



## You Have to See It for Yourself

by Leonard Kniffel

**American Libraries' Editor-in-Chief went to New Orleans in March to assess the city's readiness for ALA Annual Conference in June.**



**Reporter Leonard Kniffel among the ruins in the Ninth Ward.**

In some strange way, the city of New Orleans is like a library. Culturally, it's part of the backbone of the nation. Economically, it's hurting, and some skeptics are questioning why we should invest in it when it's all below sea level (or in the case of libraries, when everything is on the internet).

The 2006 ALA Annual Conference, scheduled for June 22–28, will be the first major convention to meet in the Crescent City since the ravages unleashed by Hurricane Katrina last August. It seems apropos that librarians, who are struggling to redefine their role as culture keepers, should be the first to return to New Orleans and see for themselves the daunting task that faces their colleagues, the city, and the nation.

It was with a certain pro-New Orleans attitude that I returned to the Big Easy on March 26–28 to see if ALA's decision to retain the city as the site for the conference was a wise one.

Boarding American Airlines flight 1299 (a bargain at \$207 round trip from Chicago), I was struck by how ordinary it seemed, like any other flight to any other city, rather than to a city ravaged by flood and hurricane, its population reduced by 65%. Families boarded the plane, a baby behind me squealed, "Mom!" An Indian family, the women wrapped in saris, climbed into their seats, followed by some young men in baseball caps, then an old guy in a baseball cap. No one seems the least bit anxious.

"Now sit back and enjoy your flight to New York," said the flight attendant. We all looked at one another. "Whoops," she giggled, "New Orleans."

As we approached for landing, the captain announced that we were flying over Lake Pontchartrain. Images of broken levees rushed to mind, but everything looked normal from the sky and, minutes later, inside the airport.

"Was the airport flooded?" I asked a woman at the information desk. "No," she smiled, "but they brought a lot of people here and used it as a kind of organizing place to try to get them out."

I climbed into a cab. The driver said he was from Ethiopia. "Twenty years in New Orleans," he bragged with an elegant accent, "It's home to me now." He pointed to water stains on the freeway overpasses, about five feet high. I told him I am with the American Library Association.

"Oh the librarians. We are so glad you are coming," the driver said.

As we pulled into downtown New Orleans, my driver pointed out the Dominion Building, with its windows still blown out. "Many offices are still closed," he said, pointing to the wind damage at the top of the Hyatt. "There are Dillard students living at the Hilton. There are construction sites here and there, many buildings are open for business." It began to seem that, while there were signs of hurricane damage if you looked for them, the city is alive and well.

At the Sheraton, the manager rushed out to greet me, a young man named Joseph Quilio. When I remarked on how well the hotel seemed to have recovered, he replied, "The Sheraton never took in any water. It came all the way up Canal Street, but stopped short of the hotel. There was some wind damage on the level of the workout room, but that's about it. I don't want to give you the impression that it wasn't awful," he added. "But the company got an air purification and cooling system in here right away, and there really was very little damage"

Thinking that things were starting to look pretty good, I made a beeline to the French Quarter. It was a beautiful day in the city. It was difficult to say what was different about Bourbon Street and Royal Street. Perhaps it was just that things were quieter, fewer people than normal. If the Quarter had gotten seedier it was hard to tell. The T-shirt shops were trying to cash in on Katrina. One rack featured black shirts emblazoned with the explanation that "FEMA" stands for "Fix Everything My Ass"

## Into a neighborhood

"We're the luckiest 10% of the 80% of the city that flooded," photographer Jackson Hill told me, as he pointed to the top step of his front porch, the highest water level his house endured. He and his wife, Linda Marshall Hill, head of public services for the main branch of New Orleans Public Library, explained that "we are on the mend, but there's a whole checklist of things to do."



**Photographer Jackson Hill.**

"A block away, people aren't back yet," Linda said. She also seemed visibly happy to see me, smiling, and saying softly, "It's huge that ALA didn't leave"—a sentiment I heard repeated over and over during my visit. She was eager to meet with other ALA representatives to plan the volunteer service projects that nearly 1,000 ALAers have already signed up for during Annual. "We want the witnesses," she said, "and no one can do that better than librarians."

Commenting on NOPL main library's remarkable lack of water damage, Linda said, "We felt it must be divine intervention, but then we researched it." Turns out the architects designed the building to withstand the kind of

flooding Katrina let loose. "We had thought for a long time that we should get the archives out of the basement, but the architect maintained that the design precluded flooding. The book drop outside was under three feet of water, and the water was six feet deep in nearby buildings."

Outside, the devastation was only beginning to register with me, as Jackson pointed at dozens of dead magnolia trees that lined Esplanade Avenue at dusk. Everything seemed to be covered with a salty film. With only about 175,000, or 35% of the population, back in the city, the neighborhood took on an eerie glow as we walked to the Café Degas for dinner, where perhaps 60 locals were dining. "You try to keep things as normal as you can," said Jackson.

"I thought the healing would be quicker," Jackson observed, "but there's so much bureaucracy. It will not take a year, it will take a generation, and still it will never be the same city. The life is coming back, but some people will never return." He urged me to read columnist Chris Rose's assessments of the situation in the **Times-Picayune**, "the best that's been written."

Later, we stopped at the Robert E. Smith branch library at Harrison Avenue and Canal Boulevard. It was a shell, with watermarks at 10 feet, shelving strewn along the side of the street. "This was a middle class neighborhood," Jackson said. "Now it's dead." And so it is, with no signs of life in any homes or businesses, now and then a vehicle crept past, here and there a FEMA trailer.

We took a ride through nearby neighborhoods, and I began to see that there are two cities here: One is composed of the French Quarter, the convention areas, the hotels in the central business district. The other New Orleans is a war zone of abandoned homes, debris piles, and street after street, mile after mile, of darkened buildings with watermarks sometimes reaching the second floor.

I saw trees uprooted, houses shifted off their foundations, and up and down the streets an ominous glow given off by the street lamps and the salty residue that seems to cover everything.

## **From rarified to squalid**

Back at the lovely Sheraton, a box of chocolates awaited me, and a note: "Welcome to the Sheraton New Orleans and to our fabulous city!" Signed, "Margo." I don't know from Margo, but I do know that it will be entirely possible to attend the ALA conference in New Orleans and never see what I have just seen, entirely possible to parade down Bourbon Street, drink a hurricane, buy Mardi Gras beads and T-shirts, and never know the difference. If that's what you want.



**Musician Michael White lost an archival quality collection that took a lifetime to build.**

The next morning, Jackson and I headed for Xavier University to interview and photograph Michael White, a jazz musician and professor. At age 49, White has family roots lodged deep in the beginnings of the New Orleans jazz scene. As a youngster he had "some very special apprenticeships," as a musician "in the street parade

tradition," learning from the masters and playing for jazz funerals, club and church parades, and other public events.

Slowly, lovingly, White described his losses: a collection of some 50 vintage musical instruments, many of which belonged to legendary New Orleans musicians such as Paul Barnes and Sydney Bechet, and unique memorabilia, including video, letters, photographs, and sheet music.

White's story is heartbreaking. His personal collection would most likely have ended up in the Amistad Research Center or the Historic New Orleans Collection, but never in his worst nightmare could he have imagined that they would wind up in waterlogged heaps eaten by mold.



**Xavier University Library Director Robert Skinner talks about his facility's rapid recovery.**

At Xavier, University Librarian Robert Skinner showed off the library's remarkable recovery. Walking in, you would never know that 18 inches of water swept through the entire first floor, which had to be gutted and the floors replaced. Though the numbers were not in, he guessed that "\$1 million would be a conservative damage estimate."

Due to the abysmal state of mail delivery in New Orleans, Skinner said, the library has received no periodicals since the hurricane. "EBSCO is only now able to restart our subscriptions," he noted, and staff members were bracing for eight months worth of mail to process.

Like most of the staff, Skinner is living in a trailer across the street from the university. "Our house is a gutted shell," he said, "but my wife is working on the landscaping."

"It's very important that ALA comes, to see the librarians here returning to work with such spirit. People who work here are highly dedicated and couldn't wait to get back. I've never seen absenteeism at such a low," Skinner said. "This is frontier living down here, and it's important for the people who come to ALA to see that."



**In a temporary library on the second floor, Benjamin Franklin High School Principal Carol A. Christen (left) and Librarian Idella Washington explain the daunting task of recovery.**

At our next stop, the Benjamin Franklin High School on Leon C. Simon Drive, we followed the signs to the temporary library on the second floor, where Principal Carol A. Christen and Librarian Idella Washington explained their dire circumstances, grateful that their site will be one of the volunteer service projects during the ALA conference.

"The youngsters that are here want to be here," explained Christen, noting that 540 of 935 students were back in school, even though the entire first floor was being redone. "We're bringing normal life back to our kids." Washington nodded, "We're a close family now."

"It's going to take a long time," Christen bemoaned. "It's nothing but devastation. We drive through it every day, but you can't let it pull you down." She revealed that the teachers at the school lost their benefits and "went COBRA" in November. The school reopened January 17—"Benjamin Franklin's birthday, I planned that"—and in February they were still operating on donations and loans. "We've seen nothing from the Katrina Relief Act," she rued.

## Jaw-dropping sights

Driving through the Ninth Ward, I understood what Christen was talking about. The devastation was beyond belief. Cars on shattered houses, houses on cars, people's lives strewn about, records, clothes, a toaster in the muck. I spotted a pile of broken china and bent over to pick up one unbroken dinner plate; on the back it said, "Made in Persia." I was tempted to take the dish with me until Jackson reminded me that this is not a garbage dump and that someone who had lived in this demolished home may walk here soon and get some comfort from finding one unbroken plate.

"The people who lived here were those least likely to evacuate," said Jackson, "and they were hardest hit." Block after block, for miles there is nothing but desolation. At one spot, men in yellow, wearing surgical masks, dug through debris with the help of an earthmover. Bodies were still being recovered. We passed house after house, thousands, smashed to pieces, houses swept into one another. One house was on top of a car under a tree, with a boat topping off the whole absurd pile of wreckage.

As we crossed the bridge back to the central city, Jackson confided that he has spent a lot of money on tire repair. "Nails and glass everywhere," he said, adding that he has been eager to take anyone who will come on a tour through the destruction. "I just want people to be witnesses to this."



**Priscilla Lawrence, Executive Director of the Historic New Orleans Collection.**

Back in the Quarter, Priscilla Lawrence, executive director of the [Historic New Orleans Collection](#) on Royal Street, was waiting to show us through the facility, which sustained no damage, although an HNOC warehouse on Tchoupitoulas Street suffered some roof damage and portions of the collection had to be freeze dried.

"New Orleans is still a wonderful place to visit," she assured me immediately. While making it clear that she does not generally encourage gawking, she said, "We need people to know how much it has suffered" and to understand "the vastness of what happened."

"It's a national problem," Lawrence said. In addition to enjoying what the city has to offer, she advised those who are coming to the Annual Conference to "take a tour and understand that this city is 80% devastated."

Every destroyed home is someone's life."

Like all the others I talked to, Lawrence emphasized how important it is for the city and the library community that ALAers show up in June. The HNOC will be the venue for several receptions, but most important, she said, the "Common Routes: St. Domingue-Louisiana" exhibition should be on every librarian's to-see list. Showcasing some 150 objects from more than three dozen institutions and private collections in Europe, the Americas, and Louisiana, the exhibit will run through June 30 and presents a comprehensive look at the history of St. Domingue (Haiti) and the impact of its revolution on Louisiana.

A private tour through the softly lit displays of irreplaceable paintings, drawings, and artifacts was a total antidote to the catastrophe outside; but more than that, the exhibit represents a vote of confidence in the city by the institutions that sent their treasures to New Orleans during this horrific time.

Lawrence stopped us in front of "Veüe et Perspective de la Nouvelle Orleans," a 1726 painting of the city as a frontier outpost in a swamp. "This painting has never been here before and will never be back," she assured us.

At the collection's Williams Research Center, Director Alfred Lemmon showed off the facility, which opened in 1996. "The ALA conference is so important," he said, "because it is the first big conference since Katrina. Several preservation groups are trying to find ways to assist archives, especially the archives of the Archdiocese. Those in the parishes were hit hard." The Research Center is in the middle of a building project next door, "a four-story vault with a reconstructed façade." Lemmon climbed a ladder to demonstrate plastic drop cloths that can be lowered over the book stacks during construction.

The next stop was New Orleans Public Library. City Librarian Bill Johnson chatted about the stages of recovery that will be required before the system can be whole again. The ALA conference will be "a plus for the city, a plus for the library," he said. "We have the same tax base as the city. The economic impact, the exposure—there probably has never been a conference this important to the host city."

Johnson said he has been able to funnel 37 former library employees through the Job One program run by the Red Cross with federal money, bringing the staff up to 72 or 73 people, from a pre-Katrina level of 216. "We don't know what the repopulation is going to look like," he said, "so we are trying to track it to be able to plan where our resources should go."

NOPL's Alvar branch, one of the community service project sites, is close to the Ninth Ward. "We're pretty confident that people are coming back," said Johnson. The library is also looking into bookmobiles and storefronts as a way to deal with the uncertainties of repopulation. "3M has donated two internet kiosks, and we are checking into where to put them," he added.

Encouraging people to come to the conference, Johnson said, "Where the convention people will be, mold and the water and air quality are not a problem. It would be a tremendous boost for the library, and they can have the same experience they had when they were here before Katrina."

Later that day, an ALA contingent met with NOPL staffers Elisabeth Konrad, Kim Tran, Rica Triggs, and Linda Marshall Hill for a planning session on the volunteer projects during Annual, working out the many details that go into planning a project that involves up to a thousand volunteers, from logistics to liability.

Triggs observed that the generosity prompted by a call for books put on the internet by Abrams Publishing "spun into a legend" and resulted in 30–40 calls a day about book donations. The problem with naïve donations, no matter how generous, is that they often consist of books that people want to get rid of, not books people want to check out of the library. The group concluded that perhaps some volunteers could help by sorting through gifts.

Konrad confessed, "Thank goodness we have jobs, but you spend the weekends salvaging, and believe me, there will still be volunteer opportunities when you come back in 2011." She urged me, "Do not diminish the magnitude of the disaster when you report on it. We haven't got a dime of FEMA money yet. Everybody's quality of life has changed." Explaining that her home was a total loss, she said with disgust, "but if the 17th Street Canal hadn't breached, I would only have had minor wind damage."

## Parting glances

The next morning, I walked the convention center area stopping at various convention hotels. Their upbeat veneer was thin but strong. In the hotel lobby at the Hilton Garden Inn Downtown, I asked about the hotel's ability to handle guests, and the young woman behind the desk smiled indulgently, "This hotel opened a week after," she said, "there was no damage."

I checked out the Doubletree, the Hilton, the Monteleone. They were all ready, with smiling employees stationed at the reception desks and seemingly determined to deliver the best hotel service you've ever had.

The Riverwalk Marketplace that runs from the Hilton to the Convention Center was almost completely reopened, although customers on this Tuesday morning were few.

The last sight on the way to the airport was a cluster of dozens of scum-covered cars under a viaduct. "Just look at that," said my driver.

I spent three days in New Orleans trying to assess the readiness of the city to host the ALA conference. My conclusion: They are ready. The "hospitality industry," as hotels and convention centers like to think of themselves, are chomping at the bit, many facilities having suffered very little damage. And the Quarter is back; all the shopkeepers need are visitors.

So I headed home, knowing that it will be completely possible to attend the ALA conference in New Orleans and see the city as it has always appeared to outsiders. You will be able to have dinner at Emeril's or the Court of Two Sisters, or shop for antiques on Royal Street and tchotchkies of every persuasion in the Riverwalk Marketplace. That would mean, however, missing an opportunity to witness a major American cultural center at arguably the most pivotal point in its history. You can avoid seeing the destruction wreaked by Katrina and the floods—the costliest and one of the deadliest hurricanes in American history and a disaster that has robbed this country of a unique treasure—in favor of a façade of normalcy.

New Orleans will never be the same again, and whatever recovery its neighborhoods can achieve is still very much a question to which no one has the answer. The city belongs to America, to all of us. Come down and do the conference, yes; but this is not conference as usual unless you put on blinders. I urge you, instead, to bring a wide-angle lens and two helping hands.