A Passion to Preserve

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IT'S NO MERE COINCIDENCE that the city with the oldest gay bar in the country is exceptionally rich in well-preserved historic architecture. The bar, Café Lafitte in Exile, once occupied the Bourbon Street building that was the blacksmith shop of the pirate Jean Lafitte. New Orleans, especially its French Quarter, or Vieux Carré, has long been a magnet for gay men. They have served the place well. The countless picture books of old New Orleans published in the past century offer telling glimpses of gay men's redeeming sensibilities. One volume quotes an antique dealer who bought and restored a condemned Victorian cottage in Bywater: “I found something that no one else appreciated, and I thought I could make it beautiful.”

Most New Orleans residents turned their back on the city's oldest section as newer districts were developed through the last half of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. “I never knew where the Vieux Carré was until I was practically out of high school,” recalled New Orleans preservation architect Samuel Wilson Jr., born in New Orleans in 1911. “When the Opera House burned down, my mother was all in a tizzy. My father said, ‘The whole place ought to burn down. It would be the best thing that could happen for the city.’” What happened instead is that gay men became a central force in fostering the revival of the Vieux Carré in the first several decades of the twentieth century.

The gay fascination with the city goes back more than a century. In his chronicle of historic preservation in America, Charles Hosmer reports that in 1895 a young man named Allison Owen, just out of architecture school in Boston, suggested the formation of a society for the preservation of colonial landmarks in New Orleans. He helped to obtain passage of a city ordinance that set aside the old Spanish government building, the Cabildo, as a museum.

A generation older than Owen, wealthy New Orleans bachelor businessman William Irby had similar ideas. At the time of Irby's suicide in 1926 a New Orleans newspaper commented that “out of pure sentiment alone, Mr. Irby is known to have purchased property in the Vieux Carré to preserve
many of its famous old landmarks." These early investments were crucial to the French Quarter's revival. In 1918 Irby bought the century-old Seignouret-Brulatour House at 520 Royal Street. After restoring it to serve as his home, he invited the Arts and Crafts Club to set up its gallery and classrooms there in the early 1920s. The club's annual Bal Masqué des Artistes helped to resurrect the mystique of the Vieux Carré. The civic-minded and philanthropic Irby purchased and restored several other key landmarks in the Quarter, including the lower Pontalba Building on Jackson Square, which he gave to the Louisiana State Museum. He gave the site of the old French Opera House to Tulane University and financed the rehabilitation of the crumbling Saint Louis Cathedral.

Richard Koch was also passionately involved with historic buildings and devoted much of his life to studying the architecture of the French Quarter. Born in New Orleans in 1889, Koch graduated from Tulane’s School of Architecture, studied in Paris, and worked briefly in New York and Boston before he returned to New Orleans in 1916. His firm pioneered in the restoration of historic Louisiana architecture. The young architect supervised the relocation of a threatened plantation house to New Orleans in the early 1920s; known as Hurst House, the restoration became a showplace. When the New Orleans Little Theater hired Koch to convert an old building on Saint Peter Street for its use as a theater, he convinced the group to leave the historic building intact and erect a new building in a style appropriate to the neighborhood. Koch was a leader in the adaptive reuse of old buildings and in using eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Creole designs when creating new structures. His early restoration projects outside New Orleans included Oak Alley Plantation in Vacherie, Louisiana, and Shadows-on-the-Teche in New Iberia.

By the early 1930s Richard Koch was uniquely qualified to head the Historic American Buildings Survey in Louisiana. His 1934 inventory of Louisiana structures deserving HABS documentation may be the most comprehensive ever compiled in the state. Koch was a skillful drafter, watercolorist, and photographer. With unflagging attention to detail he kept a perfectionist’s eye on the quality of the records produced by his HABS staff as they crisscrossed the state recording endangered buildings—from celebrated landmarks to forgotten outbuildings, from cottages to tombs. By the late 1930s exhibitions of HABS drawings, photographs, and watercolors at the Arts and Crafts Club were helping to promote architectural preservation in Louisiana. When in 1940 the Army Corps of Engineers insisted on clearing the way for construction of a new Mississippi River levee, Koch fiercely protested the planned demolition of Uncle Sam, an exquisite and extensive Greek Revival plantation complex at Convent. And it was Koch who then
photographed the destruction of the mansion and its several dozen brick outbuildings, one of Louisiana’s greatest losses of historic architecture. The levee was never built.

The author of a recent profile of Richard Koch expresses puzzlement at the never-married preservationist whose “emotional energy seems to have been totally absorbed by the study of historic architecture.” Despite ample information about his professional interests and accomplishments, he remains elusive personally: “His immaculate reputation, his crowded schedule, his membership in the exclusive Boston Club, his illustrious academic career, his sojourns in Mexico somehow serve to obscure personal insights.” It seems likely that, as a gay man of his era, Richard Koch’s circumspection was well founded.

Through the 1920s the pioneering work of men like Irby and Koch helped to foster the rediscovery of the dilapidated and disreputable Frenchtown by artists and writers and other creative types. Some moved in and restored its buildings as homes and businesses—art galleries, bookshops, tearooms, restaurants, clubs, and speakeasies. Others just visited, from uptown and from out of town. One visitor of particular note was Arnold Genthe, a fifty-something bachelor photographer when he visited New Orleans in the 1920s. A resident of New York and, before that, of San Francisco, where he was a member of that city’s smart and genial Bohemian Club since the 1890s, Genthe won acclaim for the loose, painterly style of his portrait photography. His delight in the New Orleans writings of George Washington Cable and Lafcadio Hearn made him want to create a series of photographs of the Vieux Carré. Some told him that it was too late to make a meaningful record; too much of the Quarter’s old glory and charm had been destroyed. But he decided to proceed with his project.

Genthe’s first visit to New Orleans distressed him. The narrow streets of the French Quarter were noisy and busy, cluttered with telephone wires, gaudy advertising signs, and automobiles. He noted with sadness the effects of indifference and decay and was appalled to discover that an entire block of old Creole houses on Royal Street had been razed in 1918 to make room for a new courthouse. Genthe mourned the recent disappearance of such old landmarks as the stately Saint Louis Hotel and the celebrated French Opera House. He lamented the decay of the Ursuline Convent and the removal of wrought-iron ornament from the facades of many buildings. But enough remained to make him eager to carry out his plan.

“It is true one has to overcome many difficulties,” Genthe wrote, “and much sympathetic search and patient experimenting are required before one can hope to secure photographs which, instead of being merely matter-of-fact records of things as they are today, will actually suggest something of the
vanished beauty and charm of the old days.” Genthe managed to make such evocative pictures in the mellow light of early morning and late evening. A book of these photos, *Impressions of Old New Orleans*, was published in 1926, inspiring preservation-minded people well beyond Louisiana. In his introduction to the volume Genthe noted that people had only begun to realize what a tragedy the loss of the French Quarter would be. A few individuals had bought some of the old houses and were restoring them appropriately, he wrote, and a commission had been created to guard against inappropriate changes in the historic quarter.

By the time Arnold Genthe was photographing old New Orleans, Lyle Saxon had been a rehabilitating presence there for several years. Born in 1891, Saxon had grown up in Baton Rouge. An unusual child who liked listening to old people reminisce, he enjoyed visiting New Orleans with his mother and attending performances at the French Opera House. After graduating from Louisiana State University, Saxon moved to the city in 1914 to work as a journalist. He had always loved the French Quarter. Walking through its narrow streets, he was struck by the wretched state of decay and decided to make an effort to bring some of it back. His friends tried to talk him out of it, but Saxon moved into a sixteen-room rental house at 612 Royal Street. He cleaned out the mess, returned the large rooms to their original dimensions by removing partitions, and furnished about a third of the rooms—as much as he could afford—with old pieces.

In the company of men like William Irby (who Saxon termed “the good-fairy of Frenchtown”) and Richard Koch, Lyle Saxon was a pioneer in the revival and preservation of the Vieux Carré. Saxon championed such redemption because he believed that only by living in the old buildings could one tap into the Quarter’s rich accumulation of untold stories. He used the *Times-Picayune* as a vehicle to promote his vision. At 536 Royal, which he purchased in 1920, Saxon’s door was open to anyone who wished to call, especially writers, artists, and musicians. As he developed friendships with his visitors, including some from uptown New Orleans, he would go for walks with them through the grimy streets and try to coax them to join him in rehabilitating the French Quarter. It was a hard sell. Robert Tallant gives a vivid glimpse of the state of the neighborhood when Saxon first moved in.

Leasing that Royal Street house and moving into the French Quarter as it was then was startling, even shocking, to a degree that may seem incomprehensible now. Some old people, descendants of the Creoles, still clung with a kind of grim tenacity to a few of the old
homes, but all the other buildings were occupied by the extremely poor, often by criminals. After dusk few respectable persons ventured into the neighborhood. Thugs waited in dark alleyways. Prostitutes stood naked behind shuttered doors and windows. The courtyards, once so beautiful, were often filled with refuse and incredible filth. Saxon was told he would be murdered. Once this almost happened. Three ruffians broke into his Royal Street house, bound him with wire and tortured him with lighted matches and cigarette stubs and kicked out two of his teeth, all in an effort to make him tell where his valuables were concealed. “All I had,” he told me years later, “was some family silver and my grandpa’s gold watch chain.”

William Spratling was one of the first to join Lyle Saxon in the Quarter. Born in New York State in 1900 the artistic young Spratling was transplanted to the South in his early teens. He came to New Orleans in 1922 to teach architecture at Tulane. Against the advice of colleagues who told him that he ought to live uptown rather than in the Vieux Carré, Spratling found himself an apartment in Pirate’s Alley with a view of the cathedral garden. He produced illustrations for some of Saxon’s newspaper stories and created a folio, Drawings of Historic New Orleans, which Saxon edited. With his landlady, the journalist Natalie Scott, Spratling went rambling through the countryside searching out old houses. Her writing and his sketches resulted in their 1927 book, Old Plantation Houses in Louisiana.

The close-knit circle of writers and Tulane faculty members with whom Lyle Saxon and William Spratling socialized called themselves the Shasta Daisies Society. The population of artists and writers in the Vieux Carré continued to grow, and as they started living in the old houses and slave quarters, the neighborhood began to feel more like a community than a ghetto of poverty and crime. Saxon convinced many property owners to restore their buildings or at least to maintain them.

While making his living as a journalist, Saxon steeped himself in the history and culture of the city. Then in 1926 he quit newspaper work and went to New York City. Declaring Greenwich Village “the only part of New York that has any sort of charm to it,” he kept an apartment on Christopher Street for six years, spending about half of each year there. Saxon hosted a perpetual salon for expatriate southern writers and artists. As the ebb and flow of visitors allowed, he wrote. His first book, Father Mississippi, was published in 1927; Fabulous New Orleans, Old Louisiana, and Lafitte, the Pirate appeared in the three succeeding years. In all of Saxon’s books, the brilliant and breezy storyteller illuminates the romantic history of his homeland. Not a scholarly historian or chronicler of facts, he was a quirky keeper
of tribal lore, a weaver of historical fiction. He drew on his years of listening
to old people and old buildings.

In New Orleans, Saxon kept house with the help of his black valet, Joe
Gilmore. “The Friends of Joe Gilmore is a wonderful book that really gives the
best biography, with great affection, of Lyle Saxon,” says New Orleans histo-
rian Roberts Batson. “People of a certain age have gotten really incensed when
I have suggested that Joe Gilmore was more than Lyle Saxon’s valet. Not
only are we crossing the sexual taboo but the racial as well. At any rate, Lyle
had written these little essays, and they were published in 1948, two years
after he died.”

In an essay in The Friends of Joe Gilmore, Saxon tells of being able to
buy a sixteen-room, eighteenth-century Spanish house at 534 Madison Street
after selling the movie rights to Lafitte, the Pirate. He planned to restore
it, as he had the two houses on Royal in the 1920s, and make it his retire-
ment home. “It was practically a shell and needed tremendous remodel-
ing. Joe worked with me. . . . We had architects, contractors, and workmen.
The place was filthy and had to be done from top to bottom, from roof to
floors; but it was so beautiful, it was worthwhile. On one side were Spanish
arches—three above and three on the ground which opened into sort of a
loggia paved with flagstones. I had looked this over and liked it. It was a
place where I wanted to sit and drink.”

When Saxon bought the house, the elaborate courtyard was paved with
concrete, and the large rooms had been cut up with partitions to make a
boardinghouse. Restoring the place, he told a friend, would require “all the
rest of my life and all the money I ever hope to make.” Saxon tried to revi-
talize the place, spending more than he could really afford. The courtyard
soon grew lush with bamboo, climbing fig, wisteria, and sweet olive. He added
a carved cypress doorway that had been part of a confessional in Saint Louis
Cathedral, and doors from an old New Orleans theater. But Saxon was forced
to sell the partially restored Madison Street house because of his meager
finances and poor health. He and Joe Gilmore remained in a suite at the
Saint Charles Hotel.

In Saxon’s evocative and perhaps autobiographical opening to Fabu-
lous New Orleans, a small boy discovers that “the beautiful masked women
who rode upon the floats” at Mardi Gras are “strangely masculine in body.”
This glimpse may be as close as Saxon ever came in print to capturing the
truth that is at the heart of the fabulous magic of New Orleans, especially in
the rebirth of the Vieux Carré. We can come closer: Lyle Saxon, who came to
be seen as the “official patriarch” of New Orleans, had a well-developed
matriarchal side, and it was that duality that made all the difference.
In his travels around Louisiana, Lyle Saxon particularly admired Shadows-on-the-Teche. “That old plantation house in New Iberia, ‘The Shadows,’ is one of the most beautiful dwellings in Louisiana,” he wrote. “The house is set deep in a three-acre flower garden behind moss-draped live oaks and tall hedges of bamboo. It is built of warm, rose-colored bricks with eight large, white Doric columns across its façade and a blue slate roof broken by dormer windows. The house is rich and beautiful in detail.”

While Saxon was trying to pay for his restorations in the decrepit French Quarter, his friend William Weeks Hall was living as a small-town bachelor gentleman artist at Shadows-on-the-Teche, which was built on the Bayou Teche by his great-grandfather in 1834. Hall visited Saxon frequently in New Orleans. “He is the last of his family, just as I am the last of mine,” Saxon wrote, “and we have known each other since we were boys through many years of laughter and vicissitudes.”

Weeks Hall was born in New Orleans in 1894. Growing up at the Shadows, he knew it as a diminished place. The once spacious estate had shrunk from more than 150 acres to about 3. The house was rundown, the garden had largely vanished, and most of the outbuildings were gone. As an only child with artistic inclinations, Hall remembered the old house as “a collection of dusty potted plants, a scent of the nineties, and little else.” Nonetheless, Louisiana writer Harnett Kane wrote portentously of Weeks Hall that “at some early time beyond his remembrance, he had acquired a vast and earnest affection for the place, not less fervent than that of his forebears. The house and its family, to him, were one; the past and the future must be one. The place must, in some way, be preserved.”

After a long absence from Louisiana—attending the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, serving in a camouflage unit in World War I, then lurking in Paris as an arty bohemian—Weeks Hall returned home to New Iberia in 1922. By then, his parents were dead and he was sole owner of Shadows-on-the-Teche. “He pushed open the gate and leaned upon it,” Harnett Kane wrote. “The Shadows was there, as if it had been awaiting his return, as if it had been sure that, as before, it would not be lost. He felt a sense of desolation as he poked at broken bushes and cracked boarding. Chimneys had fallen; water had wrought havoc here and there. But as he looked he realized that in the main the place was unhurt. He made his decision; he would stay here again for the indefinite future. It was as if he had never been away from it; the intervening years had only added a richness to its meaning for him. He would live in this sixteen-room house, and he would see what he could do.”

In the attic Hall found watercolors of the Shadows when it was just thirty years old, stereoscopic photographs from when it was forty, plus sketches, drawings, and invoices for house supplies. With the help of Richard Koch,
Hall and his assistants restored the place. They cleared away the old smokehouse and slave quarters, deemed too far gone to be saved, and used their old brick to construct walkways and flooring in sections of the reestablished garden. The thirteen live oaks, which his great-grandmother had planted, were still in place, as were a half-dozen camellia trees and a clump of bamboo. Hall kept those remains but was not interested in recreating a period garden. The new garden would be his own dynamic creation, a large canvas on which he could play with light, color, and texture. The publicity generated by Hall’s revival of the Shadows eventually drew thousands of tourists.

“I have lived on this place, attending to it and building it,” Hall wrote. “Nothing in life has meant, or will mean, more to me than this garden on a summer morning before sunrise. At all hours, no place is more tranquil nor more ageless. Its inherent charm to me has been in its placid seclusion from a changing world, and in that will be its value to others. This quality must be preserved. I can go, but there is no reason why the place should not remain as long as it is humanly possible for me to enable it to do so. I have never considered myself anything but a trustee of something fine which chance had put in my hands to preserve. I have something unique to give to the American people and have protected this survival intact for that purpose alone.”

Weeks Hall’s concern about the future of Shadows-on-the-Teche after his death began in earnest in the 1930s and became increasingly worrisome through the next two decades. He explored leaving the place to the American Institute of Architects, then the National Park Service. By the time he died in 1958, Hall had struck a deal with the National Trust for Historic Preservation. To amass the required cash endowment, he quit drinking, cut back on his lavish eating, and restricted his long-distance phoning mainly to making frequent and anxious calls to the National Trust. Since his death, the Trust has operated Shadows-on-the-Teche as a historic site.

Lyle Saxon considered Weeks Hall one of the best artists of Louisiana. Though Hall was a highly accomplished painter and photographer, Harnett Kane’s portrait of him in his sixth decade shows clearly that the Shadows was his central creation. “He has compiled histories of it, interpretations, monographs. He has photographed it hundreds of times, from every imaginable angle and some unimaginable ones. Sitting on a bench by the hour, he has clocked the play of light and shade over the brick, on the off-white of the cornices, on the green of the jalousies. He knows it so well, he is so anxious that others appreciate it as he does, that the result can be disconcerting to the new arrival. I have caught him trying to arrange that a visitor walk in at a certain hour in the late afternoon or by early moonlight. He is the lover anxious that his lady be seen only at her best. Of all who have found themselves under the sway of this dominating house, none has so subordinated
his will to it. As one Frenchman in New Iberia put it, ‘That man married to that place!’”

Harnett Kane, a generation younger than Lyle Saxon and Weeks Hall and friend of both, was another bachelor gentleman married to the preservation of Louisiana history and culture. A native of New Orleans, Kane was born in 1910, graduated from Tulane in 1931, and lived in the South all his life. Like Saxon he spent years writing for a New Orleans newspaper, then turned to a prolific book-writing career: The Bayous of Louisiana, Deep Delta Country, Plantation Parade, Natchez on the Mississippi, Queen New Orleans, Spies for the Blue and Gray, The Southern Christmas Book, The Golden Coast, Gone Are the Days, The Romantic South, and many novels based on the lives of prominent southern women.

Harnett Kane’s role in saving old New Orleans began in the 1930s, when many of his feature articles on the Vieux Carré were published in the New Orleans Item. He cited the disappearance of courtyards and balconies and the appearance of inappropriate commercial signs as examples of unconscionable change. An early house threatened by highway developers in 1949 prompted Kane to help found the Louisiana Landmarks Society. The house eventually perished anyway, but the organization went on to win many preservation battles through the urban-renewal and freeway-building binge of the 1950s and 1960s.

While Harnett Kane was coming of age in New Orleans, Boyd Cruise was biding his time as an artistically gifted teenager in Lake Charles, Louisiana. A mesmerizing glimpse of New Orleans during a Mardi Gras visit in 1927 left the shy eighteen-year-old Cruise determined to return. A year later, after winning a scholarship from the Art School of the New Orleans Arts and Crafts Club in the French Quarter, Boyd Cruise traveled from Lake Charles to the city that would be his home for the rest of his life.

At the Arts and Crafts Club on Royal Street, “Uncle Charlie” Bein taught Cruise to paint in watercolor, and Weeks Hall came from the Shad-ows once a week to teach composition. For two years Cruise lived in an attic apartment on Saint Ann Street, sharing the space with an enormous plaster clown mask that had been created and abandoned by a previous tenant. “It was in Carnival colors and must have been six or eight feet tall,” Cruise recalled. “You couldn’t get it downstairs because it was wider than the stairs.”

After attending the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts and spending two summers in Europe, Cruise returned to New Orleans in the mid-1930s. Richard Koch created a job for him in the Historic American Buildings Survey. “There was no place in the HABS for an artist,” architect Sam Wilson said, “but Boyd needed a job. He and Mr. Koch were friends and both were very active in the Arts and Crafts Club. Mr. Koch thought we ought to have
a record of the colors of these buildings. Boyd made hundreds of watercol-
ors of buildings around the countryside and in the city.” Cruise’s paintings
of some buildings were made just before demolition: “Painted and destroyed
in the same month,” he would note.21

Sailors strutting their stuff in the streets of the French Quarter cap-
tured young Cruise’s imagination. They and other elements of the present
day animate many of his HABS watercolors, which convey the color and
flavor of the lives of historic buildings and neighborhoods through the late
1930s and just into the 1940s. In addition to accurate and evocative paintings,
Cruise created many exceptionally elegant and precisely measured drawings
that delineated key design details—columns, dormers, doorways, hardware.
“Both Cruise and his friend and mentor, Koch, were attached to buildings in a
far more intense sense than usually is found, even among dedicated profes-
sionals,” says a New Orleans preservationist. “This emotional attachment reso-
nates in all of Cruise’s best works.”22

Of the many French Quarter houses Cruise painted, one especially
captivated his domophilic imagination: He thought it would be an ideal home
for his partner and himself. “So I got Harold, who was a child-welfare worker,
and we both went back and peered over the fence. Harold got the money
and there we were. We gave up a lot of things to have that house, but I
certainly don’t regret it and I’m sure he never did.”23 Harold Schilke pur-
chased the wonderful but decaying double Creole cottage on Saint Ann Street
in 1938. The four rooms and two small service buildings were occupied by
six families. The patio and garden were filled with trash. Schilke and Cruise
spent years restoring it and furnishing it with antiques.

Like many artists Cruise was drawn to the French Quarter’s rich pa-
tina of age and decay. But as his vision matured, the meticulous artist be-
gan to create vividly colorful paintings depicting the old buildings not as
they appeared in the present but as they might have looked in the previous
century. The French Opera House, the old French Market, and the Little
Theater thrived again. Houses and shops looked fresh and prosperous, as
did the residents in their period clothing. The horse-drawn carriages, the
iron grillwork of the balconies, the street vendors, the dogs on leashes—
everything was portrayed in intricate and historically correct detail. Before
he began a painting, Cruise would learn the correct date of the building’s
construction and would then determine the correct styles of clothing and
other elements. “These studies are amazing in their transcription of archi-
tectural details and their faithfulness to the architecture of the old city,”
said Weeks Hall. “Immense research was required for the costumes of the
figures and the restoration of parts of the buildings which have since been
destroyed.”24
Devoutly private, proper, and formal, Boyd Cruise felt most comfort-
able within the milieu of his imagined nineteenth century. After doing his pe-
riod research he trusted his innate historical vision. “When I was painting, I
didn’t know why I put someone in a certain place or did something else. . . .
But when I got through I knew why: because it was right.”

While Boyd Cruise labored religiously over his historical paintings, Clay
Shaw’s redemptive instinct found its outlet in the ambitious restoration of
many French Quarter buildings. Shaw, who grew up north of the city in the
small town of Amite, began to make his mark in New Orleans after serving in
World War II. Twenty years later Shaw became the target of vicious mud-
slinging in the aftermath of a presidential assassination. And so, restoring
the dignity of preservationist Clay Shaw has become a compelling mission
for Roberts Batson, New Orleans historian. Batson’s Gay Heritage Tour in-
cludes 724 Governor Nicholls Street in the French Quarter, where a memo-
rial plaque reads: “In tribute to Clay Shaw, 1913–1974. Pioneer in the reno-
vation of the Vieux Carré. This 1834 building, the Spanish stables, is one of
nine restorations by Clay Shaw. In addition, he conceived and completed
the International Trade Mart and directed the restoration of the French
Market. Clay Shaw was a patron of the humanities and lived his life with
the utmost grace; an invaluable citizen, he was respected, admired and
loved by many.”

“The plaque is lovely, but it’s also heartbreaking,” says Batson. “The
Clay Shaw trial is a centerpiece of my Gay Heritage Tour. Shaw was brought
to trial because Jim Garrison, the district attorney of Orleans Parish, was out
to discredit the Warren Commission, the committee appointed by the
U.S. government to investigate the assassination of President Kennedy.
In 1967 Garrison announced that Lee Harvey Oswald was not the lone
assassin, that there had been a conspiracy, and that it was hatched right
here in New Orleans.

“Jim Garrison was a monster out to further his own ambitions. He knew
that Clay Shaw was gay, and he figured Shaw would commit suicide if ar-
rested. That’s what was expected of gay people then, particularly prominent
people, rather than have all the details of their personal lives revealed. Clay
Shaw was one of the leading citizens of New Orleans, a highly respected
business leader. Garrison figured that Shaw would kill himself, and then
Garrison could say to the world that Shaw must have had something to do
with the assassination.”

“I have tremendous admiration for Clay Shaw and the enormous grace
with which he survived what Garrison did to him. Unfortunately, Oliver
Stone’s film JFK is based on books by Garrison. And the Clay Shaw character
Cherishing Old New Orleans and Louisiana

in the film is not Shaw; it is Oliver Stone’s stereotype of a rich, bitchy, middle-aged queen who’s repulsive, scary, and nasty. That’s what the world has seen. And that, probably more than anything else, is why I’m doing what I’m doing. To tell the full and honest stories of our lives."

Clay Shaw was in his preservation prime when New York City native Don Schueler first saw New Orleans on a vacation trip in the early 1950s. “We came to the corner of Esplanade and Royal, I looked down those streets, and right then I decided I was going to live here. It was this cascade of absolutely beautiful architecture, essentially traditional European but with a totally individual New Orleans twist. It just didn’t look like any other American city. Plus, the French Quarter was fun! I was twenty-two and good-looking, a big frog in a little pond. So I went back to New York, quit my job, and moved South.” In 1964 Schueler met Willie Brown, who had grown up in a poor New Orleans family. Within a few years, true to type, the couple were fixing up a neglected ninety-year-old house in the city’s Garden District.

“Gays have never gotten credit for the fact that they really are the moving force in recreating and revitalizing central cities,” Schueler says. “The process of restoring old houses is linked inextricably with restoring the quality of the human life in those neighborhoods. As long as there are interesting architectural possibilities, gays are always the first ones to move into blighted neighborhoods. To do it, they brave a great deal of stuff, often quite dangerous—regular crime, gay bashing, and all the rest of it. It’s a true kind of pioneering. Then you get young heterosexual singles and couples moving in, the beneficiaries of the gay aesthetic orientation.”

In his chronicle of the historic preservation movement, Charles Hosmer says it’s remarkable that so much preservation work was done in the French Quarter during the 1930s without a private preservation organization as such. Remarkable, yes, but not unexplainable. “I tell you that this town is aswarm and alive and criss-crossed with perverts,” an agitated Senator Huey Long declared to a newspaper reporter in 1935. To understand a large portion of the extraordinarily passionate and longstanding preservation ethic for which New Orleans is known, one need only acknowledge the uncommon historical and aesthetic vision that generations of gay men and their female collaborators have brought to their relationships with the city.

The Society for the Preservation of Ancient Tombs, organized in New Orleans in the 1920s, was among the earliest of such collaborations. This graveyard-keeping enterprise continues to be informed by a singular vision. In the mid-1990s two gay men purchased and restored an abandoned plot at historic Saint Louis Cemetery Number One. The handsome marble tomb they erected bears their names: “Jerah Johnson, Historian,” and
“George Febres, Artist.” Not only did they fix up their own property, but as a provision of the sale they requested permission to clean up the crumbling tomb next door.\textsuperscript{27} New Orleans cemetery expert Robert Florence states that this case of pioneering graveyard restoration “seems to have triggered a gentrification of sorts, as the general condition of St. Louis Cemetery Number One surrounding [this] tomb appears spruced up, and there have been a number of recent nearby tomb restorations.”\textsuperscript{28}

The gay preservation lineage that has served New Orleans and Louisiana through the past century is brought to the present by the three individuals whose narratives follow. Believing that “life doesn’t make any sense unless you have a context in which to live it,” architect Curt Greska has dedicated himself to preserving Louisiana’s historical context, opposing “the wanton destruction of things of beauty.” Similarly artist and educator Lloyd Sensat has brightened the prospects of Louisiana’s historic buildings by creating a program in which children and youth are inspired by “the magic, beauty, and mystery of the old houses.” Declaring that “the two biggest focuses of my life are my being gay and architectural preservation,” Randy Plaisance enthuses about living in the French Quarter and working to save the historic buildings of his native state.