SOCIAL MEMORY benefits from an associated structural framework — that is, a place or object that reflects and evokes a historical recollection, both good and bad. As we individually treasure mementos to commemorate times past and loved ones lost, our societies collectively save old buildings, erect monuments, name and rename streets, designate hallowed grounds, and protect historical cityscapes so that citizens may synchronize their narratives of who they are as a people, where they came from, and where they should be going.

As a city with a complex, colorful, glorious and tragic past, and a modern-day economy based on marketing it, New Orleans proliferates in structurally based social memory. It uses the French Quarter, for example, to preserve the social memory of antebellum Creole society. It points to the Garden District to recall wealthy 19th-century Anglo society and upholds Tremé to remind us about the contributions of the city’s free people of color. More recently, it welcomed a museum complex built in part to salute the city’s key role in World War II, something that had gone unappreciated in prior times. Preservation is intrinsic to this arrangement; without it, we would forget, or fail to convince newcomers, of these narratives. New Orleans’ role in the slave trade illustrates that power by providing a case study of its absence.

By nearly all estimates, postcolonial New Orleans was the nation’s premier slave marketplace. The port formed a node in the domestic shipments of “surplus” slaves from the tired soils of the Upper South and into the Deep South with its insatiable demand for labor on sugar cane and cotton plantations. More than 750,000 people were forcibly shipped southward during the antebellum era, a shift in the African diaspora so significant that historian Ira Berlin described it as the “Second Middle Passage.” During the antebellum years, the New Orleans cityscape abounded with the material machinations, structures, and spaces of the slave trade. The high visibility of the human marketplace — the shipping, escorting, jailing, preparing, marketing, presenting, auctioning, and purchasing of people — captured the attention of countless visitors, who scribed their observations in hundreds of diaries, travelogues, journals and news articles about the “peculiar institution.” Those written by Europeans or Northerners (the lion’s share) usually expressed compassion for the slave, dismay at the institution, and outright loathing for the trader. Southern sympathizers, ever fond of pointing out paternalistic master-slave relations and anecdotes of slave contentedness, either remained silent on

New Orleans in the early 1800s formed the premier domestic marketplace in the flow of enslaved people from the Upper South to the Deep South. Yet structural evidence of the city’s lucrative slave trade is almost entirely gone.

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Theformer St. Louis Exchange Hotel lot remained vacant until 1960, when the present-day Omni Royal Orleans Hotel was erected in a style similar to the old St. Louis Exchange. Architects preserved a fragment of the 1840 structure: note the palimpsest of the word “EXCHANGE” under the red arrow.
the grim spectacle of the auction block, or effusively scapegoated the trader so as to exonerate the master and institution. Others did not directly record what they witnessed but nevertheless came away scared; among them was a young Abraham Lincoln, who guided a flatboat to New Orleans in 1828 and 1831 and, for the first and only time in his life, saw large-scale Southern plantation vassalage and big-city slave trading up close and personal. What he witnessed in the streets of New Orleans would inform his personal development and later affect the channels of American history. It is worthwhile, then, to reconstruct the cityscapes (that is, the visible urban elements) of the New Orleans slave trade in the era of Lincoln’s visits, the high antebellum decades of the 1820s and 1830s.

Despite the grotesque public image of the commerce of slavery, city leaders in both the public and private sectors made little attempt to hide or disguise it. It entailed numerous professions, from shippers, brokers and traders to lawyers, auctioneers, pen-keepers, notaries and others who earned incomes in the change-of-ownership process. New players entered the market constantly, and proclaimed their openings with collegial solemnity, “Newman & Mortimer,” read one such announcement in 1828, “have formed a partnership [of] Brokers, offer[ing] their services to their friends and public [in the] buy-\ing and selling of real property, slaves and all kinds of produce...” Nearly all New Orleans’ professional firms, banks and insurance companies had their hands in the slave trade to one degree or another.

Most slave transactions took place in two types of spaces. One involved private pens run by dealers, brokers, or traders, who bought and displayed nu-merous slaves and sold them to walk-in customers. The other was the public auction, where auctioneers coordinated transactions between current and pro-spective masters. Auctions were held in prominent places, open to all free classes, and advertised aggres-sively. Because of their public nature and ritualistic spectacle, auctions attracted much more attention from visitors than the private one-on-one retail transactions that occurred at the pens or elsewhere.

Since the early American years, auctions generally occurred in “coffee houses,” a loan translation of mai-so de café, which meant, in France, an establishment that served coffee in the morning and alcohol later. In 19th-century New Orleans, coffee houses were traditional saloons with a rather sophisticated if garish atmosphere, catering to men of the establishment class. Their commercial functions earned them the name “exchange,” which implied a full-service business-networking center, where white men could convene, discuss, negotiate, socialize, recreate, gamble, dine, drink, and lodge. Among the first, the Exchange Cof-fee House on Conti Street (1806), grew so popular as a saloon that it attracted commercial activities such as the auctioning of ships, houses, land, and, inevitably, slaves. It soon found itself competing with a new op-eration erected in 1810–1811 at the corner of Chartres and St. Louis streets. Originally called Tremoulet’s Commercial (or New Exchange) Coffee House, this business became Maspero’s Exchange in 1814, Elkin’s Exchange after Pierre Maspero’s death in 1822, and by 1826, Hewlett’s Exchange, named for new owner John Hewlett. Because of the place’s popularity and frequent management changes, newspapers and city directories ascribed a variety of names to the busi-ness at 129 (now 501) Chartres: the “Exchange Cof-fee House,” “New Exchange Coffee House,” “Hewlett’s Coffee House,” or “La Bourse de Hewlett.” The two-story, 55-by-62-foot edifice boasted behind its gaudy Venetian screens a 19-foot-high ceiling, four 12-lamp glass chandeliers, framed maps and oil paintings (described by one Northerner as “licentious”), wood and marble finishing, and an enormous bar with French glassware. Like many of New Orleans’ coffee houses, the upper floor contained billiards and gam-bling tables. Throughout the mid-antebellum years, Hewlett’s Exchange buzzed with trilingual auctioning activity, in which everything from ships to houses to land to sugar kettles to people legally changed hands. The city’s seven auctioneers worked the block on a rotating schedule, every day except Sunday, often-times while maintaining other jobs elsewhere. Joseph Le Carpentier handled Mondays, Wednesdays, and Saturdays; Toussaint Mosby (president of the New Orleans Architect Company) worked Tuesdays and Fridays; H. J. Domingon, George Boyd, and Joseph Baudue got Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays; and the busy Isaac McCoy and Francois Duttillet worked six days a week. At the time of Lincoln’s visit, Hewlett’s Exchange was the New Orleans business community’s single most important public meeting site for networking, news-gathering, and wheeling-dealing.

Slave auctioning would later add two illustrious new venues to the New Orleans cityscape. In 1837 the magnificent St. Charles Exchange arose in the Faubourg St. Mary, followed the next year by the imposing City Exchange on St. Louis Street in the Old City (for which Hewlett’s Exchange and adja-cent structures were demolished). Both edifices, oc-cupying entire city blocks, rising over four stories, and topped with landmark domes, ranked among the nation’s most splendid hotels. Both became fa-mous, and infamous, for their auction blocks.

Not all slave owners subjected their human prop-erty to the slave pens and auction houses. Some mas-ters, particularly residents of the city proper, opted to handle sales themselves by inviting prospective buyers to their homes. Urban domestic slaves, with whom white families frequently developed ostensibly warm relations, often changed hands in this manner. For-sale-by-owner ads appeared in local newspapers at a rate around one or two per day:

For Sale—A NEGRO WOMAN 18 years of age guaranteed against the diseases and vices proscribed by law...speaks English and French—understands cooking either in the French or English style [sic], something of a washer, and a good nurse.

Prospective buyers of this teenager were directed to visit master J. Montamat at his house on Ely-sian Fields. Another announcement, posted during Lincoln’s 1828 visit, advertised “a young and likely Negro fellow [and] several others of both sexes, for sale by the subscriber [David C. McClure] at No. 116, Bienville street.” One of McClure’s slaves later escaped, prompting the perturbed master to post a ten dollar reward for thirty-three-year-old “John... very stout built, black complexion, [with] rather a frown on his countenance.”

To be continued in the next Preservation in Print.

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