



Draining New Orleans

The 300-Year Quest to Dewater the Crescent City

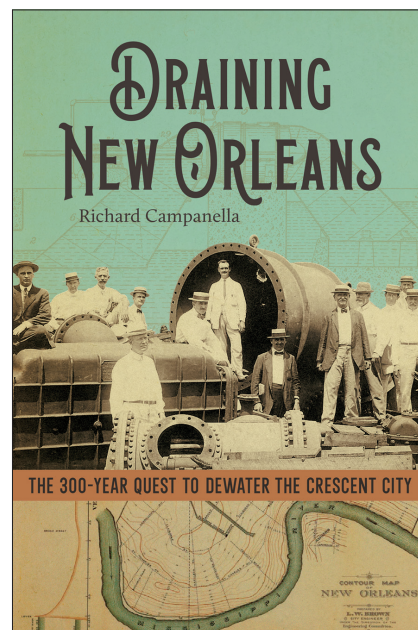
RICHARD CAMPANELLA

In *Draining New Orleans*, the first full-length book devoted to “the world’s toughest drainage problem,” renowned geographer Richard Campanella recounts the epic challenges and ingenious efforts to dewater the Crescent City. With forays into geography, public health, engineering, architecture, politics, sociology, race relations, and disaster response, he chronicles the herculean attempts to “reclaim” the city’s swamps and marshes and install subsurface drainage for massive urban expansion.

The study begins with a vivid description of a festive event on Mardi Gras weekend 1915, which attracted an entourage of elite New Orleanians to the edge of Bayou Barataria to witness the christening of giant water pumps. President Woodrow Wilson, connected via phoneline from the White House, planned to activate the station with the push of a button, effectively draining the West Bank of New Orleans. What transpired in the years and decades that followed can only be understood by examining the large swath of history dating back two centuries earlier—to the geological formation and indigenous occupation of this delta—and extending through the colonial, antebellum, postbellum, and Progressive eras to modern times.

The consequences of dewatering New Orleans proved both triumphant and tragic. The city’s engineering prowess transformed it into a world leader in drainage technology, yet the municipality also fell victim to its own success. Rather than a story about mud and machinery, this is a history of people, power, and the making of place. Campanella emphasizes the role of determined and sometimes unsavory individuals who spearheaded projects to separate water from dirt, creating lucrative opportunities in the process not only for the community but also for themselves.

RICHARD CAMPANELLA is a geographer and associate dean for research at the Tulane School of Architecture. He is the author of fourteen books, including *The West Bank of Greater New Orleans* and *Cityscapes of New Orleans*, as well as hundreds of articles on Louisiana history and geography.



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