

Physical, Economic, and Social Attributes of the New Orleans Ninth Ward

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1. Neighborhood History

Development History

The area of land now known as the 9th Ward became a part of New Orleans in 1852. Of the 17 wards that comprise New Orleans, the 9th ward is the largest geographically. In the 1910's the city of New Orleans began a massive pumping operation, spearheaded by the engineer A. Baldwin Wood, where the groundwater from beneath the city was removed to allow for increased development and expansion. With much of the city already at or below sea level, the pumping of groundwater led to increased subsidence of much of the city including the Lower 9th thus exacerbating flood events due to elevations below sea level. In the 1920's the industrial canal was constructed through the area effectively bisecting the area and furthering its isolation for the central core of the city. It also led to the creation of a number of the neighborhoods that give the 9th ward its character today.

Due to the swampy, flood prone nature of the area - the 9th ward, the lower 9th in particular, was among the last areas of the city to be fully developed. Despite this the area does have a long history of habitation and agricultural usage. In the early 1800's the area's development was primarily limited to sugar plantations and other farming activities. The population of the Holy Cross neighborhood alone totaled some 1800 persons by 1852. The early settlers of the area included African Americans, including French Creoles and Free Persons of Color, and poor European immigrants, primarily from Ireland, Germany, and Italy. The low cost of housing in the 9th Ward served to concentrate the population of poor, working class laborers. Only half of the Lower 9th had been developed by 1950. Historic data of the area indicates that there were no houses to speak of in the area prior to 1920; this is a reflection of the fact that most of the occupied dwellings were transient in nature and of the lean-to or shanty variety.

Neighborhood Institutions and Activism

The greatest asset to the rebuilding and recovery efforts of the Lower 9th Ward is the history of community action and activism in the area. Numerous neighborhood organizations including housing and community development corporations, churches and other faith based congregation led initiatives, Head Start Programs, and other neighborhood associations are found in the Lower 9th. Much of the activism has been in reaction to the political neglect of the area. The actions by civic groups have concentrated on securing assistance to residents in the form of government funds and services.

Architectural History and the Built Environment

Neighborhoods

When the industrial canal bisected the 9th Ward in 1923, while increasing the isolation of the area, it also encouraged the development of several distinct neighborhoods that give the 9th ward its character today. For the purposes of this study the three primary neighborhoods of concern are:

- **Bywater** - The portion of the Ninth Ward along the riverfront between Faubourg Marigny and the Industrial Canal.
- **Holy Cross** – Comprises the portion of the Lower 9th on the river side of St. Claude Avenue.
- **Lower 9th Ward** – Stretches along the river and is bounded by the Industrial Canal to the west, the St. Bernard Parish line to the east, and railroad tracts to the north.

The area to the west of the canal is referred to as the Upper Ninth Ward and includes the neighborhoods of Bywater and St. Claude.

Architectural Styles

Few structures greater than one story are seen in the Lower Ninth, this is in part a factor of the nature of the subsoil which is of an unstable clay type making multistory construction an expensive proposition due to the extensive foundation requirements. The homes of the Lower 9th consist primarily of small, single family “shotgun” homes. A shotgun house typically has one room leading into the next without hallways and lacks windows on the side walls. This style of house is particularly well suited for hot climates because one can open the front and back doors, and the breeze will flow through the entire house, and the porch provides shade for outdoor visiting. Shotgun architecture is now recognized as an African American contribution to American architectural styles. Research indicates that this architectural style came to New Orleans from West Africa via Haiti.

When Africans in Haiti revolted in 1791, many European plantation owners fled to New Orleans, taking with them enslaved Africans still under their control. Many other free people of color migrated to New Orleans as well. This had a profound effect on the demographics of New Orleans. In 1810, the population of New Orleans was approximately 1/3 white, 1/3 enslaved Africans, and 1/3 free people of color, most of who had come from Haiti.

In New Orleans, free people of color continued to build shotgun houses, replacing their African motifs with gingerbread trimmings. And the porch on the front of these houses was quite distinct from French homes whose outdoor areas were actually interior courtyards. The front porch on shotgun houses supported interconnectedness between people and gave neighbors a strong sense of community.

2. Demographics 1980-2000

Population by Age and Income

In 2000 the population of the Lower 9th Ward was 14,008 persons and with 98.3% of the population being African-American, is one of the most segregated neighborhoods in New Orleans. The age cohorts of the residents are also of interest with 30.7% of the population under the age of 18, in contrast to the Orleans Parish where only 26.7 was under the age of 18. . According to the 2000 US census, the Lower Ninth Ward has a poverty level of 36.4 percent. A quarter of households have an annual income of less than

\$10,000, while half live on less than \$20,000. According to the GNOCDC¹ 1,112 families in the lower Ninth ward lived below the poverty line, of those households, 60.8% were headed by a female householder (no husband present) with own children under the age of 18.

Employment

Over half of the population in the ward is categorized as “not in the labor force,” mainly because they have ceased looking for work. Of those employed, 22.7% are in low wage service jobs in the Retail Trade (12.1%) and Accommodation and Food Services (10.6%) industries. Health Care and Social Assistance accounts for an additional 14.3% of the jobs held by residents of the Lower Ninth.

Quality of Life

Businesses

The commercial activities of the Lower Ninth are concentrated along the main streets: St. Claude Ave, Claiborne Ave, and Caffin Aver. The business located there are in service to the needs of its residential population. Small grocery stores, barber and beauty shops, and Laundromats comprise the bulk of the business. Only one gas station serves the area, a reflection of the fact that 30% of the households are without automobiles. Noticeably lacking in the area are fast food establishments, dining places, or bars.

Schools

Seven schools are located in the Lower Ninth Ward, three of them public and four private. The racial makeup of the public versus private schools in the area is a reflection of the racially segregated nature of the neighborhood. The public schools consist of 100% students of color, while in contrast the private schools are only comprised of 5-12% students of color. The majority of the private school students reside outside of the Lower Ninth Ward. Test scores of students in the public schools of the Lower Ninth are consistently poor in comparison with those seen in both Louisiana as a whole and those of students nationally.

Parks and Recreation

Only one public park, the Sam Bonart Playground, is located in the neighborhood of the Lower Ninth Ward. Children typically use the playgrounds at school or play game in their front yards or the streets in front of their homes.

Religious Institutions

The Lower Ninth is home to a large number of churches and other religious institutions. The oldest church in the Lower Ninth is the St. Maurice church constructed in 1857. The original building still stands at the intersection of St. Maurice Avenue and Chartes Streets.

¹ Greater New Orleans Community Data Center, <http://www.gnocdc.org/>

Community Service Centers

The Andrew P. Sanchez, Sr. Multi-Service Center at the intersection of Caffin Street and Claiborne Avenue houses a number of community service organizations including; Total Community Action Lower Ninth Ward Head Start Program, The Lower Ninth Ward Health Clinic, a Great Expectations site, the Lower Ninth Neighborhood Council's office, and the 5th District New Orleans Police department sub-station. The Lower Ninth is also home to a branch of the New Orleans public library as well as a senior citizens center and a gymnasium.

3. Property Ownership and Housing Profiles

Homeownership Rates

Prior to hurricane Katrina the Lower Ninth Ward had the highest rates of Home Ownership in the city of New Orleans. Approximately 60% of the households were owner-occupied, in contrast to 53% of the Orleans Parish at large. However, as a result of low investment due to homeowners financial constraints, many of these homes are in poor physical condition. Construction of the majority of the homes occurred in the 1950's, since that time the homes have been passed down to family members by the original occupants. More than half of the residents of the Lower Ninth have occupied their homes for more than 15 years. The long term occupancy rates combined with the high rates of home ownership suggest a desire on the part of the residents to remain in a neighborhood where they were born and raised. However the long term occupancy rates may also be a reflection of the high poverty rates resulting in a lack of affordable housing options on behalf of the residents. The median home value of the Lower Ninth Ward was significantly lower than that of the Parish at \$52,420 versus \$88,100, a reflection of the depreciation in home values from lack of upkeep and investment.

The Lower Ninth Ward became a haven for low income residents who desired home ownership. In the 1930's building lots were sold for \$250 a piece. However community investment has not progressed far beyond the initial construction of family dwellings, with many of the residents living off of their initial family investment thus contributing to the blighted state of the neighborhood. The high home ownership rates give the illusion of prosperity however those with mortgage or rental payments dedicate a disproportionate amount of their income to housing costs.

Vacancy and Physical Conditions

The Lower Ninth is also characterized by a high vacancy rate. Of the 5,600 housing units in the Lower Ninth, 14% or 781 units are unoccupied. These homes were often abandoned as a result of dilapidation and unsafe living conditions and contributed to the blighted image of the neighborhood. However pre-Katrina revitalization efforts in the neighborhood were concentrated on refurbishment of these properties in an effort to return them to the occupied housing stock of the ward rather than on demolition or new construction.

4. Politics and Elected Officials

Political Structure

The city of New Orleans is governed by a mayor and city council. The Mayor is aided by a Chief Administrative officer and the council is comprised of seven members, two at large and five others each responsible for a dedicated district (A-E).

Elected Officials

Cynthia Willard-Lewis - The Lower Ninth Ward is a part of District E and is currently represented by Cynthia Willard-Lewis. Ms. Willard-Lewis is a Democrat first elected in 2000, who was re-elected in 2004. Ms. Willard-Lewis is very involved in the debate surrounding the rebuilding of the Lower Ninth Ward and has been an advocate for rebuilding and not a wholesale buyout of the residents.

Clarence Ray Nagin, Jr. – Embattled mayor of the City of New Orleans, Nagin has been sharply criticized over his handling of both the initial crisis and the recovery efforts. Nagin was elected in 2002 and does not have any previous experience in public office. Prior to becoming mayor of New Orleans, Nagin served as the vice president and general manager of Cox Communications, cable and Telecommunications Company. His lack of political experience and capital has been an obstacle in the recovery effort. Mayor Nagin created the Bring New Orleans Back commission and is relying on their recommendations in conjunction with reports by the Urban Land Institute.

Kathleen Babineaux Blanco – In 2004 became the first woman to serve as governor of the state of Louisiana. Prior to taking office she served two terms as lieutenant governor. Blanco began her career in politics in 1984 as a representative in the state Legislature. Blanco has also been a target of heated criticism over her actions both pre- and post- Katrina. Governor Blanco created the Louisiana Recovery Authority to assist in determining the rebuilding priorities of the state.