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Floating Bath Houses: Public Health and Recreation for the Working Class in Nineteenth-century New Orleans

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Floating Bath Houses:
Public Health and Recreation for the Working Class in Nineteenth-century New Orleans

A Thesis

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

Master of Arts

In

History

By

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BA, University of New Orleans, 2007

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Abstract

One seemingly lost aspect of working-class life in antebellum New Orleans stems from the effort of entrepreneurs to provide bathing and swimming facilities for the city's working poor. In exchange for a relatively inexpensive fee per use, working-class New Orleanians served as the customer base for "floating pools" moored along the Mississippi riverfront. Beginning in 1836, these pools represented a transitional phase between the long extant tradition of bathing and swimming for free in the river and the development of commercialized, waterfront pleasure resorts for the masses in the late 1800s. Close proximity of working class neighborhoods to the river allowed New Orleans entrepreneurs to capitalize on restrictions city official began to place on bathing in the river. The floating pools represented an early stage in the commercialization of recreation as well as public hygiene.

Keywords

Floating baths, bathe, pool, public health, recreation, swimming, hygiene, and New Orleans.

Introduction

“The advance of civilization is largely measured by the victories of mankind over its greatest enemy --- dirt.”¹ Josiah Quincy

New Orleans is surrounded by water. The Mississippi River flows along fifteen miles of New Orleans' periphery and carries a large amount of fresh air along with generous commercial traffic.² The city is sited upon land that was wrestled from the river's "watery excesses."³ In the nineteenth century, New Orleans was dependent upon the waters that surround it for its way of life. The riverfront was crowded with ships from all around the world. "Thousands of flatboats were packed so tightly that one could walk deck to deck from one end of the city to the other," according to one account. Along the city docks, one could see thousands of cotton bales and sugar barrels stacked waiting for the merchants who were responsible for making the sale.⁴ The extremely productive port relied upon a great deal of manual labor, which led to increased population, wealth, and disease. New Orleans was subject to both man-made and natural disasters. The city not only experienced yellow fever and cholera epidemics, but also had to contend with hurricanes and devastating floods. Life for citizens was relatively difficult and

¹ Quoted in Maryilyn Williams, Thorton, *"The Great Unwashed" Public Baths in Urban America 1840-1920* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1991), 1.

² *Daily Picayune*, January 15, 1902.

³ Craig Colten, E., *An Unnatural Metropolis Wrestling New Orleans from Nature* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 2.

⁴ Walter Johnson, *Soul By Soul* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 1.

hazardous. New Orleans, like many other port cities, featured a tough, transient citizenry that provided labor on the docks and resided in congested neighborhoods.⁵

One seemingly lost aspect of working-class life in antebellum New Orleans stems from the effort of entrepreneurs to provide bathing and swimming facilities for the city's working poor. In exchange for a relatively inexpensive fee per use, working-class New Orleanians served as the customer base for "floating pools" moored along the Mississippi riverfront. These pools represented a transitional phase between the long extant tradition of bathing and swimming for free in the river and the development of commercialized, waterfront pleasure resorts for the masses in the late 1800s. The floating pools prospered amid a series of legislative changes that severely limited when citizens could bathe in the river. Overshadowed by the trolley parks and other amusements available along the city's lakefront, the nineteenth century floating pools found in New Orleans, as well as those in other North American cities, have remained largely unexamined by scholars. Seasoned archivists at the four leading history research centers in New Orleans were unaware of the floating pools. Digitization of the nineteenth century newspapers has allowed a fascinating part of the city's history to resurface. Online search capabilities led to the discovery of a topic that was unknown to veteran archivists consulted at all of the four leading research centers in New Orleans.⁶

⁵ Capers, Gerald, M. Jr. "Confederates and Yankees in Occupied New Orleans, 1862-1865," *The Journal of Southern History*: 30, 4 (Nov., 1964), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2204279> , 411.

⁶ Archivists at the Williams History Research Center of the Historic New Orleans Collection, the New Orleans Public Library's Louisiana Division, the University of New Orleans Special Collections, and the Louisiana Research Collection, Tulane University Libraries, were completely unaware of this aspect of New Orleans history. This topic interested me because of my current position as an aquatics manager and my experience in competitive swimming. I happened to read an article regarding a 21st century floating pool in New York City that mentioned a 19th century predecessor. This led me to search for

Close proximity of working class neighborhoods to the river allowed New Orleans entrepreneurs to capitalize on restrictions city officials began to place on bathing in the river. The floating pools represented an early stage in the commercialization of recreation as well as hygiene. City officials in the 1830s began to regulate an area of everyday life that had once been free from government interest. The unsanitary conditions in New Orleans had grown out of control by the 1830s and were identified as fueling the yellow fever epidemics that took the lives of thousands of its citizens. The floating pools helped to ameliorate this public health problem, even if much of the population was unaware of the added benefit.

In addition, New Orleans was also in need of a recreational outlet for its poorest citizens. Simultaneous with the development of Carrollton Gardens and Milneburg in the mid-1830s as waterfront pleasure resorts for wealthier citizens, the floating baths provided a place where working people could gather together, socialize, and learn valuable skills such as swimming. The baths served both genders and were accessible to all classes, yet the upper class did not see the floating baths as desirable. The floating bathhouses, together with legislation prohibiting nude bathing in the river, allowed New Orleans' civic and business elites to reshape the behavior of the working class in an attempt to have them conform to middle class standard of cleanliness and

information on floating pools in New Orleans while preparing a research project on the history of swimming in New Orleans in an Introduction to Public History course. The searchable, online newspaper database has provided information that otherwise would be most difficult to find. However, I understand that there are limitations connected to the technological advance. For example, typographical errors caused by the digitization process often create slight spelling errors. Therefore, I have performed multiple word searches using a variety of spellings to try to find additional information. Keywords used for these searches included the following (and variations of the correct spelling): pools, floating pools, swimming, drowning, baths, floating baths, bathhouses, bathing, and bathe.

decorum. The floating pools in New York City developed into a service provided to its citizens for free. Physicians and other public health experts called for free baths as essential reforms that could diminish the effects of epidemics; nevertheless, the New Orleans pools never abandoned the profit-motive. The story of the floating pools indicate that the New Orleans business and political establishment legislated the poor out of the river and into commercial baths. Thus, any larger civic good that might result from cleansing the laboring class had to be paid for using the nickels and dimes of the workers themselves.

Floating Pool Origins

By the early 1800's, upper class citizens enjoyed access to land-based public baths featuring marble tubs. One of the public baths is described in the *Orleans Gazette* as sixty feet wide and one hundred and twenty feet long. It also contained eleven bathing rooms on the upper level and twelve bathing rooms on the lower level.⁷ In addition, a few physicians had established sulphurous fumigatory steam baths that reportedly cured a wide variety of illnesses from ulcers and paralysis to leprosy in the early stages. These medicinal baths were private and were not part of routine hygiene. The service was fee based and one physician, Reynaro De La Ferriere, charged \$9.00 for six baths for whites, and free people of color. Slaves paid \$1.00 per bath. Due to the expense, the baths were seemingly used as a last resort for illnesses.⁸

During the same time period, the middle class and poor men, women, children, slaves, and free people of color continued to use the Mississippi River and canals for

⁷ *Orleans Gazette*, August 13, 1806.

⁸ *Louisiana Advertiser*, January 13, 1820.

bathing and swimming. As the city developed and the population expanded, the riverfront was used increasingly for commerce, which strengthened the *laissez faire* mentality of city officials towards the needs of business. By 1834, the commercialized riverfront extended a few miles upriver and downriver from the city's old quarter.⁹ Therefore, little emphasis was placed on the individual need for personal hygiene or leisure. Simultaneously, the need for greater civic control of waterfront use became apparent. Nakedness had already become an issue as increased commercial and family activity conflicted with public nudity associated with bathing. In 1816, the New Orleans City Council passed a public bathing ordinance which allowed for the creation of public baths and outlined usage rules based on gender and race:

All persons are hereby expressly forbidden to bathe or swim at any time of the year on the banks of the river Mississippi, in front of the city and suburbs, after 5 O'clock A.M. and before 8 O'clock P.M. as also to bathe in an unbecoming manner and to remain naked on the river's bank, insight of those passing by, under the penalty, in either case of a fine of five dollars, for the payment of which parents, masters, or mistresses, shall be a slave he shall receive fifteen lashes at the police jail. And all persons are further forbidden, under the same penalties, to bathe or swim in the basin of the canal de Carondelet at any time of the year, and under any pretence whatever.¹⁰

New Orleans' close ties to the Mississippi River and other bodies of water that surrounded it made its development similar to that of New York City. Both expanded in much the same way due to the cities' dependence on commercial growth along the

⁹ James Winston, E, "Notes on the Economic History of New Orleans, 1803-1836," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review*: 11, 2 (Sept., 1924), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1893582>, 204. The city had spread upriver to "the lower line of the parish of Jefferson and three miles down the left bank 'from the center of the square of the city'."

¹⁰ Jane De Grummond, "On Bathing," *Louisiana History*: 8, 4 (Autumn, 1967), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4230974>, 328.

rivers. New Orleans followed the trends set forth by many other American cities with respect to sanitation issues with the exception of the city's unwillingness to provide free bathing facilities. The idea of personal cleanliness in America developed over the course of the nineteenth century, coinciding with immigration, urban expansion, and the development of urban slums. Substandard living conditions prevented many of the urban poor from implementing the middle class ideals of personal cleanliness.

Between 1830 and 1840, New Orleans developed faster than any other city in the United States. Historian James E. Winston notes that "no other city of the world has ever advanced with such rapid and gigantic strides as New Orleans during this time period."¹¹ The population in New Orleans in 1803 was only eight thousand, but by 1836 the population had reached sixty thousand. The concept of public baths began to gain popularity during the late 1830's for several reasons. The Panic of 1837, the first great depression in American history, increased significantly the numbers of poor in New Orleans as well as other cities. Increased numbers of immigrants arrived from Ireland, contributing impoverished migrants and their accompanying dilemmas to the citizenry. Many believed the destitute threatened the social fabric of American society. Middle-class Americans saw the urban poor mainly for their neediness, vice, disorder, and drunkenness.¹²

¹¹ James Winston, E, "Notes on the Economic History of New Orleans, 1803-1836," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review*: 11, 2 (Sept., 1924), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1893582>, 200.

¹² U.S. Census Office, J.D.B. DeBow, *Statistical View of the United States: Compendium of the Seventh Census* (Washington, D.C.: A.O.P. Nicholson, 1854), 192; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970, Bicentennial Edition* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1975), I: 106. For a summary and analysis of urban reform in the nineteenth century, see Paul Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820-1920* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978), chaps. I-12.

In order to combat the social disorder, floating pools were developed by civic-minded entrepreneurs in New Orleans, who transplanted the European tradition of public baths. The European pools were often small, communal bathing pools with steam baths as an option. The majority of these public baths were in cities or large towns throughout Europe. These baths also served as a form of amusement and were often furnished with food, drink, and entertainment.¹³ By the middle of the eighteenth century, summer bathing in Europe had become well established. For example, the city of Bath, England, developed due to the popularity of summer bathing. As a result, the English government began to market the idea of public bathing facilities.¹⁴

During the 1830s, several factors helped drive the public bath movement throughout the rest of Europe. Expanding urban populations brought an increase in slums. A series of cholera epidemics spread through Europe, which helped to establish a correlation between bathing and reduced instances of illness. Europeans did not completely understand all of the mechanisms of epidemics; however, a growing middle class embraced the idea of personal cleanliness and the concept spread from Europe into America during the nineteenth century.¹⁵

The first floating pool to be launched in New Orleans was created by Messrs. Boulanger, Collins & Company in 1836 and was established in the city's third municipality. Located downriver from the old quarter, the third municipality was the

¹³ Maryilyn Williams, Thorton, *"The Great Unwashed" Public Baths in Urban America 1840-1920* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1991), 7.

¹⁴ Thorton, 7.

¹⁵ Thorton, 10.

poorest of the three municipalities.¹⁶ The pool opened the same year that the city government split into three individual districts. Boulanger was originally from France and seemingly brought the European tradition of floating baths to New Orleans. The *Daily Picayune* provided one of the most complete descriptions of the floating pools.

The construction of the floating pools was made from two of the largest flatboats, that were placed side by side, about thirty feet apart and built between them a large framework, consisting of a floor with upright planks all around, and this he [Boulanger, Collins, And Company] attached to the boats, so that the floor at one end was three feet and at the other end eight feet under water, while the planks all around were sufficiently close to protect bathers from being drawn under the boats, and the frame was sufficiently open to let the current pass through easily. On the deck of the boats there were, on both sides, rough state-rooms for the bathers to undress and leave their clothes, an [sic] all around inner edge there was left a wide gallery, protected by an awning, having benches, etc., for loungers and bathers to rest, sit, drink, smoke, and the like.¹⁷



¹⁶ A. Hirsh , J. Logsdon, *Creole New Orleans, Race And Americanization* (Baton Rouge : Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 153-163.

¹⁷ *The Times Picayune*, August 17, 1865. The description was included in a photo collection with a caption bemoaning the loss of the floating pools.

This 1890 photograph from New York depicts a floating bath during ladies day. The floating baths in New York were segregated by gender. Therefore, the baths would be open at certain times for men and then for women. The floating pools in New Orleans did have “ladies only compartments” for changing. However, there is no evidence that New Orleans’ floating bathhouses had any form of gender segregation. However, the floating baths along the lakefront did provide separate bath houses for men, women, and free people of color. The Lakefront floating pools served the wealthier citizens who could afford the steam railroad fare to Milneburg.

The floating pools along the riverfront shed light on the efforts of city officials in antebellum New Orleans to control the spread of disease while also attempting to manage, with varying levels of success, the behavior and pastimes of the city’s working class.

Boulanger’s floating bath was an economic success, busy from morning until evening for the entire season. Because of this pool’s popularity, similar pools were opened the next season. One was opened by Robert Murphey, who was then the lessee of the First District Ferry. His floating pools were moored between the First and Second District Ferry landings in Algiers, the section of New Orleans located across the river from the oldest quarter of the city.¹⁹ The development of the floating pools on the west bank of the river suggests that waterfront space was at a premium on the east bank. Despite the extra cost of a ferry ride, it proved to be profitable to locate a pool on

¹⁸ [Maggieblanck.com/New York/Life.html](http://Maggieblanck.com/NewYork/Life.html), 2/12/10.

¹⁹ *The Daily Picayune*, August 17, 1865.

the west bank. According to the *Picayune*, “It was a complete success and the floating baths became an institution. During several summers they were frequented by crowds. It cost ten cents and ten minutes to cross the river, and fifteen cents for the bath.”²⁰

New Orleans was among the first North American cities to implement floating pools. The New Orleans pools may have been the first in the United States, but no definitive evidence has yet been found. While land-based public baths already existed elsewhere, it seems that the cultural connections between France and New Orleans may have introduced the floating pool concept to North America to via the Crescent City. The popularity and usefulness of floating pools soon caught on in other cities, including New York and Chicago.²¹

New Orleans soon developed a number of floating pools that were open to many of its citizens. There is no indication that the floating pools along the river allowed free people of color or slaves to access the facilities. Likewise, there is no indication that they were banned. Nevertheless, the usage fees would have prevented the poorest residents of the city from using the baths. These would have been the citizens most affected by the ordinances restricting nude bathing in the river to late evening and early morning hours. The floating pools provided a sanctioned form of personal hygiene for the white working poor and middle class citizens of the city. Many of the private, land-based bath houses which were visited mainly by the upper class were located within the old Quarter. An editor of the *Daily Picayune* notes in 1838 that the city has “elegant

²⁰ *The Daily Picayune*, August 27, 1865.

²¹ Ann Bittenwieser, L., *MANHATTAN Water-Bound* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1999), 108-112. Newspaper descriptions of early baths in New York City are too vague to make a definitive assessment. While a “marine bath” existed in New York City in 1816, it does not seem to be the same structure as the floating bath houses.

public baths in our neighborhood, with marble tubs; but they are too costly for the mass of the people – and the mass of the people need ablutions as much as the opulent do.”²² In the same year, an advertisement in the *Daily Picayune* described one of the early swimming schools and floating bathhouses on the Mississippi River. The baths “offered a graduated depth of water of three to seven feet, formed by an enclosed basin eighty feet long by thirty feet broad, protected by a railing from the strong current of the river, and yet sufficiently open to allow a free passage to the water.”²³ By 1838, floating bathhouses had opened in all three municipalities. They were used during the six warmest months and then towed to the opposite side of the river, probably to increase commercial access to local docks.²⁴

Public Health

In 1840, much the same scene could be found in New York City’s floating bath houses as in New Orleans. As described by an editor in the *Daily Picayune*, the “New York bath houses, in summer evenings, are densely crowded.”²⁵ Other cities had started to provide free access to their citizens, while New Orleans never funded floating baths. By the 1850’s, New York City also provided floating pools that were government funded.²⁶ By the late 1870’s, a New Orleans paper noted that New York City provided six free pools that served over 1.5 million citizens.²⁷ Clearly, the baths were viewed as a public benefit.

²² *Daily Picayune*, “More Floating Baths,” September 1, 1838.

²³ *The Daily Picayune*, August 19, 1838

²⁴ *The Daily Picayune*, “More Floating Baths”, September 1, 1838

²⁵ *Daily Picayune*, “Bathing Houses,” May, 29, 1840.

²⁶ Ann Bittenwieser, L., *MANHATTAN Water-Bound* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1999), 108.

²⁷ *The Daily Picayune*, August 25, 1879. “In New York City there are six of these free swimming baths, three in each river, which were used by 2100 persons daily or over 1,500,000 bathers of both sexes last summer.”

Meanwhile, New York City newspapers reported on the lack of government sponsored public health initiatives and the filthy conditions of New Orleans. An 1884 article published in the *New York Times* described the city as a place "...where blocks of garbage, reeking with the odor of dead chickens and cats, offended both the nostrils and the eye...never before had [anyone] seen such evidences [sic] of filth in any civilized city: not even in Cairo."²⁸ Not even the World's Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition and the expectation of hosting international visitors and reporters, including the *New York Times* commentator, had provided an impetus for the city to cleanse its streets or its citizens. Wealthy citizens continued to vacate the city in the summer and when there was a disease outbreak. The city occupied a strategic economic position, yet New Orleans remained infamous for impoverished citizens and streets cluttered with filth.²⁹

Urban slums presented many problems, and after careful examination, physicians and other experts proposed public baths as a solution to the problem of personal cleanliness. By the 1840's, the custom of bathing by getting "wet all over at once" developed as a result of the water cure craze, which further developed the connection between bathing and public health.³⁰ The water cure craze was set in motion by Vincent Priessnitz in the Silesia region, located in modern day Poland. This belief was founded on the idea that water was the sustainer of life, and many treatments consisted of different baths such as wet compresses, steam, and water massage.

²⁸ *The New York Times*, "A City Reeking With Filth", May 24, 1884.

²⁹ Dennis East, II, "Health and Wealth: Goals of the New Orleans Public Health Movement, 1879-84," *Louisiana History*: 9, 3 (Summer, 1968), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4231020>, 246.

³⁰ Eberlein, 39; *Daily Advertiser* (New York), June 5, 1792, quoted in I.N. Phelps Stokes, *The Iconography of Manhattan Island 1648-1909* (New York: Robert H. Dodd, 1928), 5: 1289.

Women were the chief clientele for the many water cure centers opened in America between the 1840s and 1880s. While the water cure craze had become less popular by the time of the Civil War, the use of water as a form of therapy continued as treatment for some diseases. As a result, bathing began to be seen throughout America as an important part of maintaining good health.³¹

During the mid-nineteenth century, health reformers continued to affirm the importance of personal cleanliness through regular bathing.³² These reformers managed to convince most Americans that one could not be dirty and healthy at the same time. Personal cleanliness had developed a symbolic meaning for the middle and upper-class Americans and further increased the demand for public baths in America. However, this symbolic meaning was often not fully embraced by poor and working class Americans.³³

Wealthier classes interpreted personal cleanliness as a mark of moral superiority, and they viewed dirtiness as a sign of weakness and degradation. "Cleanliness indicated control, spiritual refinement, breeding; the unclean were vulgar, coarse, and animalistic," according to one reformer.³⁴ At the same time, throughout America cities an increase in urban slums correlated to an increase in epidemics. New governmental standards of cleanliness developed, which led to some of the first formal investigations into the public health of cities. These revealed the dismal conditions of slums and the

³¹ Maryilyn Williams, Thorton, *"The Great Unwashed"*, 12.

³² Richard H. Shryock, "Sylvester Graham and the Popular Health Movement," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 18 (September 1931), 174-80; Catherine E. Beecher, *A Treatise on Domestic Economy for the Use of Young Ladies at Home* (Boston, 1841), 102-3.

³³ Maryilyn Williams, Thorton, *"The Great Unwashed"*, 14.

³⁴ Quoted in Bushman and Bushman, "The Early History of Cleanliness in America," *Journal of American History* 74 (Mar. 1988): <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3423320>, 1228.

federal government promoted further sanitary reform that included provisions for public baths. The number of cholera epidemics developing throughout American cities also helped strengthen the demand for cleanliness and public baths.³⁵

An 1846 article by a New Orleans physician stressed the importance of regular bathing for the maintenance of one's good health. The doctor was appalled by the lack of free public baths in some American cities and stated that "such a thing as public baths erected at the public expense, and free to all without charge or for only a mere pittance is quite unknown in these modern times."³⁶ He stressed that New Orleans, along with other cities, should build public baths that would increase the overall health of citizens. He also argued that communal baths could serve cities as architectural ornaments.³⁷ During the middle nineteenth century, the riverfront was experiencing dramatic growth and the riverfront property was highly valued by business interests. Therefore, the lack of free public baths in New Orleans was due in part to the mass commercialization of the river front. The lack of interest by public officials to provide funding for public baths for the poor played another important role in maintaining the commercialized approach to personal hygiene in New Orleans.

Another advocate for cleanliness was E. Mealey who in 1849 argued with the American Medical Association (AMA) for public baths in American cities. The AMA believed that free baths were the answer to improved health and that frequent bathing by the poor and working class citizens would remove "a prominent cause of disease and

³⁵ Maryilyn Williams, Thorton, *"The Great Unwashed"*, 14.

³⁶ Quoted in Albert W. Ely, "On the Revival of the Roman Thermae, or Ancient Public Baths," *DeBow's Review* 2 (Oct. 1846), 232-238.

³⁷ Ely, 232-238.

contribute to [their] moral, as well as physical improvement.”³⁸ The AMA argued “that uncleanliness and mental degradation are intimately associated with each other. [This] is now generally admitted; hence, in proportion as the body is kept cleanly, are the moral facilities elevated, and the tendency to commit crime diminished.”³⁹

In numerous instances, New Orleans political leaders ignored the advice of public health experts who advised that free public baths were a necessity. The economic impact of disease and epidemics forced New Orleans city government to assume a leading role in fighting disease. The city endured several epidemics during this period. Some medical experts argued that “yellow fever originated in the filth and unsanitary conditions that prevailed and advocated sanitary reforms to clean up the Crescent City.”⁴⁰ However, New Orleans was hindered by its tri-partite municipal structure from 1836-1852, and all three municipalities lacked the funds as well as the will to enforce health or sanitary projects. In addition, citizens that survived yellow fever epidemics helped make the issue of fighting disease more difficult because of their apathy. Their lack of concern stemmed from the belief that survivors seemed relatively immune and only new immigrants were susceptible to the disease. Further, wealthy citizens would simply leave New Orleans during summer months to avoid the epidemics.⁴¹ Richard Henry Wilde commented on the two cities that existed within New Orleans. The one that appeared between November to June, which was a “...hurly burly place, where a person could hardly walk the streets without being run over.” Then there

³⁸American Medical Association, 647, 479, 569; Boyer, 89.

³⁹Maryilyn Williams, Thorton, “*The Great Unwashed*”, 15.

⁴⁰ Quoted in East, Dennis, II, “Health and Wealth: Goals of the New Orleans Public Health Movement 1870-1884,” *Louisiana History*: 9, 3 (Summer, 1968), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4231020>, 245.

⁴¹ Quoted in East, *Louisiana History*: 9, 3 (Summer, 1968), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4231020>, 246.

was the other city that existed between July to November, which was filled with "...quiet anxiety in anticipation of the common diseases of summer and fall especially yellow fever."⁴² New Orleans also was in dire need of public works well into the late 1800s. Emil Deckert, a German visitor in the mid-1800s, remarked on the appalling conditions of city streets. To fix street damage, wooden planks had been hastily laid across the worst areas. Deckert noted that "then in the 'middle of the street, always separated from the walk by a drainage ditch reigns an indescribable chaos of ...kitchen wastes, together with deposits of floods and dust storms..."⁴³ "Rats too numerous to count were feeding on the abundant garbage laying in city streets and ditches. Together this formed a smell of vapors that was only made worse by summer temperatures."⁴⁴

Among the elites, one found entrenched indifference to conditions affecting the poorest citizens. In an effort to appeal to all classes of citizens, the editors of local newspapers presented the issue of bathing and cleanliness using rhetoric similar to a church sermon. Describing the omnipresence of uncleanliness, an 1839 article in *The Daily Picayune* reported that "...there is not one who might have his limbs in it [water] but would come out a cooler, cleaner, and better Christian. We verily believe that cleanliness is a better antidote for vice than a treadmill; and that frequent bathing would prove more effectual in reclaiming loafers than the thirty days which is generally awarded them to the calaboose [city jail]."⁴⁵ City government believed that inexpensive pools served many purposes ranging from the healthful supposed moral benefits to

⁴² Edward Tucker, L, and Richard Henry Wild, "Richard Henry Wilde in New Orleans: Selected Letter, 1844-1847," *Louisiana History*: 7, 4 (Autumn, 1966), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4230923>, 337.

⁴³ Frederic Trautmann, "New Orleans, the Mississippi, and the Delta through a German's Eyes: The Travels of Emil Deckert, 1885-1886," *Louisiana History*: 25, 1 (Winter, 1984), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4232330>, 82.

⁴⁴ Quoted in Trautmann, *Louisiana History*: 25, 1 (Winter, 1984), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4232330>, 84.

⁴⁵ *Daily Picayune*, "The Importance of Baths," May 18, 1839.

recreation. The *Daily Picayune* described the health benefits of bathing in floating pools often.

A fresh current of water is of itself an Arcanum of medicine. Whether its particles are applied internally or externally, they are productive of the most beneficent results. Internally, water allays thirst, promotes digestion, cleanses the intestines, promotes transpiration, softens the humors, and aids every secretion necessary to the human system. Externally, when our blood is heated we must have water to refresh – when our nerves are irritated, fatigued and weakened, we must have water to be calmed and invigorated – when our skin is clogged with sweat or uncleanness, we must have water to cleanse it of all impurities – when our muscles ache, we must have water to restore their compactness and strength; and in the heavy month of August, in this southern clime, nothing is better than a bath to carry off the electrical particles which are constantly combining with the body.⁴⁶

The editor sought to make citizens aware of all of the benefits associated with the use of floating baths and one's individual responsibility. An 1840 editorial in the *Daily Picayune* pointed out that the current law on bathing “should encourage, it should foster, it should enforce bathing.”⁴⁷ While the newspaper editors identified bathing as a need, the law regarding bathing further restricted the time one could bathe in the open water, continuing the city's role in seeking to reshape the behavior of the working class and requiring individual responsibility while restricting free access to bathing.

Clearly, not even bathing advocates were aware of the real reasons for the health benefits. Despite the positive assessment of regular and regulated bathing, the water quality of the Mississippi River was not good. Prior to the 1869 Slaughter-House Case, which required the city's butchers to slaughter their animals across the river in a new slaughterhouse, butchers located upstream from the city would simply toss the

⁴⁶ *The Daily Picayune*, August 5, 1838.

⁴⁷ *The Daily Picayune*, “Swimming,” July 15, 1840.

“mass of gory waste into the Mississippi River.”⁴⁸ A physician testified to a legislative committee that “much of the rotting effuse from the slaughter houses and stock landings collected in the river around the giant suction pipes from which New Orleans drew its water supply.”⁴⁹ For many years, the slaughterhouses had helped to undermine the public health of the citizens of New Orleans even as local and state government and newspaper editors called upon individuals to cleanse themselves in floating pools established for profit.

Business interests overruled public health advocates even during the worst crises. New Orleans was affected frequently by epidemics of the plague, influenza and yellow fever. These ailments ran rampant and took tens of thousands of lives in turn-of-the century New Orleans. One reason for the many yellow fever epidemics was the

...inability of physicians to determine the cause of the dreaded disease...Disagreement over the cause of yellow fever meant that initial city and state legislation proved generally ineffective. Other obstacles arose from the lack of funds and power of enforcement of municipal boards of health to supervise sanitary projects in New Orleans.⁵⁰

The board recommended the quarantining of those exposed to yellow fever in order to stop its spread. Intense opposition to quarantines in New Orleans resulted in worsening epidemics. Historian Dennis East, II concludes that despite the escalating occurrence and size of epidemics in the city, businessmen considered all sanitary legislation on

⁴⁸ Quoted in Michael Ross, A, “Justice Miller’s Reconstruction: The Slaughter-House Cases, Health Codes, and Civil Rights in New Orleans, 1861-1873,” *The Journal of Southern History*: 64, 4 (Nov., 1998), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2587513>, 654.

⁴⁹ Quoted in Michael Ross, A, “Justice Miller’s Reconstruction, 4 .

⁵⁰ Dennis East, II, “Health and Wealth: Goals of the New Orleans Public Health Movement, 1879-84,” *Louisiana History*: 9, 3 (Summer, 1968), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4231020>, 245.

public health to be an “unwarranted interference with the God-given right of free enterprise.”⁵¹

The city in 1852 reunited and formed one municipality. In response to the devastating epidemics of 1853 and 1854, the State of Louisiana created a Board of Health in 1855, and the City Council passed an ordinance providing for a Health Department in New Orleans. The chief purpose of this city department was to “take cognizance of all matters and subjects pertaining to the public health.” The Health Officer had permission to enter any building in the city at any hour between sunrise and sunset to examine the sanitary conditions. The Health Officer recommended that the city establish certain systems to help with public hygiene, such as a system of underground drainage and a waterworks system that would provide a water supply to citizens. Another recommendation was “to establish a system of cheap land-based bathing houses, also public washing and ironing establishments.” The ordinance to establish a city health department was accompanied by an ordinance to prevent bathing in certain “designated spaces of the city from, daybreak until 12 o’clock at night was adopted.”⁵² The city further restricts the time that the working class could utilize the waterfront for bathing. The city refused to provide free bath houses, while herding the poorest citizens into for-profit bathhouses, excepting those who could bathe during the first few hours of each day.

Fines and charges were levied against those persons bathing outside of the allowed times. In 1857, the *Daily Picayune* reported that a “small party of four had to

⁵¹ Quoted in East, II, “Health and Wealth: Goals of the New Orleans Public Health Movement, 1879-84,” *Louisiana History*: 9, 3 (Summer, 1968), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4231020>, 247.

⁵² *Daily Picayune*, “Sanitary Measures” October 20, 1853.

pay a fine of \$2.50 each for bathing in a Canal, which is contrary to the provisions of the existing ordinances.”⁵³ Another method used by the city to punish those who violated the bathing ordinance was devised by police patrol officers. The *Daily Picayune* reported that the “officers have a way of preventing the boys from bathing in the Mississippi River, against the ordinances. The officers wait till the boys are fully undressed, and then carry off their clothes.”⁵⁴

The establishment of the city health department also prompted the growth in number and popularity of floating pools in New Orleans. By 1852 floating pools began to change shape. Instead of being fashioned from flat boats, they now were constructed from “two old steamboats hulks, separated by grating, resting on a floor.”⁵⁵ Unlike New York, New Orleans’ city government continued to dedicate no funds for the development of public baths. Despite the heightened concerns following the waves of yellow fever, responsibility for creating floating baths continued to be left to civic-minded entrepreneurs.⁵⁶ Floating baths continued to spring up all around the city, so entrepreneurs may have helped ease the spread of epidemic diseases such as yellow fever, the plague, and influenza by helping keep people clean. Nevertheless, this public good developed via a financial burden placed upon the city’s poorer citizens.

Recreation

In addition to serving public health needs, the floating baths also provided a space where citizens could find a recreational outlet. During the mid-1800s, American

⁵³ *Daily Picayune*, “The City,” May 8, 1857.

⁵⁴ *Daily Picayune*, “City Intelligence,” May 3, 1848.

⁵⁵ *Daily Picayune*, “A Word About Bathing,” June 7, 1852.

⁵⁶ *Daily Picayune*, “Free Public Baths,” August 9, 1899.

citizens began to look beyond informal, unstructured pastimes toward more structured and genteel activities. They embraced a wide variety of the newly introduced and proper sports of the English aristocracy... [and] Americans also came to entertain the idea of a separate time of the year known as a vacation.⁵⁷

The commercialized recreational use of water became a popular pastime in New Orleans because of the extreme summer heat and a desire to escape summer disease outbreaks. As early as 1833, there were bathhouses built along the lakefront for citizens who could afford the steam passenger railroad fares. While bathhouses were open to free persons of color, no slaves were allowed to use these facilities. There is no evidence that free people of color were allowed to use the floating bath houses along the Mississippi River, which may indicate that the free people of color were motivated to utilize this option along the lakefront. In addition, the railroad company added special railroad cars for transporting only free people of color to the lake.⁵⁸

When the threat of yellow fever loomed, wealthy citizens would escape, or “vacation” as they referred to it, to the lakefront bathhouses on Lake Pontchartrain. A *Daily Picayune* editor argued in 1837 that the railroad fare to reach Lake Pontchartrain should be reduced to twelve and a half cents to no more than twenty-five cents because the current cost deters hundreds from visiting the lake for the purpose of bathing.⁵⁹ All economic classes in New Orleans began to share the belief that getting fresh air was a way to prevent disease. Still, exposure to fresh air would not prevent epidemics from

⁵⁷ Frederick Stielow, “Grand Isle, Louisiana, and the “New” Leisure, 1866-1893,” *Louisiana History*: 239-257 (Summer, 1982), 239 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42321187>, 239.

⁵⁸ Baughman, James P, “A Southern Spa: Ante-Bellum Lake Pontchartrain,” *The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association*: 3,1 (Winter 2006), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4230644>, 15-16.

⁵⁹ *The Daily Picayune*, “Lake Ponchartrain,” August 8, 1837.

spreading throughout the city. The *New Orleans Times* reported in 1878 that “Due to the high temperatures and disease in the city, it was widely believed that it was important to spend one in seven days in the fresh air of the lakefront. This would improve one’s health as well as the sanitary conditions of New Orleans.”⁶⁰ The south shore of Lake Pontchartrain during the late nineteenth century, quickly became one of the most popular resort destinations for antebellum travelers, as well as for locals. As one traveler noted in the *Daily Picayune*, the resorts along Lake Pontchartrain are “visited often and with pleasure by the city’s residents.”⁶¹ This visitor also points out that, “having escaped for a few hours the thick vapors and clouds of dust that alternately enclosed us in the street, [we] felt well in fresher, cleaner air of those place – air that wafted us from the large bodies of water.”⁶²

The popularity of the lakefront increased in part because of the city ordinances passed prohibiting “indiscriminate swimming or bathing in the Mississippi River or in the numerous canals of the city.”⁶³ “The ‘season’ for the lake ran from May to October as proprietors of the resorts strove to outdo each other in attracting and satisfying guests.”⁶⁴ The location of the lake resorts made them susceptible to lake storms, which often caused large amounts of damage. Resorts were also financially affected by

⁶⁰ *New Orleans Times*, “Summer Pleasures. How the People Who Can’t Get Away from the City Enjoy Themselves during the Summer Season,” June 17, 1878.

⁶¹ Quoted in Frederic Trautmann, “New Orleans, the Mississippi, and the Delta through a German’s Eyes: The Travels of Emil Deckert, 1885-1886,” *Louisiana History*: 25, 1 (Winter, 1984), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/424075>, 89.

⁶² Trautmann, 89.

⁶³ Baughman, James P., “A Southern Spa: Ante-Bellum Lake Pontchartrain,” *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association*, 3, 1 (Winter, 1962) <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4230644>, 14.

⁶⁴ James P. Baughman, “A Southern Spa: Ante-Bellum Lake Pontchartrain,” *Louisiana History*: 3, 1 (Winter 2006), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4230644>, 12.

citywide epidemics and summer sicknesses, drastically reducing the profits they would have otherwise acquired.⁶⁵

Despite calls for less expensive fares, travel to the lakefront remained considerably more expensive until the late 1800s, when street railway companies developed trolley parks at West End and Spanish Fort. In 1865, transportation and access to the lake bathhouses cost \$5.00 as compared to the 25 cents for the use of the bath houses along the river.⁶⁶ Economic status determined whether one would have access to bathe in the lake or the river.

The concept of women using these public bathhouses produced both positive and negative responses from the press. An article in *The Picayune* in 1837 quotes Mary Wollstonecraft who wrote *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* that females should “rigidly and regularly follow the practice of daily ablution.”⁶⁷ Also, the development of the bathing suit made swimming even more fashionable. An editorialist in the *Daily Picayune* describes ladies wearing “an outfit made of dark material, and trimmed in red or blue binding. The upper part of the outfit resembles a boy’s blouse, while the lower part a pair of trousers. This outfit goes from the wrist to the knee.”⁶⁸

Bathing facilities along the New Orleans lakefront were not without controversy. Some accusations suggested that the lakefront’s three bathing facilities contributed to “loosened” moral standards. In 1840, a letter published in the *Daily Picayune* pleaded for law enforcement to help clean up the vices of Milneburg Lakefront resort area. The

⁶⁵ Baugham, *Louisiana History*: 3, 1 (Winter 2006), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4230644>, 13.

⁶⁶ *The New Orleans Times*, August, 27, 1865. Often times the Omnibuses would pass by several of the floating bath houses every half an hour.⁶⁶

⁶⁷ *The Picayune*, “Bathing—The Ladies,” June 29, 1837.

⁶⁸ *Daily Picayune*, “Ladies’ Swimming School,” July 24, 1859.

individual described “the loose and abandoned females who now inhabit the atmosphere with their presence. [Soon] the time will shortly arrive when not but characters as deeply steeped in vice and iniquity as these degraded beings are, will visit the lake, fearful of the moral contagion.”⁶⁹ By the 1850s, controversy developed over women wearing bloomers at the waterfront. There were also complaints of nudity, mainly male nudity at the Lakefront during the daylight hours, along with reports of nude bathing in the Mississippi. One New Orleanian wrote to the *New Orleans Times* requesting police help to monitor the riverfront for inappropriate bathing by young men. The gentleman had taken his family to the riverfront and found it necessary to leave because of adolescent males bathing in the nude.⁷⁰

The floating baths also provided a place for citizens to learn how to swim, an important skill in New Orleans. The *Times Picayune* reported in 1840 that,

every opportunity should be allowed and boys should be encouraged in learning to swim; not alone for the healthful refreshment, which is in itself an all-sufficient reason, but for the valuable means of self-preservation thus acquired. Few ever learn the invigorating accomplishment after the season of boyhood is past, and therefore it is while the ambition is alive and the young spirit desires the acquirement that the possession of this noble art should be achieved.⁷¹

There is no mention of encouraging girls or young women to learn how to swim is made alongside this endorsement of swimming as a skill every boy must learn. The floating pools offered a safer atmosphere for citizens to learn to swim. This offered citizens hope, since it was common to learn of death by drowning in the city. There is a

⁶⁹ *New Orleans Times*, “Round About Town,” June 16, 1878.

⁷⁰ *New Orleans Times*, “Round About Town,” June 16, 1878.

⁷¹ *The Daily Picayune*, July 17, 1840.

good “probability that hundreds of individuals are lost this way, about whom nothing is ever heard.”⁷² Drowning affected all ages, races, and both genders. Due to the commercialization and restrictions on the river the poorest citizens and slaves were not provided an opportunity to bathe in a safe environment. Therefore, drowning deaths of African-Americans and poor whites continued amid the official restrictions on swimming in the river and fee-based access to safe forms of bathing. The following example, from the period when floating pools had already started to appear throughout the city, reminds one of the dangers that never receded. In 1838, the *Daily Picayune* reported that “a negro boy was drowned yesterday while bathing at the packet wharf.”⁷³ Death notices reveal that African-American children comprised the largest group of drowning deaths and near-drownings throughout the 1800s. By 1878, swimming’s popularity had developed to the point that the *New Orleans Times* published an article touting a new instructional device. The article noted that the “swimming board is perfectly safe, and one may learn to swim in a very short period of time by using one.”⁷⁴ In New Orleans, the ability to swim was seen as a valuable skill that those of some means were encouraged to learn. African-Americans and poor whites, however, were forced to learn these skills while navigating dangerous river currents on their own.

Besides helping people learn how to swim, the bathhouses developed swimming as a sport, one already known for the health benefits it conferred upon its participants. An 1841 editorial in the *Daily Picayune* argued:

⁷² *The Daily Picayune*, April 5, 1840.

⁷³ *The Daily Picayune*, June 24, 1838.

⁷⁴ *The New Orleans Times*, “How to Learn to Swim”, June 24, 1878.

Nobody ever awoke the next morning after a swim, with the head aching, the nerves trembling, the eyes unbecomingly inflamed, and the stomach uneasy; but precisely the reverse of all this follows the manly and beneficial habit of exercise in the water. Nearly all luxuries have either one sting of regret or another following in their train, but swimming is a delight as agreeable always to remembrance as it is in actual enjoyment.⁷⁵

By the late nineteenth century, swimming had become the most popular sport for all classes and races due in part to the availability and access to Lake Pontchartrain, the Gulf of Mexico, and the Mississippi River. Consequently, thousands swam during the summer months. Swimming's popularity led to organized clubs. In 1872, the male-only New Orleans Athletic Club formed and was open only to a select group. By 1874, the club had approximately three hundred and fifty members, which enabled the club to purchase property at 37-39-41 Burgundy Street. The new property housed a gymnasium, baths, and swimming pools.⁷⁶ The club ensured wealthier citizens both access to swimming in the center of the city and separation from the lower classes.

Swimming's general popularity as a sport developed, in part, because the cheap fees to enter the river and, eventually, the lake, as less expensive transportation developed. By the mid-nineteenth century, swimming races were popular along Lake Ponchartrain and the Mississippi River. A swimming match advertised in June 1878 had a prize of 100 dollars. Two individuals were to swim twenty-nine miles in the Mississippi River, from the Luling landing in St. Charles Parish to the Canal Street landing.⁷⁷ Citizens would often place bets on the swimming races. A one mile race in the Mississippi River in 1883, was wagered on by New Orleanians. The winner was

⁷⁵ *The Daily Picayune*, April 29, 1841.

⁷⁶ John d. Fair. "Stongmen of the Crescent City: Weightlifting at the New Orleans Athletic Club, 1872-1972," *Louisiana History*: 45, 4 (Autumn, 2004), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4234059>, 410.

⁷⁷ *The New Orleans Times*, "Swimming Match," June 2, 1878.

awarded three hundred dollars.⁷⁸ Another one mile race in 1874 in Lake Pontchartrain offered the winner two hundred dollars.⁷⁹

Swimming, if only for a short time, freed New Orleanians from some of the demands of urban life and the discomfort of the semi-tropical climate. Leisure pastimes became possible, in part, because of an increased population and the concurrent increase in rail access to pleasure resorts. These changes were accompanied by more access to leisure time, particularly for the working class. This milieu encouraged a major shift in sexual norms that was often initiated at resorts and bath houses in the city.⁸⁰ Men and women began to openly socialize and interact in a non-standard way. One example is that women would often swim in water where men could see them, which up to this point was considered taboo. This brings to mind several newspaper reports which sensationalized accounts of St. John's Eve Voodoo ceremonies.⁸¹ Development of the lakefront as a destination for the masses helped to encourage the wealthy citizens to leave the city for resorts along the Gulf Coast and in Mandeville.

The electrification of the street railroad system in the 1890's allowed even more New Orleans residents to afford day trips to the lakefront pleasure resorts; the success of the Trolley Parks in the late 1800's contributed to the complete disappearance of the riverfront pools. Nevertheless, the decline of the public baths began with the onset of the Civil War.

⁷⁸ *Daily Picayune*, "Sporting", May 5, 1883.

⁷⁹ *Daily Picayune*, "Sporting", May 5, 1883.

⁸⁰ Kasson, John, *Amusing The Million, Coney Island at the Turn of the Century* (Hill & Wang: New York A division of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978), 41.

⁸¹ Ward, Martha, *Voodoo Queen* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004), 120.

Demise of the Floating Pools

Before evacuating the city during the Civil War, the Confederate General Mansfield Lovell made certain that all cotton stored in the city was destroyed. This was achieved by moving all of the cotton to the levees before torching the bales. All of the steamboats loaded with cotton and unable to leave the port were also burned. An onlooker noted that "As the fires raged...the glare set men and women weeping and wailing."⁸² Burning all of the cotton meant that most of the vessels moored to the docks were burned.⁸³ After all of the fires were put out, the docks that were not completely destroyed were disarray. Since the floating pools were moored alongside these docks, many, if not most, floating pools likely burned as well. Therefore, the city was left with few if any floating pools for a considerable period of time. In 1865, an individual wrote the *New Orleans Times* questioning why there were no floating pools, since there had been floating pools during the previous twenty years."⁸⁴

Federal occupation of New Orleans during the Civil War would prove to have a positive effect on the public health reform movement. The United States Sanitary Commission reported on the importance of cleanliness in regards to health and pointed to the connection between filth and disease. When the Union occupied New Orleans, General Benjamin Butler established measures to clean up the city, but never to establish bathing facilities or re-establish floating bathhouses along the river.⁸⁵ Throughout the Union occupation of the city, many of the union soldiers were forced to

⁸² James Lang, O, "Gloom Envelops New Orleans: April 24 to May 2, 1862," *Louisiana History*: 1, 4 (Autumn, 1960), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4230588>, 285.

⁸³ Lang, O, *Louisiana History*: 1, 4 (Autumn, 1960), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4230588>, 285.

⁸⁴ *New Orleans Times*, "Floating Baths," September 2, 1865.

⁸⁵ Capers, Gerald, M. Jr., "Confederates and Yankees in Occupied New Orleans, 1862-1865," *The Journal of Southern History*: 30, 4 (Nov., 1964), 405-426

bathe in the river or canals due to a lack of bathing facilities in New Orleans.⁸⁶ After the Civil War, urban slums continued to grow as did the immigrant population; both added to the threat of disease and epidemics.

When Reconstruction ended, the few lakefront resorts that had welcomed black residents began to institute segregation policies. Blacks after 1865 began to show a quickening interest in the attractions of local spas such as Milneburg. They had a new found freedom that even free blacks had not known before the Civil War. However, the collapse of Reconstruction and the corresponding decline in efforts to safeguard the political and civil rights of black citizens led to the renewal of racial segregation.⁸⁷

It also didn't help that after the Civil War "funds for public health were almost non-existent in the poverty-stricken postwar South. In many, perhaps most instances, public health concerns were relegated to private, charitable organizations."⁸⁸ Despite the apparent disappearance of most floating baths, an 1877 ordinance prohibited nude bathing in any publicly exposed water within or contiguous to the city. Free access to bathing in public waters was now completely illegal. In 1899, an editorial in the *Times Picayune* stated that "the city of New Orleans, with its mighty river at the doors, owes it to its people to give them free and safe baths..."⁸⁹ The editorial further stated that those individuals who did seek to bathe in the river or canals did so at a risk of being caught by the police, as well as the risk of losing their lives to drowning.⁹⁰ According to the

⁸⁶ *Daily True Delta*, "A Letter from a Private," June 7, 1861.

⁸⁷ Dale Somers, *The Rise of Sports In New Orleans 1850-1900* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1972), 26.

⁸⁸ James Breeden, O, "Joseph Jones and Public Health in the New South," *Louisiana History*: 32, 4 (Autumn, 1991), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4232906>, 347.

⁸⁹ *Times Picayune*, "Free Public Baths," August 9, 1899.

⁹⁰ *Times Picayune*, August 9, 1899.

Times Picayune, in 1885 the hardship imposed was in the failure to provide a suitable replacement for public bathing.⁹¹ Also, the development of the public water works department made running water inside of homes more common. An article in the *Daily Picayune* predicted that “the use of artesian well water for washing and bathing by people at large will soon become universal.”⁹²

Additionally, several legal cases both in New Orleans, and in other cities, contributed to a decrease in public bathing facilities. In May, 1879, the case of *Brazos v New York* decided that even though a boat towed by a tugboat struck a bath house, the tugboat owner was not liable and there was no negligence.⁹³ Although this case did not result in a ruling of negligence, it did contribute to the growing fear of accidents on the river. The rising incidence of accidents in both New Orleans and New York likely stemmed from the increased trade and traffic on waterways. After the Civil War, increased industrialization led to increased traffic on the Mississippi River. This is similar to what took place in New York during the same period. New York City’s floating pools disappeared because of, “individual and group pressure, the ad hoc nature of government intervention, and the unforeseen consequences of changing technology”⁹⁴ These factors created an environment in which both the riverfront commerce and property values along the river increased markedly. A case similar to the New York one is *The Public Bath v. City of New Orleans in 1894*. In this case, the bath house in question was a mobile one. It was attached to two boats so that it could be moved easily from dock to dock wherever the need arose. The defendant company had the

⁹¹ *The Times Picayune*, “A Hygienic Institution”, May 8, 1892.

⁹² *Daily Picayune*, July 1, 1885.

⁹³ *The M.R. Brazos v. New York* 1879 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 187 (1879).

⁹⁴ Ann Bittenwieser, L., *MANHATTAN Water-Bound* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1999), 2-3.

boat in its possession for repair. The company had been warned that the lines should not be loosened on the bath house, however, the city did anyway in an attempt to prevent swaying. As a result, the company took the risk of the Bath House going adrift. After a debate regarding the question of jurisdiction, the Court decided that it would be a terrible policy to deny the legal right to seek compensation. Therefore, the Court awarded the plaintiff \$350 as a reasonable compensation for the salvage of the vessel.⁹⁵

Overall, the floating pools created a transitional space between the long tradition of bathing and swimming in the natural realm and mass commercialization of waterfront recreation and bathing. The floating baths established a space where the upper class could reshape the behavior of the working class and require conformity to middle class standards. At the same time, entrepreneurs benefitted financially from the poorer New Orleanians who were being moved to pay for the privilege of bathing in a safer manner.

The floating pools provide another perspective on the refusal of New Orleans business and civic leaders to invest in public infrastructure or the health of its citizens beyond the commercial or entrepreneurial model. New Orleans government was more than willing to regulate the bathing habits of the city's poor and require them to use a commercial facility. However, the same government found no reason to use public funds to either provide free access or subsidize the "Floating Pools" that the members of the laboring class were increasingly being "herded" into. Despite the presence of disease and the possibility of epidemics, a city noted for its horrid living conditions repeatedly ignored expert medical opinion on the need for government to regard

⁹⁵ *The Public Bath NO. 13 ; TEBO et al. v. Mayor, etc., of City of New York et al.* 6 F. 692 (1894).

cleanliness as a civic good. Instead, the same commercial elites that chose to squelch the dangers of yellow fever interpreted hygiene as an individual responsibility.

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