



## HURRICANE KATRINA DEVASTATES GULF HISTORY AND CULTURE

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*The devastating winds and waves of Hurricane Katrina that wiped out people's homes, communities and livelihoods also swept away many historic treasures, including famous architecture and works of art.*

As the human search and rescue operations from Hurricane Katrina wind down, efforts began to assess the toll the storm took on the cultural heritage and history of the Gulf Coast region.

Cultural experts worry that the storm also will impact less tangible characteristics of the area, such as the food, language and music that make a place unique.

“I think this could represent the greatest cultural disaster in the history of the country,” Richard Moe, president of the National Trust for Historical Preservation, which is working to resurrect the region, told the Washington Post.

### **A famous region**

The history of the region hit hardest by Hurricane Katrina has much to do with its location at the convergence of the Mississippi River and Gulf of Mexico.

Long before trains and highways linked the United States, the Mississippi was the country's main trade route.

New Orleans was founded in 1718 as a French colony. The busy Louisiana trade center was transferred to the Spanish in 1763, but given back to France in 1800. In 1803, Napoleon sold New Orleans, along with the entire state, to the United States in a transaction known as the Louisiana Purchase.

Europeans of French and Spanish descent, Africans, Latin Americans, Caribbeans, Native Americans and others called the city home.

The Creole people, a mix of African, French and American Indians, are famous for their language, zydeco music and food.

Tourists came from all over the world to eat distinctly Creole and Cajun foods: gumbo, jambalaya, dirty rice and crawfish, po'boy sandwiches and turtle soup, café au lait and beignets.

New Orleans neighborhoods were filled with Spanish-styled homes from the late 1700s, multi-story French colonial buildings and single-story, wood-framed buildings from the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Jazz, considered the most uniquely American form of music, found a solid foundation in 20th century New Orleans. The music is celebrated in the city's annual Mardi Gras -- or Fat Tuesday -- parades and jazz festivals and funerals.

Louis Armstrong, often referred to as a father of jazz, was born in one of the poorest sections of New Orleans in 1901. His mentor Joe "King" Oliver, was one of a handful of noted musicians in New Orleans -- along with Jelly Roll Morton, Sidney Bechet and others -- who created a distinctive and widely popular new band music out of blues and ragtime.

### **What was lost**

Though much of the city's historic French Quarter was built on higher ground and may have avoided the most severe flooding, officials fear historical objects -- from antique musical instruments to furniture -- could be lost.

Heat and humidity could damage physical artifacts such as the paintings and documents housed in the Pitot House Museum, which shows how traditional Creole families lived, said Meg Lousteau, director of the Louisiana Landmarks Society, according to the Washington Post.

And others worry about what will happen to the vibrant arts feel of the region if artists don't return.

"It is hard to sit in silence, to watch one's youth wash away," said jazz singer and pianist Harry Connick Jr. on his Web site. "New Orleans is my essence, my soul, my muse, and I can only dream that one day she will recapture her glory."

### **Mississippi**

In Mississippi, Katrina's winds also wiped away architecture that is part of American history.

"Almost all our old houses have gone. This isn't just a question of financial loss, this is our history that has disappeared," Helen Sirmon, a teacher who took her classes on tours of Biloxi's historic buildings, told Reuters.

The Brielmaier House, which was built around 1895 and had served as a visitors' center was seen floating down the street during the storm.

All that is left of the Pleasant Reed House, built by a former slave around 1887 and home to an African-American museum, is the chimney.

Beauvoir, the 1852 Greek Revival house where the Confederate president during the Civil War, Jefferson Davis, spent his last 12 years, is in tatters.

### **Will the region ever be the same?**

Historic preservation experts and tourism officials alike are working with disaster officials to save and restore the region.

“The lessons we’ve learned from other hurricanes and recovery efforts is that the things that were important before the storm need to be important after the storm,” John Hildreth, director of the National Trust for Historic Preservation’s southern office, told Architectural Record News.

“The city that is reborn is one that still has its heritage and culture.”

-- *Compiled by Annie Schleicher for NewsHour Extra*

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