

NEW ORLEANS  
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A recent visit to New Orleans invites a comparison: Are Key West and New Orleans "sister" cities?

The similarities are legion.

Early settlers to both areas found inhospitable natural environments: low, flat, mosquito-infested sites with nearby wetlands. In Louisiana, these were cypress swamps; in the Keys, salt ponds. As a result, yellow fever plagued both places. Hints of this peril are visible in both cities in their distinctive cemeteries.

Early settlers to both places initially built on relatively high ground. Later generations gradually expanded into lower-lying, adjacent areas.

Both communities are differentiated from the colonial eastern seaboard by the distinctive groups that settled them: New Orleans drew the French and Spanish; Key West, Bahamians and Cubans. As a result, both cities are islands culturally, if not literally. Additionally, both cities have strong historical connections to the Caribbean, with shipping routes tying these cities to ports further south.

Both cities had multiple minority groups, with no clear ruling majority, a diffusion of power helping to promote a culture of relative tolerance. New Orleans balanced French, Spanish, American and African influences; Key West juggled Bahamian, Cuban, American and African influences.

Both cities experienced the devastation of fire: New Orleans twice in the late 18th century, Key West thrice during the 19th. As a result, both gradually introduced masonry buildings and fireproof roofing.

Both cities fell under Union control during the Civil War: Key West for all of the war, New Orleans for most of it.

Both cities experienced boom-and-bust economic cycles. New Orleans thrived during the antebellum period, then collapsed with the South's defeat. Key West flourished during the second half of the 19th century, experiencing setbacks with the decline of wrecking, cigar manufacturing and other traditional livelihoods.

During boom periods, both cities built impressive architecture, a badge of their wealth and aspirations. During subsequent economic declines, they held onto what they had, preserving their patrimony as high-water marks of their material and cultural achievement.

In more recent decades, both cities learned the value of historic preservation in helping to promote economic and downtown revitalization, including tourism. Both cities designated historic districts and took steps to preserve them.

Most recently, both cities experienced a similar pattern of hurricane damage. While the older parts of these cities on relatively higher ground survived extensive flooding, low-lying areas with post-war, slab-on-grade buildings fared the worst.

Additionally, both cities — especially in the wake of the 2005 hurricane season — have limited affordable housing, leading to a corresponding labor shortage. Because rents are high, working people often find it more in their interest to live and work elsewhere.

Yet despite these similarities between New Orleans and Key West, there are also significant differences:

New Orleans is much larger. Even with the exodus following Katrina, the Crescent City is still a good-sized city with more than 200,000 people, compared to 25,000 in Key West. Additionally, there are more than 38,000 historic buildings in New Orleans, compared to approximately 2,600 in Key West.

New Orleans faces enormous poverty. Even before Katrina, large areas were blighted, crime-ridden and dangerous. Key West is safer and cleaner.

New Orleans has a different racial mix. Even with the demographic changes brought by Katrina, the African-American population is on par with — if not exceeding — whites. By contrast, African-Americans in Key West make up less than 10 percent of the population.

Finally, New Orleans is, perhaps, the most endangered historic city in America. In the wake of Katrina, some neighborhoods are still uninhabited. While much progress has been made in recovering, there is still a long way to go, and the outcome is not certain. Key West, even with a real estate downturn, is on a sounder economic footing.

Comparing and contrasting these two cities shows that understanding one's own place serves as a reference point for understanding and appreciating other places — whether they be similar or different. Additionally, in reviewing these two cities, it is apparent that the diversity of American regional culture is astonishing. How blessed we are as Americans to be heirs of these remarkable places.

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