

VERSAILLES VILLAGE: THE HISTORY AND STRUCTURE OF A VIETNAMESE COMMUNITY IN NEW ORLEANS

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the history and structure of a Vietnamese community. Drawing on interviews with community members, census data, and information from existing sources, the study demonstrates how social ecology and social policy have together provided a framework for creating a specific economic and geographical structure. It describes the growth of this community from a group of refugees into an interdependent neighborhood characterized by a high degree of institutional completeness.

INTRODUCTION

A multitude of new ethnic communities have arisen in the United States as a consequence of the increased immigration that followed the liberalization of American immigration policy in 1965. The massive flow of Vietnamese into the country, after the end of the Vietnam war in 1975, produced some of the most culturally distinctive of these communities. The present study is an effort to provide ethnographic insight into the development of a Southeast Asian neighborhood in the United States, and to illustrate the forces that shaped this development. In providing this portrait of a Vietnamese neighborhood, I intend to show how social ecology and social policy have together provided a framework for creating a specific economic and geographical structure. I identify the initial forces in community creation as institutional (refugee resettlement agencies) and ecological (niches created by the economic position of the refugees and by shifts in demands for housing). These initial forces were followed by network contacts that shaped a settlement pattern in southeastern Louisiana. The network contacts formalized into a coherent set of organizations and institutions within the new community.

To draw this portrait, I use information from 135 unstructured interviews that I conducted with community members from 1992 through 1995, census data, and information from existing sources, notably old newspaper reports.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The study of the geographical structure of ethnic communities has played an important part in the development of American sociology. In their classic work *The City* (1967), Park and Burgess drew on ecological concepts to describe the spatial and economic situations of an earlier generation of American immigrants. Park and Burgess saw newly-arrived immigrants as characterized primarily by their disadvantages. Their lack of English language

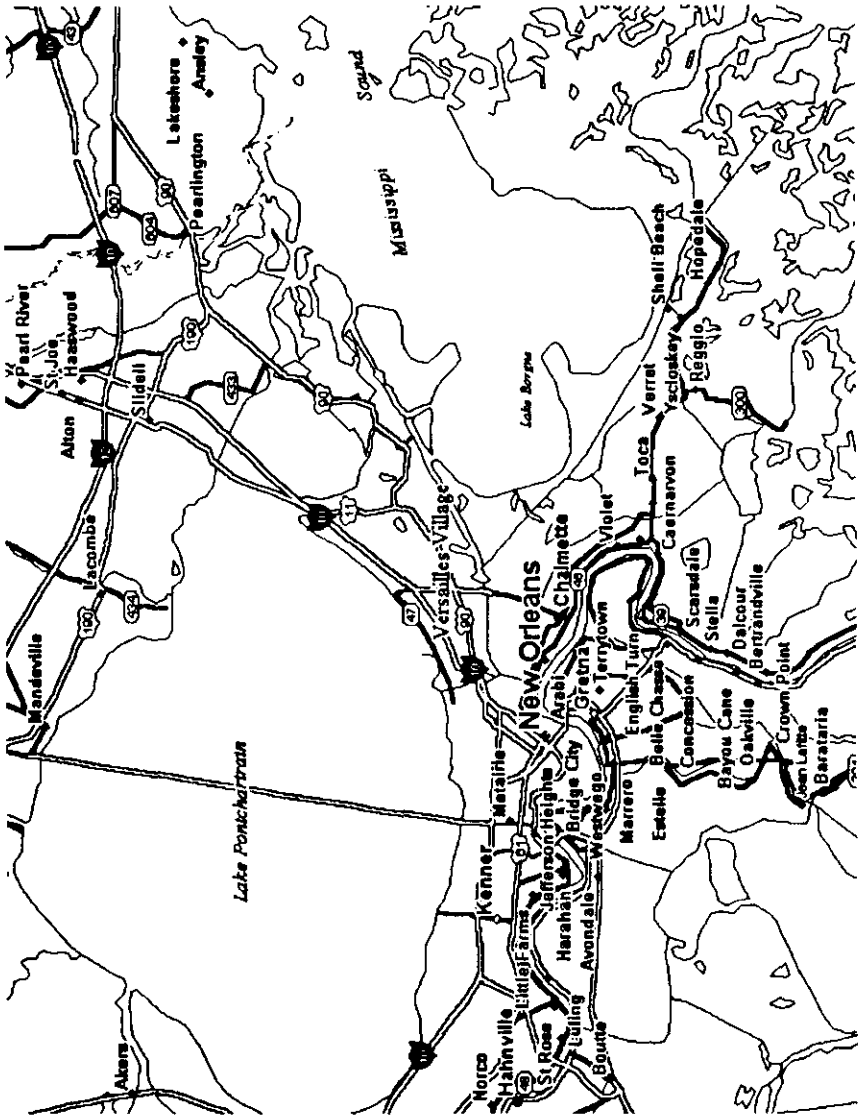
skills, absence of appropriate work and social skills, and relative ignorance of the larger society rendered them unable to compete with natives. As a result, according to Park and Burgess, immigrants tended to settle in undesirable, low-income neighborhoods near city centers where jobs for unskilled laborers were available in nearby industrial sectors. The immigrants' unfamiliarity with their host society and their familiarity with their own language and customs led them to establish their homes in dense ethnic concentrations.

Hawley (1950), following in the ecological tradition, argued that patterns of settlement vary with market fluctuation. More recently, Aldrich and Zimmer (1989) have argued that resource and environmental flows create environments. In other words, people adapt to settlement patterns and to flows of resources among settlement patterns. Housing and jobs are major resources that are increasing in availability in areas outside of large, centralized cities. The suburbanization of housing and jobs produces patterns of settlement different from those seen by Park and Burgess. Contemporary new settlers tend to be drawn to suburban fringe areas. Even when policy makers outside the ethnic group are involved in placing new immigrants, the availability of ecological niches can be critical in establishing immigrant communities.

While the ecological literature provides ideas that are useful for explaining the geography of ethnic communities, investigations of ethnic communities as interrelated systems of economic and social institutions can help us conceptualize the social structures of these communities. The literature on ethnic enclaves is particularly useful. Portes and Manning (1986) and Portes and Jensen (1987) have emphasized the importance of economic differentiation in creating a viable ethnic community. They have maintained that ethnic communities can promote successful adaptation for their members by placing the members in

Figure 1: Location of Versailles Village

Source: Delorme Atlas, 1995



interconnected social roles as employers, employees, and consumers. Similarly, Zhou (1992) has argued that New York's Chinatown has been a successful ethnic enclave because of its varied, interdependent institutions.

In this study, I make use of ecological concepts to explain the geographical position and form of a Vietnamese community and I demonstrate how ecological forces interacted with the institutional, political forces. I then show how networks of refugees, channeled by these forces, produced a residential enclave with a high degree of institutional completeness.

THE FOUNDING OF A VIETNAMESE COMMUNITY IN NEW ORLEANS

Versailles Village began in 1975 when about 1,000 refugees from Vietnam were settled on the eastern edge of New Orleans by Associated Catholic Charities, the primary volunteer agencies in charge of refugee resettlement (Ashton 1985a). Although Vietnamese communities had grown up all around the United States, Versailles Village was one of the first to be intentionally fostered by a resettlement organization. According to Ms. Elise Cerniglia, who was Director of Resettlement and Immigration Services for Associated Catholic Charities in New Orleans when the Vietnamese began arriving, the U.S. Department of State initially pressured her to scatter the Vietnamese among members of other ethnic groups, as was the practice elsewhere in the United States. Ms. Cerniglia, having earlier been in charge of resettlement of Cuban refugees, believed that refugees should be concentrated so that they could help one another.

I said, 'no, they need one another.' So, I started to resettle them in communities. That's why I looked for housing that could take large numbers of people. The Government saw the success and that's what they started doing elsewhere... New Orleans was a pattern for other places, no doubt about it. (Cerniglia 1994)

Versailles Village is located on the far eastern edge of New Orleans, by the swamps of the Bayou Sauvage Wildlife Refuge (Figure 1). It took root in this geographically marginal location for one reason: cheap, available housing. A New Orleans *Times Picayune* reporter wrote

These neighborhoods were seeded by chance. Their location reflects the city's rental vacancies

a decade ago when Associated Catholic Charities began looking for housing for the refugees. (Ashton 1985a)

The Versailles Arms apartments, near Michoud Boulevard and the Chef Menteur Highway, offered ample room for new residents. The apartments were considered undesirable by most New Orleanians, since they were a long way from the city itself and were provided with inadequate bus service (Ashton 1985b). According to Melanie Ottaway, the manager of Versailles Arms Apartments, the apartment complex had been built in 1970, when the neighborhood of New Orleans East was still expected to expand, along with the local NASA plant (Ottaway 1994). By 1975, however, economic hardship had hit the plant and the management of the apartment complex was eager to find residents.

The initial 1,000 Vietnamese apartment dwellers provided the end link in a system of chain migration. In 1976, another 2,000 Vietnamese arrived on their own. While Associated Catholic Charities continued to settle Vietnamese in the area, many other Vietnamese were drawn by ties to friends, relatives, and former neighbors. This was the second move in the United States for the majority of new arrivals. According to Sister Ann Devaney, head of refugee social services for Catholic Charities, three fifths of those who have settled in the community have been secondary migrants from other states (cited in Ashton 1985a).

The religious and historical backgrounds of those in this neighborhood attest to the importance of established networks in directing living patterns, even among those who have migrated around the world. Eighty percent of the Vietnamese in this community are Catholics (Nash 1992). The late Rev. Michael Viet-Anh, a priest who lived in the Versailles area, has estimated that

about 60 percent of the Vietnamese in the Versailles community once lived in Bui Chu province in North Vietnam and later moved to Vung Tau [a coastal town in former South Vietnam]. (Ashton 1985b)

Most of the residents of Versailles Village who do not trace their origins back to Bui Chu are from families deriving from Nghe An, another Catholic area that moved south in 1954. The Nghe An people settled on the

Table 1: Characteristics of Census Tracts Containing Versailles Village

	1970	1980	1980	1980	1990	Vietnamese only
Census tracts	17.12*	17.29	17.30	17.29	17.30	
Total population	4945	10566	89	10607	1496	4640
White	4877	3224	58	1059	443	---
Black	22	3680	31	4854	960	---
Vietnamese	0	3352	0	4566	74	4640
Other Asian	0	74	0	89	5	---
All families	1310	2334	22	2411	368	898
Female-headed	80	427	1	614	67	52
% Males in labor force	88.8	65.2	19.8	62.5	88.8	55.5
% Unemployed	6.7	5.7	35.3	12.8	6.3	16.2
% Females in labor force	45.1	53.5	20.7	47.2	80.3	34.9
% Unemployed	5.7	7.4	100**	11.4	5.3	8.7
Median family incomes (\$)	11927	16560	9605	17044	38864	15841
% Families below poverty	4.5	24.9	0	37.1	4.9	50.4
% High School Graduate	78.0	63.5	31.2	60.0	93.8	36.5
% College Graduate	23.0	12.5	0	14.4	38.3	4.0

*The areas of Tracts 17.29 and 17.30 together comprised Tract 17.12 in 1970..

**Only 6 females were listed as being in the labor force in Tract 17.30 in 1980, all unemployed.

Source: U.S. Census of Population and Housing, Summary Tape File 3C

island of Phu Quoc or in the coastal town of Nha Trang. This reconstruction of Vietnamese villages on the banks of the bayous has resulted from channeling by ethnic networks, rather than from official resettlement policy. "Despite the appearances," the *Times Picayune* concluded from an interview with former Associated Catholic Charities head Michael Haddad, "no villages were resettled...in New Orleans by Associated Catholic Charities. The villagers apparently regrouped on their own" (Ashton 1985b).

In interviews that I conducted with Vietnamese residents in the area, I found that the overwhelming majority had been drawn to New Orleans by of some sort of family connection. When I asked, "why did you come to New Orleans?," the most common answers were "because my brother was here" or "because my uncle was here", or because some other relative was already in the New Orleans area. Other answers that were frequently given were, "because I heard the weather was like the weather in Vietnam," or "because I heard there were jobs for fishermen." These answers might, on the face of it, seem to suggest that at least some of the residents of New Orleans East had not migrated along lines provided by family networks. However, when I would ask them, "how did you hear about the weather?" or "how did you hear about the job?" the answers were, invariably, "my wife's uncle, who was already

here, told us about it in a letter," or "I heard about it from my cousin." Thus, even those who did not have family reunification as a motivation for moving to New Orleans moved as a result of information provided by family.

According to a 1979 report of the Indochinese Resettlement Task Force appointed by the Mayor of New Orleans to study the impact of the Vietnamese on the city, New Orleans was attractive to the Vietnamese because of a strong Catholic organization funded for resettlement and social services, a Catholic cultural ambience, proximity to fishing opportunities, and climactic similarities with their homeland (Indochinese Resettlement Task Force 1979). However, since Louisiana's services and opportunities are limited compared to many other parts of the country, the Vietnamese community itself appears to have been the biggest draw for secondary migrants. Rhonda Cooperstein, co-author of a federal report on refugee communities in New Orleans, Orange and San Francisco counties in California, Wichita, Kansas, and Rochester and Ithaca, New York, has remarked,

Refugee communities have built up in areas based on four factors - a good economy, an existing Vietnamese community, higher welfare benefits, and warm weather. Since New Orleans doesn't have particularly high welfare benefits and its economy has been in a slump,

if people are moving to Louisiana I'd say they are going for the community. (in Ashton 1985b)

Since most of the Vietnamese of New Orleans East come from villages, they are generally of modest socioeconomic backgrounds. The 1979 Task Force described them as "agriculturalists and fishermen" in their native country (Indochinese Resettlement Task Force 1979). The 1990 5 Percent Public Use Microdata Sample of the U.S. Census of Population and Housing indicates that Vietnamese in the New Orleans SMSA continue to work in relatively low-paying, blue-collar occupations. Although the Vietnamese of this area are not concentrated in any one occupational area, the general tenor of their employment is suggested by the few jobs in which more than 3 percent of them are employed: cashiers (4.0%), waiters and waitresses (3.1%), cooks (3.1%), fishers (3.1%), and textile sewing machine operators (4.8%) (U.S. Census Bureau 1992).

SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC STRUCTURE OF THE COMMUNITY

The neighborhood is primarily located within a single census tract, Tract 17.29, although in recent years it has begun to extend into another, newly designated and wealthier tract, Tract 17.30. Some of the demographic characteristics of this community are provided in Table 1. This table can give an indication of how these characteristics have changed over a relatively short period of time.

In 1970, the two areas that now comprise Tract 17.29 and Tract 17.30 were a single tract, Tract 17.12. The population was small and almost all the inhabitants were white. Nearly a quarter of them were college graduates, and only 4.5 percent were below the poverty level. During the 1970's, the area began a major demographic change.

The historical sources of this change are complex, but at the risk of oversimplification we may identify the chief causes as: 1) a decline in employment at the Michoud NASA plant, which was the most important industry in the area; 2) an influx of black families seeking a suburban way of life, which caused those whites who were unwilling to be part of a numerical racial minority to move to Slidell, Mandeville, and other places immediately outside of New Orleans; and 3) the failure of the plans of contractors and developers for the area. In the newspaper article, "Plans for the Model Community Didn't Include Crime,

Poverty", *Times-Picayune* staff writer Christopher Cooper described the difficulties that have beset these suburbs, named "Village de l'Est" by developers.

Designed in the early 1960s, Village de l'Est was a forerunner of a national suburban trend called the 'New City' ... The dream began to sour a few years later when the NASA plant lost several contracts and started laying off workers. Then developers who needed to drain the vast marshlands of New Orleans East to complete their plans ran into fierce opposition from environmentalists. By the 1980s, their "New City" had fallen apart. (Cooper 1991)

Because the new suburbs were built on soft swamp land, moreover, subsidence became a serious problem, as houses, garages, and sidewalks began to sink unevenly, causing cracks in floors and sidewalks, and often making it impossible to open garage doors (Cooper 1991).

As the dreams of suburban planners began to fade and the economic base of the community weakened, the nature of construction in the area changed. By the early 1980s, housing construction shifted from single family homes to rental units, bringing in a more transient and poorer population. This new population induced many of the older homeowners to abandon the neighborhood in favor of suburbs across Lake Ponchartrain (Cooper 1991).

As the black population of New Orleans grew as a proportion of all residents, blacks seeking a suburban way of life moved to this new neighborhood in large numbers.

Between 1970 and 1980, about 30,000 people moved to eastern New Orleans, swelling the population by 73 percent, while the city as a whole lost population. Most of those who moved to eastern New Orleans...were black. (Cooper 1991)

In the absence of a survey on this subject, it is difficult to say how many whites left the area because of reluctance to live in a majority black neighborhood, but this seems to have been one of the factors in this change.

One pocket of this area formed an exception to the general trends in New Orleans East. Between 1980 and 1990, a number of fairly expensive condominiums and apartment complexes were built in Tract 17.30, in the area known as "Oak Island", located along

Table 2: Selected Housing Characteristics of Asians Residing in Tract 17.29 (Versailles Village) in 1980 and in 1990

	1980	1990
% Units occupied by owner (N)	14.8 (86)	37.3 (358)
% All owner-occupied units occupied by Asians	2.8	27.8
Median persons per housing unit	5.96	4.78
Median persons per owner-occupied housing unit	5.71	5.67
Median persons per renter-occupied housing unit	6.01	4.17
Median rooms per housing unit	3.7	4.4
Median rooms per owner-occupied housing unit	4.5	4.7
Median rooms per renter-occupied housing unit	3.6	4.2

Source: U.S. Census of Population and Housing, 1990

Michoud Boulevard near the interstate highway, which provided convenient access to both New Orleans and Slidell. This new construction transformed Tract 17.30, which had been mostly swamp, into an island of affluence, bordering Tract 17.29, where housing constructed during the heyday of the New Orleans aerospace industry was vacant and available to lower-income people.

By 1980, as we have seen, the Vietnamese community had been established as a result of the cheap, available housing in this area. By this time, the area was almost 1/3 white, 1/3 black, and 1/3 Vietnamese. Although the percentage of males in the labor force who were unemployed had declined slightly since 1970, the percentage of families below the poverty level had risen drastically to nearly a quarter of the population. This may be attributed in part to the increase in female-headed families, which rose from only about 6 percent of all families to over 18 percent.

By 1990, the neighborhood had become almost entirely black and Vietnamese: 46 percent of the total population was black and 43 percent were Vietnamese. To interpret these statistics correctly, it is important to emphasize that they do not mean that blacks and Vietnamese are evenly distributed on every street. While the two racial groups live in close proximity throughout this census tract, the Vietnamese are heavily concentrated along Versailles Avenue and its adjoining streets, and around the Vietnamese Catholic church on Dwyer Boulevard. Many of the newer streets in the vicinity of the church bear Vietnamese names. Over the years, the Vietnamese have tended to move out of the Versailles Arms apartments, initial focal point of their settlement, and into the nearby suburban, free-standing housing.

A map of Versailles Village is presented in

Figure 2. Census Tract 17.29 consists of the triangle bordered by the bayou on the north, by Highway 90 on the south, and by Michoud Boulevard on the west. As we see in Figure 2, the first free-standing houses occupied by the Vietnamese were just to the west of the apartment buildings. Through the 1980s, the Vietnamese gradually moved further westward, occupying the houses in the square bounded in the north by Saigon Street, in the South by Peltier, and in the west by Palace.

Despite the move out of the apartments, many of the people in this area were struggling economically: the median family income of census tract 17.29 was only \$17,440 in 1990, and 37.1 percent of families were below the poverty level. The Vietnamese in this neighborhood had a median family income of only \$15,841 and over half of the Vietnamese families in the tract lived below the poverty level. For the city of New Orleans as a whole, at the same time, the median household income was \$18,477 and 27.3 percent of families were below poverty level.

Unemployment among males in the labor force was 12.8 percent and 25.5 percent of all families were headed by females. The Vietnamese showed even higher unemployment than their neighbors of other racial groups, with a male unemployment rate of 16.2 percent. However, they were much less likely to live in female-headed households: only 5.8 percent of Vietnamese families in the tract were headed by females, compared to over one-fourth of all families.

In terms of education, the Vietnamese appear to be at a considerable disadvantage compared to their non-Vietnamese neighbors. While about 60.0 percent of the residents of Tract 17.29 were high school graduates in 1990, only 36.5 percent of adult Vietnamese in the area were high school graduates (Table 1).

In sum, this is a relatively poor neighborhood, and the Vietnamese occupy an even more serious economic situation than their non-Vietnamese neighbors, with several decided disadvantages in human capital endowments.

Despite their socioeconomic disadvantages, however, the Vietnamese have managed to build an interdependent metropolitan village on their bit of wetland in this small bit of the city of New Orleans. The following section examines evidence on the homes, businesses, and community centers established by these members of a new American ethnic group.

HOUSING, LEADERSHIP, AND BUSINESS IN VERSAILLES

Table 2 contains selected housing characteristics of Asians (as mentioned above, the category "Asians" in this tract is virtually synonymous with "Vietnamese") in Tract 17.29, as shown in the 1980 and 1990 U.S. Census. Although the majority of Asians remain renters, rather than owners, home ownership has increased markedly, from only 15 percent to over 37 percent, a greater than three-fold increase. This is especially impressive when we consider that nearly 30 percent of these Asians arrived in the United States after 1980 and over 10 percent arrived after 1985.

Asians have also increased greatly as a percentage of all home owners in the tract, increasing from 3 percent to 28 percent of all home owners in this ten-year period. Even this figure, however, does not take into account the growth in quality of housing for Vietnamese home owners. A walk or drive down Dwyer Boulevard shows even the casual observer several large, new homes, either recently constructed or in the process of construction. All of these new homes are Vietnamese-owned.

Housing units in this neighborhood are densely occupied, and the owner-occupied units are more densely occupied than the renter-occupied units. In part, the denser occupation of owner-occupied units is a result of the fact that the Versailles Arms Apartment complex, the main source of rental housing, enforces limitations on the number of individuals who can live in each apartment. The density of occupation of renter-occupied units declined from 1980 to 1990 partially because non-Vietnamese moved into the apartments in larger numbers in this period and partially because the apartment complex began enforcing rules regarding persons per room more strictly in this period (Ottaway 1994). On this

point, cultural geographers Airiess and Clawson observe,

When the refugees arrived it was common to have two or three families living in a two-bedroom Versailles Arms apartment. Strictly enforced HUD regulations, however, eventually limited the number of occupants to six, allowing only a small extended family to occupy a single apartment. The duplexes and single family houses permitted a larger extended family to remain intact. (Airriess, Clawson 1991)

The continuing high density of occupation of the owner-occupied units is a reflection of the way in which many people with more limited economic power manage to purchase houses. According to Monsignor Dominic Luong,

Some Americans were asking me, 'how is it that you people just come to America and almost right away you can buy houses and have all these things?' So I took them out to visit some families to see how we live and how we manage to come up with the money to buy our homes. Two families will move in together and all work and save their money. Or someone who doesn't have a home will move in with a relative who owns one and won't have to pay any rent, so they can save all their money until they can buy a home of their own. (Luong 1993)

By 1980, Vietnamese home-buying in the neighborhood had become so common that a Vietnamese developer, Mr. Hung Van Chu, created several new blocks, giving the streets Vietnamese names, such as *Tu-Do* ("Freedom") and *My-Viet* ("America-Vietnam"). This new housing development represented a move further west and to the north (Figure 2). In September, 1983 the Archdiocese of New Orleans gave permission for the current large Vietnamese church to be built beside this new development. Funds were collected from Vietnamese Catholics throughout New Orleans and the Mary Queen of Vietnam Church was completed in May 1985.

The church has served as a center of both the spiritual and the social life of this little neighborhood. Behind the church, there is a Child Development Center, where nuns teach catechism classes and volunteer teachers teach Vietnamese language skills and enrichment classes in a variety of subjects in the evenings. The majority of junior high and high

Table 3: Vietnamese-Owned Businesses Located in the Vietnamese Commercial District on Alcee Fortier Boulevard (July 1994)

Type of Business	Number
Groceries	7
Restaurants	7
Night clubs	4
Retail apparel	4
Jewelry	3
Beauty salons	3
Gift shops	3
Vietnamese language bookstores	1
Vietnamese language videos	3
Legal and business services*	5
Insurance	2
Real estate	1
Engineering and contracting	1
Car audio	1
Modern drug stores	3
Traditional drug stores	3
Optometry clinic	1
Dental clinic	1
Medical clinic	1

*Includes notary services, sale of money orders, translation services, and others.

form the central commercial strip of the neighborhood. Table 3 shows a tally of types of businesses located on this strip. All of these buildings were Vietnamese-owned and all of the shop-owners to whom business space was rented were Vietnamese.

The fifty permanent businesses located in this one to two block area are supplemented in the mornings, especially on Saturday mornings, by sidewalk vendors working out of trucks who bring in fresh meat, seafood, live chickens and ducks, fruit, and other perishable goods. Many of the residents of this neighborhood, of course, do not work in the neighborhood. They work as clerks in local groceries stores, as manual laborers, or they commute to work in the Gulf of Mexico, where they are employed by Vietnamese fishing and shrimp boat captains, many of whom also live in the neighborhood. Most families do own cars, and they are economically involved with the world outside their neighborhood, but their economic involvement with the outside world also means they can earn money to bring back and spend in the neighborhood business district.

THE GARDENS OF VERSAILLES: JOBS FOR ELDERLS

While the business district provides Vietnamese people in this area with a commercial center, at the margins of the neighborhood may be found small-scale agricultural areas. Along the northernmost edge of the Vietnamese neighborhood, sandwiched between a levee and a bayou, lies an elaborate complex of fruit and vegetable gardens (Airriess, Clawson 1994; Figure 2). It would be difficult to judge the extent of the contribution these gardens make to the economic life of the community since no records are kept on how much is produced. Since some of the gardeners receive public assistance, and none of them pay taxes on earnings from their products, they are understandably reticent to discuss profits. When outsiders ask them about earnings from gardening, they invariably claim to grow primarily for their use. But while much of the produce is indeed consumed by growers, given away to extended family and neighbors, or bartered, it has apparently also become one important means of bringing capital into the community.

During the Spring and Summer of 1993 and of 1994, I witnessed large produce trucks in the neighborhood. According to one informant, at least two large produce trucks visit the neighborhood every two weeks during harvest

school students in these evening classes are enrolled at the schools in the neighborhood shown in Figure 2. At the church, also, the Vietnamese American Voters' Association meets to prepare neighborhood people to take the test for U.S. citizenship.

The church, moreover, serves as the center of social organization for the neighborhood. Monsignor Dominic Luong, the pastor quoted above, serves as chief spokesman and recognized leader of both church and neighborhood. He is supported by between one and two dozen influential neighborhood figures. These individuals are all males. A few of these have influence because they have the prestige of high education and they can help people deal with the outside world in financial or legal matters: at least two of them are high school teachers. Others are wealthy shopowners or successful owners of fishing boats who contribute financially to the church and to community projects.

A look at the business district of the Versailles community, shown in Figure 2, provides evidence that the Vietnamese community also provides a protected domestic market for ethnic investors. Although Vietnamese-owned businesses are scattered around the neighborhood, those on Alcee Fortier Boulevard

season. These trucks bring the harvest to other Vietnamese communities around the U.S., selling vegetables, produced mainly by older people, for use in Vietnamese dishes, and even supplying restaurants.

According to longtime Versailles Arms manager Melanie Ottaway, the gardens began in the tension between the desires of apartment dwellers to maintain traditional Vietnamese gardens and rules governing use of apartment complex territory. Ms. Ottaway explained

They always liked to have gardens to grow their vegetables and the spices for their foods. People started planting gardens out in front of their apartments. This was against the rules, but we didn't want to come down too hard, so we overlooked it. But the gardens kept getting bigger and bigger, and eventually the whole apartment complex was going to be one big garden. We had to put an end to it. (Ottaway 1994)

Many apartment dwellers were, understandably, upset at the prospect of being forced to give up their gardens, which probably provided important dietary supplements in quite a few cases. Officials of Versailles Arms Apartments brought the issue to the attention of Catholic Church officials since, as we have seen, Catholic organizations settled the Vietnamese in New Orleans and have been the primary link between the Vietnamese and mainstream American society. In 1978, the Archdiocese of New Orleans contacted the New Orleans East Corporation, one of the land development corporations that had undertaken the creation of new neighborhoods in the wetlands of Eastern New Orleans in the 1960's. This corporation had no immediate plans for the wetlands to the north of the levee and it gave permission, through an agreement with the Archdiocese, for Vietnamese to use it for private gardens. Since 1978, the Vietnamese gardens have continued to grow at the boundaries of the neighborhood. The only threat to this activity occurred after the savings and loan company that owned the New Orleans East Corporation was taken over by the Resolution Trust Corporation of the United States Government in the 1980s and the New Orleans East Corporation ceased to exist. The 25-acre strip of tilled land by the levee, along with about 3,000 acres of additional wetland, was purchased from the RTC by a lawyer, Mr. John Cummings. While the gardeners feared

the worst, however, Mr. Cummings allowed continued cultivation.

On Saturday, August 20, 1994, Mr. Cummings met with a group of about 20 gardeners and agreed to lease the land to them for a nominal fee. Mr. Cummings originally wanted to have each gardener sign an individual lease, since Louisiana law could create doubt as to his ownership of the land if he allowed unrestricted squatting, but the gardeners were afraid of complications with their Social Security or Supplementary Security Income if they were to become recognized agriculturalists. Once more, the Vietnamese Catholic Church acted as a center for the community. Monsignor Dominic Luong signed a \$1.00 monthly lease with Mr. Cummings on behalf of the gardeners and the landlord stated that it was his intention to donate this nominal rent to the church. The lawyer also expressed enthusiasm for the industry of the Vietnamese and offered to clear 20 additional acres for cultivation and said that he would consider hiring rangers to patrol the land to help prevent damage to the gardens by wild animals and the vandalism of children (Treadway 1994).

CONCLUSION

The Vietnamese are one of the newest additions to America's ethnic mosaic. In the twenty-year period since their arrival in the United States, they have established distinctive communities in various areas. Here, I have offered a structural and historical portrait of one of these communities, Versailles Village. I have described the growth of this community from a group of refugees into an interdependent neighborhood, with its own social and economic structures. I have used newspaper reports, census data, interviews, and observations to describe the process in which institutional and economic forces initiated the community, in which social networks along extended kinship lines led to its growth, and in which these social networks developed formal economic and social structures.

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