

*The Plan Book Drawings of the
New Orleans Notarial Archives: Legal
Background and Artistic Development*

SALLY K. REEVES

THE NEW ORLEANS Notarial Archives was created by an act of the Louisiana State Legislature in 1867. It is the only notarial archives in the United States, Louisiana being the nation's only civil law (as opposed to common law) state. The Archives bears similarities to those repositories of notarial records found in other civil law jurisdictions such as Quebec, Mexico, France, or Spain. The following article traces the origin and development of this unusual genre of architectural and topographical drawings, and explains their context within the civil law notarial system of New Orleans.

Notarial acts in civil law jurisdictions are in essence contracts between living people or officially recorded declarations by individuals. In New Orleans, these contracts include sales of real property or of slaves, mortgages, leases, building and marriage contracts, wills, procurations, emancipations, business incorporations, family meetings, meetings of creditors, and so on. There are also numerous maritime documents, including captains' protests after mishaps at sea, sales of every kind of vessel, 'bottomry' bonds, and charter parties. The office holds the records of some 6,000 Orleans

SALLY K. REEVES is archivist in the Notarial Archives in New Orleans. This paper was presented at the semiannual meeting of the American Antiquarian Society at The Arsenal on April 22, 1995.

Copyright © 1995 by American Antiquarian Society

Parish notaries whose acts date from 1731 to the present. The total holdings consist of over 37,000 volumes containing about 35,000,000 pages of original textual and visual materials (c. 26,500 linear feet). The office continues to grow, having received over 58,000 new acts and bound over 400 books last year (1994).

The collection includes approximately 240,000 pages of colonial period (pre-1803) records. New Orleans was founded on behalf of the French government and the Company of the Indies by the Canadian explorer and military officer Jean Baptiste LeMoyne de Bienville in 1718. Forty-five years later, following the defeat of the French in Canada in the Seven Years' War, the French king donated the Louisiana colony to his Spanish Bourbon cousin. The Spanish effectively governed the colony from 1768 until 1803, when they gave it back to France, and twenty days later, Napoleon sold Louisiana to the United States.

Records in the Notarial Archives from the French period date from 1731 to 1768 and are scattered, limited to about 7,000 pages. Still, they include sales of property and slaves, procurations, petitions, leases, inventories of estate, and some wills and marriage contracts, all of which illuminate daily life in this elusive period. Spanish period documents date from 1768 to 1803, and amount to about 235,000 pages with every kind of act. Nineteenth-century volumes amount to about 4,500,000 pages of which roughly a third are in French. Nearly all of the rest of the acts are in English, with a smattering in German and Italian.

DESCRIPTION AND UNDERLYING VALUES OF CIVIL LAW NOTARIAL PRACTICE

The civil law notary is a highly trained professional who transcribes into documentary language the agreements or individual declarations of parties who appear before him. The notary then functions as an archivist of the document he creates. The notary is a semipublic official whose signature to a document guarantees the identity of appearing parties, along with the authenticity of

their agreements and the genuineness of their signatures. Unlike the modern attorney representing the interests of one side in a transaction, the traditional notary is a disinterested third party who represents both sides. He makes sure that the contracts he witnesses are neither onerous (unfair to one side) nor vague, which would make them subject to litigation later. In doing so, he uses a generous amount of what today we might consider 'boiler plate,' but which the French called 'les formulaires'—stock phrases that really represent the wisdom of centuries distilled into a formula. In trying to ensure that acts were flawless and thus not prone to be litigated later, the law set itself up as a benign influence that promoted stability in society, championed the family, and provided a secure and inexpensive framework for citizens to conduct their private business. They used the notarial act to ascertain and give permanent evidence to their rights. They could count on that evidence because the act bears on its face all that is needed for a legal contract. It also gives evidence to the accidents of its preservation, in that it falls chronologically in the notarial book which has been subject continuously to public scrutiny. Thus private law could proceed without the intervention of 'meddling lawyers.' Indeed, the notarial system tended to obviate the need for numerous lawyers in the colony, and militated against the litigious society.

There was litigation, of course, but it is not reflected in notarial acts. The Archives is in the courthouse, but does not function to preserve adversarial-style court proceedings. Notarial acts involving more than one party are invariably amicable agreements. They represent what functions in society, not what malfunctions.

Notarial acts also generally reflect relationships between private parties, not between the individual and the state. For this reason, the Archives does not hold permits, licenses, or other records that show a hierarchical relationship between parties. If the state appeared in a notarial record, it would be as a contracting, thus equal, party to the act.

THE NOTARY AS ARCHIVIST

By law, the notary had a serious obligation to preserve his acts indefinitely. As a precaution against fire, he had to locate his *étude* or office in a brick building with a tile roof. He had to bind and conserve his acts and plans in chronological order within prescribed intervals and make them available for public inspection during regular hours. He also had exclusive right to make 'true' or authenticated copies from his acts, the intellectual concept for which derives from medieval times.

Before 1867 the New Orleans notary achieved a certain permanence by officially passing his records down to a commissioned successor in office. After 1867, Louisiana law provided for the Notarial Archives to function as the preserving agent, authorizing the custodian to demand and retain the complete works of deceased or retired notaries. Over the years the various safeguards in the system provided for the survival of the collection that exists today in spite of war, political change, and Louisiana's damp, insect-infested, flood- and hurricane-prone environment.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PLAN BOOK COLLECTION

Perhaps the most treasured documents that the notaries preserved were the watercolor surveys kept in their Plan Books. Some 5,200 of these oversized, 'engineer's scale' (approximately 1 inch to 23 feet) nineteenth-century architectural drawings and plot plans have survived in the collection. The collection itself dates from 1803 to 1918, with seventy percent of the drawings falling between 1830 and 1860. Individual drawings average just over 38 inches long by something over 24 [.27] inches wide. A few are as small as 1.5 by 2 feet, and a number are in the range of 10 feet by 6 feet. The largest is over 25 feet long and 5 feet wide. The drawings were signed and dated by trained civil engineers and surveyors and an occasional architect. They are the visual products of lot surveys, usually drawn to scale and measured down to the 'line,' an eighth part of an inch. The drawing grounds were

frequently rendered in heavy watercolors, hues of light or deep pink, bright blues, yellows, corals, and greens. The buildings illustrated were painted and detailed in an attempt to show exact sizes, shapes, materials, colors, siting, and floor plan or roof massing.

This attempt at authenticity was a function of the drawings' provenance. They were usually created for public notice, to advertise judicially-ordered sales. The notice attracted bidders to ensure that properties sold at fair market value, which would—in accordance with the underlying principles of civil law—promote the stability of society by protecting the rights of multiple owners, women, minors, heirs, or creditors.

A week or so after the winning bidders were 'adjudicated' at the auction, the buyer and seller executed an authentic act of sale at a specified notary's office. At that time the notary took the plan used to advertise the sale and 'deposited it in his office,' to make it part of his permanent archives. Sometimes he also signed and dated or *paraphed* it to identify the visual material with the corresponding act. He did all of this to provide permanent tangible proof that the properties had been duly advertised before being sold; to clarify title; and because the rules of civil procedure mandated that both the buyer and the seller were bound by what had been advertised. There was an old formulary in French acts that always stated after the property description that the buyer had *vu et visité la propriété à son loisir*, in other words, had viewed and visited the property at his leisure and therefore needed no further description. The realistic drawings, displayed over the course of weeks at public gathering places, provided a way to view the property at leisure in a busy world. But their subsequent filing in the notary's plan books converted the documents into contractual evidence.

The oversized 'Plan Books' continued to be preserved in the notarial *études* until the Notarial Archives was founded in 1867 or until the late nineteenth-century notaries died or retired. As a result of these historical events, the Notarial Archives has a collection the likes of which we have searched in vain to find a dupli-

cate. Why did the custom of making drawings such as this grow up in New Orleans during the nineteenth century and not elsewhere? The answer seems to lie in our civil law background, where clues to the evolution of third-party notice have been around since legal scholars first began to study and analyze Louisiana's colonial records during the early twentieth century.¹

It seems that the notion of giving third-party notice before a sale came to Louisiana with the French at the turn of the eighteenth century. At that time the founders were heir to a legal system that drew partly on written Roman law as codified by Justinian in the sixth century and filtered through medieval times to central Europe and partly on Germanic custom. During the seventeenth century the great French jurist Jean Domat began to systematize and unify Roman rules, royal ordinances, and Frankish customs as they applied in France, and he was followed during the eighteenth century by Robert Pothier, who contributed to the development of civil procedure.² By 1731, when the French Colonial period holdings begin at the Archives, documents show that the notion of third-party notice was so regularized and well developed that one suspects it either had been evolving for a long time, or was based on an exact ordinance that was itself a product of systematized law. In order to sell property in New Orleans, an eighteenth-century land or slave owner had to apply to the *commissionnaire ordonnateur* of the Superior Council for permission. That permission had to be in writing, and the signed and dated document had to be attached to the act of sale. And if the *ordonnateur* did give permission, it was generally conditioned on 'observing the usual formalities.' Only rarely, because of some special waiver, was permission granted without the formalities.³

1. See, for example, Henry Plauché Dart, 'A Judicial Auction Sale in Louisiana, 1739,' *Louisiana Historical Quarterly* 8:3 (July 1925), 382-88.

2. A. N. Yannopoulos, *Louisiana Civil Law System Coursebook, Part 1* (Baton Rouge, La., 1977), 18.

3. For example, sale of property, Meunier to Lefevre, Henri, notary, January 19, 1738. French series 2:9273-76.

One wonders if this was an overly paternalistic society. What business was it of the *ordonnateur* that a property owner, even in a colony, should want to sell his house or his lot? Did the government really need to control the people's business at such a level? It seems that only in analyzing the 'usual formalities' part can we put these questions into a better historical perspective. The permits and formalities were functioning as a property registration and third-party notice system. In the absence of a recordation office, these would protect other landowners if the seller did not have true title. They would also uncover any debts he might owe on it. If a landowner's property was mortgaged, he could still sell it, but the encumbrance had to go with it.

The 'usual formalities' consisted in having the *greffier*, a court official, provide for an elaborate public notice procedure which he conducted in a precise manner. On three consecutive Sundays, he would post a notice of the sale on the outside of the church door at the hour of high Mass, the one time of the week that everyone could be expected to be in town. In the case of New Orleans, this was the church of St. Louis located on the public square, now Jackson Square. The notice was also posted on the door of the Council, this also being in a building on the square. After posting the notice—what the French called the *affiche*, still the French word for poster—the notary and court officials would wait 'at the bar of the court' on Wednesday from ten a.m. until the candle burned down to a precise level. Anyone who wanted to bid on the property could appear at the office, make his bid, or make opposition to the sale. If someone wanted to cover the bid, he could. This procedure was repeated on three consecutive Sundays of posting followed by three consecutive Wednesdays of receiving. A march through town with the beating of the drums announcing the sale accompanied the program. At the end of the whole process, the *dernier enrichisseur*, or last and final bidder, was the winner. We might note here that a few of those auctions featured some spirited bidding that upped the price significantly.⁴

4. For example, sale Rixner to Petit, April 28, 1762, French series 2:67126-38.

The *proces-verbal*, or written description of oral proceedings, one of the customary attachments to the notarial act, documents the steps taken at the auction. The practice of attaching the *proces-verbal* to acts continued throughout the nineteenth century.

It was from the custom of the *affiche* that the genre of notarial plan book drawings grew in New Orleans. After the onset of American domination in 1803, New Orleans society became more heterogeneous, while at the same time the economy boomed. As the Catholic Church declined as the center of the urban universe, coffee houses, hotels, and merchant exchanges began to take their place as the city's social centers. A new, weekday, commercial venue paved the way for notices more elaborate than the old *affiches* once posted at Sunday Mass. During this period too, European-trained civil engineers from places like the *Ecole Polytechnique* and the *Ecole des Ponts et Chaussées* began to appear in New Orleans in increasing numbers, some as war refugees. These former military engineers were capable of making professional plans and surveys of a type that would serve the city's growing land-based commerce.

One of the earliest and most well known of these surveyors was Barthelemy Lafon, a Frenchman who arrived in New Orleans in 1790 and worked there until his death in 1820.⁵ Lafon designed buildings, surveyed both city and plantation lands as deputy surveyor for the state, laid out towns and *faubourgs*, speculated in land, and dabbled in theater and privateering. His classic French drawing style was spiced with a certain flourish that can be recognized in a moment.

Lafon trained as a civil engineer, one of New Orleans's great early city surveyors, Joseph Pilié, teaching him 'geography, copying, and redrawing . . . plans, maps and drawings.'⁶ Pilié was a pioneer in the creation of the archival drawing collection. Born in Mirabilis, Ste. Domingue, in 1789, he came to New Orleans as a

5. *Historic New Orleans Collection Quarterly* XI:1 (Winter 1993), 10-11.

6. Barthelemy Lafon Contract Book, February 17, 1805 (Mss. #316, Historic New Orleans Collection).

child with his family, escaping the slave rebellion of the 1790s. He apprenticed with Lafon, began making surveys in 1807, taught art and made scenic designs for a decade, and became city surveyor in 1819.⁷ He continued to work as a surveyor either for the city or independently until his death in 1846. Between the Public Library and the Notarial Archives, 327 of Pilié's plans have been catalogued to date—228 of these at the Archives, and more being found all the time.

In all of the *richesse* of Pilié's work, we have few building elevations by him, but notably an 1826 design for the Mariners' Church on Canal Street. He is also credited with the design of Oak Alley Plantation in St. James Parish, built by his wife's relatives during the early 1830s. Pilié's real importance, however, lies in the day-to-day work he did as city surveyor. In the Archives are his drawings for the city's new powder magazine, for a major new levee, for wharves, the French Market, and the St. Mary Market. He laid out lot lines, wrote specifications for city contracts, designed a huge prison, built little bridges, and certified boundaries. His style reflected classic French conservatism—modestly-scaled plans of two to three feet with precise black Roman lettering, soft pink backgrounds, and lots of ground washed in a pale yellow.

About 1819 Pilié seems to have introduced in the city the *indication*, a precisely-articulated roof shape on a topographical plan. The *indication* looks like a monopoly house. While it does not display a façade, it does indicate the building's footprint, and gives us a precise idea of siting, scale, and roof massing. Combined with what we know about New Orleans architecture from this early-nineteenth-century period, we can surmise other details from these drawings. Numerous other surveyors would follow Pilié's lead in providing *indications* for topographical drawings during the following two decades.

In 1823 Pilié also made an important early plan of a complex in downtown New Orleans, providing both elevations and indica-

7. John H. Mahe II and Roseanne McCaffery, *Encyclopedia of New Orleans Artists, 1718-1918*, The Historic New Orleans Collection, n.p. [New Orleans], 1987, 306-7.

tions of the houses, kitchens, and warehouses on the site. Like other archival drawings in the Plan Book collection, this was not a design drawing, not a drawing *for* a building complex, but a drawing *of* a building complex. It was made for an auction, for public notice. Simple as it is, with little façade detail and drawn in the classic school of architectural drawings whose chief aim is to show the effect of light and shadow on building forms, the drawing nevertheless constitutes an important link between the topographical drawing without elevation and the glorious pictorial exercises that were to follow in the 1830s (fig. 1).

With a few exceptions such as the preceding, Joseph Pilié did not reach very far beyond the *indication* in his daily work. But he led the way for others, notably his son Louis H. Pilié, who followed the father as city surveyor and had a long career of his own. Louis H. would live through the coming of age of the Plan Book drawings as a unique genre in New Orleans. In his time, the city filled with talented engineers and surveyors who showed in their drawings not only competence with line and color, but also an obvious love for the objects of their representations.

A good example of the well-developed drawing is found in Plan Book 48, Folio 2. 'PLAN / OF THREE PROPERTIES / THIRD DISTR^T.' SIGNED: 'New Orleans February 25th 1860 / E. Surgi & A. Persac / Civil Engineers / 130 Exchange Alley' (watercolor, ink on paper, 49½' x 24½') (fig. 2).

This drawing contains two separate building elevations, one at the top and another at the bottom. They show three Creole cottages for sale on Frenchmen and Casa Calvo Streets, backed by Peace and Moreau. The top elevation depicts a four-bay Creole cottage with a high, hipped roof and two dormers. Each shuttered opening has a fanlight transom. A sign hanging over the door tells us that the building is Henri's shop. Architectural details such as the transom designs, the brick sawtooth row, and the wrought-iron supports under the overhang suggest that the cottage was probably built during the late 1820s.

At the bottom of the plan is a second elevation of two four-bay,

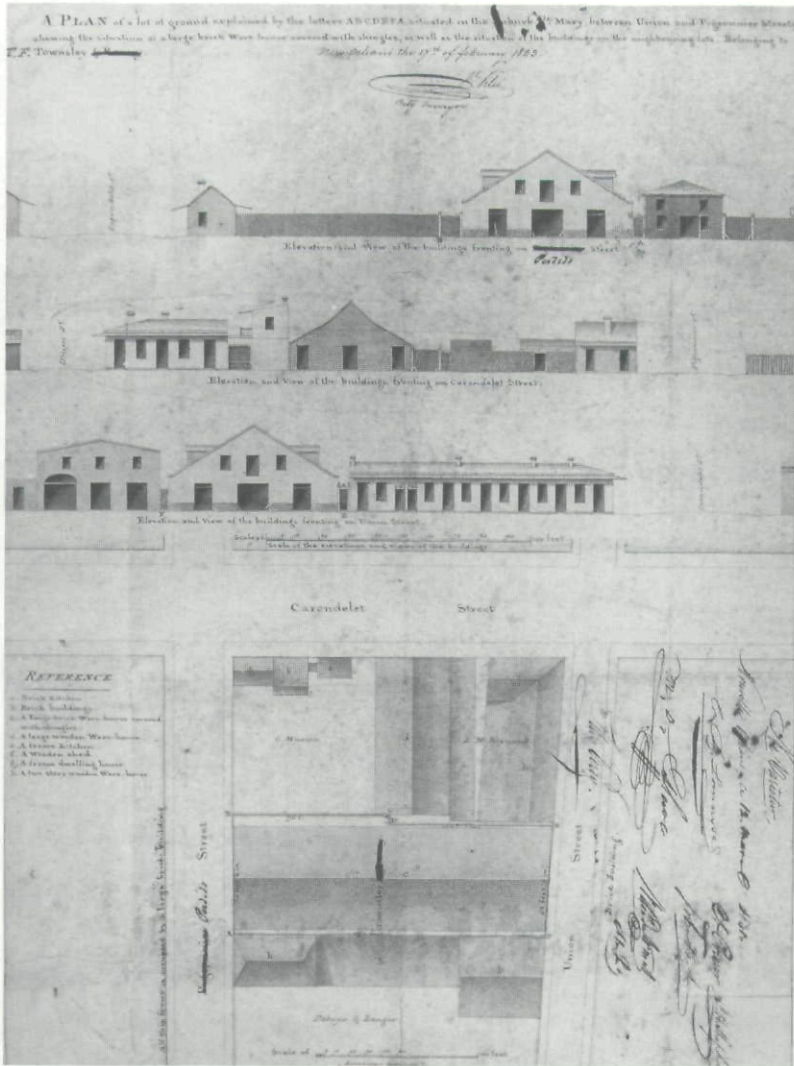


Fig. 1. The earliest known elevation of buildings made to accompany an auction sale in New Orleans showing the early, restrained style of Joseph Pilié, City Surveyor. 'Plan of a lot of ground explained by the letters ABCDEFA . . . showing the situation of a large brick ware-house covered with shingles, as well as the situation of the buildings on the neighboring lots. . . .' / New Orleans the 17th of February 1823 / Jh Pilié / City Surveyor. (Plan attached to act before Felix de Armes, notary, March 12, 1830.) Courtesy, Custodian of Notarial Records, New Orleans, La.

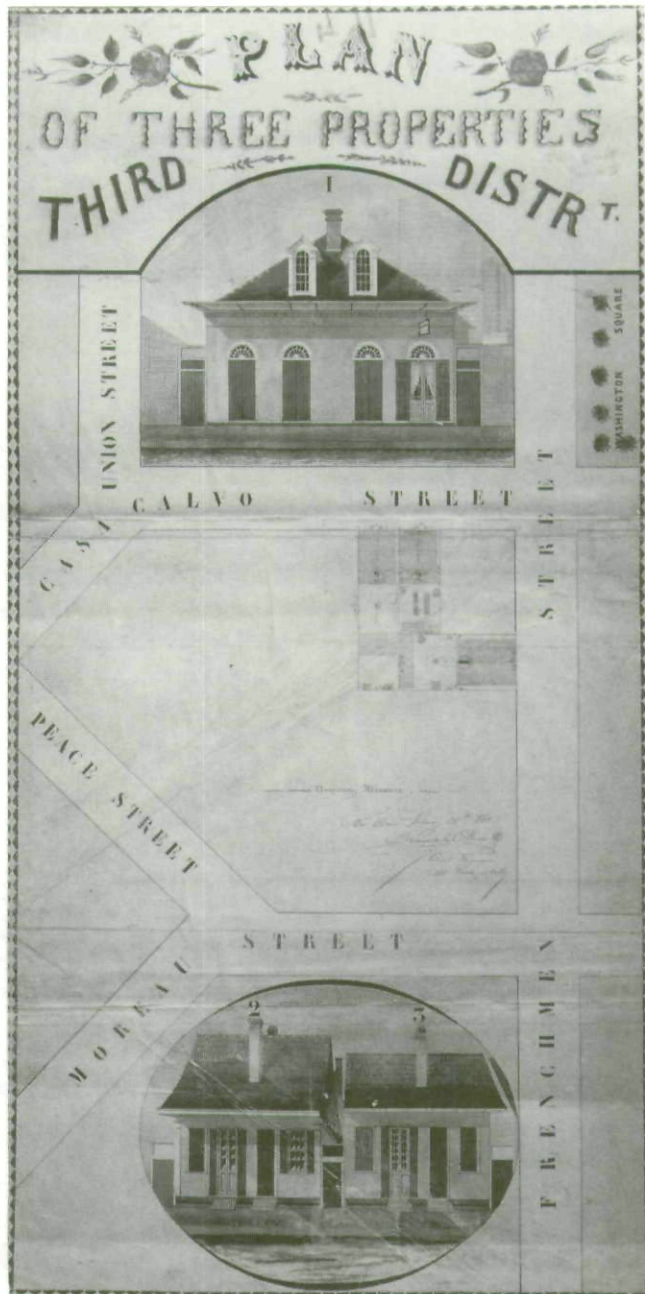


Fig. 2. Plans and elevations of three Creole cottages in the Faubourg Marigny showing the artistic accomplishments of the artist M. Adrien Persac, collaborating with Surgi, the civil engineer. 'Plan of Three Properties / Third Distr' [signed] 'New Orleans February 25th 1863 / E. Surgi and A. Persac / Civil Engineers / 130 Exchange Alley.' Plan Book 48, folio 2, New Orleans Notarial Archives. Courtesy of Notarial Records, New Orleans, La.

gable-sided Creole cottages, less distinguished than the first house. The cottage on lot 3 is the smallest and simplest of the group, and has little façade detail. It probably dates to the 1820s. Lot 2's cottage, judging from the overhang design and pilasters, probably dates to the 1830s.

The site plan in the middle of the drawing shows us that the first house (on lot 1) faces Frenchmen Street in the Faubourg Marigny, an early suburb just downriver from the Vieux Carré. Behind it is a two-story kitchen, along with privies, cistern, a well, and a shed. The smaller houses on lots 2 and 3 face Casa Calvo (now Royal) Street, and have their own kitchens, cisterns, and so on. It should be noted that in all three main house floor plans halls are lacking. This feature is one of the chief characteristics of the early Creole cottage, which typically has four main rooms with interior chimneys, and two rear *cabinets* (small rooms) flanking a recessed *cabinet* gallery. This is a decidedly Creole floor plan, one that contrasts sharply with the side-hall floor plans of American or Anglo designs found in predominantly Anglo neighborhoods and cities.

The collection is full of contrasts between French and American architectural types and styles—stair shapes and locations, roof shapes and visibility, halls and the lack of halls, formal (French) and romantic (Anglo) garden plans; showy (Anglo) and simple (French) entrances, or the location of entrances, front (Anglo) and rear (French). Creoles entered their homes through *porte-cocheres*, 'dog-trots,' exterior side alleys, and interior side alleys. All of these features can be found on various floor plans depicted in the collection.

CIVIL ENGINEERS, SURVEYORS, AND ARTISTS

Eugene Surgi and Adrien Persac, who signed this plan February 25, 1860, were two of the most important creators in this collection. Surgi, a Parisian whose brother Louis was a military engineer for Napoleon, came to New Orleans during the 1830s and with Louis spent a career making plans and industrial designs.

Eugene Surgi would have done the survey work for the lot lines and building dimensions in the sample drawing. His collaborator Persac, on the other hand, was an artist and would have painted the pictures.

Marie Adrien Persac was one of the most accomplished artists represented in the collection. Born in Lyons about 1823, he was active in the New Orleans area as a painter, lithographer, and art teacher from 1857 to 1872. He is best known for his idyllic plantation scenes, and has been described as 'a master of watercolor technique' with great skill in detailing. Persac is respected as an artist in Europe as well as in New Orleans. The Historic New Orleans Collection some years ago purchased from a London dealer a splendid watercolor view of New Orleans's riverfront in 1858, considered Persac's earliest extant work.⁸ It had hung in an office in Paris for many years. The Louvre also has some Persac paintings. The Notarial Archives has thirty-three large Persac drawings. Their distinctive features include masterful detail, complex hues, a sense of lighting, depth, and atmosphere, human figures drawn in to enhance street scenes, and well-labeled floor plans.

Two other surveyor-artists of note in the collection are Pietro Gualdi and Charles de Armas. Gualdi was born in Capri, Italy, in 1808, and died in New Orleans in 1857. He treated his drawings like operatic stage settings, with a sense of drama in the immediacy of the composition and with figures added both for scale and for theatrical effect. Clouds float in the skies—hardly needed to document a property. Shadow lines, which the draftsman would use to indicate depth in brick or framework details, become in the Gualdi drawings indicators of time of day or suggestions of relief from the heat. Charles Arthur de Armas was a Creole born in New Orleans in 1824 to a long line of notaries. He was a French classicist who, like Joseph Pilié, preferred control to drama in his drawings. His works are more linear than painterly, his palette limited, almost subdued. The Archives has 275 of his plans dating

8. *The Historic New Orleans Collection Newsletter*, Vol. VI, No. 4 (Fall 1988).

between July 1848 and December 1867, after which his brother Arthur de Armas completed many more in the same distinctive style, working until 1887. With Persac and Hedin, mentioned below, Charles de Armas may be considered among the top three practitioners represented in the collection. Both de Armas and Gualdi were trained in perspective and capable of creating 'single view' drawings in which the front plane is drawn at an angle to the paper, allowing the viewer to see three dimensions, including the front, a side, and the roof. This is in distinction to the 'orthographic' or right-angle drawing, meaning that the planes of the object depicted are parallel to the bottom and sides of the page, so that one generally sees the front only or the side only.

Graphically speaking, many of the drawings should be described as 'orthographic topographical elevations,' that is, right angle, front plane depictions of buildings already built. As the title portions state, they are plans *of* properties with buildings, not plans *for* properties with buildings. With very few exceptions, these are not design drawings. They show properties after they had been owned and lived in for a generation or two, and the people had died or lost out to creditors. Sometimes, however, they depict speculatively-built cottages such as a row developed on Esplanade Avenue in the 1840s. In this case, the drawing was made for marketing the development and the auction sale was entirely elective. We are still not looking at a design drawing, however. The office does have this type of document, but in the building contract collection.

Persac, Gualdi, and de Armas were only three of many artists who painted the plans and elevations in the collection. We have identified over 133 different signatures on the plans between 1803 and 1918, including that of a free man of color, Norbert Rillieux. The Prussian-born engineer Charles F. Zimpel, known for his fine map making and line drawings, is represented in quite a few plans of the 1830s. Another frequently-found European is Benjamin Buisson (1793-1874), who attended L'École Polytechnique in Paris and became a military engineer in the army of

Napoleon at a tender age, sought a new life in New Orleans after Waterloo, and enjoyed a long and successful second career here as a civil rather than a military engineer. There are several other possibly German representatives with names such as Moellhausen, Engelhardt, Egloffstein, and Schlarbaum. There was a John Schreiber, an Adolph Knell, Cuno Werner, and Ludwig Reizenstein, believed to be the person of that name who became a great innovator in the science of lithography. Some of them seem to have influenced the others to adapt a more painterly style towards mid-century.

It was the Teutonic-sounding Henry Moellhausen, it seems, along with Louis Surgi, who began to escalate the competition during the 1840s and push the genre of drawings to new heights of attractiveness. Moellhausen's plans, with their startling German Gothic and colorful Tuscan title lettering, were perhaps the first to break out of the classic mold followed so stringently by Pilié, de Armas, Zimpel, Allou d'Hemecourt, and others. Not always a great renderer, Moellhausen was adept at making the *toute ensemble* of a drawing attractive to the eye, even if the house it had to sell was of modest value or indeed if there was only a bare lot to sell. Moellhausen and Surgi used a variety of title colors during the 1840s and went beyond the convention of pink and yellow to render backgrounds (fig. 3). Moellhausen was the first to supply little area maps to his drawings, giving the product a readable setting and supplying information about neighborhood amenities. Surgi seems to have pioneered the technique of the *entourage* within the genre, adding engaging little figures like those on the Esplanade Avenue row to his drawings, and generally making them more charming than sober, rather unlike the works of Pilié.

Both Surgi and Moellhausen pointed the way to the work of Carl Axel Hedin, a Stockholm-born artist whose work makes the biggest impact on viewers. We know little of his personal life other than that he was born in 1810 and died in 1858. The Archives has 547 drawings either by his hand or out of his shop dating between January 1846 and May 1866.

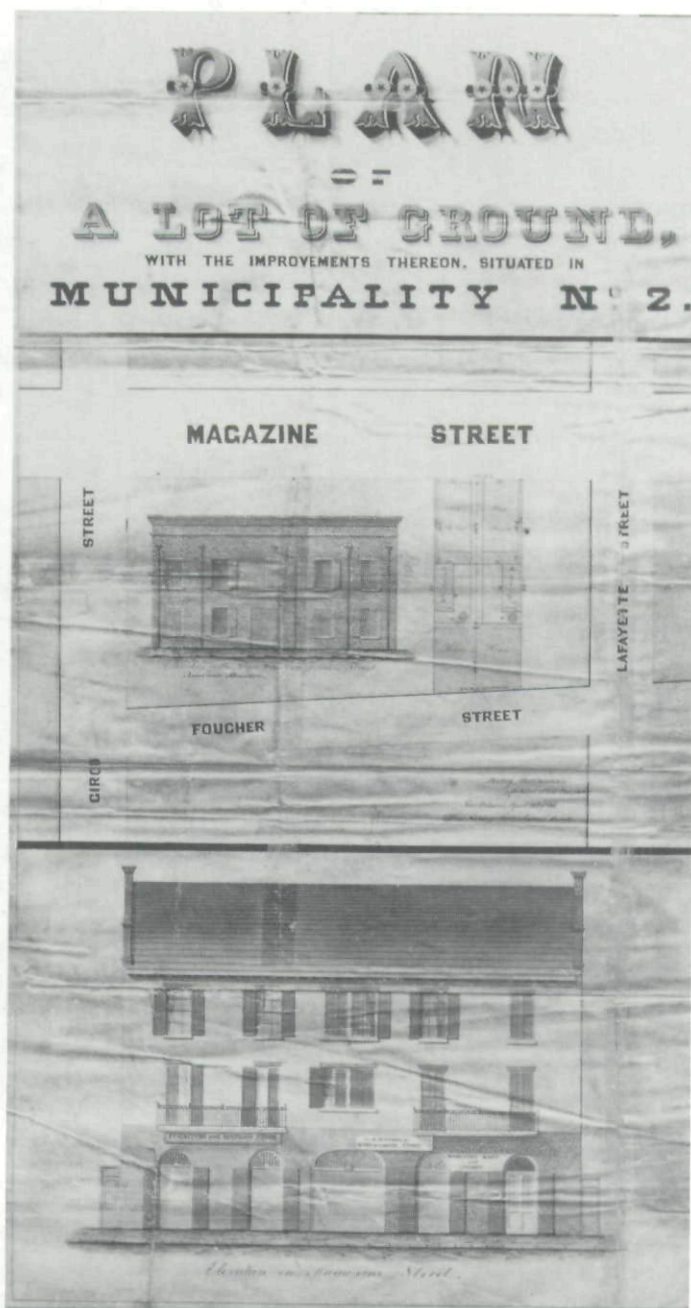


Fig. 3. Elevation by Henry Moellhausen showing the attractive graphic style of title lettering of which he was a leading proponent during the 1840s. [signed] 'Henry Mollhausen / Architect and Civil Engineer / New Orleans April 20th 1846.' Plan Book 25, folio 11, New Orleans Notarial Archives. Courtesy, Custodian of Notarial Records, New Orleans, La.

It was Hedin, perhaps, who brought the genre of civil engineers' plans in New Orleans to its greatest height. While he generally eschewed the single view drawing and ignored or was ignorant of perspective, he developed his orthographic views to their highest potential. Some of his drawings are nothing short of spectacular—tours de force of color, composition, and line. If their purpose was to get and hold the attention of businessmen and shoppers in a crowded, loud hotel rotunda or mercantile exchange, surely they must have succeeded. Hedin used the technique of scale quite effectively to make his points, combining this with an intensity of color and a beauty of form that almost 150 years later can still take one's breath away. His titles alone are an exercise in graphic art, with complex Tuscan-style letters over lines of multicolored Gothic, Clarendon, and Roman (fig. 4). His backgrounds, constructed from a patented azure blue contrasting with intense pinks and yellows, envelop noble buildings of bright red brick or gleaming white wood set in gardens with lush tropical foliage, their stepped Greek Revival cornices set against a brilliant sky. Hedin's area diagrams, no doubt borrowed from Moellhausen and added to provide inducements for buyers, identify such neighborhood amenities as street railway tracks and stops, planked roads, nearby coffee houses, markets, wharves, churches, or schools. If after Moellhausen the genre expanded, after Hedin it was never the same. No one could outdo him.

Hedin worked both by himself and at various times with two partners with German-sounding names, V. Egloffstein and a Mr. Schlarbaum. Like Peter Paul Rubens, he seems to have had a studio where drawings were produced very obviously in his style, but neither signed nor dated. Whether these were by craven imitators or simply out of his *atelier* after his 1858 death, we cannot prove. One hundred and seventy-six plans fall into this category.

After the Civil War, the custom of making the distinctive Plan Book drawings continued without interruption in New Orleans until 1888. That year, one of the greatest plans in the collection, a 99 by 24 inch plantation tract complete with the image of a

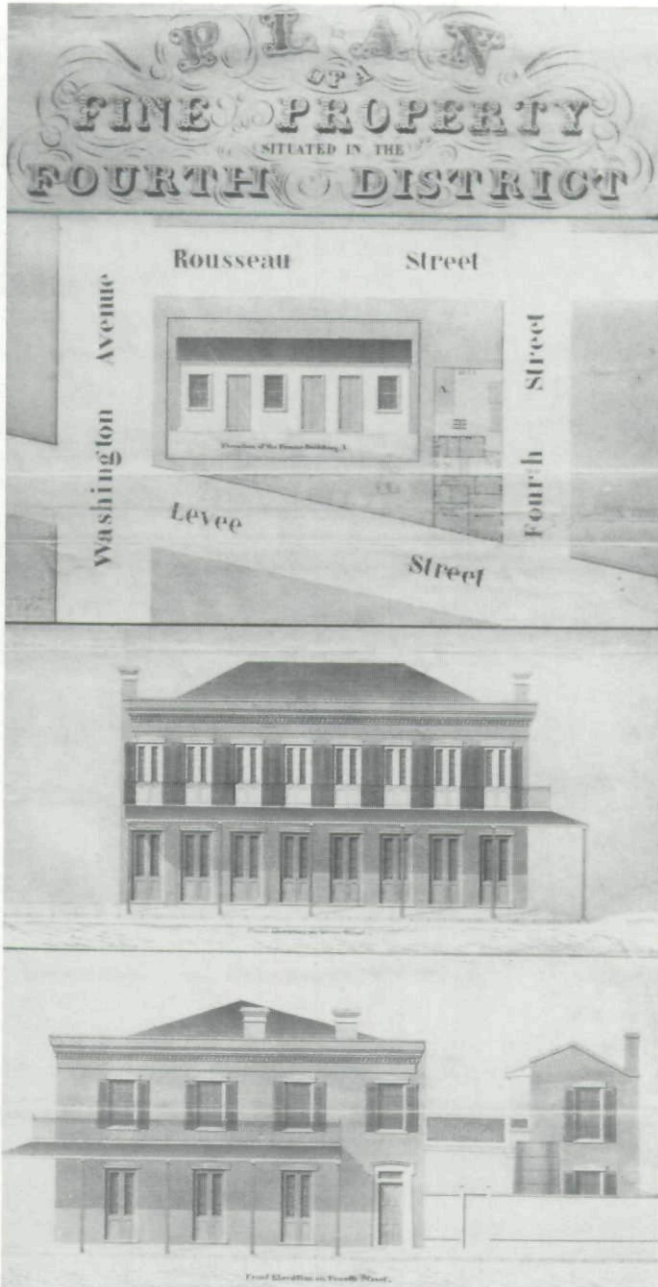


Fig. 4. Elevations of a red brick dry goods store and coffeehouse with dependency, showing attractive lettering and the fully developed style of C. A. Hedin during the 1850s. 'Plan of A / FINE PROPERTY / situated in the / FOURTH DISTRICT' [signed] 'New Orleans March 27th 1853 / C. A. Hedin / Civil Engineer.' Plan Book 49, Folio 11, New Orleans Notarial Archives. Courtesy, Custodian of Notarial Records, New Orleans, La.

raised, circa-1820 manor house surviving amid the subdivision of its own estate, was completed by Arthur George de Armas. After that, two years must elapse before one can count another watercolor in the Plan Book collection, and following this, a decade. In 1901 another drawing appeared—indeed, there are thirteen completed between 1901 and 1918—but the technique had declined, along with the architecture it depicted. Blueprints, Van Dykes, sepias, and various other experiments with diazo now took center stage. Today the bluelines are still filed relentlessly, and we duly process them—but they are more likely to show a zoning proviso for a Wendy's parking lot than they are to show a building. Perhaps it is just as well. The archival drawings were born, grew, and died in one kind of place and time, and both are now gone.

CONCLUSION

While an armchair review of the highlights of this collection focuses attention on the drawings as art, it must be remembered that they are both more and less than that. Most fundamentally, they are legal documents. They reinforce the information in the notarial acts for whose ends they were generated, and the acts do the same. Sometimes they provide the only graphic representation of a lot in an entire chain of title, and every now and again must wake from their legal slumber to reassume for a moment their evidentiary value before retiring to the serene realm of history, art, and architecture.

Evidentiary value aside, the plans offer great potential for historic research. They depict a wide variety of building types, including Spanish colonial and Creole townhouses, Creole cottages and storehouses, Greek Revival and Italianate suburban houses, American-style row houses, granite-front American stores, warehouses, shotgun cottages, markets, street railway depots, kitchens, slave quarters, stables, poultry houses, cisterns, wells, and sheds. Plans with landscaping details may depict recognizable trees and flowering shrubs, walkways, gazebos, fences, little French *parterres*, vegetable gardens, or fruit arbors. Neighbor-

hood amenities will include navigation canals, bridges, and frequently the cars and tracks of street railways. Plans from nearby states stress prominent topographical features such as water frontage, smaller rivers, and bayous. From the neighboring parishes or across the Mississippi River, we may find an occasional, if rare, plantation house. In all, it is an unparalleled resource for the study of architectural history, historic landscape design, graphic arts and color, technological history, social history, city planning, and topography.

Like the city that gave birth to them, the plans came out of European traditions reshaped into something distinct unto New Orleans. The genre evolved in the context of the social and legal culture resting on a traditional Gallic base that was transformed in the currents of America. Perhaps 10,000 of these plans once existed, although the Archives has only half that. In any case, it is clear that without the notarial system of New Orleans, few if any would probably have survived, if they existed at all.

Copyright of Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society is the property of American Antiquarian Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.