

## Past is prologue in "Accidental City"

April 12, 2012 2:00 AM Nick Marinello  
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What is past is prologue. This sentiment underscores nearly every character, anecdote, fact and figure presented in a richly textured history of early New Orleans written by Tulane historian Lawrence Powell. Though focusing only on the city's history up until 1812, *The Accidental City: Improvising New Orleans* goes a long way toward understanding its contemporary idiosyncrasies.



"You can't write history without seeing it in some sense through the lens of your own experience," says historian Lawrence Powell, who has lived in New Orleans for more than 30 years. (Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)

From the sly disregard of authority practiced by the city's founder, to the enjoyment culture nurtured by its Creole gentry, to the improvisational wit of the slave population, *The Accidental City* details the complex, fluid interplay of people from all strata of society as they negotiate the difficult, sometimes impossible conditions associated with establishing and growing a city along the soggy banks of the Mississippi River.

"New Orleans is a place where people have built a culture that is unique simply because of the place and because the people had to learn how to get along," says

Powell. "They shared a culture by building one."

Central to the story [Powell](#) tells are the social relationships among different classes and races.

"History is about stories and about people, and sometimes about how people are exploited or thwarted by larger social forces that they have little control over," says Powell. "And sometimes they can bend those forces to their own needs."

Powell admits that when he began working on the book six years ago, his intention was to write the entire history of New Orleans ? "from the primordial ooze to Katrina sludge." But following the storm, when so many Americans were asking why New Orleans existed in such an improbable location, Powell found himself asking the same question.

"I had to drill down. I had to get into the weeds of the question. And then the book started building out from there."

Powell, a history professor who is retiring from the university in June, is planning a forthcoming volume to complete his history of the city.