," a term used in both San Francisco and New Orleans. There were also the equally notorious "French restaurants" where respectable dining establishments were on the ground floor, with the upper floors put to other uses. New Orleans also had a tradition of assignment rooms in even some of its smarter restaurants — and these were not in Storyville.

The Barbary Coast was regulated only by San Francisco's splendidly



The new Iberville Housing Project as it appeared in November 1944 looking from Canal Street on the site of Storyville, which had been closed down some 27 years earlier, from the Charles L. Franck Collection. The Municipal Auditorium is visible in the background. (HNOC # 1979325.1588)