



# Greater Gentilly: An Introduction

## Neighborhood Market Area Report

### Where is Greater Gentilly?

Nearly all New Orleanians agree that the area known as Gentilly generally lies between City Park and the Industrial Canal. Within that expanse, however, we find subdivisions built decades apart, each with differing physical, structural, and cultural histories—and distinctive senses of place and identity. Neighborhood geographies—where they are located, what separates them, what they are called—are not absolute facts; rather, they are perceptions held in the minds of residents. There is no “right” or “wrong” answer to the question, “where is Gentilly?” While nearly everyone would agree that beautiful Gentilly Boulevard, with its graceful live oaks and stately homes, forms the iconic heart of Gentilly, few would concur on the area’s precise limits.

Of course, urban plans and statistical analyses demand that we draw “hard lines” on these “soft” perceptual geographies, and this report is no different. What we are calling “Greater Gentilly” includes the official city-recognized neighborhoods of Gentilly Woods, Gentilly Terrace, Dillard, St. Bernard Projects (now under renovation as “Columbia Parc at the Bayou District”), Fillmore, St. Anthony, Milneburg, Pontchartrain Park, Lake Terrace, and Lake Oaks, as well as a small portion of Desire between Gentilly Boulevard and I-10. We consider Gentilly Boulevard to unify Gentilly rather than divide it, and thus use the I-10/610 corridor as the area’s lower boundary. The Industrial Canal, City Park (specifically Bayou St. John), and Lake Pontchartrain bound the area on the east, west, and north. What we are calling “Greater Gentilly” corresponds fairly well to “Planning District 6” used in recent city master planning exercises. It falls in the northwestern quadrant of the vast Third Municipal District, and comprises the bulk of City Council District D. Greater Gentilly, which spans roughly 8.5 square miles, was home to 51,414 people according to the 2000 Census: 37,647 African Americans; 11,786 whites; 1532 of Hispanic ethnicity, and 649 of Asian ancestry.

### Origins and Physical Geography

Greater Gentilly occupies a section of the deltaic plain of the Mississippi River. That plain formed over the last seven thousand years, as the Mississippi River deposited vast quantities of sand, silt, and clay particles into gulf waters and created what we now call southeastern Louisiana. The river’s channel shifted periodically, forming new lobes and new lands throughout the deltaic plain. One such channel flowed down what is now Metairie Road, City Park Avenue, and Gentilly Boulevard; known as the St. Bernard Complex, this deltaic lobe was responsible for creating much of present-day Orleans and St. Bernard parishes, including Greater Gentilly, starting as early as 4,300 years ago and ending as recently as thousand years ago.

Springtime river floodwaters deposited the largest quantities of the coarsest sediments (sand and coarse silt) immediately along the river’s banks, and delivered smaller quantities of silt and clay as that sheet of water flowed away from the river. Over time, this action built up the river’s immediate banks as the highest land (“natural levees,” ten to twelve feet above sea level) on the deltaic plain, while the “backswamp” farthest from the river rose only a foot or so above sea level. Because Greater Gentilly lay two to four miles away from the land-producing Mississippi, it received relatively small amounts of fine-grain (silt and clay) sediment deposition, and thus lay

relatively low in topographic elevation. The newly formed lands of future Gentilly also enveloped a sandy barrier island produced by the Pearl River (along the present-day Louisiana/Mississippi border) that had been nudged western by gulf currents over centuries. This feature, a swath of compacted subterranean sand known as the Pine Island Trend, remains about ten to twenty beneath Greater Gentilly today.

Even after the Mississippi River assumed its present-day channel, a fork located in present-day River Ridge in Jefferson Parish continued to send river water down the present-day Metairie Road-City Park Avenue-Gentilly Boulevard-Chef Menteur Highway corridor. This “distributary,” known in historical times as Bayou Metairie and Bayou Gentilly, continued to build up adjacent lands. For this reason, Gentilly Boulevard is two to three feet above sea level, the highest natural terrain in Greater Gentilly. Northward from this oak-lined fertile ridge were dense cypress swamps (that is, forested wetlands) which petered out into saline marshes (grassy wetlands) near Lake Pontchartrain. Inlets, principally Bayou St. John, transected the landscape, all of which was *above the level of sea*—albeit slightly. This wetlands environment continued eastward and westward, all along the southern shore of Lake Pontchartrain, with little deviation.



The natural environment of Greater Gentilly was utterly transformed by urbanization. The Bayou Metairie-Bayou Gentilly system was cut off from the Mississippi, and its channel filled in gradually, in the nineteenth century. The Industrial Canal, excavated in 1918-1923, severed Orleans Parish in two and separated Gentilly from what we now call New Orleans East. The erection of manmade levees along the Mississippi River and the installation of a sophisticated municipal drainage system (1895-1915) to remove groundwater and rainwater inadvertently robbed the soils of Greater Gentilly of new sediment and ground water, allowing them to subside below sea level. Lakefront levees were built to keep salt water from pouring into the newly formed topographic bowl, and new high land was created along the lakefront to further buffer the area. This latter effort—the Lakefront Project, 1926-1934—created all areas lakeside of Leon C. Simon Drive, comprising the neighborhoods of Lake Terrace and Lake Oaks as well as the present-day campus of the University of New Orleans. These manmade areas, plus Gentilly Boulevard, form the only major residentially occupied land in Greater Gentilly that lay above sea level. All other areas have fallen below sea level, because of human action.

### From Landscape to Cityscape, 1700s-1900s

Indigenous peoples and early French colonials sailed past present-day Greater Gentilly as they entered Lake Pontchartrain and Bayou St. John, seeking a convenient portage to the Mississippi River. That portage—present-day Bayou Road—gave impetus to establish New Orleans at the present-day French Quarter in 1718. Since the earliest days, the high ground following Bayou Gentilly encouraged a small farming community to form along what is now Gentilly Boulevard. Le Page du Pratz, describing the area in the 1710s-1730s, wrote, “A league [two to three miles] behind the town[,] we meet with a Bayouc or creek [Bayou St. John], which can bear large boats with oars. From this creek to the town, a part of its banks is inhabited by planters; in like manner as are the long banks of another creek [Bayou Gentilly]: the habitations of this last go under the name of Gentilly.”<sup>1</sup> Often spelled “Chantilly,” the area gained its appellation because its location on the outskirts of New Orleans recollected the estate of the same name outside Paris.

For the next century, Gentilly remained an outlying farming and dairy community strung out along the Gentilly Ridge (today’s Gentilly Boulevard), providing fresh foodstuffs for the New Orleans market. What prevented full-scale urbanization was the mile of low-lying swampland between the ridge and the natural levee of the Mississippi, where most New Orleanians lived. Some individuals, like the wealthy entrepreneur Alexander Milne, foresaw potential in Gentilly and purchased vast acreages.

What gave those swamplands value came in 1831, when investors, eyeing lucrative opportunities for trading around Lake Pontchartrain and along the Gulf Coast, built the first railroad west of the Appalachians along what is now Elysian Fields Avenue. Suddenly, Gentilly became easily accessible to downtown New Orleans. The Pontchartrain Railroad’s lakefront terminus became Port Pontchartrain, home to the small but vibrant shipping and recreational community of Milneburg (located at the present-day intersection of Elysian Fields Avenue and Leon C. Simon Drive). The following real estate ad, posted by Alexander Milne himself in May 1831, attests to the impact of the newly inaugurated railroad on Greater Gentilly:

*This town [Milneburg] delightfully situated on the border of Lake Pontchartrain, (lately become a port of entry by a law of the United States, under the denomination of port Pontchartrain,) the rail road from the city of New Orleans passing through the centre of it, (...only a ten minutes ride on a locomotive carriage...). The site of this town is beautiful in the extreme, and it possesses many and great advantages, as the whole of the commerce of the lakes with a great part of the*

---

<sup>1</sup> Le Page du Pratz, *The History of Louisiana*, ed. Joseph G. Tregle, Jr. (Baton Rouge, LA, 1976 reprint of 1758 original), 55 and 157

*coasting trade, must [soon] center there... [It is also] a watering place for health and recreation...."*<sup>2</sup>

Port Pontchartrain allowed steam packets to ferry passengers between New Orleans and Mandeville, Biloxi, Mobile, and Pensacola. As a result, visitors by the thousands traversed the still-empty marshes and swamps of what is now Greater Gentilly throughout the nineteenth century. Some left behind descriptions. English geologist Charles Lyell described the Greater Gentilly landscape in 1846 as "swamps in which the tall cypress, hung with Spanish moss, was flourishing, and below it numerous shrubs just bursting into leaf." He described the farms and gardens of present-day Gentilly Boulevard and Faubourg Marigny as having "almond and peach trees...in full blossom[.] the blue-leaved palmetto, and the leaves of a species of iris...were very abundant. We saw a tavern called the "Elysian Fields Coffee House," and some others with French inscriptions."<sup>3</sup> During his tour of the South in 1853-1854, Frederick Law Olmsted encountered a substantially more developed and deforested Greater Gentilly:

*There were many small buildings [at Milneburg], erected on piles over the water—bathing-houses, bowling-alleys, and billiard-rooms, with other indications of a place of holiday resort.... Off we puffed, past the restaurant...through the little village of white houses...into a dense, gray cypress forest. [On] each side of the track, the trees had all been felled and removed, leaving a dreary strip of swamp, covered with stumps.... So it continued, for two or three miles; then the ground became dryer [Gentilly Ridge], there was an abrupt termination of the gray wood; the fog was lifting...disclosing a flat country, skirted still, and finally bounded, in the background, with the swamp-forest. A few low houses, one story high, [with] verandas...were scattered thinly over it.<sup>4</sup>*

That landscape changed little into the early twentieth century. Low-lying elevation--and the resulting high water and organic content of the finely textured soils--precluded urbanization in nearly all areas except for the ridge and lakefront. "Truck farming" (dairy and vegetable farming for local markets) and lakefront recreation continued to account for most of the land use and economic activity at these two peripheral nodes.

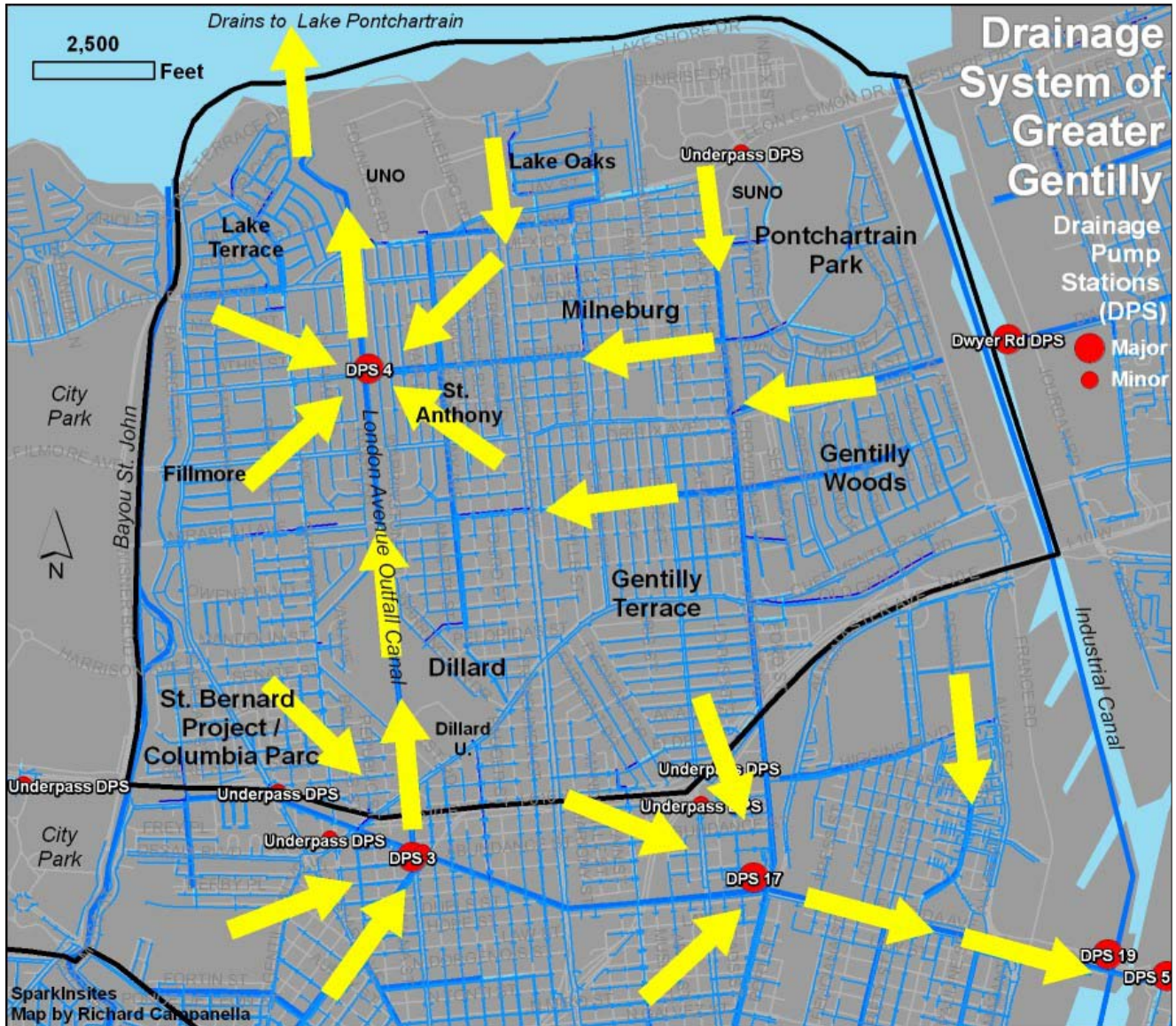
What changed Greater Gentilly's destiny—and that of the entire lakefront half of New Orleans—was the advanced municipal drainage system installed during 1895-1915 and subsequently expanded. The system used natural topography to drain runoff from within New Orleans' various hydrological sub-basins to low points therein, then installed pumps to propel the water through outfall canals and into adjacent lakes. Engineer Albert Baldwin Wood's "screw pump," an enormous impeller that drew water out of the suction basin and into the discharge basin rapidly and efficiently, made the system that much more effective. Greater Gentilly's soggy, water-collecting soils dried out and became value new real estate. A land rush from the old riverside city into the newly drained lakeside wetlands ensued. Assessed property values citywide grew during 1900-1914 by 80 percent, to \$250 million. Death rates plunged as mosquito-infested swamps dried and a new water-distribution system made cisterns obsolete. Progressive Era reforms in city planning and engineering brought New Orleans out of nineteenth-century conditions, and Greater Gentilly was at the forefront of the transformation. The excavation of the Industrial Canal (1918-1923) further defined the area, giving it a hard eastern edge as well as economic opportunities along the new deep-draft waterway lined with private-sector dock space.

---

<sup>2</sup> *New Orleans Bee*, May 13, 1831, p. 2, c. 6.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Lyell, *A Second Visit to the United States of North America*, 2 vols. (New York and London, 1849), 2:90 (page numbers vary on subsequent editions).

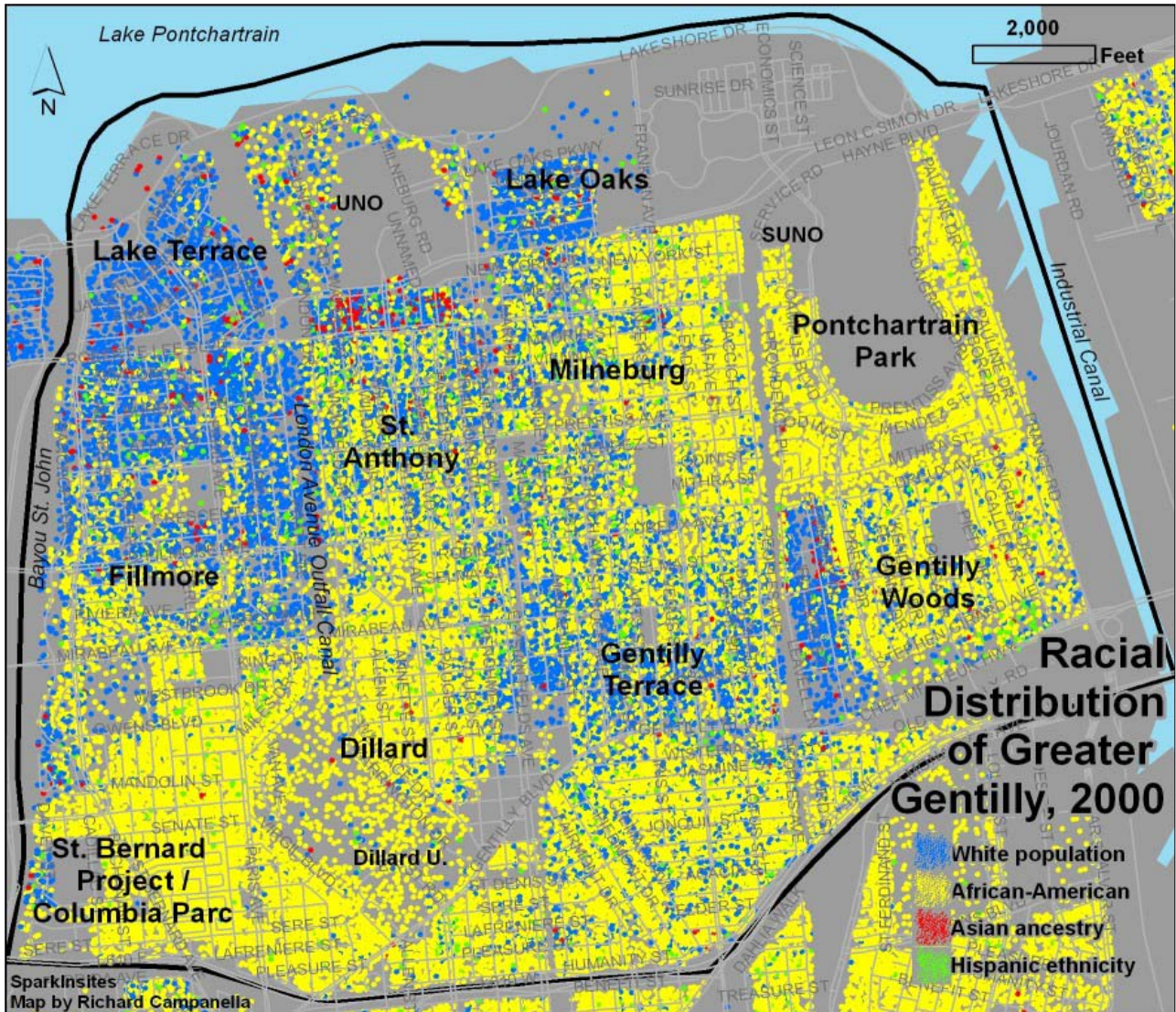
<sup>4</sup> Frederick Law Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom: A Traveler's Observations on Cotton and Slavery in the American Slave States*, 2 vols. (New York and London, 1861), 1:290-91.



Drainage in Greater Gentilly today occurs via two major hydrological sub-basins, plus the fringes of a third basin. Rain falling (or groundwater rising) within the area bounded by the Industrial Canal, Gentilly Boulevard, the lakefront, and the London Avenue Outfall Canal drain, by means of an intricate network of pipes and underground lines, toward Drainage Pump Station (DPS) #4, which lifts and pushes the runoff out the London Avenue Canal and into Lake Pontchartrain. The Fillmore area west of the London Avenue Outfall Canal is also removed in this manner. Areas west and south of Dillard University drain toward DPS #3, which pushes the water northward through the London Avenue Outfall Canal toward DPS #4 and is thence lifted into Lake Pontchartrain. The remaining areas of Greater Gentilly—south of Gentilly Boulevard and west of Elysian Fields Avenue—drain into the Industrial Canal by means of DPS #17 and #19.

## The Modern Neighborhood Emerges, 1900s-2000s

With municipal drainage underway and streetcars and automobiles giving New Orleanians new mobility, the open fields of Greater Gentilly transformed into a cityscape. Gentilly Terrace (1910) became the first of the modern subdivisions in the area. Laid out to emulate the “beautiful residential districts...which have proven so successful in Los Angeles,”<sup>5</sup> Gentilly Terrace was high enough to enable construction 15 to 60 inches above the street grade and to allow for a local version of a basement—or a least a flight of stairs to reach the main floor. Gentilly Terrace today reflects the aim of its creators: the Craftsman-style California bungalows, Spanish Revival homes, and English cottages reflected the aesthetics and aspirations of the Golden State between the world wars, complete with steep-sloped lawns that are all but unknown elsewhere in New Orleans.

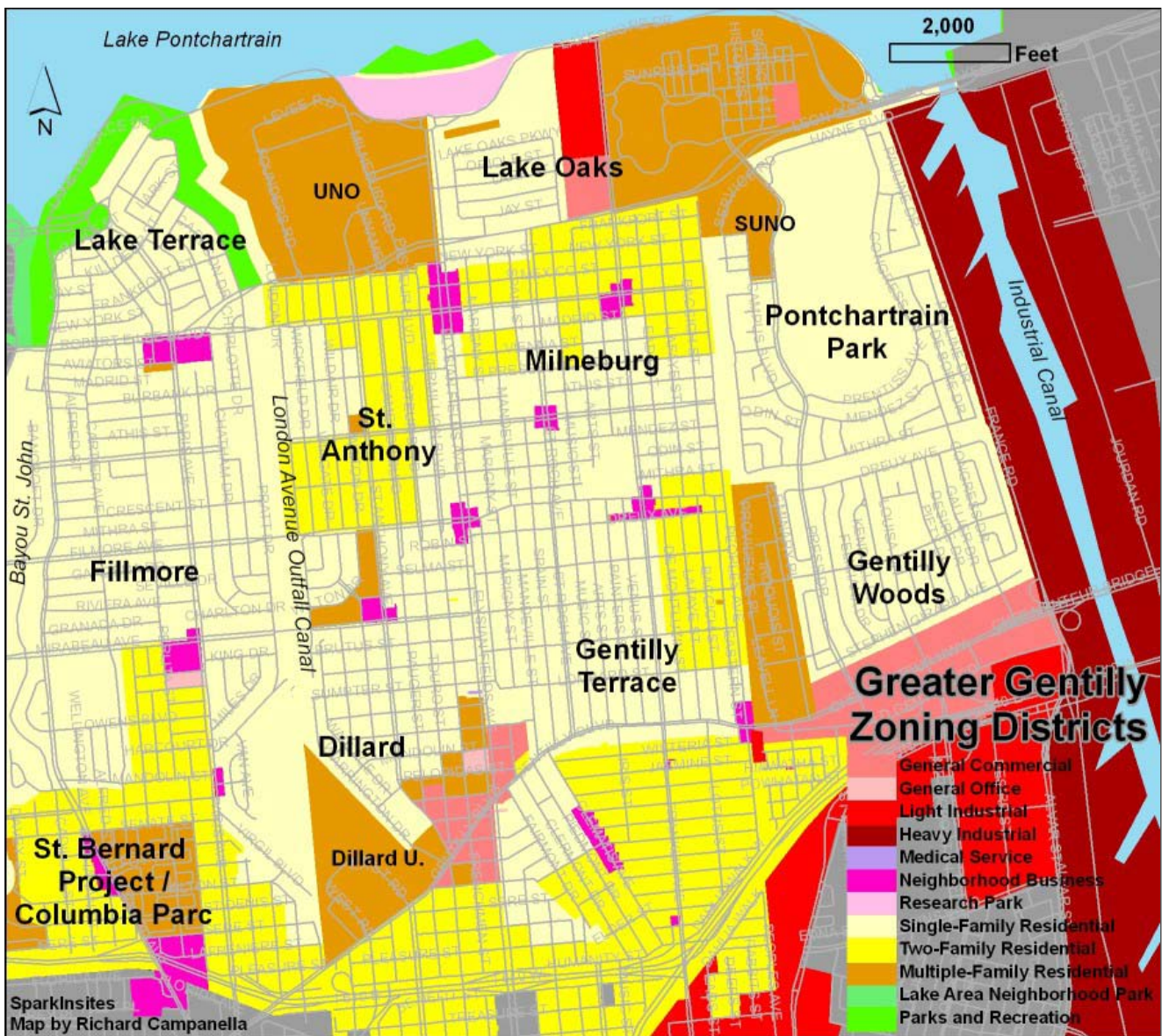


Another population cluster formed in the 1930s westward along Gentilly Boulevard, as Dillard University was established and gave rise to the first major African American neighborhood (Sugar Hill) in the area. Shortly thereafter, the St. Bernard Housing Project opened, also with a black residential population.

<sup>5</sup> “Where Homes Are Built On Hills” (brochure, circa 1910), as quoted in Reiff, Laura, “Gentilly Terrace: ‘Where Homes Are Built on Hills.’” *Preservation in Print* (February 2000), Vol. 27, No. 1, page 27.

Greater Gentilly was poised for a real estate boom. The few remaining nineteenth-century homes disappeared, as did Milneburg itself, on account of the Lakefront Project (1926-1934), which added 1.5 square miles of manmade high ground to Greater Gentilly's northern edge (later home to the Naval Air Station). In 1932, the 101-year-old Pontchartrain Railroad finally ended its service, symbolizing Gentilly's emergence from outlying countryside to urban environment. By World War II, roughly half of Greater Gentilly assumed its present-day appearance, with single-family bungalows and cottages set amid a grid of streets in a design similar to many other American inner suburbs.

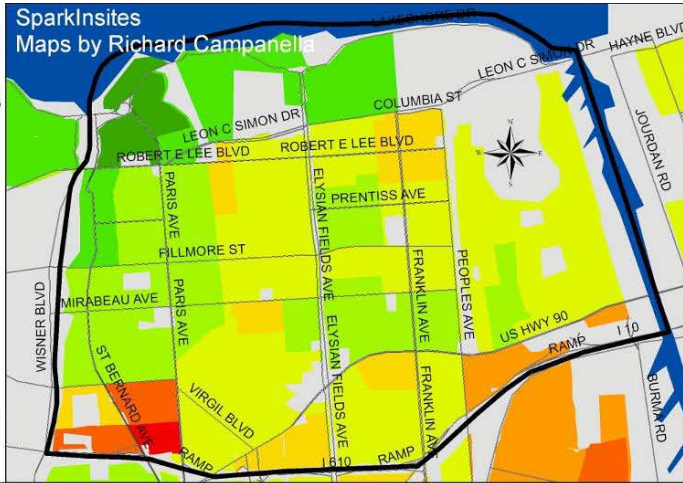
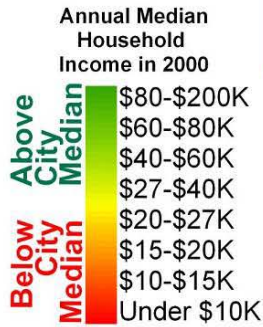
Most remaining open fields were subdivided and developed during the 1950s, most notably Gentilly Woods and Pontchartrain Park. These two neighborhoods—the former populated by white families and the latter specifically created as the first modern lakefront subdivision open for African American families to purchase—came to symbolize the racially segregated residential settlement patterns of Greater Gentilly. Until Pontchartrain Park, most of Greater Gentilly (with the exception of the Dillard area and the St. Bernard Project) was occupied exclusively by white families; racist deed covenants prevented black families from purchasing or renting homes.



Civil rights laws and white flight over the next generation rendered the area from one of overwhelming residential racial segregation, to one of the most residentially integrated major areas in greater New Orleans. Greater Gentilly by century's end enjoyed an enviable reputation as a tolerant, diverse, generally middle-class neighborhood of affordable and charming (if not historic or magnificent) homes, with grassy lawns and pleasant foliage. Three four-year universities (University of New Orleans, Southern University, and Dillard University, plus the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary), the Gentilly Boulevard / Chef Menteur Highway commercial corridor, and the Industrial Canal offered employment and investment opportunities, while easy access to I-10 and I-610 via spacious arteries like Franklin, Elysian Fields, and Paris avenues, made Gentilly convenient to commuters.

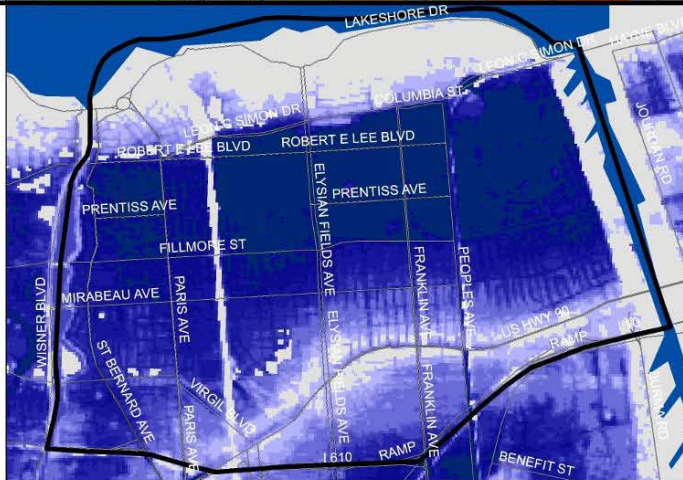
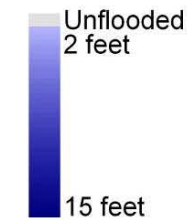
## Greater Gentilly

### Economic Class



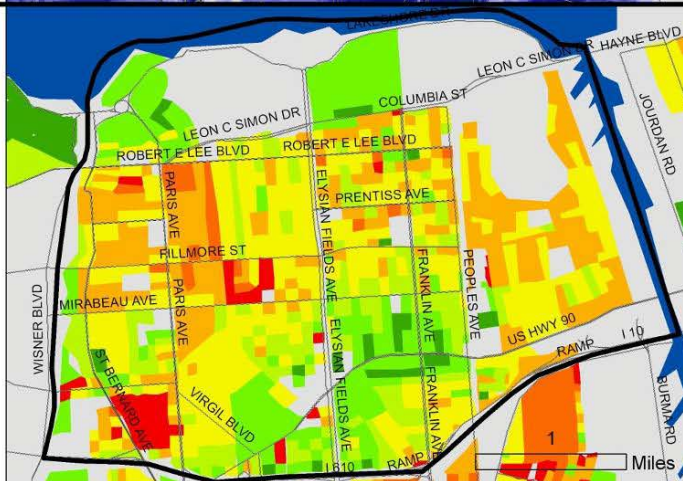
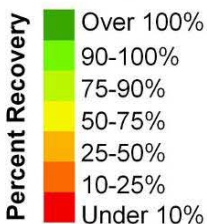
### Flood Damage

Katrina-Induced Flood Depths as of September 2, 2005



### Population Recovery

Households Receiving Mail in June 2009 Compared to June 2005



## Risk and Resiliency

The same Progressive Era municipal improvements that allowed Greater Gentilly to develop, also affected its sustainability. The installation of the drainage system removed the water component from local soils, which allowed organic matter to decay. The resultant cavities allowed fine-grain particles of silt and clay to settle, compact, and subside. Thus, even as Greater Gentilly filled with tens of thousands of residents, it sunk below sea level. Today, areas between Fillmore and Robert E. Lee / Leon C. Simon lie between four and eight feet below sea level. The London Avenue Outfall Canal, meanwhile, removes runoff at the level of the sea—which means residents live their entire lives with the potential threat of that canal bursting and inundating their homes.

Additionally, the excavation of the Industrial Canal, followed by the Intracoastal Waterway (1930s-1940s) and the Mississippi River-Gulf Outlet Canal (1950s-1960s), introduced gulf water to Greater Gentilly's eastern flank, even as those salt waters intruded and deteriorated coast marshes

and cypress swamps east and south of the metropolis. Levees along those manmade navigation canals breached when Hurricane Betsy struck New Orleans in September 1965, flooding much of Greater Gentilly. Forty years later, on August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina raised water levels in Lake Pontchartrain and in the ungated London Avenue Outfall Canal. Its floodwalls ruptured in two locations, flooding Greater Gentilly with anywhere from one to ten feet of salt water, depending on the area's topographic elevation.



Four years after the Katrina catastrophe, the patterns of population recovery in Greater Gentilly are stabilizing. Lacking a true headcount until the 2010 Census is tabulated, we must look to surrogate data sources to estimate population, such as households receiving mail. In June 2005, two months before Katrina, 20,127 households received mail in Greater Gentilly. That figure plummeted to nearly zero in the weeks after the flood, but, by June 2009, rose to 12,289 households, or 61 percent of the pre-storm total. If we assume that households are roughly (though by no means perfectly) correlated with population, then we may estimate that of the 51,414 people who lived in Greater Gentilly in 2000, around 31,000 had returned by summer 2009. Recovery rates are not evenly distributed: areas that were poor and deeply flooded suffer the lowest return rates, while wealthier less-

flooded areas have higher rates. Those in between on both accounts are roughly half recovered. The 2010 Census will finally reveal how many people actually live in Greater Gentilly.

What is the urban risk of Greater Gentilly? We address this question by considering risk as a function of (1) hazard, (2) exposure, and (3) vulnerability. "Hazard" refers a natural or manmade threat. "Exposure" refers to the positioning of people, usually in terms of residence, in hazard's way. "Vulnerability" refers to people's ability to recover from being exposed to the hazard, which usually varies indirectly with education levels, economic class, and the extent of one's social network. That is, less-educated poor people who are isolated and disenfranchised from their community are the most socially vulnerable in the face of trauma.

The hazard threatening Greater Gentilly—that is, the possibility of a hurricane-induced storm surge approaching the area—remains the same as before Hurricane Katrina, but the chances that the surge enters Greater Gentilly has been reduced since 2005. New gates on the lakefront outfall canals, plus a massive 8000-foot-long barrier on the "funnel" between the Intracoastal Waterway and the Mississippi River-Gulf Outlet Canal (entry point of much of Katrina's surge) have reduced the likelihood that that surge will rupture the floodwalls and levees that protect Greater Gentilly. Another gate, at the Seabrook/Lake Pontchartrain end of the Industrial Canal, is scheduled for construction during 2011. When these and other risk-reduction projects are completed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers by late 2011, the metropolitan area, including Greater Gentilly, is promised a level of protection that can withstand a hurricane that has a 1 percent chance of occurring in any given year.

The exposure of Gentilly residents to hazard has been somewhat ameliorated since Katrina, but only partially. Numerous homes have been raised or built anew above base flood elevation, and are thus able to evade inundations of two to three feet or deeper. However, most homes, and most of the area's urban infrastructure, remain potentially exposed to floodwaters, and only about 15 percent of the population lives above sea level. Greater Gentilly's exposure to hazard is roughly the same as Lakeview and arguably New Orleans East; however, it is higher than those in downtown and uptown New Orleans, which are more elevated and farther from the surge-prone navigation and outfall canals.

Likewise, the vulnerability of the Greater Gentilly population generally resembles that of the larger New Orleans population, although the area lacks the substantial numbers of prosperous and better-educated residents of areas such as the University area in uptown, or Lakeview. Nor does it have larger populations of very poor residents, as does Central City and portions of the Upper Ninth Ward.

Given these levels of urban hazard, exposure, and vulnerability, Greater Gentilly's level of urban risk is lower than it once was, but not as low as it needs to be. The same can be said of greater New Orleans.

Written by Richard Campanella  
On behalf of Spark Insites, LLC  
August 2010

