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A House Divided: The Evolution of the Louisiana Superdome from a  
Divisive Concept into a Symbol of New Orleans and the Surrounding Areas

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts  
in  
History

by

Matthew B. Higgins

B.A. University of New Orleans 2000

May 2009

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## **Abstract**

The following thesis examines the development of the Louisiana Superdome from a concept that created division amongst the people of Louisiana, including those in the New Orleans metropolitan area, to a facility that would serve as, “a symbol of our recovery”.

This thesis begins with the fanfare and euphoria from the reopening of the Superdome in September 2006 following millions of dollars worth of damage from Hurricane Katrina and from those using it as a “shelter of last resort”. It then introduces some of the major players in the Superdome’s development from a divisive concept into a symbol of the community. This thesis examines the factors in the evolution of the meaning of the Superdome for those in the surrounding communities. The factors include political ideology, economic conditions, race relations, and entertainment.

**Keywords: Superdome, New Orleans, Louisiana, Hurricane Katrina, John Schwegmann, Dave Dixon, Superdome as symbol of New Orleans, Governor John McKiethen**

## **Introduction**

On September 25, 2006, the city of New Orleans and its surrounding communities came together to celebrate the reopening of the Louisiana Superdome following its closure more than a year before, due to damage caused by Hurricane Katrina. Residents and Saints fans had eagerly anticipated the event, preceded by live concerts and other entertainment rolled into a massive block party around the Superdome hours before the game. The culmination of the day was the football game between the New Orleans Saints and the Atlanta Falcons. Thousands of fans, with or without tickets congregated outside the sold-out Superdome. An enormous tailgate party was televised to a national audience on ESPN. Before the opening kickoff, U-2 and Greenday performed a pre-game concert featuring local musicians Trombone Shorty and the Rebirth Brass Band; adding to the significance was the coin toss initiated by former President George H.W. Bush. The resulting game featured the New Orleans Saints, with the support of a deafening crowd, defeating the Atlanta Falcons 23-3.

Outside commentators remarked about the euphoric scene in the Superdome when only blocks away there remained so many visible scars of the previous year's tragedy. Several fans interviewed indicated that they had travelled to the city from their temporary homes in such places as Atlanta, Dallas, or Houston. "Why?" many asked, would the state of Louisiana, the proprietors of the building, put so much effort into repairing a building that is used primarily as an entertainment venue when other more vital needs such as education, health care, much of the infrastructure, and public safety were in dire need of repair themselves? Once state and local leaders learned from Superdome management that the Superdome had the insurance and government aid in place to repair, they determined that the renovation of the Superdome would serve as a catalyst for other parts of the region following Katrina. In a sense the reopening of the

Superdome would play the same role in serving as an anchor in revitalizing the region as it had thirty-one years earlier played in revitalizing the Central Business District.

The Louisiana Superdome was constructed only thirty-one years earlier in 1975, but by 2006, the Superdome was as much a part of the community of New Orleans as is the French Quarter, Garden District, or the Mississippi River. The Superdome dominated the skyline of downtown New Orleans much like the Eiffel Tower dominates the skyline of Paris. It had become such a symbol of the community that despite the misery associated with the Superdome in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, there was little opposition to repairing it. Governor Kathleen Blanco called the Superdome, a “symbol of our recovery,”<sup>1</sup> using it as a reference to the bigger movement to repair New Orleans and the surrounding communities following the devastation that occurred due to Hurricane Katrina.

By 2006, most residents of New Orleans and its surrounding communities, especially those under thirty-five years of age, took for granted that the Superdome has always been a symbol of the New Orleans community with overwhelming support from the community, but that was not always the case. In reality, the Superdome was in its beginning, a divisive proposition that would stumble upon its way to serving as a symbol of the community.

### **Divisive Beginnings**

The new stadium would come into existence almost concomitantly with the New Orleans Saints, the first major league professional team in the history of New Orleans. Ironically, the birth of the Saints came at a time when the City of New Orleans, indeed much of the State of Louisiana, was struggling to heal racial fissures, which intensified over the desegregation of its public facilities, especially its schools throughout the sixties. To a large extent the new football

team did more to bring together black and white citizens than conciliatory efforts by public officials and community leaders.

The original concept of the Louisiana Superdome was first envisioned in the early 60's by Dave Dixon, a New Orleanian who was involved in obtaining a professional football franchise for the city of New Orleans. Dixon envisioned a facility that would be multi-purpose; it would host sporting events, conventions, concerts, and other entertainment events. Dixon believed that the construction of the Superdome would create thousands of jobs, be a boon to the local economy, redevelop downtown New Orleans, and would lead to the acquisition of a major league sports franchise.<sup>2</sup> He had tried earlier in 1963 to convince Lamar Hunt, owner of the American Football League's Dallas Texans franchise to move his team to New Orleans and play in Tulane Stadium, but he was unsuccessful and the Texans moved to Kansas City and were renamed the Chiefs.<sup>3</sup> Dixon, who held no public office, was able to get local leaders like Mayor Vic Schiro of New Orleans to back his idea.<sup>4</sup> However, the construction of such a facility would cost too much for one city to cover. It would need the capital from the state of Louisiana.

Dave Dixon then proposed his idea to Louisiana Governor John McKeithen. McKeithen served as governor of Louisiana from 1964-1972 as a Democrat in the tradition of Huey P. Long. Like Long, McKeithen was from the Northern part of the state, and like Long, McKeithen was conservative on social issues, but believed in regulating big business. While serving as public service commissioner, he maintained the cost of a public phone call at a nickel when the rate was twice as much in most other states.<sup>5</sup> And in the tradition of Huey Long, he supported large government projects that would enhance the community at large. The Superdome was such a project. Dixon stated,

“We knew Tulane needed the campus space for campus expansion. They were growing from a campus of three or four thousand (students) to fifteen thousand or whatever, so they needed the space....of course the Saints were a business and they would welcome a Superdome, so I talked to the governor. John McKeithen was a brand new governor and I didn’t really think we’d get too much help, but I went up to meet with him and to my amazement, he turned out to be probably as big a football fan as I am and was a tremendous football fan, a big L.S.U. fan. When I outlined him the concept of it, a domed stadium, that the only dome in existence then was the Astrodome.....I pitched him the idea that this would be a chance for Louisiana to pass Houston. To my amazement, in describing it to him, you know, how we could use it where we could play baseball and football and we could get all kinds of major league sports, they could start the tourism and convention business and he bought it immediately. He said, ‘My God Mr. Dixon! That would be the greatest building in the history of mankind and we’ll build that sucker.’”<sup>6</sup>

In the 1966 Louisiana legislative session, McKeithen pushed through a bill that created the Louisiana Stadium and Exposition District<sup>7</sup> to develop the Superdome project. This legislation next went before the voters as a constitutional amendment the following fall for their approval before it could become law. The constitutional amendment called for a fifty thousand seat stadium at a cost of thirty-five million dollars which would be financed through a four percent tax on hotel and motel rooms.<sup>8</sup>

Opposition to the Superdome began almost as soon as it was proposed. John Schwegmann, a fiscal conservative legislator from Jefferson Parish was the most notable opponent. Even state legislators who supported the concept of a dome stadium expressed similar concerns. Much of the early concern stemmed from fears that the state would be embarking upon

a risky financial venture, at a time when the state's economy faced an uncertain future. Some early opponents insisted that the state should not be involved in such a project which could be done better by private initiative. To be sure, Houston's Astrodome had just opened and completed primarily with the use of private funds. Although many skeptics were told that the state need not assume financial risks in building the Superdome, others insisted that a massive all-purpose facility could only be built by the state. This suggestion fueled speculation that this would be a financial boondoggle to reward political insiders and their supporters.

Opponents of the amendment argued that using public funds to build a stadium would short change necessary government programs such as education and health care. Opponents also argued that for the state to get a return on its investment, the Superdome must be able to host conventions, which opponents claimed was not possible due to lack of available space at the proposed site. Since the site was downtown, opponents argued that traffic congestion would become a nightmare.<sup>9</sup> To counter the opponents, Dave Dixon traveled throughout the entire state in two days making several speeches to drum up support for the Superdome.<sup>10</sup> But supporters received a boost that opponents could not diminish. On November 1, 1966, one week before the election to ratify the amendment, the National Football League awarded the city of New Orleans a professional football franchise. New Orleans was competing with seven other cities in the summer of 1966 for an expansion franchise. Two weeks before the N.F.L. awarded a franchise to New Orleans, Representative Hale Boggs and Senator Russell Long used their seniority in Congress to influence legislation that exempted the N.F.L. from antitrust laws regarding its merger with the American Football League. However, league officials made it clear that the awarding of the franchise was contingent on voters approving the stadium proposal. Commissioner Peter Rozelle stated, "Tulane Stadium is an excellent interim stadium, but a new

stadium is a necessity.”<sup>11</sup> Subsequently, on November 8, 1966, the constitutional amendment creating the Louisiana Stadium and Exposition District and the resulting construction of the Louisiana Superdome was approved by 76% of the voters.<sup>12</sup>

Will Pennequy was a sports writer for the *Times Picayune* in 1966 when the N.F.L. awarded the Saints to New Orleans. Pennequy later worked for the Superdome from 1987-1998. When asked what affect the awarding of the N.F.L. franchise in 1966 had for passage of the Superdome amendment, Pennequy responded, “Everything” He then elaborated, “Without the presence of a team, I don’t think the Superdome would have been built.”<sup>13</sup> When asked if he ever had any doubts the Superdome would ever be built even with the presence of an N.F.L. team, Pennequy responded, “Even those people who thought it was a good idea never really were completely sold on whether it was going to get built or not until McKeithen said this thing is going to happen.....because he was from the north eastern, central eastern, half way between central and north Louisiana, he brought a lot of political clout with him.”<sup>14</sup>

Two years later in 1968, it was still uncertain whether a domed stadium would be built in New Orleans. That year, President Lyndon B. Johnson decided not to run for reelection as president; instead his vice-president Hubert H. Humphrey of Minnesota ran as the Democratic nominee. According to Dave Dixon, Humphrey was planning on selecting Governor McKeithen to be his running mate so as to balance the ticket with a conservative from the South. Dixon heard Governor of Alabama George Wallace tell McKeithen over the phone that he would not run for president in 1968 if Humphrey selected McKeithen as his running mate. Humphrey chose not to select McKeithen as his running mate because *Life* ran a series of articles linking McKeithen’s friend Aubrey Young to the mafia <sup>15</sup> As a result, Humphrey selected Senator

Edmund Muskie of Maine, lost the 1968 election to Richard Nixon, and George Wallace won several Deep South states as the third party candidate.

By 1969, estimated costs of the Superdome project had risen to 93.5 million dollars.<sup>16</sup> At this point, ground had yet to be broken for the construction of this facility. In response, Governor McKeithen decided to put the state's credit behind the facility. His plan obligated the state to pay the principle and interest of the construction bonds minus any stadium or hotel/motel proceeds for the next thirty-five years.<sup>17</sup>

Opposition shifted into a higher gear immediately after the governor put forth his plan to use state funds to finance the Superdome project. The most notable person among the opposition was state legislator John G. Schwegmann. Schwegmann was born in the Ninth Ward of New Orleans in 1911. In 1946, he and his two brothers opened a grocery store called Schwegmann Brothers Giant Super Market. This store was not like their father's corner store; it was one of the first giant supermarkets in the United States which remodeled the grocery business by offering large volume at discount prices and providing self-service to the customer, which the small mom and pop grocery stores could not compete against. By 1957, there were several stores across New Orleans; the Gentilly location was for many years the largest supermarket in the world.<sup>18</sup>

Earlier in 1948, Schwegmann fought a Louisiana law that required a minimum markup on all alcoholic beverages sold at stores. He was a plaintiff in a test case that made its way all the way to the Louisiana Supreme Court which ruled the law unconstitutional.<sup>19</sup>

In addition to the alcoholic beverage markup law, Schwegmann also fought milk price fixing. Louisiana had a law at the time that allowed the state's dairy producers to set the price of milk, rather than the retailer. Schwegmann sued to overturn this law; this case made its way all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. In 1951 in the case of *Schwegmann vs. Calvert Distillers*

*Corp.*, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of Schwegmann and the minimum markup law was overturned. Saul Stone, one of Schwegmann's attorneys, later stated in regards to the case, "He favored unrestricted, free competition. It's principle, nothing personal with it. He had nothing to gain at all."<sup>20</sup> Schwegmann's son John F. Schwegmann stated in regards to the milk pricing law, "Money is the mother's milk of politics. Spread around enough money and history will prove you can pass almost any legislation you want."<sup>21</sup>

These cases along with a zoning dispute on the west bank of the river in Harvey, where the local "mom and pop" grocery store owners tried without success to deny Schwegmann from opening a new Schwegmann Giant Supermarket in Harvey- they failed to stop Schwegmann from opening the store, but motivated Schwegmann to run for political office.<sup>22</sup>

Swegmann was elected to the Louisiana House in 1961 and elected to the Louisiana senate in 1968 serving Jefferson Parish. Schwegmann was a Democrat, but in the 1960's, most southern government office holders were Democrats, a tradition dating back to Reconstruction. Despite his party affiliation, he frequently opposed measures led by Democratic governors. This included the Superdome project. In addition to his opposition of government funded projects, like most fiscal conservatives, Schwegmann also took a populist view that the funds could be better spent on important social needs like the state's Charity Hospital System.<sup>23</sup>

New senator Schwegmann would get the chance to exercise his political views, not in the legislature but via the courts. A friendly suit was filed against the Louisiana Stadium and Exposition District, the body which administered sales of the bonds and overall management of the project, in March of 1969 in Orleans Civil District Court. This was done in order to expedite the sale of bonds; Superdome bonds could not have been easily sold with the threat of litigation hanging over them. John Schwegmann, with the support of the two other state senators, J. Bennet

Johnston and Jackson B. Davis, both of Shreveport, filed a legal brief against the proposal. On March 12 of that year, the district court ruled that the bond proposal was unconstitutional.<sup>24</sup>

Judge Oliver P. Carriere declared that Act 566 of the 1966 Legislature and resulting Article 14:47 of the Louisiana Constitution to be constitutional, but Judge Carriere declared the Louisiana Stadium and Exposition District to be unconstitutional. In his ruling, Judge Carriere wrote, “No bond issued under this amendment shall be secured by the faith and credit of the state.....The state and the district cannot do indirectly that which is directly prohibited by the Constitution of Louisiana. Consequently, the court is of the opinion that that the lease, the management and operating agreement and the bond resolution are unconstitutional, null, and void.”<sup>25</sup>

John Schwegmann commented, “(The ruling) is a victory for the taxpayers of Louisiana, and it stopped the governor from using unauthorized state money for the domed stadium.” Schwegmann also commented that he had “no quarrel” with the Superdome project, “if it could be built within the limits of the money allocated it by the constitutional amendment- the hotel motel tax.” He also stated, “While the decision will be appealed, I expect to fight the use of unauthorized state funds or state guarantees for the domed stadium.”

The proponents of the bond proposal did indeed appeal the decision to the Louisiana Supreme Court. In a 4-3 decision, the Louisiana Supreme Court in June of 1969 overturned the lower court’s ruling. Justice Summers writing for the majority stated in response to the argument that the financing and construction of the stadium were not contrary to the constitutional amendment, “These arguments fail to take into consideration that the amendment places no limitations upon the terms and conditions of the lease which it authorizes except the duration of the lease and the requirement of a fixed rental. The requisite authority to enter into a lease

therefore is explicit.”<sup>26</sup> Following this decision, opposition forces, not including Schwegmann, appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court which refused to hear the case.<sup>27</sup>

Despite the high court’s favorable ruling, McKeithen had to expend even more of his political capital to push the project toward completion. Due to a weak bond market, the governor pushed through the 1970 Louisiana legislative session a bill that would raise the interest rates of the Superdome bonds from 6% to 8%, in order to stimulate investment. Before becoming law, the bill would have to be ratified by the voters, like the original Superdome project. John Schwegmann and his fellow opponents lobbied against the amendment. In the fall of that year, Amendment 29 was defeated by the voters of Louisiana.<sup>28</sup>

This amendment was among the other fifty-two on the statewide ballot in November of that year, which also failed. New Orleans Mayor Moon Landrieu admitted that Schwegmann “hit upon a sensitive public nerve” in lobbying the public to vote against all the amendments. Schwegmann argued that there were too many amendments on the ballot to consider responsibly. Some amendments that were intended only for local parishes such as removing the ceiling on city property tax millage required parish and state approval. This particular amendment failed to get either.

The voting patterns were only slightly different in other parts of the state. In Baton Rouge, only two of the statewide amendments, one affecting East Baton Rouge Parish and one affecting Vietnam veterans, garnered a majority of votes; but these two amendments failed to receive the requisite statewide approval.

Undaunted by the voters’ revolt and with the higher bond interest rate now set, McKeithen and his forces set out to find a buyer for the bonds. In July 1971, he and other state leaders met with David Rockefeller, president of Chase Manhattan Bank in an attempt to

persuade him to underwrite the bonds for the Superdome project. At the time, prospects for acquiring a buyer appeared good.<sup>29</sup> However, Schwegmann and his forces also met with Chase Manhattan Bank officials a week later to persuade them not to underwrite the bonds.<sup>30</sup> Chase Manhattan Bank officials proposed to underwrite eighty-eight million dollars worth of bonds, which turned out to be a deal breaker. The Superdome proponents were not defeated though; First National Bank of Commerce, a New Orleans based financial institution, agreed to underwrite the bonds. F.N.B.C. joined with a Little Rock AR brokerage firm to underwrite the bonds. Due in part to the willingness of F.N.B.C. to put its capitol behind the Superdome project, other banks in the New Orleans area as well as banks from other parts of Louisiana, Texas, North Carolina, and Georgia agreed to underwrite Superdome bonds. Governor McKeithen was another factor in influencing Southern banks to put their capital behind the Superdome project. He is quoted as saying, “They accused me of twisting the arms of Southern Banks, but I didn’t twist their arms, I twisted their necks.”<sup>31</sup>

Nat Kiefer, a state senator from New Orleans headed a commission in 1971 to investigate possible corruption involving awarding of contracts with the Superdome project. This was done in response to the rising costs of the Superdome project which was originally proposed at thirty-five million dollars in 1966 but would cost over \$160 million by the time it was completed in 1975.<sup>32</sup>

Part of the impetus behind finding bond purchasers was a resolution drafted by senator Nat Kiefer of New Orleans in the 1971 legislative session. Kiefer, a proponent of the Superdome, introduced the resolution to assuage concerns about the Superdome project which by 1971 was figured to cost 100 million dollars. His resolution called for a ceiling on spending of just over 129 million dollars.<sup>33</sup>

Nat Kiefer was born in 1939 and grew up in New Orleans' 8<sup>th</sup> Ward; this area encompasses such neighborhoods as St. Roch, Gentilly Terrace, and the Faubourg Marigny. This mostly white, working class area in 1971 was entrenched for almost forty years with Long Family political ideals. Kiefer attended Tulane University on a football scholarship as an undergrad, which led to him attending Tulane Law School. Kiefer died of cancer in 1985, and the president of the state senate commented, "Not many people have the ability to turn a tough issue around. He could do that."<sup>34</sup> This ability helped get his 1971 resolution passed, fending off any attempts in the legislature to kill the Superdome project.

1971 was also a gubernatorial election year in Louisiana. John McKeithen was barred by law from seeking a third term. John Schwegmann chose not to seek a second term in the state senate and instead ran for governor that year. Part of his platform included his continual opposition to the Superdome project. During his campaign, he stated that he was not against the Superdome project provided it adhered to what the voters approved in the 1966 constitutional amendment. Schwegmann reiterated that he was opposed to rising costs of the Superdome project as well as putting the state's credit behind the bonds. He viewed these two items as subterfuge used by the Superdome supporters to evade the wishes of the voters and feared that this was another example of old, dirty, Louisiana politics.<sup>35</sup> And unlike McKeithen, Schwegmann was not much of a sports fan, so in addition to his political convictions, he had no personal interest in seeing construction of a facility whose primary use was for sporting events. John F. Schwegmann stated, "If my father had been elected governor, knowing the powers that Louisiana governors have, I am reasonably certain that he would have found a way to not build the Superdome. I'm rather confident of that."<sup>36</sup>

Running against Schwegmann were Congressman Edwin Edwards of Crowley in Southwest Louisiana and state Senator J. Bennett Johnston Jr. of Shreveport. Schwegmann was unable to sway voters, especially those outside of the New Orleans area where he was not nearly as well known. In addition, his fiscal conservatism did not play well for many old time Democrats raised in the tradition of Huey Long. If this were not enough to defeat his chances for election, Governor McKeithen informed the Louisiana Baptist Association in 1971 that Schwemmann was the 'largest liquor dealer in the world.'<sup>37</sup> Schwegmann finished fifth overall in the primary, and Edwin Edwards and J. Bennett Johnston Jr. advanced to a runoff. In the runoff, Edwards defeated Johnston.<sup>38</sup>

Edwin Edwards was born to a Cajun sharecropper father and a French speaking Cajun mother. After a brief stint in the Navy, Edwards went to law school at Louisiana State University and began his practice in his hometown of Crowley. There Edwards built up his practice using his ability to speak Cajun French to obtain more clients in the Southwest Louisiana town. Prior to Edwards serving in Congress, he served as floor leader of the Louisiana senate for Governor McKeithen.<sup>39</sup> Edwards would govern in the tradition of Huey P. Long in that he garnered much of his support from poor whites as well as blacks. Like Long, Edwards was in favor of the use of government to promote the well being of its citizens. In this regard, Governor Edwards put his support behind the Superdome project.

In 1973, two years into its construction, costs for the Superdome project soared even higher. In December 1973, an additional 8.2 million dollars was needed to complete construction.<sup>40</sup> Governor Edwards and Senator Nat Kiefer lobbied the Louisiana legislature for the appropriation of these funds to complete the project despite the fact that two years earlier, Kiefer had drafted a resolution that put a ceiling of \$129.5 million on spending for the project.

Kiefer set up a committee to determine why the additional funds were needed. In January of 1974, Kiefer's committee determined that costs had been cut in the building of the Superdome despite the fact that the Superdome project managers knew that items that were deleted originally would have to be replaced sooner or later. Nevertheless, the committee recommended that an additional \$8.2 million be allocated by the legislature to the Superdome project. Governor Edwards concurred with this view. Kiefer's committee would remain intact to determine if there was any fraud or corruption associated with the Superdome construction.<sup>41</sup> In February, the Louisiana legislature approved the additional 8.2 million dollars needed for construction.<sup>42</sup>

The Kiefer committee audited several of the Superdome construction contracts. No major fraud or corruption was discovered, just minor violations, typical of any large scale project like this one. The Kiefer committee discovered that a Pennsylvania subcontractor owed 90,000 dollars in back sales taxes.<sup>43</sup> And while 90,000 dollars is a large sum of money for ordinary citizens, it pales in comparison when compared to the overall cost of the project, which would rise several million dollars higher before the Superdome opened for business a year later.

Other factors were in play during this long, drawn out drama that were just as, if not more important than whether there was corruption, whether the Superdome costs were too high, legality over state's credit behind bonds; and these factors were related to the economy of the city of New Orleans, the area most vital to Louisiana's economy as a whole.

New Orleans has always been a destination for travelers, with its viable port; but the systematic, city backed tourism trade has only been in existence since the 1960's/'70's. Indeed, in the early part of the twentieth century, the French Quarter, now an internationally recognized tourist destination, included much slum housing that housed many of the city's newly arrived Italian immigrants.

By the 1960's, the city's port, its most vital economic industry, had already lost competition to other Sunbelt cities<sup>44</sup>. In 1979, port operations and transportation employed 11% of New Orleans' labor force, but a 1978 University of New Orleans study found that New Orleans was losing ground to Southern competitors- Baton Rouge, Houston, and Galveston between 1965 and 1976.<sup>45</sup> In 1959 Chicago became a deepwater port with the opening of the St. Lawrence Seaway; at the same time, the port of New Orleans was considered old and in need of modern technology to keep it competitive with other cities.<sup>46</sup>

New Orleans also lost manufacturing jobs during this time period. The city had never been a major haven for manufacturing jobs like Midwest cities such as Pittsburgh, Cleveland, or Detroit; but in 1953, manufacturing accounted for 18.5% of the city's workforce. By 1978, manufacturing accounted for only 10.2% of the total labor force. In 1962, NASA opened the Michoud Assembly Facility, which employed over 10,000 workers, but by the late '60's, only a few thousand were employed.<sup>47</sup> The Mayor's Office of Policy and Planning's 1979 report stated, "The New Orleans economy has been in a period of relative stagnation since 1966. Until a reversal showed signs of beginning in 1978, unemployment had increased each year since 1966 both in absolute terms and as a percentage of the labor force."<sup>48</sup> It would be inaccurate to say that the loss of so many manufacturing jobs was unique to New Orleans; the Rustbelt would see dramatic losses of jobs to cities in the Sunbelt; but it is accurate to say that city and state leaders with the support of the majority of the people chose to pursue a service based industry, i.e. tourism, to fill this void. The Superdome was the prime symbol of the movement towards a service based industry.

The building of the Superdome was also part of a larger movement to revitalize the city's central business district. The Superdome rests on thirteen acres near Poydras St. Poydras St. is

the location for the city's newest business high rises. Prior to the 1960's, this location was mostly the address for railroad yards; but Poydras St., which runs from the exit/on ramps for Interstate 10 to the Mississippi River, with the C.B.D. in the middle, was developed by major oil businesses such as Shell, Texaco, Exxon, and Amoco. The oil boom, along with tourism, was the only bright spots for New Orleans economy. Indeed, by the 1970's much of the area known as the Warehouse District became skid row. It would be revitalized in 1980's via the World's Fair and subsequent building of the convention center. The result of this oil and tourism boom was that it created a huge disparity in the labor force. Oil jobs were primarily white collar jobs, whereas most service based industry jobs pay less than middle class standard wages and have little room for upward mobility for those at the bottom.

Despite the reasonable objections raised by the opponents to the Superdome project, these economic factors helped prevent their cause from being successful. Inertia is the property of matter by which it retains its velocity so long as it is not acted upon another force. It is difficult to stop a large object once it has gained speed, and by the 1970's, Superdome project opponents did not have the necessary force to stop the Superdome's development and it continued forward.

### **Becoming a Symbol**

Finally, the Louisiana Superdome opened its doors to the public on August 3, 1975. 45,000 spectators attended the opening, which featured many local officials like Mayor Landrieu, Governor Edwards, and former governor, John McKeithen. A short movie was presented on the big screens to the spectators in attendance detailing the development of the Superdome.<sup>49</sup> On August 9, 1975, the first event for which the Superdome was built occurred, a preseason game between the New Orleans Saints and the Houston Oilers.<sup>50</sup> In an eerie

coincidence, on August 29, 1975, thirty-years to the day before Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast, Bob Hope performed along with other celebrities to celebrate the opening of the Superdome.<sup>51</sup>

Despite the jubilee associated with the grand opening, the Superdome had a rocky start to its beginning. As critics had charged, the Superdome operated in the red after it opened for business; events and the hotel/motel tax did not cover expenditures. In August of 1976, Chief Executive Officer of the Superdome Charles E. Roemer II told an executive committee looking into prospective management entities to run the Superdome operations, “There is no way to come up with a way to make this a money-making operation in the near future.” Roemer also stated that the most the Superdome could hope to make in any one year is between ten and twelve million dollars. The annual expenses totaled twenty-four million dollars. Roemer’s outlook on the Superdome’s financial concerns was ‘dismal’.<sup>52</sup> The 1977 fiscal year saw the Superdome lose thirteen million dollars.<sup>53</sup>

Financial difficulties were not the only problems plaguing the nascent Superdome. The company responsible for providing services such as ticket vendors, food and beverage vendors, and security from 1975-1977 was mired in controversy that included charges of corruption against one of its owners, as well as complaints that the company failed to provide adequate service that their contract required of them. That company was Superdome Services Inc, a minority owned business.

S.S.I. was awarded their exclusive contract by the Louisiana legislature after Mayor Moon Landrieu explicitly put his support behind S.S.I.<sup>54</sup> Throughout his career, Landrieu’s political support came from black voters. In 1960, he was elected to the Louisiana House of Representatives as the state rep. for parts of Uptown New Orleans. While serving as a state rep.,

he opposed segregationist legislation. In 1970, Landrieu was elected mayor of New Orleans with over 90% of the city's black population voting for Landrieu.<sup>55</sup> Landrieu rewarded his black constituents by placing them in positions at city hall and by supporting a minority owned business trying to obtain a lucrative contract associated with the Superdome.

Mayor Landrieu was caught between a rock and a hard place. New Orleans, like Atlanta, Chicago, Detroit, and other major American cities experienced "white flight". Following the civil rights initiatives of the 1960's, whites fled the America's urban centers to the homogenous, primarily white suburbs. This left a majority, underclass black population to fill the space left by the white middle class. The void left by the middle class was one of the reasons that New Orleans focused its economy on oil and tourism in the 1970's.

Landrieu has always been a Democrat, raised in the traditions of Long and Roosevelt political ideals, so part of his ideals was in line with awarding a government contract to a S.S.I. Nevertheless, he was a politician who realized if he wanted to be reelected in 1974, he would have to cater to the majority. Although the Superdome was a state facility, it was perceived by many outside of New Orleans to be a local, or at best, a regional project; however, the metropolitan region was often polarized between the whites in suburban Jefferson and St. Bernard Parishes and the blacks in Orleans Parish; and Landrieu only held power in Orleans. In this situation, Landrieu awarded the lucrative but scrutinized Superdome contract to S.S.I.

One of S.S.I.'s two owners, Sherman Copelin, earlier had been involved in a scandal with the Family Health Foundation. A consulting firm owned by Copelin conducted business with the F.H.F., which was convicted in federal district court of fraud for using federal funds for non-F.H.F. purposes in March of 1975. Copelin was granted immunity for his testimony during the F.H.F. trial, where under oath, Copelin admitted to receiving \$50,000.00 from F.H.F., but later

insisted that he never stated on the witness stand that he received a bribe. However, he would not state publicly what the payment was for.<sup>56</sup> Once these allegation became known, state Representative Kevin Reilly of Baton Rouge and state Representative Sam Leblanc III of New Orleans amongst others, called for the ouster of Copelin. Copelin responded that Leblanc was critical because he was trying to court the whites of his district during a runoff election by attacking Copelin and Copelin accused Reilly of trying to sway his legislative colleagues to provide funds to cover the Superdome's deficit.<sup>57</sup>

By the fall of 1975, many patrons complained that S.S.I. failed to provide adequate services. Some complained that they were harassed by youths in the concourse and when they complained to security officials, no one took the necessary action. Another complaint concerning the services was that the food and beverage vendors were rude and inefficient.<sup>58</sup> A "spit guard" was installed between the mid level and lower level seats in response to complaints from patrons that they were being spat on by youths in upper level seating sections.<sup>59</sup> Copelin defended S.S.I. by stating that S.S.I. could not provide the type of service demanded because the state contract with S.S.I. allowed for only a limited number of workers. Copelin requested that S.S.I. be allowed to increase personnel.<sup>60</sup> It would not matter because in October of 1977, the state terminated its contract with S.S.I. Hyatt Management took over S.S.I.'s duties. Some members of the black community called for a boycott of the Superdome, but there would not be an organized boycott,<sup>61</sup> and opposition would eventually dwindle.

After the bumps in the road during its first few years of operation, the Superdome began its development as a symbol of the city of New Orleans and the surrounding communities. Major events like Super Bowls would assist by imprinting the Superdome as a feature of New Orleans into the minds of the millions who watched the games on television.

The first Super Bowl inside the Superdome occurred in January 1979. By 1979, the Super Bowl had become a major American event. The Super Bowl was and continues to be, the one of the highest watched television programs each year. It has become an American tradition to have a party for the event, and even those who never watch football, attend Super Bowl parties. The 1979 Super Bowl featured the Pittsburgh Steelers and the Dallas Cowboys before a sell out crowd of 79,484<sup>62</sup>, with 47% of all televisions in the U.S. tuned into the game.<sup>63</sup>

The Super Bowl has grown in size as an event since 1979. The most recent official economic estimate comes from the 2007 Super Bowl. The official economic estimate from that year was \$400 million generated to the Miami/South Florida region where the game was played.<sup>64</sup> This figure is calculated by the amount of taxable sales to the region. This includes such items as hotel rooms, food and beverage purchases, transportation rentals, among other entertainment expenses.

There are some who are skeptical of this estimate though. Robert Baade, an economics professor at Lake Forest College in Chicago argues that the \$400 million dollar is inflated; the more accurate figure is about one-tenth of that. He argues that the official figure fails to take into account that a city like Miami is already a tourist destination and that the Super Bowl preempts any other type of visitor from coming to Miami that weekend, not to mention local area residents who would normally spend money in the city but would not during such a hectic week as the week leading up to the Super Bowl. The figure also fails to factor in that much of the money will be funneled to areas outside the area. For example, the ninety-one room Hotel Victor on South Beach is owned by Zom Inc. of Orlando and operated by Hyatt Hotels and Resorts, which is based out of Chicago. Money spent to rent rooms at this establishment will be sent to the

headquarters in Chicago; the money then may be used for things like remodeling of the Miami hotel, but there is not a direct correlation between the money earned in the Miami hotel and the money used for operating expenses for the Miami hotel. In addition, this figure fails to calculate the amount of money spent by the county on such public safety measures as police, fire, and ambulance services.<sup>65</sup> In the last decade, the N.F.L. has awarded non-traditional cities like Detroit and Indianapolis Super Bowls as a reward for building new stadiums, at least partly financed by public funds. This cost, Baade contends, is not tallied in the official estimate.

Critics of Baade's findings contend that his findings fail to take into consideration that many deals are done between business and local leaders at the Super Bowl site to land future events like conventions. They also add that the Super Bowl provides television coverage to the host city, acting as free advertisement.<sup>66</sup> Free advertisement is not a phrase associated with the Super Bowl. In 2009, N.B.C. charged three-million dollars for a thirty-second ad for Super Bowl XLIII.<sup>67</sup>

Miami, like New Orleans, is a tourist destination and as such, the two lead the way as host cities for the Super Bowl. Both cities have serious social ills such as high poverty rates, lack of adequate educational and health care facilities; both are vulnerable to devastating hurricanes; but both also have focused on tourism as the driving force of their economies.

Two years later, in January 1981, the Super Bowl would return to New Orleans. Five years later the Super Bowl was played again in New Orleans. This game featured the New England Patriots and the Chicago Bears, who had several popular players such as Walter Payton and William Refrigerator Perry. Two more Super Bowls were played in the Superdome in the 1990's, one in 1990, and the other in 1997. The last Super Bowl inside the Superdome was in 2002.

The 2002 game was arguably the most memorable Super Bowl as it was the first one played following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Security was tighter than previous Super Bowls, with tens of millions watching from around the world. The pre-game festivities featured celebrities like Paul McCartney, and it also included ex presidents. World renowned band, U2 performed at half time. The game, fittingly, was won by the New England Patriots with a field goal as time expired.

The NCAA Men's Basketball Final Four, like the Super Bowl sells out the host stadium, as well as dominates television ratings. In 1989, C.B.S. and the N.C.A.A. entered into an exclusive television contract beginning in 1991, which gave CBS sole rights to the broadcast of the entire N.C.A.A. tournament for seven years at a cost of \$1 billion.<sup>68</sup> In 2000, C.B.S. and the N.C.A.A. entered into another contract that gave CBS exclusive rights for eleven years at a cost of \$6 billion.<sup>69</sup> A 2008 press release from the N.C.A.A. states that the Men's Final Four generated \$47 million for the host city for 2008, San Antonio. The \$47 million includes almost \$37 million in visitor spending; visitors stayed an average of 3.7 days and spent an average of \$223 per person per day.<sup>70</sup>

The men's Final Four has been played inside the Superdome four times. All of the championship games have not been decided until the closing seconds of the game, thus imprinting the association with of the Superdome with these memorable games. The first one was played in 1982. In the championship game, University of North Carolina freshman Michael Jordan made the game winning shot with seventeen seconds to give University of North Carolina a 63-62 victory over Georgetown University. Again in 1987, the championship game was decided by one point as Indiana University defeated Syracuse University 74-73 with a game winning shot in the final seconds of the contest. In 1993, the University of North Carolina

became national champions with a 77-71 victory over the University of Michigan. The championship game was not decided until the closing minutes of the game. The last time the NCAA Men's Final Four occurred in the Superdome was in 2003, where again the championship was decided in the final minutes as Syracuse University defeated the University of Kansas 81-78. The 2012 Final Four will be hosted by the Superdome.

Other notable sporting events hosted by the Superdome include the Sugar Bowl, which is played each year, and is currently a member of the Bowl Championship Series in NCAA college football, and as such, rotates the "national championship" game with the other major bowls of the B.C.S. The Bayou Classic is held each year, the Saturday following Thanksgiving played between Southern University and Grambling University.

The Superdome, as its founders intended, also hosts major non-sporting events. Popular music acts such as the Rolling Stones, Pink Floyd, and the Eagles have performed in front of sold out audiences inside the Superdome. In addition to these acts which attract fans internationally, the Superdome also hosts smaller events such as sporting shows, car shows, the circus, and thousands each year attend the Essence Music Festival, which features musical acts and speakers whose target audience is African-American.

Will Penneguy credits Bob Johnson, who was general manager of the Superdome with making the building as something more than just a venue for sports. Bob Johnson was the general manager from 1985 to 1995. In 1988, the Superdome was the host for the Republican National Convention. George H.W. Bush and Dan Quayle were formally nominated as the Republican candidates for president and vice-president, and they would go on to obtain victory in the November general election. In one weekend alone in 1994, the Superdome hosted five different events.<sup>71</sup>

These events have cast a national and international spotlight on the Superdome. As a result, millions have come to identify the Superdome with the city of New Orleans and its surrounding communities. Thanks to television, millions of viewers can view these major events without having ever set foot in New Orleans. Because of this, residents of the New Orleans community take pride in the fact that the Superdome has attracted events that most other cities in the United States have not been able to attract, such as Super Bowls or Final Fours. New Orleans has hosted the Super Bowl more times than any other city except Miami. The diverse events that have occurred at the Superdome have attracted audiences that transcend color and class lines. The Bayou Classic and the Essence Music Festival attract predominately black audiences, while sportsman shows attract primarily white ones; but events like New Orleans Saints games, which have called the Superdome the home stadium of the city's NFL franchise since its opening, attract a wide spectrum of class and race.

By 2005, the population of Louisiana's opposition to the Superdome had died out. During the year, there were renewed negotiations between the state and the New Orleans Saints involving the lease signed between the two. The Saints wanted either a new state of the art stadium, or major renovation of the Superdome. Debate existed amongst fans and citizens over the issue but Governor Blanco's proposal did not include a new stadium. Discussions were in a preliminary stage when the Saints began their preseason in August of 2005. Those discussions never advanced because on August 29, 2005 Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast of Louisiana and Mississippi.

At first, it appeared New Orleans dodged a bullet from the Category 3 hurricane. However, the levees surrounding the city breached and 80% of the city was flooded, some areas with as much as 10' of water or more. Many of the indigent, elderly, and the medically handicap

of the city could not get out, and as a result, went to the Superdome, which was being used as a makeshift shelter. Thousands were stranded in the Superdome as flood waters prevented them from escaping. Part of the roof was torn off by the hurricane's winds and power was cut off. Refugees waited days inside the smoldering building with waste laying everywhere until assistance arrived.

Despite the misery associated with the Superdome in the immediate aftermath of Katrina, the state made the repair of the facility a priority. State officials believed the Superdome would serve as a symbol of the determination of the people of the surrounding communities to rebuild their damaged infrastructure. So despite the fact much of the infrastructure including homes, hospitals, and schools had yet to be rebuilt a year after Katrina, the Superdome reopened on September 25, 2006 for the Monday Night Football telecast between the Saints and Falcons.

The Superdome appears to have a sustainable future. The State of Louisiana and the New Orleans Saints are currently holding negotiations to keep the Saints in New Orleans for several years. Currently, there is a push to finalize a deal by April 2009 when the N.F.L. owners meet to award the 2013 Super Bowl; if the State and the Saints can finalize a deal by the April 2009 deadline, it is very likely New Orleans will be awarded the 2013 Super Bowl; if a deal fails to take place, then a successful bid for New Orleans would be difficult.<sup>72</sup>

Since Hurricane Katrina, the Superdome has undergone \$220 million dollars in renovations. The club lounges, the most expensive seats, have been renovated; heating/air-conditioning systems have been updated; the roof, the field, and the suites and seats have all been replaced by newer models since Hurricane Katrina. Other renovations that have yet to take place but could, depending on negotiations between the Saints and the State, include widening the stadium concourses, redoing the lower seating- Dave Dixon stated that the lower seats could be

pushed in closer to the field which would allow construction of up to ten-thousand more seats.<sup>73</sup> Also included in the renovations would be additional concession and retail stands, which could generate as much as eight to twelve million annually for the Saints. This possible final phase of post-Katrina renovation coupled with the other post-Katrina renovations would total \$320 million dollars in renovations. That would be more than the recent renovations to Green Bay's Lambeau Field and only five million less than the new Cowboys' stadium set to open for the 2009 N.F.L. season.<sup>74</sup> According to Will Pennequy, "It's the best it's ever been right now."<sup>75</sup>

The Superdome continues to issue bonds to pay its operating costs. On January 28, 2009, the Louisiana Stadium and Exposition District filed suit against Merrill Lynch over a dispute involving \$238 million worth of bonds. The suit alleges that Merrill Lynch was engaged, without the L.S.E.D.'s knowledge, in sales of auction rate bonds; auction rate bonds are bonds that are sold to a bidder at a lower interest rate; this was done because there were few buyers of these bonds, which were used to refinance existing Superdome debt, post Katrina repairs, and existing capital. In 2008, there was a downturn in the government securities market. The suit alleges that Merrill Lynch's actions artificially inflated the market, and when Merrill Lynch stopped participating, investors stopped buying these kinds of bonds causing the bond interest rates to skyrocket from 4% to 12%, costing the L.S.E.D. \$65,000 per day. In order to stop this bleeding, the state bought some of the bonds, which it will hold until 2009. L.S.E.D. attorney James Swanson stated, "If we had known Merrill Lynch was participating in these auctions and these auctions eventually failed if Merrill Lynch quit participating, we would not have used this method of financing."<sup>76</sup> Merrill Lynch is now a subsidiary of Bank of America after being bought out following huge losses related to their investment in sub prime mortgages.

## **Conclusion**

Has the Superdome been worth the expense? If one argues solely dollars and sense, then there is certainly an argument against it. The arguments against such a facility have substance behind it. The construction of the Superdome cost approximately four times as much as the original amendment stated, not to mention the state had to issue bonds to pay for the construction because hotel/motel tax revenues were insufficient. It is unclear just how much revenue events like the Super Bowl bring to the region; official estimates put it in the hundreds of millions of dollars whereas some economists figure only in the tens of millions, and the Super Bowl is an event that New Orleans has hosted on average less than one out of every five years. The annual events such as the Bayou Classic and the Sugar Bowl do not produce the revenue anywhere near the revenue generated by the Super Bowl. Critics contend that cities like Miami and New Orleans, both popular tourist destinations, still have serious social ills that the revenue generated from their economic industries has failed to remedy.

Supporters of the Superdome contend that without it, the city and region would have fallen further behind, as evidenced by the loss of manufacturing jobs and reduction in port traffic. Supporters also contend that the events that the Superdome attracts generate other revenue indirectly, for example, the business deals done at pre Super Bowl functions between local leaders and national/international companies. This is in addition to the exposure that these events provide to tourists and those watching on television of the area. This exposure provides free advertisement of the region to millions of potential visitors and portrays the region as “the place to be” because it is host to the most popular event in American sports.

The Superdome though, has become more than just another football stadium. The Houston Astrodome and domes in other cities have either been demolished or are near the end of

their lifespan as venues for major entertainment events such as Super Bowls and NCAA Final Fours. Indeed, many of these domes have made way for single purpose stadiums that are either outdoor or have retractable roofs, but the Superdome has not yet met a similar fate. It appeared in 2005 that the Superdome would face its end in the near future after Saints owner Tom Benson expressed publically his dissatisfaction with the Superdome as the permanent home of the Saints. The major impetus behind the solidifying of the Superdome as a symbol of New Orleans and the surrounding community was Hurricane Katrina.

The Superdome was one of *the* symbols of a destroyed New Orleans in the immediate aftermath of Katrina. The roof had been torn off and millions of viewers worldwide witnessed on television the suffering of those stuck inside this “shelter of last resort” who survived for days in the stifling hot building without electricity, plumbing, and adequate food and water.

The people of the New Orleans area, with their elected officials leading the way, did not want to see the Superdome come to its end this way. The Superdome had been the venue that arguably saved New Orleans from falling into an economic despair similar to Detroit; the Superdome had been the one public institution that transcends racial divisions prevalent in almost everything other aspect of daily life, even Mardi Gras; and the Superdome had been the symbol that millions outside the region have associated with New Orleans. This is an important aspect to community pride that has seen its share of economic and racial strife, in addition to the constant threat each hurricane season of a catastrophic storm hitting the region.

Other cities like Houston do not share the same perspective of their domed stadiums like New Orleans. This is due to several factors. First, the majority of the residents in these cities do not have roots in them. Many came from other cities in search of economic opportunity or their parents did. Second, since many of these residents come from other areas of the country, these

residents are not familiar with the long standing racial divisions that exist in the South. Certainly many other areas outside of the South have had their share of racial strife, but it was not as systematic as Jim Crow, thus leading to the creation of institutions like black colleges which continue to this day; and since these areas did not have large black populations until World War I, racial division is not as ingrained as it has been in the South. Third, cities like Houston have viable economies and as such do not rely primarily on tourism to sustain their economies. Houston is the headquarters to many Fortune 500 companies including Exxon and Shell Oil. Seattle is the headquarters of Microsoft. Both of these cities had domed stadiums and both have demolished them in favor of outdoor or retractable roof stadiums that are built as single use facilities such as baseball parks and football stadiums. In order for a business to remain a top tier company, that business must be continuously modernizing and expanding to stay on top, but this business minded approach is not part of the psyche of the New Orleans community. The perspective that New Orleans and the surrounding region has towards the Superdome is similar to the perspective that Medieval Europeans shared towards the cathedrals they built and the perspective of Ancient Romans towards the Coliseum.

The Superdome, like the cathedrals, serves as a center point of the community. The cathedrals of Europe were the symbols of the communities. The community would come together on Sundays to perform a ritual, not unlike Saints fans on Sundays during the N.F.L. season coming together as one to cheer on the Home team. Cathedrals served as places of civic instruction, places where marriages and baptisms were certified by the authority of the community, the Church; and cathedrals were places where the community festivals, usually feast days of Saints, would center around.

The Roman Coliseum also served as a gathering point for members of a community. The Roman Coliseum, like the Superdome, was a place for events that served as a source of excitement and an escape from everyday life for most Romans. Many of the events were barbaric by our standards, such as the gladiator fights or the lions mauling the Christians; but this view must be put in the proper context. Life in ancient times, even for those with wealth was not a carefree existence. Even with their superior knowledge, Romans could only partially mitigate most diseases, not to mention the constant threat of barbarians to their Empire, or the threat of a slave rebellion. In this context, human life was not viewed as valuable as it is now, so it is more understandable why people would delight in seeing death; at least it was a show and it was exciting!

The Superdome may not last as long as the Roman Coliseum or even the cathedrals of Europe, but it has evolved in its short lifespan from a divisive concept into a symbol of New Orleans and the surrounding regions. Recent scholarly work exemplifies this change in attitude. Prior to Hurricane Katrina, there was little in the way of scholarly work on the Superdome; most of the literary work on the Superdome was done by those in sports media; but some of the more recent scholarship includes *Cities of the Dead* by Joseph Roach and *New Orleans on Parade: Tourism and Transformation of the Crescent City* by J. Mark Souther.

It is uncertain what the future holds for the Superdome, but given the amount of money invested in the Superdome infrastructure and its operating costs, the present lack of any other type of economy for the region other than tourism, and the enthusiasm the region has for sporting and in general, entertainment events, it seems likely that the Superdome will be around for decades to come.

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