

Fall 12-20-2018

Abraham Shushan: In the Shadow of Huey Long

Brad J. Burke

University of New Orleans, brad.burke@coloniallifesales.com

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Abraham Shushan: In the Shadow of Huey Long

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

Brad J. Burke

B.A. Louisiana State University, 2001

December, 2018

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this paper to my family: Claire, Brody, Ireland and Finley. They have been the rock behind me to keep pushing me forward in everything I do. Their positive attitudes inspired me to think outside the box and for that I'm extremely grateful.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Professor Robert Dupont for working with me throughout this process. He has been my backbone throughout this process. Whenever I needed Professor Dupont he was there for me and that will not go forgotten. I would also like to thank the late Dr. Michael Mizell-Nelson for not only having patience with me but also for showing me how to become a historian.

Table of Contents

List of Figures	v
Abstract	vi
Introduction.....	1
Literature Review.....	2
Political Background.....	4
Abraham Shushan	14
Conclusion	26
Bibliography	27
Vita.....	30

List of Figures

Abraham L. Shushan.....	1
Shushan Airport	24
Commissioners of the Orleans Levee Board	24

Abstract

Abraham L. Shushan worked in the shadow of Huey P. Long. Long's political machine ran on the force of his personality with political power given as a reward to those he considered loyal. Shushan was one such lieutenant who benefited from his unwavering loyalty to Long. Shushan served within the New Orleans political scene helping Long achieve his goals including building the Shushan Airport on the city's lakefront as well as being instrumental in the construction of the seawall protecting New Orleans along the shoreline of Lake Pontchartrain. By the time he started working for Long, Shushan was already a fixture in New Orleans politics serving on the Orleans Levee Board since 1920. A man of ambition and skill, Huey Long chose Shushan for his political acumen. Shushan's work for Long cost him his career during the period of "scandal and reform" following the fallout after Long's assassination in 1935.

Keywords: Abraham L. Shushan, Huey P. Long, Shushan Airport, Orleans Levee Board, New Orleans, Politics, Public Works



Photo courtesy of UNO Special Collections

Introduction

Born January 12, 1894 in Reserve, Louisiana, Abraham Lazar Shushan served as one of Long's two closest advisors. The son of Jewish immigrants, Shushan rose from humble beginnings to become an integral part of the largest political machine in the South as well as an influential civic and business leader during a booming era of New Orleans. There is very little written about Shushan directly except for the work of graduate student Arthur Scully.¹ Piecing together his life requires pulling information from diverse sources and cautiously inferring possible connections that would not normally be stated explicitly. Scully's work examines the two largest projects of

¹ Arthur Scully, "Huey Long's Lieutenant, Abe Shushan and the Image of Long as a Neo-Populist and Mass Leader," (M.A. thesis, University of New Orleans, 1978).

Shushan's career, the Lake Pontchartrain seawall and the New Orleans Lakeshore Airport, as proof of the Long machine's populist leanings. However, this work ignores a vital piece of information: Shushan had his own motivations, and the success of those two projects almost certainly emanated from his talent in business and his position as president of the Orleans Levee Board. When one considers Shushan's works, a different portrait begins to emerge: that of an extremely intelligent man with impressive foresight who built his own substantial empire by exploiting Long's political maneuvering. Considering the level of anti-Semitism in mainstream culture at the time,² Shushan would probably never have been able to attain power as an elected official. That fact combined with his desire for privacy could possibly explain why he allowed Long to take credit for his work instead of using it to further his own career. By examining Shushan's work in this matter, one can keep his accomplishments from disappearing into Long's legacy and assist in separating the careers and motivations of two very enterprising men. Lieutenants such as Abe Shushan were more than just mindless functionaries of the Long administration. They were individuals of vision and initiative who helped shaped the Long agenda.

Literature Review

As previously noted, very little scholarship exists written directly on Abraham L. Shushan. He is, however, mentioned in several books detailing the history of the Huey Long political machine. Perhaps the best work featuring Shushan is in the T. Harry Williams biography of Huey Long, *Huey Long*.³ Williams' book about the "Kingfish" has arguably served as the seminal work on Long since its publication. Williams notes Shushan's work within the Long political organization, his loyalty to the governor, his work on constructing the lakefront airport,

² Leonard Dinnerstein, *Anti-Semitism in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

³ T. Harry Williams, *Huey Long* (New York: Vintage Books, 1969), 421.

and his troubles after Long's assassination. The airport is a point of focus detailing the modern transportation hub for New Orleans. The book also touches on Shushan's role in collecting money for the Long political machine. Shushan, along with several others, established the National Book Company in New Orleans to publish Long's autobiography, *Every Man A King*, in 1933. Williams' book discusses Shushan's difficulties battling indictments brought against him for alleged tax fraud. Although fixed directly on the life of Huey Long, the book does profile the work of those in the Long political machine and Shushan is featured several times.⁴

Most other mentions of Shushan are merely that of a Long associate with his hand caught in the till. Edward D. White's *Kingfish: The Reign of Huey P. Long*, Harnett T. Kane's *Huey Long's Louisiana Hayride: The American Rehearsal for Dictatorship 1928-1940*, and William Ivy Hair's *The Kingfish and His Realm: The Life and Times of Huey P. Long* cover Long's life with Shushan mentioned only in passing as one of his subordinates.⁵

Other works cover Shushan's work on the seawall and for New Orleans Lakefront Airport. A publication by the Urban Studies Institute at the then-Louisiana State University in New Orleans, *Lakefront New Orleans: Planning and Development 1926-1971* by Judy Filipich and Lee Taylor, mentions Shushan in his role of member of the Board of Commissioners of the Orleans Levee Board.⁶ The focus, however, is the role he played in building the Lake Pontchartrain seawall and the airport. Also focusing on Shushan's part on the lake shoreline development is Richard

⁴ Ibid, 421, 549-550, 645, 757, 798, 820.

⁵ Edward D. White, *Kingfish: The Reign of Huey P. Long* (New York: Random House, 2009); Harnett T. Kane, *Huey Long's Louisiana Hayride: The American Rehearsal For Dictatorship 1928-1940* (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing, 1971); William Ivy Hair, *The Kingfish and His Realm: The Life and Times of Huey P. Long* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996).

⁶ Judy Filipich and Lee Taylor, *Lakefront New Orleans: Planning and Development 1926-1971* (New Orleans: LSU New Orleans Urban Studies Institute, 1971).

Campanella's *Time and Place in New Orleans: Past Geographies In The Present Day* (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing Company, 2002).⁷

Perhaps the two most helpful sources for information are in the archives of the New Orleans Lakefront Airport and the Abe Shushan Collection in the Special Collections at the University of New Orleans. At the former, the minutes of the meeting of the Orleans Levee Board are available, which show the day-to-day business of that body. These are quite helpful especially when looking at the development of the New Orleans Lakefront Airport. The Abe Shushan Collection at the University of New Orleans (UNO) consists of a variety of sources. A major resource is the large number of scrapbooks (31 volumes) that contain newspaper clippings covering Shushan's life. New Orleans newspapers are, of course, well represented with clippings from 1920 to the time of his death in 1966. Also informative is a commemorative booklet from the opening of the then-Shushan Airport. The booklet, published by the Orleans Levee District in 1933, is a slick, colorful examination of the airport. However, as the booklet is more as a souvenir item rather than as a scholastic study of the airport.

The life of Abe Shushan is best researched through the archives at the New Orleans Lakefront Airport and the Special Collections of the University of New Orleans. As most books that mention Shushan are about Huey Long, the minutes of the Orleans Levee District and the database at UNO are the most valuable sources of information.

Political Background

Political history in Louisiana is more difficult to wade through than the swamps that dot the state's landscape. Corruption and scandal have plagued the state since its inception and

⁷ Richard Campanella, *Time and Place in New Orleans: Past Geographies In The Present Day* (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing Company, 2002).

continue to do so today. These issues undoubtedly changed the destiny of Louisiana in a multitude of ways on many different levels. However, Governors, a powerful position where the consequences become magnified, exerted their considerable sway over most of the state's government. One particularly controversial figure is Huey P. Long, the 40th Governor of Louisiana, serving from 1928 to 1932. Long considered himself a populist, but scholars have argued whether he was populist, demagogue, or dictator⁸ — despite the large number of accomplishments in his home state. An examination of Long's closest advisors and confidants for better insight into his true motivations reveal a far more nuanced way of sharing power. The credit for governance in Louisiana during that period went to Long. His bombastic style and micromanagement overshadowed the work done by his lieutenants. This approach does not consider that the lieutenants themselves might have their own motivations; one cannot forget that, although these people were secondary in the larger narrative, these subordinates were successful and continued to influence their communities in meaningful ways. Thus one must carefully draw a line between Long's ambitions and those of his lieutenants, and also learn from the successes of these underlings who sought to maximize their influence with what resources they had.

The governments of the city of New Orleans and the state of Louisiana are heavily entwined, due primarily to the status of New Orleans as the most economically viable city in the state. This close relationship occurs on an individual level as well as organizational, and it is vital to study these connections to understand the professional relationship between Huey Long and Abraham Shushan. The Governor of Louisiana has sweeping powers across the branches of the state

⁸ Scully, 2; Williams, 101.

government, more so than other states. Other major factors are the influence of local community groups and the wide range of power given to the president of the Orleans Levee District Board.

New Orleans is both blessed and cursed by its access to water. Located at the mouth of the Mississippi River and south of Lake Pontchartrain, the city thrived economically, but that same location makes flooding a continual concern. Most of New Orleans lies below sea level in a topographic “bowl” ringed by 104.8 miles of levees that protect against flooding from the river. Average amounts of rainfall would take several days to drain out of the city if not for a system of mechanical pumps designed to facilitate the drainage of the city. After Hurricane Katrina, the United States Army Corps of Engineers constructed the world’s largest pumping station at the West Closure Complex of the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway, capable of handling 150,000 gallons of floodwater per second to better service the needs of the city’s inhabitants. In addition to these levees and pumps, the city also makes use of the Bonnet Carré Spillway (constructed in 1935) located above the city in St. Charles Parish, 200 floodgates, 103 flood valves, and a seawall along Lake Pontchartrain.⁹ The creation of such extensive flood prevention measures requires considerable cooperation amongst federal, state, and local governments which led to the creation of the Orleans Levee District which has significantly more power than other similar agencies along the length of the Mississippi.¹⁰

Organized in 1890, the Orleans Levee District Board’s primary purpose was maintaining the levees on the Mississippi River and Lake Pontchartrain within the limits of the city of New Orleans. Since then, the Board’s activities have expanded to a multitude of functions related to the lakefront, including: building a protective seawall, the construction and administration of the

⁹ The Orleans Levee District (OLD), *The Orleans Levee District – A History* [Internet]; available from <http://orleanslevee.com/history.htm>; accessed April 21, 2018.

¹⁰ OLD, <http://orleanslevee.com/history.htm>; accessed April 23, 2015.

Lakefront Airport, making land available for the formation of the Louisiana State University at New Orleans,¹¹ the formation of a police force specifically for the levees, and the creation of parks and parkways in the reclaimed land along the lakeshore. The Orleans Levee Board's functions overlap with those of other governmental units more than any other levee board in the state. While its relationship with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is like other districts, it has a more restricted relationship with the Louisiana Department of Public Works as the Board performs its own engineering work and the state's only function is to approve its projects.¹² Concerning its relationship with the city during Shushan's time, the Board was more closely aligned with local government than other districts mainly because its membership includes the mayor and a member of city council. Other examples of its connection to local government include the necessity of city approval for the levee police, meeting city specifications for subdivision developments, cooperation with the Board of Port Commissioners for the construction and maintenance of levees along the Industrial Canal, and coordination with city agencies on plans for parks and recreational facilities.¹³

The state-controlled network of levee districts pre-dated federal participation in flood control which started in 1917 when Congress enacted legislation authorizing levee construction.¹⁴ Under this program, local interests paid one-third of the cost, furnished the necessary rights of way, and agreed to maintain them. The U.S. Corps of Engineers constructed an important component of statewide flood control, the Bonnet Carré Spillway, with funding by

¹¹ Robert L. Dupont, *On Higher Ground: The University of New Orleans at 50* (New Orleans: University of New Orleans Press, 2008), 20-28.

¹² Orleans Levee Board, organizational chart, November 1952.

¹³ Howard L. Vaughn and Robert Friedman, "Government in Metropolitan New Orleans," *Tulane Studies in Political Science*, Vol. 6, (June 1959): 64-65.

¹⁴ FEMA, *History of Levees* [Internet]; available from https://www.fema.gov/media-library-data/1463585486484-d22943de4883b61a6ede15aa57a78a7f/History_of_Levees_0512_508.pdf; accessed April 22, 2018.

Congress after passage of the Reed-Jones Flood Control Act. The act followed the disastrous flood in 1927 which killed 246 people and left 700,000 homeless.¹⁵ The Spillway project had the support for several years by Louisiana congressmen on the basis that it was unfair for Louisiana to bear the cost of protecting the area against flood waters which originated in twenty-seven states. The \$13 million project can handle 250,000 cubic feet of water per second and even more in times of high water. It costs practically nothing to operate except in times of emergency.¹⁶

The diversity and scope of authority given to the Orleans Levee Board is considerable, and most of that power lies in the hands of the secretary. The board chooses the secretary (previously titled as the president) who supervises the accounting, stenographic, public relations, legal, and engineering departments. The secretary is also the official representative of the board and he assigns all district business to the proper department. The secretary maintains the minutes for monthly board meetings, keeps files on all contracts and leases, directs the hiring and dismissal of employees in accordance with state civil service rules.¹⁷ However, after Hurricane Katrina, the responsibilities of the Orleans Levee District split into two different systems: Flood Protection and Non-Flood Protection. The latter oversees the management of the New Orleans Lakefront Airport although the land on which the airport is built is maintained by the Orleans Levee District Flood Protection agency.¹⁸

New Orleans, and by extension Louisiana, still felt the effects of the Civil War and Restoration at the beginning of the 20th Century. The Bourbon Democrats lost influence and

¹⁵ John M. Barry, *Rising Tide* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 285-289.

¹⁶ OLD, *The Orleans Levee District – A History* [internet]; available from <http://orleanslevee.com/history.htm>; accessed April 21, 2018.

¹⁷ New Orleans Lakefront Airport, *Lakefront Airport History* [Internet]; available from <http://www.lakefrontairport.com/>; accessed April 18, 2018.

¹⁸ Phone interview with Chance Halprin, New Orleans Lakefront Airport management, Interviewed April 25, 2018.

elections, and so mayor John Fitzpatrick reorganized the local faction into the Choctaw Club.¹⁹ From this group sprang the Regular Democratic Organization (RDO). This new group gained influence in the late 1800s and helped to elect Mayor Martin Behrman in 1904. A pro-business, conservative group composed of influential and well-connected community leaders, the RDO promoted the goals of business interests, banking, railroads, and laissez-faire capitalism as well as expanded public works. They appealed to working-class and immigrant voters mainly because they had jobs to dispense.²⁰ The RDO allied itself with Governor John Parker, a progressivist, and supported him in his successful gubernatorial campaign in 1920. In the municipal election of 1925 several members led by Colonel John Sullivan created a splinter group called the “New Regulars” who believed in a more progressive ideology. It is through Sullivan that Parker most likely met Abe Shushan.²¹

John Milliken Parker, Jr. was Governor of Louisiana from 1920-1924. His paternal grandfather was a substantial landholder and slave owner in Mississippi, but John Parker, Sr. moved his family to New Orleans and prospered as a commission merchant, wholesale grocer, and cotton broker. The senior Parker participated in local politics as a member of the anti-Republican White League and of anti-machine reform movements. Before young Parker began work for his father’s firm in the 1880s, he worked briefly on the family plantation at Bethel Church in Mississippi. His background in plantations led him to become a prominent figure in movements advocating federal programs of flood control in the region.²² By 1912 he sold most of his properties in the delta at a time when his peers held him in high regard as one of the

¹⁹ Edward F. Haas, *Political Leadership in a Southern City: New Orleans in the Progressive Era, 1896-1902* (Ruston, LA: McGinty Press, 1988), 25-26, 67.

²⁰ James Bolner, *Louisiana Politics in a Labyrinth* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 84.

²¹ Scully, 7.

²² Miriam G. Reeves, *The Governors of Louisiana* (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing Company, 1986), 95-98; Walter G. Cowan and Jack B. McGuire, *Louisiana Governors: Rulers, Rascals, and Reformers* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), 149-158.

leading cotton planters in Mississippi. He eventually took over and expanded his father's business and gained recognition as a leader in the New Orleans commercial establishment. By the time voters chose him to be governor, he had been the youngest president of both the Cotton Exchange and the New Orleans Board of Trade and was possibly the richest individual in Louisiana.²³ Although he accomplished much, he did not enjoy the social obligations that came along with success in business. He much preferred the outdoors, and his love of hunting cemented a political partnership and friendship with Theodore Roosevelt. Like his father and most of his business peers, Parker opposed the New Orleans political machine, which consisted of professional politicians dominated by the Democratic Party. From 1888 until his election as governor, Parker was active in mayoral and gubernatorial campaigns, and his political positions showed a desire for honest and efficient government, as well as his own disdain for professional politicians.

In 1912 Parker stunned Democrats by joining Roosevelt's Progressive party. He lost the governor's race as a Progressive in 1916, only to win it as a Democrat in 1920. During his career as governor, he aimed to complete many political reforms that were progressive in nature but fell short of accomplishing them. This resulted from Parker's lack of political maneuverability, as well as strong opposition from the Ku Klux Klan. While governor, he condemned the secrecy, religious bigotry, and violent actions of the Klan and supported legislation to ban the wearing of masks. Parker showed considerable tenacity in battling against the Klan and won respect for contributing to the order's declining influence in Louisiana. However, even his friends believed that he was unreasonably gripped by this issue over others. In the 1924 gubernatorial campaign, Parker supported Hewitt Bouanchaud against both Huey P. Long and Henry L. Fuqua. Long

²³ Spencer Phillips, "Administration of Governor Parker," (M.A. thesis, Louisiana State University, 1933), 4.

finished a strong third, and Fuqua overwhelmed Bouanchaud. This result was interpreted by most Louisiana's as a thorough repudiation of the Parker administration. Afterward, Parker intended to retire from politics to a farm in St. Francisville but returned as director of flood relief after the severe floods in 1927.²⁴

Henry L. Fuqua was Governor of Louisiana from 1924-1926; he is best remembered for passing vigorous anti-KKK legislation during his term. Prior to his election, Fuqua was the manager of the state prison at Angola, coincidentally one of the major clients of Shushan Brothers Dry Goods. When he died, Oramel H. Simpson succeeded Fuqua. Simpson was not an experienced politician, and the floods of 1927 tested his administrative talents. His performance with those floods influenced his gubernatorial chances in 1928 — a contest he lost to Long.²⁵

Huey P. Long served as Governor of Louisiana from 1928-1932, although he made it to the United States Senate in 1930. No other Louisiana governor has been as controversial as Huey Long. His programs as governor and his influence as a senator enabled him to make modern political and economic history on the state and national levels. His works influenced contemporary attitudes regarding wealth and poverty and was (apparently) moderate on race. This man shaped Louisiana's political and social development to the point that history marks his term in office as a major turning point.²⁶ In 1928, he had a clear lead in the Democratic primary, and without a Republican candidate for the governorship, he entered the governor's office. During his term, he increased spending on public education and strove to correct Louisiana's status as the most illiterate state in the nation. One of his first successful maneuvers was an innovative and bold plan to provide free textbooks for schoolchildren, where he bypassed

²⁴ Phillips, 18.

²⁵ Reeves, 98-99.

²⁶ Williams, 4-5.

conservative legal, political, and religious opposition by stating that the funding from the state provided the books directly to children, not the schools. He also increased the funding and enlarged the faculty of Louisiana State University and established its medical school. At the same time, he launched a massive highway-building program that added 2,500 miles of paved roads, 1,308 miles of asphalt roads, 9,000 miles of gravel roads, and two bridges across the Mississippi River.²⁷

Long used his power to change the political and economic landscape of Louisiana. Prior to Long, planter-business interests dominated the government under the so-called Bourbon Democrats. Most citizens, either out of frustration or intimidation, acquiesced to this “gentlemen’s rule” -- voting against their landlord, banker, or employer did not come easily. Prior to the federal women’s suffrage amendment, the state constitution limited suffrage to white men who could read or write or owned at least \$300 of property, practically disenfranchising all blacks and a substantial portion of white citizens. Although the power of the Bourbons was eroded by Progressivism and Governor Parker’s assault on New Orleans’ political machine, political power remained mainly in the hands of the few. While governor, Long extended power to small farmers, laborers, and urban interests and brought the government more under the power of the populace.²⁸

Long’s devotion to the common people was foreshadowed in his experiences after his 1918 election to the Public Service Commission. In 1921, he battled Standard Oil for control of oil pipelines, reversed telephone rate increases which resulted in large refunds to all customers, and added a severance tax on petroleum. His later moves to force a natural gas agreement on the

²⁷ Williams, 443-444; Joseph Dawson, *The Louisiana Governors: Huey P. Long* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 229.

²⁸ Williams, 697-698; Reeves, 101.

New Orleans Public Service Company, construct toll-free bridges, repeal a tax on cigarettes and tobacco, remove the poll tax, and approve a homestead bill that effectively removed the property taxes on the homes of poor and middle-class citizens convinced most of the population that he was their champion. The citizenry often overlooked his politically pragmatic moves: he gave in to the New Orleans Choctaw Club on dedicating part of a gasoline tax to pay the debt of the Port of New Orleans. He also provided for street repair and construction in exchange for their support of a massive highway bond issue, a hike in the state gasoline tax, approval of bonds for a new state capitol, and — perhaps most importantly — the removal of impeachment charges against him.²⁹

Senator Long immediately became a major political factor in the national elections of 1932 and in President Roosevelt’s administration. Long became the proponent of the “Share Our Wealth” plan, which would have liquidated personal estates more than \$3,000,000 and used the money to create a public trust to give every family \$5,000 to buy a house, car, and radio, provide a pension for people over sixty-five, guarantee a minimum salary to workers, grant cash bonuses to veterans, and establish a government-paid college education program for qualified students. Considering these accomplishments, his slogan of “Every Man a King” seems well-earned, even in spite of his continuation of the patronage system and infamous “deduct box” – a well-organized system of kickbacks. By 1935, he made inroads in Roosevelt’s Democratic following by accusing him of selling out to big business and failing to pursue the interests of the “little people.” His protests helped create the New Deal reforms which produced the graduated income tax and Social Security Administration. He posed a threat to Roosevelt’s reelection in 1936, though his strength as a presidential candidate remain untested. In the state capitol in Baton

²⁹ Dawson, 230; Williams, 404-405.

Rouge on September 8, 1935, Dr. Carl A. Weiss, Jr., the son-in-law of one of Long's political opponents, shot the Senator. He died two days later. Huey Long remains a controversial figure in historical scholarship, seen as both a demagogue and a dictator on one hand and on the other as a great mass leader. The creator of a powerful political machine and often charged with being corrupt, he was despised by many. Conversely, he promised and accomplished much, becoming one of Louisiana's most admired governors by making sure that many residents were able to lead better lives.³⁰

Long rose to national prominence but did not achieve this on his own. Able lieutenants within the Long political machine proved integral to his success. One of his most capable underlings was Abraham Shushan of New Orleans. Not only did he serve on the Orleans levee board as Long's appointee, but he had his own political agenda as well. The agenda included ambitious public works projects such as the completion of the Lake Pontchartrain sea wall and Lakefront airport.

Abraham Shushan

Abraham Lazar Shushan was the son of Joseph Shushan who was born in the Polish-Jewish portion of the Austrian Empire in Eastern Europe but immigrated to America at the age of fifteen and later became a traveling salesman. While in Reserve, Louisiana, a lumber town along the Mississippi River, the family's business focused on a retail plantation store, but later morphed into the wholesale dry goods firm of Shushan Brothers Co. headquartered in Alexandria, Louisiana.³¹ After his family moved to New Orleans, the young Abe attended McDonough 13 for grammar school and later the Soule' Business College. In 1908, Shushan

³⁰ Bolner, 142.

³¹ Scully, 6.

started working for his father's business at the age of fourteen.³² In the beginning, he travelled several days each week selling dry goods to businesses, but later began soliciting contracts with state facilities, such as the Angola State Penitentiary. Shortly before he turned twenty-one, while traveling on business in New York City, he married Mathilda Friedman.³³

Shushan's success as a New Orleans businessman brought him into contact with several organizations, but most importantly placed him on the Board of Governors of the Elks. Colonel John P. Sullivan was a member of the Elks Club³⁴ and through him Shushan met soon-to-be-Governor John Parker. By 1920, Shushan had become quite affluent and secured a position as chair of the Wholesale Merchants Bureau of the Commerce Association of New Orleans.³⁵ His high exposure to the elite social groups, background in business management, and interest in flood management cemented his connection to Parker.³⁶ After winning the governorship in 1920, Parker appointed Shushan to the Orleans Levee Board as well as the National River and Harbors Conference and the Mississippi Valley Flood Control Committee — the latter being responsible for bringing the Federal government into flood control for the multi-state Mississippi River Valley region.³⁷ However, when Parker's candidate lost to Fuqua in the 1924 Louisiana governor's race, Shushan lost his appointment to the Levee Board.³⁸

³² "A New Greater Shushan Bros. & Co. Inc. For a Great New Orleans," (New Orleans: Unknown publisher, 1946), Abe Shushan Collection, MSS 23-10, University of New Orleans Special Collections (hereafter cited as UNO Special Collections), 10.

³³ "Abraham Shushan," *New Orleans Item-Tribune*, March 23, 1931. Abe Shushan Collection, MSS 23-28, UNO Special Collections.

³⁴ Matthew J. Schott, "John M. Parker of Louisiana and the Bull Moose Progressive Party in State and Nation," (M.A. thesis, Tulane University, 1960): 60.

³⁵ "New Chair For Commerce Association," *New Orleans Item-Tribune*, June 9, 1929. Abe Shushan Collection, MSS 23-25, UNO Special Collections.

³⁶ Scully, 7-8.

³⁷ "Shushan Succeeds Kittredge to Post on Orleans Levees," *Daily States*, December 19, 1920; Governor John Parker to Abraham Shushan, 11 December 1920, MSS 23-22, Abe Shushan Collection, UNO Special Collections.

³⁸ "Mr. Shushan's letter," *The Daily States*, August 24, 1924. Abe Shushan Collection, MSS-23-25, UNO Special Collections.

The economic future of New Orleans was tied to the proper utilization of the many waterways linking the city to the Gulf of Mexico. Before there was ever talk of a seawall or airport, businessmen and politicians looked to the Lakeview area for development and initiated basic efforts to control flooding. In 1876, the city of New Orleans took over the partially built embankment on Lake Pontchartrain that the Mexican Gulf Ship Canal Company had intended to use as a harbor with railroad facilities. The city built a large wooden platform over the water to house a hotel and restaurant, as well as other temporary amusements, and expanded the embankment and turned portions into a garden. In 1880, the city named this area West End, and it became a popular destination for locals and other pleasure seekers.³⁹ In 1921, the city constructed a seawall 500 feet further out from the original embankment and filled in the space to form West End Park.⁴⁰

In 1921, the Orleans Levee Board decided that the best way to protect against flooding from high lake waters or hurricane storm surge was to reclaim a strip of land along the lakefront, like the construction of West End Park. Articles from both *The New Orleans Item* and *The Times-Picayune* on February 16, 1922 detailed various projects in which were initiatives of the Levee Board. One item was a seawall to protect the shore along Lake Pontchartrain.⁴¹ “A seawall for a sea beach along the city front of Lake Pontchartrain is the question before the Orleans Levee Board,” an article from the February 23, 1922 issue of the *Times-Picayune*, discusses the issues involved with the construction of the barrier. As part of the project, Shushan,

³⁹ Dupont, 21-22; Leonard Huber, *Lakeview Lore*, (New Orleans: Publisher Unknown, 1971), 7. This booklet was published to commemorate the opening of the Harrison Avenue office of the First National Bank.

⁴⁰ Armand Willoz, *Shore Protections in Orleans Parish* (New Orleans: Orleans Levee Board, 1956), 2. This is a small booklet published by the Orleans Levee Board and written by one of its chief engineers.

⁴¹ “New Dock work must be up to Federal Grade. Levee Board to play safe; Sea Beach type for Lake wall favored,” *The New Orleans Item*, February 16, 1922. Abe Shushan Collection, MSS 23-21, UNO Special Collections; “Levee Board Takes up seawall plans,” *The Times-Picayune*, February 16, 1922, Abe Shushan Collection, MSS 23-21, UNO Special Collections.

along with other members of the Levee Board, attended the National Rivers and Harbors congress in Washington with a tour of protected beaches in other areas of the United States.⁴² In 1922, Major Frank Kerr of the state board of engineers proposed creating a beach by erecting a barrier and pumping sand in behind it. This land created from the state-owned lake bottom would become part of the board's holdings to be sold to defray the cost of the project.⁴³

Another important project undertaken by the Orleans Levee Board in conjunction with the city government was the construction of the Inner Harbor Navigation Canal. The canal was a shortcut from the Gulf of Mexico into the city. The canal opened on February 6, 1923 with a ceremony attended by members of the Board including Shushan, as well as Governor Parker, Mayor Andrew McShane, and President Hecht of the Port of Orleans Dock Board.⁴⁴

The plans for the construction of the seawall continued but progress was slow. In a June 20, 1923 article in *The Daily States*, Shushan discussed the beginning of survey work by engineers for the seawall.⁴⁵ By 1924, however, journalists had begun to attack the board for its tardiness, but they acknowledged Shushan's attempts to bring the federal government into the process as it was his idea that flood control should involve the entire Mississippi Valley region.⁴⁶

Shushan ended his first tenure on the Board with initial work done on constructing the seawall. In 1926, the initial pumping to create the new shoreline commenced financed by a

⁴² "Long City Dream started on the way to realization. Improvement of lake front to be undertaken by Levee Board," *The Times-Picayune*, February 19, 1922. Abe Shushan Collection, MSS 23-21, UNO Special Collections.

⁴³ "Plans for Seawall," *The Times-Picayune*, July 16, 1922. Abe Shushan Collection, MSS 23-22, UNO Special Collections.

⁴⁴ "Inner Harbor Trail Blazed by Tug Samson," *New Orleans Item*, February 7, 1923. Abe Shushan Collection, MSS 23-22, UNO Special Collections; Port of New Orleans, "Port of New Orleans History" [Internet], available from <http://www.portno.com/history>; accessed May 2, 2018.

⁴⁵ "To Start Survey for Lake Seawall," *The Daily States*, June 20, 1923. Abe Shushan Collection, MSS 23-21, UNO Special Collections.

⁴⁶ "Seawall progress continues at a slower pace," *The Times-Picayune*, August 13, 1924. Abe Shushan Collection, MSS 23-21, UNO Special Collections.

\$4,000,000 million bond issue by the Board.⁴⁷ After he wins the 1928 gubernatorial race Long began consolidating his control over state agencies by purging the old guard and putting his own people in place.⁴⁸ Shushan's knowledge of flood control, loyalty, and business connections made him an obvious choice for the OLB, one of the most influential of the state agencies. Long initially allowed Joseph Haspel, a Simpson appointee, to remain as president of the Board. However, a few months after gaining the governor's office, Long fired all the employees of the OLB and put Shushan on the board as a member of a "screening committee" to determine which of those employees would be kept⁴⁹.

In 1929 Huey P. Long appointed Abraham Shushan president of the Orleans Levee Board.⁵⁰ This appointment marked the beginning of an incredibly productive period in the Board's history. In addition to building the lakefront airport and seawall, the Board managed the construction of the New Basin Canal and Bayou St. John Locks, the Donnier canal in Algiers, and the floodwall at the French Market. Shushan proved instrumental in keeping all these projects aloft, which is impressive considering his concurrent community, business, and political interests. Having so much control and social resources at his disposal, Shushan was also able to manipulate his board and popular opinion for political gain as well as financial gain. The latter later proved to be his downfall years later.

Shushan, now solidly in place at the Orleans Levee Board, and with Long providing political support, seawall and airport projects began to see significant progress. In 1927, the first

⁴⁷ Judy Filipich and Lee Taylor, *Lakefront New Orleans: Planning And Development, 1926-1971* (New Orleans: Urban Studies Institute, Louisiana State University In New Orleans, 1971), 9.

⁴⁸ Williams, 420-421.

⁴⁹ "All Levee Board Employees Fired: New Job Created, Incumbents are expected to be kept in some minor posts. Plum given to friend of Governor Long," *The Times-Picayune*, August 9, 1928; "Levee Board Employees All Fired As Long Forces Take Over Office Reins," *The New Orleans Item-Tribune*, August 9, 1928, Abe Shushan Collection, MSS 23-23, UNO Special Collections.

⁵⁰ Williams, 421.

air mail service by the St. Tammany Gulf Coast Airways had been established at Alvin Callender Field in Belle Chasse. This location was far from the city, and eventually service moved to Menefevé in Chalmette. However, this facility was little more than a grassy field with a few hangers. It was obvious that the city needed a better airfield infrastructure.⁵¹

Alongside efforts from the Young Men’s Business Club and the New Orleans Airport Commission, Shushan stepped up the push for an airport in the city partially funded by the state. The city government was happy to hand over control of such a complicated project to the state. On December 31, 1928 Shushan announced that work on a new airport at the New Orleans lakefront will begin in fifty days. He further stated that the quality of work on the airport would guarantee an AA1 rating, the highest rating for an airfield.⁵²

Discussion over where to place the airport led to the idea of continuing the land reclamation project on Lake Pontchartrain, and eventually plans were made to reclaim a triangular plot of land at the east end of the seawall/lakefront area. In 1929, the board completed a survey of the land and John Klorer, chief engineer of the OLB, drafted specific plans for reclaiming the land.⁵³ The design was ingenious for its use of oyster shells in one of the lower fill levels — the shells’ interlocking nature prevented settling, but also allowed water to drain into the lake naturally. By November of that year, bids to create the seawall found approval and final

⁵¹ “Commemorating the Formal Opening of Shushan Airport,” Commemorative booklet, MSS 23-10, Abe Shushan Collection, UNO Special Collections.

⁵² “Work To Begin On Airport Within Month,” *The New Orleans Item-Tribune*, January 1, 1929. Abe Shushan Collection, MSS 23-24, UNO Special Collections; Richard Campanella, *Time and Place in New Orleans: Past Geographies in the Present Day* (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing Company, 2002), 57.

⁵³ “Work To Begin on Airport Within Month,” *The New Orleans Item-Tribune*, Abe Shushan Collection, MSS 23-25, UNO Special Collections.

design was of concrete steps. This structure decreased the amount of splash from waves and allowed pedestrian access to the lake.⁵⁴

On June 5, 1929 Joseph Haspel resigned from the presidency of the Orleans Levee Board citing “pressure of business.”⁵⁵ In his biography of Huey Long, T. Harry Williams suggests that Long wanted to make certain that any members of the more important state agencies not loyal to him could not alter his plans – hence the sudden resignation of Haspel. With Haspel gone, Long now appointed loyal supporter Abe Shushan as president of the Orleans Levee Board.⁵⁶ Plans for the construction of the seawall now gained speed. On October 29, 1929 *The New Orleans Item-Tribune* printed a “Special Notice” issued by Shushan stating that sealed proposals for the building “of a concrete sea wall on the shore of Lake Pontchartrain, from West End to the Industrial Canal will be accepted”.⁵⁷

Although work on the seawall progressed rapidly, there were three major hurdles existed: 1) squatters who had built “camps” on the swampy lakefront, 2) popular dissent that was rooted in the idea that the seawall had been too politicized, and 3) the legal issues of how to pay for the seawall. Some felt that the taxation power of the Orleans Levee Board should not be used to back the bonds, but rather the value of the land originally intended to be sold should be used as collateral. After debating the matter in court, the Board decided to use a tax.⁵⁸ This left the reclaimed land to be put up for public use, which possibly vexed Shushan as he had imagined the entire area would become a residential corridor complete with restaurants and retail establishments – thus not open to the public. City officials accused Shushan of playing politics

⁵⁴ Filipich and Taylor, 13-14.

⁵⁵ “Long Plans To Oust Levee Board Counsel in Crevasse Claims,” *The New Orleans Item-Tribune*, June 8, 1929. Abe Shushan Collection, MSS 23-25, UNO Special Collections.

⁵⁶ Williams, 291.

⁵⁷ “Special Notice,” *The New Orleans Item-Tribune*, October 29, 1929. Abe Shushan Collection, MSS 23-25, UNO Special Collections.

⁵⁸ “Orleans Levee Board Considers Tax,” *The Times-Picayune*, June 3, 1930. Abe Shushan Collection, MSS 23-25, UNO Special Collections.

with the potential land use. Shushan countered by accurately pointing out that the city politicians could be accused of playing political games themselves by constructing the Municipal Auditorium, the criminal courts building, and other capital improvements right before the 1928 elections.⁵⁹

The issues of financing and politics no longer stood in the way. but the squatters remained, and it took quite a long time to clear them out. By 1930, the \$4,000,000 worth of landfill had been pumped in, and construction on the concrete seawall began. The Orleans Levee Board awarded the contract to build the seawall to the Orleans Dredging Company.⁶⁰ Over the next 2 years, the Board constructed the 5.5-mile-long seawall at a cost of \$2,600,000 in order to permanently stop the newly reclaimed 2,000 acres of land from eroding back into the lake.⁶¹ With the seawall and land reclamation project finally underway, Shushan could turn his attention to the airport. Unfortunately, the Great Depression had taken its toll on the market and the Board was unable to sell bonds to cover the cost. Fortunately, Huey Long had just recently won election to the U.S. Senate and he used his growing political capital to call a special session of the state legislature where he forced the issue and gave the OLB the funds they needed via the state.⁶²

With secure funding in place, Shushan began a tour of airports around the country and abroad to see how other cities designed their facilities. During this time, the board considered the issue of a name for the facility. The Orleans Levee Board almost unanimously decided to name the airport after Shushan — Shushan himself was the only person to dissent. He noted that the

⁵⁹ Abe Shushan, letter to the Editor of *The Times-Picayune*, "Lakefront Seawall," *The Times-Picayune*, October 31, 1929. Abe Shushan Collection, MSS 23-25, UNO Special Collections. A similar article appeared in *The New Orleans Item-Tribune* addressing the same subject.

⁶⁰ "Sign Contract for \$2,000,000 Seawall," *The New Orleans Item-Tribune*, January 1, 1930. Abe Shushan Collection, MSS 23-25, UNO Special Collections.

⁶¹ Wilma Heaton, "History of Orleans Levee District," Unpublished booklet, New Orleans Lakefront Airport, July 2016.

⁶² Williams, 283.

Dock Board's facilities had been named after prominent members of that committee, but those names were removed after a change in the administration.⁶³ Despite this, the board decided to name the facility after Shushan.

In 1931, it was time to begin formulating the plans for the airport. Firms based in Los Angeles, Austin, and Shreveport submitted designs — notably the board considered no local firms, and the idea that a Louisiana firm should be chosen was shot down by John Klorer who claimed that they should hire the best regardless of where they resided. The board selected the National Airport Engineering Company of Los Angeles and opened the plans to the public⁶⁴. However, at the time, John Klorer, chief engineer, had not completely checked the plans for their feasibility and accuracy⁶⁵. In 1932, the agency received bids for the construction of the airport, and Caldwell Brothers (a favorite construction firm for Long) won the bid by a very small margin.⁶⁶ Additionally, the board decided to hire that local architects oversee the implementation of National's designs plans, and the two architects Shushan provided were Emile Weil and Leon Weiss (Long's favored architect and close friend). Weil offered a flat rate of \$3,400 and Weiss offered to supervise the construction as well as act as consultant for a six percent fee. Shushan advised the Board to accept Weil's offer, which they did.⁶⁷ Three weeks later, the National Airport Engineering Company abruptly asked to be relieved of their duties to build several facilities in China.⁶⁸ Shushan, in a showing of uncharacteristic magnanimity, declared to the newspapers that they should be allowed to take on such a large amount of work. Since the original designers were no longer involved, Shushan went back to Weil and Weiss to discuss a

⁶³ Orleans Levee Board (OLB) minutes, January 6, 1931. New Orleans Lakefront Airport Collection, New Orleans Lakefront Airport.

⁶⁴ Ibid, June 18, 1931.

⁶⁵ Ibid, February 16, 1932.

⁶⁶ Ibid, March 29, 1932.

⁶⁷ Ibid, May 20, 1932.

⁶⁸ Ibid, June 7, 1932.

revised bid for supervision. Weil raised his offer to six percent, however Weiss maintained the same rate and offered to redesign the administration building and make modifications to several smaller buildings. When he presented these new proposals to the Board, he noted that he had no preference regarding selection of a firm, and if anyone had a different architect to suggest, they had ten days in which to do so because the contractors were anxious to get started (in fact, work on the first hangar had already begun). Unsurprisingly, the Board agreed to hire Weiss.⁶⁹

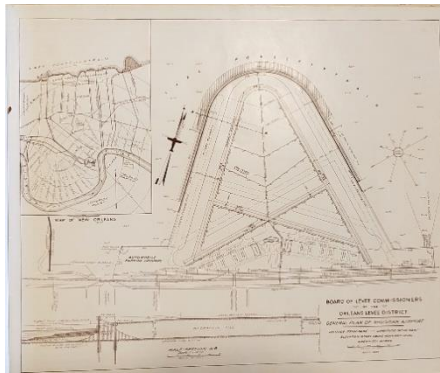
After hiring Weiss on June 8, 1932, the board discovered that Klorer and the engineering department had failed to review over seventy pages of National's designs.⁷⁰ Because National's plans were in the hands of board for nearly a year, this was a serious oversight. Weiss's offer to redesign the buildings was necessary because National's original designs were of low quality. According to an interview with one of the engineering staff, the plans had doors opening in the wrong places or wrong direction.⁷¹ In a letter written to the levee board on December 9, Weiss described his changes and the reasons a redesign was necessary — the buildings' roofs and interior elements were not fireproof, and steel frames would not hold up to extreme heat as well as concrete. This letter also included a notice that the price of construction would go up substantially, as the new design doubled the price for materials. This new design also included significant aesthetic changes — Spanish Revival gave way to Art Deco and "S" s added to the ironwork, door handles, screws, etc. Shushan held onto Weiss's letter for 6 months. On May 12, 1933 Shushan finally presented Weiss's redesign to the OLB who unanimously approved it,

⁶⁹ OLB minute, June 8, 1932.

⁷⁰ Ibid, June 21, 1932.

⁷¹ Scully, 37.

mainly because they had such late notification.⁷² The work proceeded without further drama and on Mardi Gras day in 1934, Shushan Airport opened to the public.⁷³



Shushan Airport. Photo Courtesy of UNO Special Collections



Photo courtesy of UNO Special Collections

One month after the successful opening of the airport, Shushan announced a possible resignation from his position with the Orleans Levee Board for unknown reasons, though Senator Long mentioned he knew of his ill health. Shushan’s “ill health” was most likely the

⁷² OLB minutes, May 12, 1933.

⁷³ “Shushan Airport Opens,” *The Times-Picayune*, February 18, 1934. Abe Shushan Collection, MSS 23-35, UNO Special Collections.

foreknowledge that he faced indictment for tax evasion, which was the first of several indictments against associates of Long.⁷⁴ In September of 1935, Carl Weiss assassinated Long, and Shushan was at the Senator's side to announce his passing. The following month, Shushan faced charges he had not paid taxes on \$525,732 of income he received as a rebate on the landfill for the lakefront and airport. The government's case against Shushan was weak, and the defense attorney's strategy was to claim that the income received was meant for Long's coffers. After four hours of deliberation, the jury reached a conclusion of not guilty.⁷⁵ Shushan claimed the trial was political in nature, and journalists agreed. Northern newspapers said he received a not guilty verdict because of New Orleans politics,⁷⁶ but locals supported Shushan, thinking that Roosevelt used the trial as a smear campaign against Long and his supporters. After the trial, Shushan formally resigned from the OLB, and ended his public career.⁷⁷

In 1939 the federal government indicted Shushan again – this time for fraud, but this time he was convicted and, eventually, pardoned by Harry Truman in 1947,⁷⁸ Shushan was out of politics by 1936, but his legacy goes beyond just the seawall and the airport. In 1938 the newly developed Lake Vista West subdivision opened. This subdivision existed between the Lakeview neighborhood and the lakefront, and only became habitable after the construction of the seawall. Lake Vista, instead of being designed as a grid, was designed so that the homes faced each other

⁷⁴ "Possible Trouble for Long Associate," *The New Orleans States*, October 8, 1935. Abe Shushan Collection, MSS 23-38, UNO Special Collections.

⁷⁵ Scully, 57.

⁷⁶ "Shushan found not guilty," *The Bristol Press*, October 24, 1935. Abe Shushan Collection, MSS 23-38, UNO Special Collections.

⁷⁷ "Shushan Leaves Public Life," *The New York Herald-Tribune*, November 5, 1935. Abe Shushan Collection, MSS 23-38, UNO Special Collections.

⁷⁸ Frank Donze, "Airport attests to pair of monumental egos," *The Times-Picayune* [Internet]; available from https://www.nola.com/news/index.ssf/2008/07/airport_attests_to_pair_of_mon.html; accessed May 15, 2018. UNO Special Collections possesses the letter of pardon written by then-President of the United States on behalf of Shushan.

across pedestrian walkways and the roads led to the backs of the houses.⁷⁹ This subdivision sold relatively quickly — by 1946, despite the war, the first phase almost completely sold out and the board opened the second phase.⁸⁰ Compared to the development of Lakeview, this was very quick. Shushan talked about developing a residential corridor in the area, and these subdivisions would have been part of the plan.

Conclusion

When one examines these public works as part of the development of New Orleans, it is apparent that Huey Long was not the sole mastermind behind them. Discussion of lakefront flood protection had been going on for decades, and there are only so many solutions to the problem. The developing aviation industry required an airport in a large city such as New Orleans. The Long administration solved these problems in name only. Abraham Shushan devised such a clever way of dealing with two disparate problems. To give Huey Long sole credit for accomplishing these projects is to overlook key details that indicate it was Shushan who took advantage of Long's desire to appear populist. And Shushan truly benefited in the end. Long may have risked his political power for a better popular reputation, but Shushan retained the powerful business connections and, possibly, the financial gains (such as the “rebate” on the landfill). When one looks at Shushan's career, it is impressive that one who essentially had no way of winning an election (due to rampant anti-Semitism) could garner such influence, accomplish so many projects, and do it all with very little risk to his personal life. His accomplishments are an intriguing case study in how one individual could start with so little and work his way almost to the top — even if some of his methods were not strictly legal.

⁷⁹ Filipich and Taylor, 38-45.

⁸⁰ Huber, 24.

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Vita

The author was born in New Orleans, Louisiana. He obtained his Bachelor's degree in business from Louisiana State University in 2001. He joined the University of New Orleans graduate program in 2008 to pursue his masters in history. He currently owns his own insurance agency and is married to his beautiful wife Claire and blessed with three healthy children Brody, Ireland and Finley. He fills his spare time by staying healthy through running, biking and swimming.