

An Unnatural Metropolis: Wrestling New Orleans from Nature. *By Craig E. Colten.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005. xv + 245 pp. Index, notes, maps, photographs. Cloth, \$39.95. ISBN: 0-807-12977-1.

Reviewed by Ann L. Bittenwieser

I first read *An Unnatural Metropolis: Wrestling New Orleans from Nature* on a trip to New Orleans in May 2005. It was a beautiful, sunny day, and the city gleamed between the Mississippi River and Lake Ponchartrain. I found the book to be an interesting history, as it approached the development of the city from an environmental perspective.

Hurricane *Katrina* encouraged me to reread the book in an attempt to understand better the tragic physical and social devastation visited on New Orleans in September 2005. When read to shed light on this event, *An Unnatural Metropolis* is very timely. Craig E. Colten, a professor of geography at Louisiana State University, presents a historical account of local, state, and, later, federal efforts to create flood control and sewage systems in New Orleans. Unfortunately, as he shows, this infrastructure was built in reaction to natural crises, and funding was always problematic.

But this is more than a history of levees and sewers. It is a thorough examination of such issues as garbage disposal, fresh-water supply, burial practices, and industrial pollution. Using historic documents and more recent articles and materials, Colten succeeds in showing that man's manipulation of the environment of New Orleans over time has been as important in shaping its landscape as economics and the other factors that are usually investigated in urban histories.

This book follows a recent spate of historical geographies. Ron Hagelman's *New Orleans: The Making of an Urban Landscape* (1976; 2nd ed., 2003) is the classic study of this complicated city. Richard Campanella's *Time and Place in New Orleans: Past Geographies in the Present Day* (2002), Pierce F. Laws's *New Orleans: The Making of an Urban Landscape* (2003), and the essays edited by Craig Colten in *New Orleans and Its Environs: Cultures of Change* (2001) are other works of this genre. I reviewed Ari Kellerman's multifaceted history, *A River and Its City: The Nature of Landscape in New Orleans* (2003), for this journal a couple of years ago.

Colten fits case studies within a chronological framework to tell the story of the growth of New Orleans. The book begins with the erection of a bulwark on the Mississippi River in the early eighteenth century by the Company of the Indies and continues with an account of the environmental problems affecting the densely populated metropolis that was recently submerged. Some images are familiar and could apply to many other waterfront cities. Among these are changing views of parks and open space, according to which parks are lungs, trees are a means to mitigate the heat, and open spaces are places to recreate.

Colten also introduces the reader to late-twentieth-century environmental analyses. In his chapter on garbage, he describes the wrenching psychological and economic effects that accompanied the redefinition of the Agriculture Street, once a “sanitary landfill” and then a “hazard.” In another chapter, Colten shows the evolution of the concept of wetlands preservation in Louisiana. In the nineteenth century, a swamp was preserved as a private hunting ground for wild boar. A twenty-first-century wetland park is a popular tourist attraction for viewing alligators.

Environmental justice is a subtext that runs through *An Unnatural Metropolis*. Colten’s maps are particularly poignant today. They show that new levee systems allowed African Americans to move to the previously unoccupied lowest-lying areas. (The latest map depicted is 1940, and it shows the Ninth Ward, much in the recent news about *Katrina*, as a predominately white neighborhood. Unfortunately this history does not cover the later changes in the ethnicity of this ward.) Once settled in the newly opened areas, blacks did not enjoy equality of city services. These were offered only to the wealthier whites who lived on higher ground or were provided for unaffordable fees. Polluted wells and nonexistent sewage and garbage collection were the norm. Recently this translated into a lack of public transportation for the flooded districts where blacks still resided.

If there is a fault to this book, it is in the style and graphics. Although clearly written, the style is dry and academic. The graphics are uninspired and lack clarity. The computer-generated maps are useful in showing demographic and income changes in the wards up to 1940. However, the city maps are too small and lack sufficient detail (street

names for one) to orient a newcomer to the sites. The photographs are not particularly compelling, and there are too few of them.

Recent events should make this book of interest to everyone. Planners, geographers, and environmentalists will probably find it most useful. Business historians will be able to tease out clues to the economic aspects of New Orleans' growth that underlay the environmental changes.

In his epilogue, Colten paraphrases two articles written a few years ago: "Recent popular accounts paint a dire picture and suggest that federal officials might not be willing to make the investment necessary to save a city that cannot afford to protect itself" (p. 191). As we all know, that investment was not made before *Katrina*, but a remedy has been promised by President Bush. Lessons like the ones spelled out in Colten's book point to the question: will the funds be used again simply to rebuild, or will future public works be undertaken according to a well-thought-out, comprehensive plan?

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