

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Bejeweled and Befeathered: The New Orleans Lakefront

Numerous residents along the New Orleans lakefront have heard this response: "Oh, you live out by those bird streets." Some of the streets are named after birds, while some are named for various precious and semi-precious stones. To many in other parts of town these are uncharted flyways and byways, and some explanation is needed.

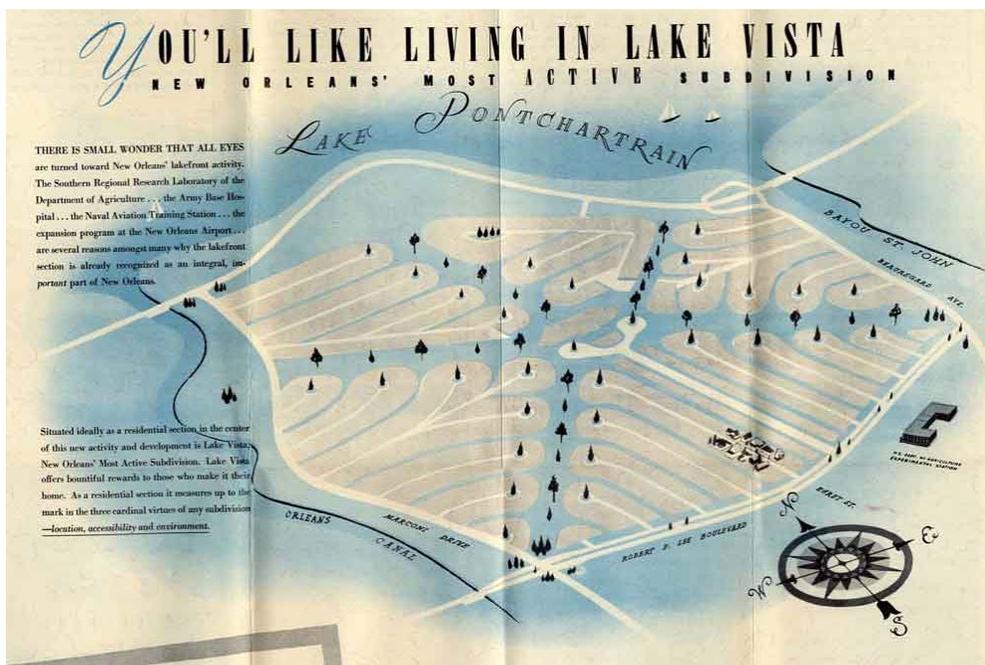
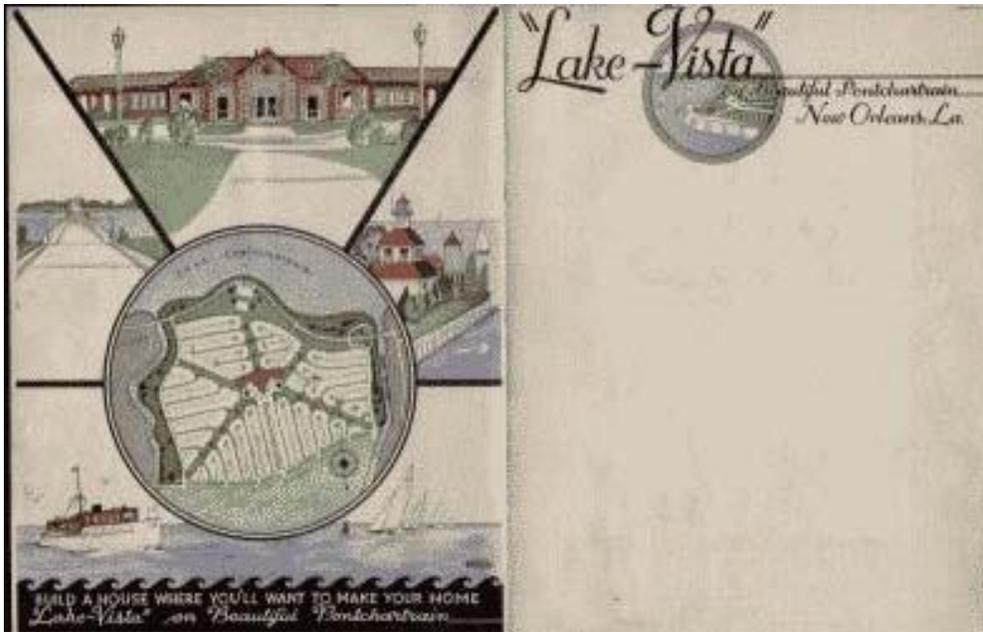
It all began back in 1890, a year that brought wind-driven water spilling over the temporary embankments until it reached a depth of over eighteen inches on Canal and other streets in the business district. This resulted that year in the creation of the Orleans Levee District with distinguished attorney, Felix J. Dreyfous, as the Orleans Levee Board's first president. Under his leadership the board set to work to extend and strengthen the levees around the city. On Thursday, December 28, 2006, at 2:53 p. m., that board ceased to exist.

In 1924 a grand reclamation project was commissioned by the Orleans Levee Board to upgrade the lakefront by improving the levee system and constructing a concrete seawall five and a half miles long. They extended this wall of steps approximately three thousand feet from the existing shoreline (Adams Avenue, which is today Robert E. Lee Blvd.) to create 2,000 acres of new land pumped in from the lake. Most of this reclaimed land would become the subdivisions known as Lake Vista (1938), Lake Terrace (1953), East and West Lakeshore (1955) and Lake Oaks (1964). This land was extremely high compared to the elevation of much of the rest of the city, which accounts for the lack of inundation after Katrina in at least the northern half of these areas (since the pumped sand gravitated downward toward Robert E. Lee).

Lake Vista was the first to be developed in 1938 with the slogan, "Build a house where you'll want to make your home." It was modeled after the town of Radburn, New Jersey, created in 1929 as the "Town for the Motor Age". The idea was to separate pedestrian and vehicular traffic with an innovation known as the superblock, which was a large tract of land surrounded by main roads. The homes contained within

were grouped around *cul-de-sacs* linked to the main arteries. There were verdant parks and lanes where residents could walk to church, school or shopping without crossing a street or confronting a motorcar.

The *cul-de-sac* is one of those elegant sounding euphemisms for a dead end street. This is not exactly a fair characterization, because this lollipop-shaped thoroughfare provides a turning circle at its end. Originating in England from a vulgar French slang expression from the days when the aristocracy spoke French, *cul-de-sac* translates into what the British would call the "arse end of a bag".



Early brochures of Lake Vista, the second showing the first ten homes constructed along Egret Street before World War II

Lake Vista's *cul-de-sac* streets were named for birds, and they migrated alphabetically clockwise around the superblock. But along the way the pecking order was somewhat disrupted. Later, some of the bird streets soared eastward into Lake Terrace and eventually into Lake Oaks. But before that happened, Pearl Harbor was attacked.



Street diagram of Radburn, New Jersey, showing cul-de-sacs and pedestrian paths

Prior to World War II, some construction was begun in Lake Vista. In the late 1930s, New Orleans architect Douglass Vincent Freret (1903 – 1973) was commissioned to design ten homes for the new Lake Vista subdivision. These modest homes were all situated along Egret Street and built at the same time. A plaque in City Park describes the architecture of Mr. Freret: “The hallmark of his work was grace and beauty within the framework of utility.” The war, however, brought everything to a halt.

All residential construction stopped so that all resources could go toward the war effort. Military installations were built all along the lakefront. There was a naval hospital in what was to become East Lakeshore, and a naval air base which is today the University of New Orleans. When the war was over, building materials became available and these facilities made way for new home construction. Lake Terrace was ready for development in 1953 and East and West Lakeshore two years later. Their designs (as well as that of Lake Oaks) more closely resembled Radburn, New Jersey's Southside with gracefully curving streets and long blocks.

Lakeshore's main street is named Jewel, mounted in a setting among numerous other gemstones in the nomenclature. This was because Jewel married Joseph. Joseph B. David and two other printers founded Franklin Printing Company in 1921, and David became the sole owner

by 1926. One of the co-founders of the Sugar Bowl, his firm printed the annual program since the first game in 1935. He also became president of the Orleans Levee Board, and (since his second wife was named Jewel Beatrice Fielder) East and West Lakeshore became a veritable jewelry box of street names. Civic-pride was a hallmark of the David family, and Joseph B. David, III, founded *New Orleans Magazine* with David Kleck in 1966.



In 1929, the urban planners of Radburn, New Jersey, sought to incorporate the modern planning principles of Sir Ebenezer Howard, who had initiated the garden city movement in Great Britain in 1898. Walt Disney was greatly influenced by Radburn and Howard in the planning of Disneyland, Walt Disney World and EPCOT, incorporating common open spaces, pedestrian pathways and collector streets.

Lakeshore and Lake Vista (with their ample park areas) are both designated bird sanctuaries by city ordinance, and a gem of a location to view migrating passerines or to watch waterfowl along the lake.

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