

corrupt city officials, and vice was not limited to this one area, but could be found throughout inner city neighborhoods. The Crescent City's Storyville has been called rather run-of-the-mill. It may have been perhaps even tame when compared with what "Baghdad by the Bay" — or Chicago or New York — had to offer.

All ended up equal in 1917. Districts across the land were ordered shut by the United States Navy when the nation entered World War I. This appears to be another social reform with the elimination of vice areas within a certain distance of military bases in hopes of preventing the spread of venereal disease among the troops. While New Orleans shows the navy calling for Storyville's demolition, its orders called for closure of the businesses, not building demolition. Storyville's buildings stood for more than two more decades. It became a poor African-American neighborhood of small rented houses, rooming houses and tenements. By the late 1930s, public housing projects were seen as a new form of social betterment. In New Orleans city planners and the Housing Authority mapped out the city's slums for demolition and redevelopment. On planning maps the former Storyville was colored red for "blighted" along with most of the nearby French Quarter.

As early as 1928, there was a plan to build a Civic Center straddling Orleans Street in the heart of the French Quarter, but fortunately the Great Depression dashed this. (One of the planned buildings, the Municipal Auditorium was built.) Ten years later there were drawings for a public housing development in the same part of the Quarter. By then the Quarter was protected, but this was not the case in other parts of town as neighborhoods were bulldozed for public housing like St. Thomas and Lafitte.

At the time rundown housing in itself was touted as the shame of a city, and best eradicated. Storyville was even more of an embarrassment because of its history and location on the fringes of the business district. It has been suggested that the feds for political reasons and to help them dispose of their rundown rental housing paid politician landowners in Storyville. Even with this being the case, the resultant Iberville Project was part of a national urban trend that probably lined the pockets of many urban slumlords with WPA money.

Storyville in essence was at first swept under the rug and finally destroyed. Even Basin Street, Storyville's main street and one of the most famous streets in the world, was renamed North Saratoga Street in 1921. That change lasted only into the 1950s when the street went back to being Basin.

New Orleans, starring Louis Armstrong and Billie Holiday

By Alex Lemann
Photos courtesy of the Louisiana State Museum

Although, to my knowledge, not a single frame of *New Orleans* (1947) was actually shot in New Orleans, the film manages to capture much more of the city's history and character than many of its brethren. Set in Storyville on the eve of the First World War, *New Orleans* is most notable for the central roles played by Billie Holiday, Louis Armstrong, and a host of other jazz legends as, essentially, themselves. While the plot and acting ultimately leave much to be desired, the portrait of the class divisions within the city and the devastating impact of the destruction of Storyville still resonate today.

New Orleans centers around an aristocratic young lady, Miralee (Dorothy Patrick), who arrives in the city to stay with an aunt and, if the aunt has her way, to find an eligible husband. Much to her aunt's chagrin, Miralee develops a taste for jazz and begins following her maid (Billie Holiday) down to Storyville to listen

to the music, spending her evenings in places so scandalous she risks social ostracism. Luckily for us, Miralee ignores the warnings of her aunt, and we are treated to some wonderful music as she begins to fall in love with a tough casino owner named Nick Duquesne (Arturo de Cordova), the so-called "king of Basin Street." Before long, though, Storyville becomes too raucous for its own good, and the Navy orders it completely demolished, fearing for the morals (and health) of its sailors.

The demolition of Storyville is presented in the film as a truly traumatic event, and the prostitutes, gamblers, johns and musicians slowly make their way out of their homes as their neighborhood is destroyed. Without really meaning to, *New Orleans* provides a sense of how traumatic this type of destruction must have been, not just for Storyville but also for the many neighborhoods that would later fall prey to the vast clearances of urban renewal. *New Orleans*, somewhat indirectly, makes a truly moving emotional and cultural case for preservation. The exterior shots of the neighborhood all look like a generic French Quarter back lot. The trauma of the demolition comes not from the loss of architecture but from the loss of people's homes, and the scattering of the cultural capital that those people represent.

This scattering becomes the focus of the film's somewhat disjointed second half as it follows Nick and his musicians on their search for greener pastures. Shifting to Chicago and beyond, the film becomes a kind of whirlwind survey course in (not strictly accurate) jazz history, charting the diaspora of musicians flung to the far corners of the world by the destruction of Storyville. In a way the second half is triumphant; Louis and Billie go on to worldwide fame and fortune, and the world comes to know the glory of jazz. On the other hand, the film never quite loses the melancholy, bitter taste that is left by the destruction of Storyville, and one gets the sense



Louis Armstrong and Billie Holiday star in the film *New Orleans*.



A scene from the *New Orleans* features Louis Armstrong holding his trumpet. Other musicians in the photograph include Zutty Singleton, Kid Ory, Barney Bigard, Bud Scott, Red Calendar, Charlie Beal, Meade Luz Lewis and Woody Herman.

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that the musicians would gladly give up the fame and the furs to get their old neighborhood back.

By the time the film finally draws to a close it feels as if it has already ended four times, and one is left wondering what happened to the movie one was watching an hour ago, most of whose characters and plot lines have been left by the wayside. Despite the shortcomings of its plot, though, *New Orleans* remains both a rare and pleasant musical experience and an evocation of the emotional drama behind preservation, casting a light on battles that rage to this day.