



New Orleans

by Roberts Batson

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One of America's most colorful cities, New Orleans boasts a rich tradition for glbtq people. It is both a popular travel destination for gay men and lesbians and the home of a diverse glbtq community.

The iconic American melting pot did not melt in New Orleans. Instead of cooking down its ethnic ingredients into a bland Americana soup, the component cultures--French, Spanish, African, Native American, and, later, Irish, Italian, Croatian, and Vietnamese, among others--resisted homogenization but did interact to cook up a spicy gumbo that retained the flavorful individuality of each one.

The Early Years

As early as the sixteenth century, French and Spanish explorers in the Mississippi River Valley noted the presence of berdaches (or "two-spirits") among the native people of the area. They were shocked that men would willingly assume the "demeaning" manner of women and do women's work, and they were astonished that these odd people were held in high regard by their tribes.

Somewhat later, in a 1751 report in which he judged Native Americans by dominant European values, Jean Bernard Bossu said of the Choctaw, "They are morally quite perverted, and most of them are addicted to sodomy."

French settlement along the central Gulf Coast began in the late 1600s. New Orleans was founded in 1718 by Jean Baptiste le Moyne, Sieur de Bienville. France ceded Louisiana to Spain in 1762, Napoleon got it back in 1800, and it became American in 1803 as a result of the Louisiana Purchase.

Originally dominated by the descendants of French and Spanish settlers, known as Creoles, the city's population also included a large contingent of slaves and a considerable number of free people of color. The descendants of the latter, who were often tied by blood and other relationships to the dominant white community, also identified themselves as Creoles.

Accounts of same-sex relationships during the colonial period are rare and are discerned mostly through inference. This reticence is understandable, as both church and state abhorred homosexual acts as the crime not to be spoken of by Christians.

After the Louisiana Purchase, the Territorial Convention of 1805 imposed the harsh sodomy statute the Americans had written for Mississippi. The first Louisiana Criminal Code prescribed a mandatory life sentence for indulging in "the abominable and detestable crime against nature." Later, the penalty was reduced to ten years in prison; and, later still, to five years.

The Raunchy Nineteenth Century



Reveler Joel Haas in costume for Mardi Gras in New Orleans in 2004. Photograph by Ted-Larry Pebworth. Courtesy Ted-Larry Pebworth.

From the time steamboats arrived in 1812, New Orleans grew rapidly, its population bolstered by an influx of settlers from Kentucky and Tennessee and other parts of the United States. As a major port city, it possessed significant military and commercial importance, becoming the economic center of the enormous cotton and sugar industries.

New Orleans soon acquired a reputation as "The City that Care Forgot." When Walt Whitman arrived in the city in 1848 he was a modest Quaker who had dismissed bars as "places of vapid, irrational un-amusement." That attitude changed quickly. Soon he was writing a series of newspaper columns set in "our first-rate tip-top" saloons.

Scholars have noted that Whitman's New Orleans experience "had an important impact on his conception of male love" as reflected in his homoerotic poems. In "Once I Pass'd Through a Populous City," a poem about New Orleans, he wrote "I remember only the man who wandered with me, there, for love of me." In "I Saw in Louisiana a Live-Oak Growing," he exulted that the "rude, unbending, lusty" tree made him "think of manly love."

New Orleans suffered greatly during the Civil War and the period of Reconstruction that followed, but the fact that economic stagnation persisted for almost a century afterwards meant that a great deal of its ante bellum architecture was not demolished in modernization efforts. As a result, New Orleans today has the largest inventory of nineteenth-century buildings in the United States.

Throughout its history, a vibrant same-sex social world flourished underground in the sensual city. In the late nineteenth century, one of the most colorful brothel owners, Fanny Sweet, was described as "Thief, lesbian, Confederate spy, poisoner and procurer." About that same time, a burly male madam known as Miss Big Nelly reportedly ran a house for male homosexuals, which was the scene of "large scale, noisy interracial functions."

Jazz, perhaps New Orleans's most significant cultural creation, flourished in late nineteenth-century bordellos. It was shaped importantly by Tony Jackson, the preeminent founding pianist and composer of this scandalous new music. After his death at age 44, he was remembered as "an epileptic, alcoholic, homosexual Negro genius," the most brilliant musician of the lot.

Jackson's hit song "Pretty Baby" was written about another man. Composed in a Bienville Street saloon in the early years of the twentieth century, it was not published until 1916, and then with new lyrics tailored for Fanny Brice to perform in the Broadway musical, *Passing Show*.

A Southern Bohemia

When writer Lyle Saxon arrived in 1919, New Orleans's oldest neighborhood, the French Quarter, had become tawdry and dilapidated. Many of the old Creole families who had lived in the Quarter had gradually moved to new parts of the city, and the area was in danger of becoming a slum.

Saxon, who later became a successful journalist and novelist, was instrumental in attracting writers and artists to the deteriorating neighborhood, promoting the French Quarter as "the next Greenwich Village" and extolling its charm. Saxon's final work, *The Friends of Joe Gilmore* (1948), is an affectionate tribute to his longtime valet and, possibly, lover.

The Quarter also became the center of the city's gay nightlife, although a famous transvestite club, the My-0-My, which flourished during the 1940s and 1950s, was located on the lakefront.

The history of the New Orleans bars frequented by homosexuals is well documented. Cafe Lafitte at the Blacksmith Shop was in operation by 1936, only three years after the end of Prohibition. When the proprietors lost their lease in 1953 they moved down the street and opened Cafe Lafitte in Exile. Still in

operation at 901 Bourbon Street, it is one of the oldest continuing gay bars in the United States.

In 1939 jazz musician "Miss Dixie" Fasnacht opened Dixie's Bar of Music in the downtown business district and, in 1949, moved to Bourbon Street. She is thought to be the model for a character in Gore Vidal's *The City and the Pillar* (1948). Although she retired in 1964, Miss Dixie, who celebrated her 95th birthday in 2005, remains a legend, especially for her support of her patrons, who were frequently harassed by police during periodic "clean up" campaigns.

Writers and Artists

In the earlier twentieth century, New Orleans became a haven for writers and artists, attracted by its congenial *laissez-faire* climate.

Young Tom Williams took the name Tennessee at the time of his initial New Orleans visit in 1938. Four hours after his first arrival in the city he wrote in his journal, "Here, surely, is the place I was made for." It is likely that his first sexual experience with a man occurred a few nights later.

Williams henceforth called New Orleans his "spiritual home" and the French Quarter "the last frontier of Bohemia." As he once wrote to a friend, "Town is *wide open*."

New Orleans features prominently in many of Williams's works, including *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), *Suddenly Last Summer* (1958), and many other plays and short stories. Appropriately, one of the city's most important cultural events is the annual Tennessee Williams Literary Festival, which attracts writers, readers, and theater-goers from all over the country.

Lesbian photographer Frances Benjamin Johnston retired to New Orleans in 1940, after she completed her final large project, a photographic documentation of Southern architecture. She lived in the city until her death in 1952. Her partner, a younger woman named Tom Sawyer, survived Johnston by three decades.

As a precocious twenty-year-old, native New Orleanian Truman Capote returned to his birthplace in 1945, where, holed up in an apartment at 711 Royal Street, he wrote the bulk of his first major work, *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (1948). He later called that period, "the freest time of my life."

Another writer particularly associated with the city is John Kennedy Toole. Toole's posthumously published *Confederacy of Dunces* (1980) is the quintessential portrait of post-World War II New Orleans, presenting a carnival of eccentrics. Perhaps reflecting Toole's unease with his own homosexuality, the novel's portrait of the gay scene in the French Quarter in the late 1960s is deeply satirical, featuring frivolous young men who would rather listen to Judy Garland and Lena Horne albums than to protest discrimination.

Contemporary artist George Dureau has accurately captured the feel of this unique city. In his mythological paintings and in his black-and-white photographs, which often feature street youth, dwarfs, and amputees, Dureau evokes the paradoxes of the city, particularly its combination of the spiritual and the carnal.

Carnival

Mardi Gras is an important holiday in New Orleans. The months-long Carnival season commences on January 6 and continues unabated until its Fat Tuesday climax (sometime between early February and early March). It not only attracts hundreds of thousands of tourists, many of whom are gay or lesbian, but it is also the heart of the city's social life, the occasion of numerous balls and parties.

The Carnival conventions of masking and cross-dressing have helped shape gay New Orleans culture. Indeed, the Lundi Gras Luncheon, a private party initiated by Bob Demmons in 1949, is the oldest continuing non-bar-related activity in the New Orleans gay community.

The first gay Carnival club, the Krewe of Yuga, began in 1958 as a lark, a party spoofing traditional society balls. Yuga flourished until a police raid of their 1962 ball abruptly destroyed it. But that same year a second gay club, the Krewe of Petronius, debuted, to be followed by the Krewe of Armeinius and a dozen or so others. These balls, which are part drag show and part bal masqué, remain an important aspect of the gay and lesbian social scene, though AIDS took a very heavy toll on the membership of many krewes and led to the disbanding of several.

As the new millennium dawned, seven gay clubs were presenting elaborate balls each carnival season, including the Krewe of Mwindo, a predominantly African-American club that debuted in 1999. In 2003, the Krewe of Satyricon presented its first ball.

Gay Liberation Arrives

Although New Orleans had long been home to a large gay population, it was slower than most other American cities to produce a gay political movement. Partly this was due to being a rather small, conservative city dominated by the Roman Catholic Church.

But there was another factor that had a chilling effect on gay visibility. For New York, 1969 was the year of the Stonewall riots. For New Orleans, 1969 was the year District Attorney Jim Garrison brought prominent gay businessman Clay Shaw to trial, charging him with conspiring to assassinate President John F. Kennedy. Shaw was perceived as a particularly vulnerable target because of his homosexuality.

Although Shaw was eventually acquitted of all charges, the experience destroyed his life. The targeting of Shaw had the effect of reminding gay and lesbian citizens of their vulnerability even in a place as famous for its live-and-let-live attitude as New Orleans.

Local gay political activism nevertheless emerged in 1970 with the short-lived Gay Liberation Front of New Orleans. Although the group fell apart by mid-1971, in that brief span it had produced the first gay public action, a demonstration at City Hall protesting police harassment. It also published the first gay-identified publication, a newsletter entitled *Sunflower*, and presented the first Stonewall commemoration, a June 1971 "Gay-In" in City Park.

Out of this organizing effort, individuals soon founded a Metropolitan Community Church congregation, a Gay Services Center, a Daughters of Bilitis chapter, and a gay student organization at Tulane University.

Southern Decadence

A small costume party in 1972, given because, as one of the original hosts explained, "We thought Mardi Gras was too good an idea to do only once a year," has grown into one of the city's most important gay events. Guests at the original party were invited to come as their favorite Southern decadent character, real or fictional. Hence the birth of the huge annual Labor Day extravaganza called Southern Decadence, which rivals Mardi Gras in terms of the number of gay tourists it attracts.

A later party to entertain out-of-town guests mushroomed into the grand "Halloween in New Orleans" circuit party that raises money for Lazarus House, an AIDS hospice.

Tragedy and Protest

Two years after the Gay Liberation Front came and went, very little visible community structure was in place when, on June 24, 1973, a fire engulfed the Upstairs Lounge, a French Quarter gay bar. The deadliest fire in the city's long history, it killed 32 people.

The horror of the Upstairs fire was compounded by the undisguised homophobia of the time. Some churches refused to allow funerals for the victims, and some parents refused to claim the bodies of their children for burial.

The tragedy, however, did motivate a handful of activists who launched another publication, *Causeway*, and established a Gay Crisis Phone Line.

But gay activism in New Orleans did not mobilize substantial numbers until June 1977, when Anita Bryant arrived to perform in concert. It was the homophobic singer's first public appearance after her successful overturn of the gay rights ordinance in Miami.

A small group called the Gertrude Stein Society announced a protest rally and hoped that a hundred people would venture out of their closets and into the bright light of day. The organizers were astonished at the turn-out. Several thousand demonstrators rallied in Jackson Square and marched through the French Quarter to the Municipal Auditorium where Bryant was performing.

A Modern Community Emerges

This explosive energy triggered the rapid expansion of a visible gay and lesbian civic infrastructure. A newspaper, *Impact*, began publication in October 1977. The following year author Tom Horner opened the Faubourg Marigny Bookstore, the first gay/feminist bookstore in the South.

Also in 1978, the Pink Triangle Alliance commemorated the first anniversary of the Bryant protest with another June rally in Jackson Square. This effort led to Gayfest, which produced its first Pride celebration in 1979. Soon the emerging community included a wide range of social, service, religious, and sports organizations, as well as the Louisiana Gay Political Action Caucus, an annual state gay conference, an active PFLAG Chapter, and a Gay Men's Chorus. In 1983 the NO/AIDS Task Force consolidated health efforts initiated by other groups.

Gay political accomplishments, however, did not equal New Orleans's rich social and cultural heritage until the 1990s. By that time activists had forged a positive relationship with police and city government. Gay political gains came about principally through the leadership of African-American politicians, especially Mayors Ernest N. Morial, Sidney J. Barthelemy, and Marc H. Morial, and City Council members Johnny Jackson and Dorothy Taylor.

After twice refusing to adopt an anti-discrimination ordinance, in 1991 the City Council finally passed the proposal to include "sexual orientation" as a protected category. A domestic partnership ordinance followed in 1993. In 1998 the Council amended the 1991 statute to add "gender identity" as a recognized, protected class. New Orleans was one of the first American cities to do so.

In 1999, the city announced an outreach program to attract gay men and lesbians, along with artists and entrepreneurs, to relocate to New Orleans, an initiative that recognized the many contributions glbtq people have made to the city, especially as urban pioneers in revitalizing areas such as the French Quarter and, later, the Faubourg Marigny and Bywater.

In 2001, Mayor Marc H. Morial appointed Larry Bagneris, Jr, an openly gay African-American man, Executive Director of the City's Human Relations Commission.

The largest city in a conservative Southern state, New Orleans exists as an island of tolerance in an area that often seems virulently anti-gay, as witnessed by the Louisiana Legislature's stubborn refusal to repeal its sodomy law. (On the other hand, Louisiana is the only Southern state to pass a hate-crimes law that includes sexual orientation.) Not surprisingly, New Orleans has often served as a beacon, attracting glbtq people from the small towns and rural areas of the South.

By the millennium New Orleans had, at last, produced a good gay gumbo, as rich and multifaceted as the city itself.

Hurricane Katrina and the Future of New Orleans

On August 29, 2005 the city and its entire population suffered the most disastrous engineering failure in American history. In the early hours on that date, Katrina, a high Category 3 hurricane, landed just east of New Orleans. The levee system, designed to protect the city from such a storm by the United States Army Corps of Engineers, failed, flooding most of the city and destroying hundreds of thousands of homes and businesses.

Mayor C. Ray Nagin had ordered a mandatory evacuation of the city, but thousands of residents refused or were unable to leave. Those who survived the storm and the subsequent flooding were eventually relocated to shelters across the country. Residents were not allowed to return for over a month. Like the population in general, glbtq people suffered enormous loss, which, in many cases, included their homes and their livelihoods.

Some also endured unique humiliations. For example, Arpollo Vicks, a twenty-year-old transgendered woman also known as Sharli'e Dominique, was arrested by the Texas A&M University Police for using the women's shower facility at the evacuation shelter where she was deposited. She was charged with criminal trespassing and was held in the Brazos County jail for five days under a prohibitively high bail. After the incident received wide notice and she was released without charges, the Montrose Counseling Center in Houston arranged to house her and her family.

Among the many casualties was Rosemary "Mama" Pino, who owned and operated five bars during the 1970s and 1980s. The beloved community leader was 83 years old. She died of undetermined causes in a nursing home that was not evacuated in advance of the storm.

Community organizations were also damaged. Activists and other personnel were scattered across the country. Facilities and equipment were destroyed. With the city's economy shattered, the financial ability of supporters to rebuild the infrastructure of the glbtq community was also severely diminished.

Many glbtq individuals and organizations around the country responded with aid to the beleaguered city, notably the National Youth Advocacy Coalition who provided grants for youths in need.

Recovery from the devastation will be slow and painful. Fortunately, however, some of the neighborhoods most heavily populated by members of the glbtq community--including the French Quarter, the Faubourg Marigny, Bywater, and the Garden District--were spared the worst of the flooding and may be among the first areas of the city to rebound.

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About the Author

Roberts Batson received undergraduate and graduate degrees from the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. In addition to professional achievement in theatrical and academic spheres, he has been a longtime gay community activist. The author of over 200 articles on New Orleans history and contemporary culture, he has been awarded Sigma Delta Chi and Vice Versa awards. In 1994 he created an acclaimed New Orleans Gay Heritage Tour, which he continues to conduct, and in 2002 began performing a one-man theatrical show, *Amazing Place, this New Orleans*. Batson is currently working on a book on New Orleans gay history.