A River and Its City: The Nature of Landscape in New Orleans. *By Ari Kelman*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003. xiii + 283 pp. Index, notes, bibliography, illustrations, photos. Cloth, $29.95. ISBN 0-520-23432-4.

Reviewed by Ann L. Buttenwieser

In the early 1980s, when it appeared that every waterfront city save my own—New York—had begun to open up its shores to residents and visitors, I compiled a booklet to entice planners, architects, and developers to think anew about New York's derelict piers and aging elevated highways. Among the examples was New Orleans's Jackson Square. New Orleans, I learned from Ari Kelman's engaging history, *A River and Its City,* was one of the first cities to demolish the barriers between the people and the waterfront that had existed there for nearly two hundred years. The city's shoreline was changed from "a site of production to a landscape of consumption," where "historical artifact, recreational amenity and aesthetic treasure" (p. 210) replaced traditional maritime uses.

Kelman, a historian, chronicles the influence of man on the mighty Mississippi and vice versa, through a series of carefully researched case studies. He explores legal, cultural, and technological history to argue that although the city's waterfront has always been considered a public space, for a century after the Civil War it was inaccessible to ordinary citizens. Kelman's subtext, then, is a series of questions: Who is the public? How should public space be used? What shapes the riverfront—technology or the environment?

There are few serious studies of urban waterfronts. Ann Breen and Dick Rigby, in *The New Waterfront, a Worldwide Success Story* (1996) and *Waterfronts: Cities Reclaim Their Edge* (1994), compiled a global catalog of renovated waterfronts. Lois Wille's *Forever Open Clear and Free: The Historic Struggle for Chicago's Lakefront* (1972) recounts the struggle to keep Chicago's shore from becoming walled in. Business historians will find it intriguing to try to deduce how Kelman's chronology of commercial development in New Orleans compares with parallel growth in Baltimore, Seattle, and New York. Commerce in New Orleans began, as it did in other maritime settlements, in the water. Boats equipped with keels, and later steam, vied for space in

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the river. To service this trade, entrepreneurs built up the shore, expanding further out into the Mississippi while simultaneously moving deeper into the city to acquire docks, warehouses, and land transportation. They built upward as well, constructing embankments to protect their real-estate investments, and the city, from natural disaster.

Several of the case studies read like cliffhangers. In tracing the early-nineteenth-century battle over whether the riverfront would be developed for public or private use, Kelman describes the long, legal history of Edward Livingston's attempts to privatize a portion of the levee to berth the steamboats that his brother, Robert, was building in the North. The levee had (and still has) enormous physical and cultural significance for New Orleans. It protects the city from the Mississippi floodwaters; it is at once the highest point and the gateway to the city; and residents used it for "storage, landfill, and a promenade" (p. 24). Livingston's war with the city captured the interest of everyone, from local Creole residents to President Thomas Jefferson.

Equally compelling are the chapters describing the city's efforts to tame the Mississippi and overcome disease and flooding. The miasmas that were believed to cause Yellow Fever reached their height in 1853, when the equivalent of "every person in a large apartment complex" (p. 104) died from the disease in one week. Kelman narrates a story of municipal cover-up and the consequent spread of the disease. The poor, living and working in more crowded conditions and in locations where mosquitoes were most likely to congregate, were inevitably the first to be hit by the fever. Ironically, when everyone else in the city was affected, the African Americans remained somehow immune, and they ended up being the ones who buried the whites. Seventy-odd years later another scourge of nature hit New Orleans: the Good Friday flood. Rescue on that occasion came late, causing devastation to fishermen and fur trappers, while officials wrangled among themselves about how to hold back the river.

Kelman adeptly weaves social history into his case studies. Battles were not just about space; they were also about winners and losers. Top officials inevitably made decisions without scheduling referendums or hearings. A particularly poignant story, which took place in the 1960s, involved the resistance to a freeway that was slated to be built along the river. As occurred in Boston and Baltimore, and later in New York City, white activists—including a local historian, a newspaper editor, and residents of the

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French Quarter (whose real estate would have been affected)—became "freeway fighters" (p. 202). Their victory resulted in the road's being redirected away from the riverside, producing a profitable, mixed-use tourist attraction, Jackson Square, but it was achieved at great cost to the African American community. They lost "the longest single strand of oak trees in the country" (p. 216) and the route for their Mardi Gras parade. In return, the community acquired a section of Highway I-10.

One weak spot in this well-written account of the New Orleans waterfront is the conclusion, in which Kelman presents his reasons for writing the book. The book needs no defense, as the narrative stands up well on its own. The maps are another weak point, as they are difficult to read, and they contain no labels. The lack of contrast in the black-and-white color tones makes the details almost impossible to see. On the other hand, the engravings, photographs, and drawings add considerable interest. Particularly striking are the photographs showing the gradual buildup of walls along the river and the impact of the freeway.

Kelman reminds us at the end of the book that we still have not learned the lesson of the "Mississippi's enduring power" (p. 220). Little has apparently changed since the fateful Good Friday flood. A *New York Times* editorial on July 4, 2003, with the headline "New Orleans's Hurricane Problem," warned, "It may be a matter of time before the Big One hits. The time to prepare New Orleans for that frightening prospect is now."

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