

Louisiana:

Two Years After the Storms

by **Valerie Gaumont**

If there is one thing Louisiana must say to the rest of the country after hurricanes Katrina and Rita, it is thank-you. When disaster struck our state, people from across the nation reached out to help. They sent much-needed relief goods, money, and many times they even came themselves in the form of work crews and

volunteers of every variety. And when people had neither time nor money to give, they sent their thoughts, prayers, and much-appreciated words of encouragement to citizens of Louisiana who struggled to rebuild their world. For all these efforts – past, present and on going – we say merci beaucoup.

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On August 29, 2005, Katrina struck the Gulf Coast with terrifying force. Thousands of people fled before the storm's fury, evacuating inland. While many landed in Baton Rouge, doubling the city's population overnight, a large number ended up in smaller towns across the state. Main Street communities such as Ruston, St. Martinville, Hammond, Ponchatoula, Winnsboro, Plaquemine, Houma, Bastrop, Columbia, and New Iberia, among others, soon found their populations swelling as well.

spheres proved invaluable as they helped coordinate efforts to place needed items like soap, shampoo, and food in the hands of those who left home believing they would be away for only a night or two. Their knowledge of local property helped those who needed housing and retail space to relocate their businesses. The local Main Street offices often served as job banks as people tried to put normality back into their lives. Their efforts were often astounding.

Bogalusa was the only Louisiana Main Street community to suffer extensive damage to its

heavy wind damage. The town, famed for its surrounding pine forests that feed the paper mill still central to Bogalusa's economy, lost many of those trees during the storm.

Strong winds uprooted or snapped large swaths of timber and hurled the trees into buildings, destroying or damaging homes and bringing down power lines. The downed trees also formed a barricade across roads, blocking access to and from the city and delaying both emergency response vehicles and work crews. Telephone and electric lines were tangled and snarled in the debris, and cellular service was spotty because many of the area's cell towers were either overloaded or wind damaged.

The wind and the trees it brought down caused the worst damage in Bogalusa's residential sections and in the downtown. Signs and roofs were hard hit. In one positive instance, the wind literally peeled an aged metal slipcover from a building, revealing an intact brick façade that had been hidden for decades.

Eventually, roads were cleared, electricity and other services were restored and the monumental task of cleaning up began. Debris was hauled away, and roofs were patched, first with the ubiquitous blue tarps that became too familiar a sight in south Louisiana and later with more permanent repairs as work crews and materials became available. Two years later, the town is still marked with bare spots where trees once stood, but growth is coming back and few blue tarps remain. It will take time.

In April 2006, Bogalusa hosted a **Your Town** workshop sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the State University of New York and Louisiana Main Street. From that workshop came the idea to build a walking trail linking the town's parks and senior center with

the downtown and celebrating the natural beauty of the area. In addition, a planned highway expansion of LA- 21 will bring growth to the town from surrounding areas, helping turn it into a visitors' destination.

While many of the buildings in town have been repaired, others are still in the process of rebuilding. Many of the older downtown businesses have closed their doors, their owners either unable or unwilling to return. Other businesses have begun to take their places, but Bogalusa still has a long way to go for a full recovery.

NEW ORLEANS

At the time of the storms, there were no urban Main Street programs in Louisiana. Louisiana Main Street dealt strictly with communities with populations of 50,000 or less. With Louisiana Main Street's excellent track record as an economic development mechanism throughout the state, a decision was made to develop urban Main Street districts to aid with the New Orleans recovery efforts. Out of the application process, four districts were chosen; Oak

“Oak Street was and after the storm

Street, North Rampart Street, St. Claude Avenue, and Oretha Castle Haley Boulevard.

Oak Street

Oak Street was once the main commercial corridor for the city of Carrollton before it was annexed by New Orleans. Oak Street's damage during the storms came not from water or wind but rather from looters. As one of the closest commercial corridors to the city center that did not flood, it was a prime target for looting. Because of the lack of water and wind damage, however, merchants were able to re-open fairly quickly.



Bogalusa was the only Main Street community to suffer extensive damage to its downtown during Katrina. While the town did not suffer the flooding that occurred further south, it did experience heavy wind damage.

In these towns, the Main Street offices acted as a central hub for evacuees and the Main Street manager coordinated the local efforts. Their abilities to work with diverse organizations from the civil, social, religious, and governmental

commercial district during Katrina. Hurricane Rita, weeks after Katrina, cut a path of destruction throughout southwestern Louisiana, hitting many of the communities, such as Abbeville and New Iberia, that were housing Katrina evacuees. Luckily their downtown historic districts were spared.

BOGALUSA

Bogalusa, a paper mill town located in Washington Parish, was hard hit by Katrina. While Bogalusa did not suffer the water damage that occurred further south, it did experience

“Our merchants are also our residents,” explains Marilyn Kearny, the district’s Main Street manager. “They had a tremendous incentive to get their businesses up and running as the need for goods and services was so great.” Because Oak Street’s businesses were all locally owned and operated, there was little corporate bureaucracy involved in re-opening them.

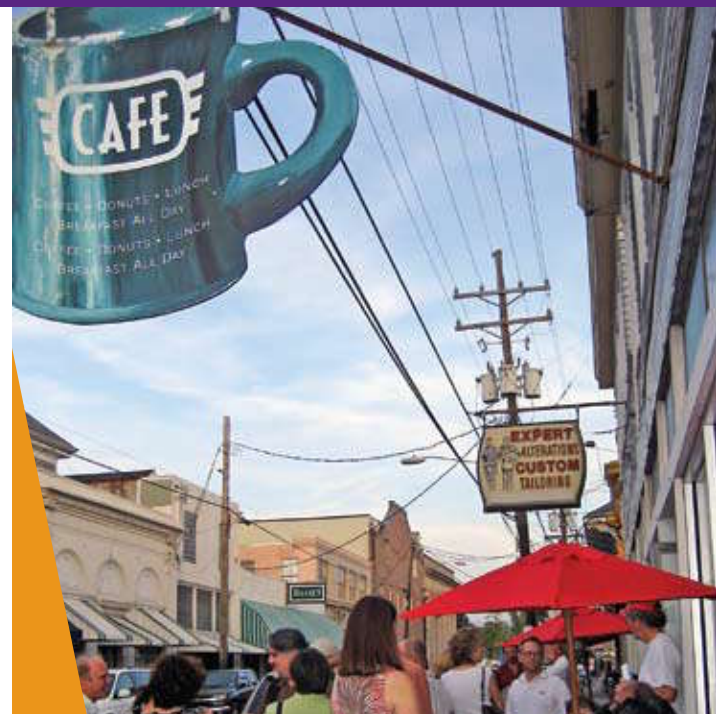
One of the big milestones Kearney credits for the continuing development of the street was becoming a designated Main Street District in 2006. “We had reached a point where we couldn’t move forward without help. I think without the program, we would have just stagnated,” she says. “Oak Street was designed as a classic Main Street and after the storm it returned very easily to its roots. The Main Street program’s philosophy and guidelines as well as the networking opportunities and services it provides were a perfect fit for us.” And things are certainly thriving on Oak Street.

This past November Oak Street hosted the first ever Po-Boy Preservation Festival as a part of **Louisiana Main to Main: A Cultural Roadshow**, a

tended. The festival featured po-boys from some of the city’s most famous restaurants, and judges gave out the “Golden Loaf Awards” for the best tasting po-boys ranging from roast beef to oysters and everything in between. Live music was played and, as it was a Saints game day, a beer garden with a large-screen television was set up so no one had to choose between football and the best po-boys in New Orleans.

The festival, in addition to serving wonderful food and providing lots of entertainment for participants, raised awareness of the district both as a tourist destination and as a place for businesses to relocate. The Main Street office has received many calls from potential business owners and is currently planning a market study so it can determine which businesses would best fit into the district’s already eclectic mix of established businesses.

Before Katrina, Oak Street was slated to receive a streetscape renovation. This project was put on hold as funds were focused on the more heavily damaged areas of the city. Now,



The Oak Street district in New Orleans suffered more from looters than from wind or water damage after Katrina. Because all of its businesses are locally owned, merchants had a tremendous incentive to get back up and running. The district’s designation as one of New Orleans’ Main Street districts (above) has been a major factor in improving the district, which has held numerous events, including a wine and cheese tasting (top) and its first-ever Po-Boy Preservation Festival last November (center).

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statewide initiative of Louisiana Main Street sponsored in part by a grant from Preserve America. “When we announced that we were holding the first ever Po-Boy Preservation Festival, people were shocked that there wasn’t a festival celebrating the po-boy already in existence.” Kearny explains with a laugh. “We never expected it would be so popular.”

The festival was held along the 8100-8300 blocks of Oak Street between S. Carrollton Avenue and Cambronne Street and was wildly popular. In the six hours the festival lasted, more than 10,000 people at-

however, the Oak Street streetscape project, which will refurbish the cobblestones rather than paving over them and will include landscaping, is back on track and work is scheduled to begin in the summer of 2008.

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Well over a hundred years old, the St. Roch Market (below left) suffered extensive damage during Katrina. The city plans to rehabilitate the market to serve as an economic engine that will reinvigorate the St. Claude commercial corridor. Meanwhile, houses in the surrounding neighborhoods are being cleaned and repaired (below right) as residents return to the area.



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St. Claude Avenue

St. Claude Avenue is located in the Upper Ninth Ward, parts of which flooded during Katrina. While the damage was not as devastating as in the Lower Ninth Ward, the area did suffer severe damage. The Upper Ninth was flooded by levee and floodwall failures near the Desire Neighborhood, across the Industrial Canal from the junction with the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet. Water also flowed into the area from the London Avenue Canal failures. The St. Claude commercial corridor serves the historic neighborhoods of Bywater, the lower Marigny, and St. Roch.

In the St. Claude district, the main commercial corridor had mixed-use development with houses sitting alongside businesses. The businesses in this area traditionally served the local residents and were hard hit as their customer base shrank. One of the key losses in the St. Claude neighborhoods was the loss of the local grocery store. While this grocery store has not yet been replaced, a local farmer's market has sprung up to serve residents in the area.

Houses are being cleaned and repaired, both in the surrounding neighborhoods and in the

St. Claude Avenue Main Street district. "For Sale" and "For Lease" signs on newly renovated buildings are appearing as work continues.

The St. Claude Avenue Main Street district continues to improve as residents return. Home to the historic St. Roch Market, the nationally recognized Barrister's Gallery, Farrington Smith Gallery, l'art Noir New Orleans, the internationally acclaimed YA/YA arts studio, and monthly art shows and markets in nearby Bywater, the St. Claude Avenue Main Street district is developing an arts/destination cluster to attract locals and tourists alike. St. Claude Avenue has also been working heavily with the Green Project to attract green businesses and to encourage consideration of environmental impact as they continue to rebuild and grow.

North Rampart Street

Home to Louis Armstrong Park, Congo Square, and the Tremé neighborhood, North Rampart Street is a district rich in history. Located just three blocks from famous Bourbon Street, North Rampart is the gateway to the French Quarter, and the North Rampart Main Street program is working to

offer a family-friendly taste of the rich New Orleans culture through festivals and events like the RampART arts and music festival and a partnership with the annual Satchmo Summerfest.

During Katrina, half of this district flooded and all of the district received heavy wind damage. When asked about the greatest challenge faced by North Rampart in a post-Katrina New Orleans, Bari Landry-Vaz, the district's Main Street manager replies, "Our most difficult issue to deal with was actually getting noticed. Because our flooding was minor and our main damage came from wind, we were very low on the repairs lists."

This is slowly changing. North Rampart's 2007 Christmas present came when the district found out that its streetlights and traffic signals are now scheduled for repair. North Rampart Main Street has also begun working with the landscapers of KaTREEna to create a plan to replace all of the lost trees and plants in the district. A list of fund-raising events is planned for 2008 to enable North Rampart Main Street to buy the needed trees and plants.

Before the storm, North Rampart was run down with many empty and abandoned buildings. Now, not only are

people starting to move back and open businesses, but the district itself is being recognized.

"In addition to reopening the Voodoo Bar, we have also added a new wine bar and the Vieux Carre Property Owner and Residents' Association has opened its new offices on North Rampart," says Landry. "In addition, the city is now sending people who want to open businesses to us and is recommending us as a good prospect. It is great to be recognized."

The district is also getting noticed as the name North Rampart gains district recognition. One of the new cafés in the district is named North Rampart Café, and St. Marks United Methodist Church, which received a façade grant for repairs from Louisiana Main Street, renamed its newly renovated community center The North Rampart Community Center. Not only does this recognize the district but it helps reinforce a sense of community that many people from the area had lost.

As a part of **Louisiana Main to Main**, North Rampart Main Street hosted RampART in November 2007. It was an all-ages event with locals and tourists mingling in Louis Armstrong Park. Located in the center of the district, the park served as the location despite the fact that its back recesses still contain up to two feet of stagnant water and there is no electricity. "We just brought our own generators," recalls Landry. "And we blocked off the back of the park. Until it can be fixed, that's all we can do."

The RampART event was a great success and plans are already being laid to make it an annual festival for the district, expanding as more of Louis Armstrong Park becomes usable.



Oretha Castle Haley Boulevard

Located in Central City, O.C. Haley Boulevard aspires to be a cultural corridor that can spotlight the rich African and Caribbean influences of New Orleans. O.C. Haley is home to the Ashe Cultural Arts Center, Zeitgeist, and Café Reconcile as well as being the future home of a jazz club/art space currently being created in a historic building undergoing renovation on the corner of O.C. Haley and Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd.

While this area did not flood during Katrina, it did suffer wind damage. When O.C. Haley Boulevard became a Main Street District in 2006, there were 23 vacant buildings among the 50 listed properties and only nine first-floor retail spaces. This is slowly changing.

Handelman's Department Store has been renovated into low-income elderly housing on the upper floors with ground-floor retail space. This addition to the neighborhood was welcome as many of the city's older inhabitants lost their homes in the storm and were having a hard time finding affordable housing.

Non-Profits Central, an initiative of the Louisiana Associa-

tion of Nonprofit Organizations (LANO), currently occupies the first floor of the building. This center formed after the storm to assist the struggling smaller nonprofits of New Orleans as they returned. It serves as a clearing-house for nonprofits and works to match needs with resources. Out of this center grew the Unified Nonprofits group that meets monthly to discuss the ongoing and upcoming issues of the community.

The Central City Renaissance Alliance is located on the second floor of the district's Masonic Hall. In addition, the Community Resource Center is expected to open in July. This center will have a café offering wireless networking capabilities for locals and will also house the City Office of Recovery Management. A Civil Rights Museum is being developed in the Myrtle Banks School Building; and in 2009, Good Work Networks plans to open a retail incubator, which will greatly increase the number of com-

mercial ventures on the street.

Clear Head Learning Center, the first daycare center to open up after Katrina, is planning an expansion. Currently, its capacity is approximately 75 children. The upcoming expansion will enable the daycare center to accept up to 100 more kids. Hope Credit Union, located on O.C. Haley Boulevard continues to work with business and homeowners in the community to obtain recovery loans and encourage revitalization.

"In the next 18 months, we should have about six new businesses on the boulevard," says the district's Main Street manager, Lynette Colin. "Keep watching, things are certainly changing."

Change is definitely in the air in Louisiana as the state works toward recovery and rebuilding. Great effort is being made to preserve the features that make each of these hard-hit areas unique, while at the same time new ways of thinking are being woven into the tapestry,

blending old and new to form a stronger whole. Locally owned businesses are returning to places they formerly occupied and new businesses are starting to open. Residences are being repaired, renovated, or rebuilt as people return and receive the funding needed to move forward.

The road to full recovery is long and one that must often be walked in small steps. As with any Main Street initiative, there are no large-scale quick fixes. But in Louisiana, the path to recovery from one of the three worst natural disasters in the nation's history has well and truly begun.

Valerie Gaumont is an architectural historian with the Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation. She has been with the Division for four years and currently works as the Louisiana Main Street Marketing Coordinator and the Coordinator of the Certified Local Government Program. Both her Bachelor's and Master's degrees are in the field of Historic Preservation.

North Rampart Street is the gateway to the French Quarter. Its Main Street program is working to offer a family-friendly taste of New Orleans culture through events such as the RampART arts and musical festival held in Louis Armstrong Park (below left). A rich cultural corridor that can spotlight the African and Caribbean influences of New Orleans, O.C. Haley Boulevard has also held musical events as part of the Louisiana Main to Main: A Cultural Roadshow (below right).

