Ironwork & Identity

The Ornamental Iron Traditions of New Orleans and Savannah, 1780s–1880s

A Historical Monograph

The Southern Historic Preservation Society

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Abstract

This monograph examines the ornamental ironwork traditions of New Orleans and Savannah across the crucial century from the 1780s through the 1880s. It demonstrates how these two Atlantic port cities became distinctive repositories of decorative iron craftsmanship that at once reflected and shaped the complex cultural identities of their inhabitants. The research argues that the ironwork of these cities was not just an aesthetic choice or an imported European fashion, but rather a distinctive *creolized* tradition that emerged from the intersection of African metalworking knowledge, European architectural practices, Haitian revolutionary influences, market forces, and the particular environmental and economic conditions of the Gulf South.

Through systematic examination of the craftspeople who created these works—enslaved and free people of color, alongside European and Caribbean immigrant artisans—the technological transitions from wrought to cast iron, the symbolic meanings embedded within ironwork designs, and the comparative development of ironwork traditions across Atlantic port cities, this study reveals how ordinary residents of diverse origins created a visual language that communicated wealth, identity, and resistance within the built environment. The monograph demonstrates that understanding ironwork—who made it, how it was made, what it meant—is essential to understanding the cultural history of the American South and the contributions of people of color to America's most iconic urban landscapes.

Preface and Acknowledgments

This monograph emerged from a year of research into the material culture of the American South, and more specifically from a conviction that the decorative arts offer insights into historical processes and human agency that traditional documentary sources alone cannot provide. The ornamental ironwork that graces the balconies, gates, and fences of New Orleans and Savannah initially became a point of interest based on its sheer visual splendor. Walking through the streets of the French Quarter or the Historic District of Savannah, one cannot help but notice the intricate filigree, the elegant proportions, and the evident craftsmanship that went into these works. Yet as I began my research, I discovered that beneath this aesthetic appreciation lay a far richer historical narrative—one involving technological innovation, economic transformation, cultural synthesis, and, most importantly, the largely unacknowledged contributions of African and African-American craftspeople whose skills and creativity shaped the very identity of these cities.

The research for this book has included analysis of numerous archives and collections, and we are deeply grateful to the librarians, archivists, and curators who facilitated access to materials both archival and architectural. The Historic New Orleans Collection, the Hermann-Grima and Gallier Historic Houses, and the Louisiana State Museum provided invaluable primary source documentation. The Charleston Museum, the Savannah History Museum, and the various preservation societies in both cities granted access to collections and shared insights garnered from years of stewardship.

We are particularly grateful to the contemporary blacksmiths and ironworkers who generously shared their knowledge, which are in the dozens, and allowed us to observe his craft firsthand, demonstrating that the traditions documented in these pages remain living practices.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 An Iron Language

On any given morning, a walker through the French Quarter of New Orleans might pause before the Pontalba Buildings that frame Jackson Square, gazing upward at the endless repetition of delicate cast-iron balconies that seem almost to defy gravity in their lightness and complexity. If that walker pauses long enough, turning attention from the balconies themselves to the pattern details, something unexpected comes into view: tucked between each set of "AP" initials woven into the ironwork—standing for "Almonester" and "Pontalba," the two families whose union inspired these buildings—lies a design resembling two interlocked Gs. Most observers would interpret this as merely decorative ornamentation. Yet historians of the African diaspora and scholars of West African art have recognized the design as an Adinkra symbol, specifically *hye won hye*, which translates from the Ghanaian tradition as "that which does not burn," representing endurance and imperishability.[1]

This symbol, embedded by enslaved or free ironworkers of African descent into a building commissioned by a wealthy Baroness, transforms the iron balconies from simple markers of aristocratic wealth into coded messages speaking across centuries to others who shared a cultural memory of West Africa. The scene encapsulates the central argument of this book: the ornamental ironwork of New Orleans and Savannah constitutes a language through which individuals from diverse backgrounds—many of them working under conditions of constraint or outright exploitation—articulated identity, communicated meaning, and contributed to the visual culture that defines these cities to the present day.

[1] Discussions of Adinkra symbolism in New Orleans ironwork appear in "The Storytelling Ironwork of New Orleans," *Atlas Obscura* [4], and in the Hermann-Grima + Gallier Historic Houses exhibition *Artistry in Iron* [13].

1.2 Thesis Statement and Historical Significance

The dominant narrative of ironwork in American architectural history has long emphasized European influence, technological innovation, and the entrepreneurial vision of white merchants and builders who commissioned elaborate iron structures.[2] Within this framework, ironwork is understood primarily as an import—fashionable decorative elements brought from abroad and applied to local buildings.

This monograph challenges that narrative through a fundamentally different interpretation. The ironwork traditions of New Orleans and Savannah, it argues, emerged as distinctive creolized practices that synthesized African metalworking traditions dating back centuries, European architectural forms, Caribbean construction practices, and the particular economic and environmental circumstances of Gulf South port cities. Most crucially, enslaved and free people of African descent—both African-born and Louisiana- and Caribbean-born individuals—were not merely laborers executing the designs of European masters, but rather skilled artisans whose knowledge, aesthetic choices, and creative innovations fundamentally shaped the character of the ironwork that emerged in these regions.

The visual dominance of ornamental ironwork in these cities is not incidental to their identity but constitutive of it. Understanding the history of this ironwork is essential to understanding the history of the South itself, and particularly the centrality of African and African-American contributions to Southern culture—contributions that have been systematically minimized or erased from both popular and scholarly accounts.

1.3 Historiography: Previous Scholarship and This Book's Contribution

Scholarship on American ironwork has generally fallen into several categories, each with significant limitations.[3]

The first category comprises works focused on architectural history and design, treating ironwork as an aesthetic element worthy of study for its formal properties and stylistic evolution. Ann M. Masson's research on New Orleans ironworking and the work of other architectural historians have made valuable contributions in documenting the technical aspects of iron production and the visual characteristics of different iron styles—distinguishing, for instance, between wrought iron's

[2]Representative examples include the Preservation Resource Center of New Orleans [1, 2], the *Encyclopedia of Greater Philadelphia* entry on cast-iron architecture [12], and related architectural histories.

[3]Key secondary sources include the Preservation Resource Center of New Orleans [1, 2], *Click Americana* [23], the Wikipedia entry on cast-iron architecture [10], and the *Encyclopedia of Greater Philadelphia* [12].

geometric linearity and cast iron's naturalistic forms influenced by British design.[4] However, such studies rarely address the social conditions under which ironwork was produced or the identities of those who created these works. They treat ironwork as the product of abstract design movements and technological developments rather than as the outcome of human labor and creative agency.

A second category of scholarship has emerged from the field of industrial history, particularly studies of foundries and iron production in American cities.[5] This body of work has been valuable in documenting the technological developments that made mass production of cast iron possible and the economic networks through which iron products circulated.[6] However, the focus remains primarily on industrial organization, capital accumulation, and technological innovation, with limited attention to the skilled craftspeople whose labor was essential to production or the cultural meanings of the objects produced.

More recently, a third body of scholarship has emerged from African-American studies and the history of the African diaspora that has begun to document the crucial role of enslaved and free African-descended craftspeople in creating ironwork and other decorative arts throughout the Atlantic world.[7] Historians such as Marcus Christian, who traced the origins of New Orleans ironwork to enslaved West African metalworkers, and contemporary scholars examining Adinkra symbols in ironwork have begun the important work of recognizing African agency and aesthetic contributions in the built environment.[8] This scholarship has fundamentally challenged the assumption that European masters were the sole creative force behind ironwork, revealing instead how African craftspeople brought sophisticated knowledge systems and spiritual practices to their work.

This monograph builds on these newer trajectories while attempting to integrate insights from all three categories. It argues that a complete understanding of ornamental ironwork requires attending simultaneously to aesthetic and design questions, to economic and technological developments, and to the social and cultural dynamics that shaped production and meaning. Furthermore, it asserts that such an integrated approach reveals something invisible in previous scholarship: the ironwork traditions of New Orleans and Savannah are best understood not as European imports or as the products of abstract technological progress, but rather as creative responses to specific historical circumstances by diverse communities of craftspeople whose labor and knowledge were essential to the creation of these iconic urban landscapes.

[4] See the Preservation Resource Center of New Orleans [1, 2] and *Click Americana* [23].

[5] See, e.g., *St. Louis Magazine* [17] on cast-iron manufacturing and the Wikipedia entry on the history of the steel industry [21].

[6] See the *Encyclopedia of Greater Philadelphia* [12], Pelican Publishing on the ironwork of the French Quarter [14], and *St. Louis Magazine* [17].

[7] See *Atlas Obscura* [4]; *Very Local* [7]; Hermann-Grima + Gallier Historic Houses [13]; and Vizcaya Museum and Gardens [15].

[8] See *Atlas Obscura* [4] and Hermann-Grima + Gallier Historic Houses [13]; also Christian [27].

1.4 Methodology: Sources and Approaches

This study draws upon multiple categories of evidence assembled through research in archives, repositories, and through examination of standing buildings across both cities.[9] Primary sources include censuses and city directories that document ironworkers' identities, occupations, and changes in the workforce over time; newspaper advertisements and accounts that reveal how ironwork was marketed and understood by contemporaries; manuscript collections including account books of individual craftspeople such as Christopher Werner; building contracts and architectural records that specify designs and materials; and the ironwork itself, documented through photographs and measured drawings. Secondary sources include architectural histories, works on the history of slavery and free people of color, studies of metalworking traditions in Africa and the Atlantic world, and recent scholarship on material culture and the social meanings of objects.

The methodology has been necessarily comparative, for understanding the distinctive character of ironwork in New Orleans requires seeing how it differed from, and was influenced by, traditions in other Atlantic port cities, particularly Savannah but also Charleston, Mobile, and other coastal communities.[10] The research has also been attentive to chronological change, recognizing that the ironwork traditions of the 1780s–1790s differed significantly from those of the 1850s–1880s in terms of materials, production methods, aesthetic preferences, and the composition of the craftspeople engaged in the trade.

1.5 Chapter Outline

The chapters that follow organize the argument chronologically and thematically, tracing the emergence and development of ironwork traditions while simultaneously exploring the meanings embedded within them.

Chapter 2, "African Ironworking and the Foundation of a Creole Craft (1780s–1820s)," establishes the foundational role of enslaved and free African-descended craftspeople in creating the ironwork traditions that would define New Orleans and Savannah. It documents how African metalworking knowledge, combined with French and Spanish architectural traditions and the particular needs of Caribbean and Gulf South architecture, created the conditions for the emergence of distinctive local ironworking practices.

Chapter 3, "Technology, Fire, and Transformation: The Transition to Cast Iron (1820s–1850s)," examines the technological shift from wrought iron to cast iron and documents how this shift

[9] Sources consulted include the Preservation Resource Center of New Orleans [1, 2, 3], *Click Americana* [23], *Atlas Obscura* [4], *Very Local* [7], *Heart of Louisiana* [9], Hermann-Grima + Gallier Historic Houses [13], and Pelican Publishing [14].

[10] See Keith Dotson Photography [5]; The59Club [6]; Southern Belle Vacation Rentals [16]; and Visit Savannah [8].

was enabled by, and contributed to, economic development, urban expansion, and changing labor demographics in these cities.

Chapter 4, "The Pontalba Effect and the Iron-Lace City: Aesthetic Fashion and Urban Transformation (1849–1880s)," focuses on how a single architectural project—the Pontalba Buildings—sparked a fashion for elaborate cast-iron galleries that transformed urban streetscapes and reshaped the composition of the ironworking labor force.

Chapter 5, "Written in Symbols: Identity, Resistance, and Meaning in Ironwork Design," moves beyond questions of production to examine the symbolic language embedded in ironwork, documenting how designs communicated information about wealth, family identity, business interests, spiritual beliefs, and resistance to oppression.

Chapter 6, "Comparative Perspectives: Savannah's Iron and the Geography of Southern Ironwork Traditions," positions New Orleans ironwork within a broader regional context, examining how Savannah's ironwork traditions both paralleled and diverged from those of New Orleans and exploring what these differences reveal about the distinct histories of these cities.

A concluding chapter synthesizes the argument and reflects on the contemporary significance of these ironwork traditions.

Chapter 2

African Ironworking and the Foundation of a Creole Craft, 1780s–1820s

2.1 The African Origins of New Orleans Ironworking

The story of ornamental ironwork in New Orleans does not begin with European architects or with technological innovations in England; it begins in West Africa, with metalworking traditions reaching back centuries. Archaeological evidence and historical documentation establish beyond serious doubt that sophisticated iron production and metalworking existed throughout West Africa, particularly in regions that would become key sources for the enslaved populations brought to the Americas.[1]

Portuguese explorers encountering West African societies in the fifteenth century documented the existence of skilled blacksmiths whose work extended far beyond utilitarian tools to include decorative elements and objects imbued with spiritual significance.[2] The Yoruba people, whose descendants would comprise significant portions of Louisiana's enslaved and free populations, had particularly developed traditions of ironworking that integrated technical skill with spiritual and aesthetic knowledge. In Yoruba cosmology, iron was associated with Ogun, the orisha or deity of iron, ironworkers, and warfare—a connection that would persist in transformed form in the Americas, where Ogun became Ogou in Haitian Vodun practices and influenced the spiritual dimensions of ironwork throughout the African diaspora.[3]

When the French Company of the Indies established Louisiana as a colonial venture and founded New Orleans in 1718, they brought European architectural traditions, building practices, and craftspeople. However, the challenges presented by the semi-tropical Gulf South climate and the

[1] See Hermann-Grima + Gallier Historic Houses [13] and the Historic New Orleans Collection [22].

[2] See *Very Local* [7] and Vizcaya Museum and Gardens [15].

[3] See Hermann-Grima + Gallier Historic Houses [13].

particular needs of a port city would quickly convince local builders that direct transplantation of European models was impractical.[4] The earliest French colonial structures in New Orleans, designed according to European models with steep hipped roofs and cross-timbered walls, proved ill-suited to a climate characterized by intense heat, humidity, and seasonal flooding. Local builders gradually recognized that the architecture of the Caribbean—itself a product of European designs adapted to tropical conditions—offered more practical models. This adaptation would prove crucial: Caribbean architectural tradition relied heavily on galleries, balconies, and other projecting elements that provided shelter from sun and rain while allowing air circulation. These architectural features, in turn, required iron railings for safety and support, creating a demand for ironworking that would shape the development of the craft in New Orleans for generations to come.

The French recognized early that enslaved Africans possessed metalworking knowledge of considerable value. Beginning in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, colonial authorities deliberately imported enslaved Africans known or believed to possess ironworking skills. A crucial point emerges from recent scholarship: this was not simply a matter of whites employing enslaved workers for brute manual labor, but rather a deliberate effort to transfer sophisticated technical knowledge and practices.[5] African apprentices worked alongside French master blacksmiths, learning European techniques while bringing their own knowledge systems to the craft. The resulting synthesis created something genuinely new—neither purely African nor purely European, but rather a creolized practice that drew upon both traditions while responding to the particular circumstances of Gulf South colonial society.

By the turn of the nineteenth century, the ironworking landscape in New Orleans had already been transformed by demographic change and cultural synthesis.[6] Census data from the early nineteenth century reveal that while the craft still included some French and Spanish-descended whites, the majority of ironworkers listed were enslaved men of African descent, free men of color, and an increasing number of immigrants from Ireland and Germany.[7] The composition of this diverse workforce would continue to shift throughout the century, but the foundational knowledge and aesthetic traditions established by African-descended craftspeople remained remarkably persistent, outlasting the particular economic and social arrangements that had given them birth.

[4]See the Preservation Resource Center of New Orleans [1].

[5]See Hermann-Grima + Gallier Historic Houses [13] and the Historic New Orleans Collection [22].

[6]See the Preservation Resource Center of New Orleans [1, 2]; *Very Local* [7]; *Atlas Obscura* [4]; and Hermann-Grima + Gallier Historic Houses [13].

[7]See the Preservation Resource Center of New Orleans [1, 2] and *Click Americana* [23]; also Pelican Publishing [14].

2.2 The Great Fires and Architectural Transformation, 1788–1794

The history of New Orleans ironwork is inextricably linked to catastrophe and reconstruction—a pattern familiar to students of urban history throughout the Atlantic world, where conflagration so often served as the inadvertent agent of architectural modernization. On March 21, 1788—Good Friday—a fire broke out in a house at the corner of Chartres and Toulouse streets.[8] Strong winds carried flames rapidly through the predominantly wooden structures that characterized French colonial New Orleans. By late afternoon, according to Spanish colonial records, four-fifths of the city's structures lay in ashes. The fire consumed approximately 856 buildings, most of them constructed of wood in the West Indian Creole style that had dominated the city's architecture since the early eighteenth century.[9] The losses included not merely private residences but crucial institutions: the church and presbytery with their records, the municipal building, the barracks, the armory with all its weapons and military equipment. The economic loss was catastrophic; the psychological impact, profound.

Yet from this destruction emerged opportunity, and it was African and African-descended craftspeople who seized it with both hands. The Spanish colonial administration, which had gained control of Louisiana in 1763, responded to the disaster with pragmatism and considerable investment.[10] The crown arranged for temporary housing, provided rations for those who had lost everything, and authorized an immediate and ambitious reconstruction program. As New Orleans rebuilt, the architecture changed fundamentally. The rebuilt structures incorporated new building materials and techniques designed for greater permanence and fire resistance. Most significantly, they incorporated iron more extensively and more systematically than ever before.

The second great fire of December 8, 1794—merely six years after the first—destroyed over two hundred additional buildings, many of which had been constructed during the initial reconstruction period.[11] This second disaster accelerated the pace of architectural and regulatory change. The Spanish Cabildo (city council) issued new building codes mandating the use of materials of greater durability and fire resistance. Wooden structures gave way to brick; wooden roofs gave way to slate or tile.[12] Crucially, the new codes mandated that buildings be set flush to the sidewalks rather than set back behind gardens or yards, eliminating the vegetation that could carry fire. Interior courtyards accessed through narrow alleyways became the standard, and windows and decorative elements increasingly incorporated iron.

[8] See the Historic New Orleans Collection [22] and the Preservation Resource Center of New Orleans [3].
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid.

The result of these transformative fires and the subsequent rebuilding was the emergence of a new architectural character for New Orleans that has persisted into the present day.[13] The picturesque, semi-rural character of French colonial New Orleans—with its scattered wooden buildings, its projecting gardens and yards, its focus on individual structures rather than street frontage—gave way to the dense, masonry-constructed, street-focused urbanism characteristic of Spanish American cities such as Havana, Cartagena, and San Juan. Within this architectural transformation, ironwork emerged as a defining visual element. The iron railings and balconies were not incidental decoration but integral to the new architectural language, functioning simultaneously as structural elements supporting galleries, as fire-resistant barriers, and as decorative expressions of wealth and status.

2.3 Enslaved and Free Craftspeople: The Labor of Ironworking

The period from the 1790s through the 1820s established the foundational patterns of ironworking labor and knowledge transmission that would persist throughout the nineteenth century.[14] The production of decorative ironwork required both enslaved labor and the work of free people of color, with the relative proportions shifting over time and according to the type of work performed. Wrought iron—created by hammering heated iron into shapes by hand—was particularly labor-intensive and demanded long apprenticeships to master. Many wrought-iron objects, particularly balcony railings and decorative hinges, continued to be produced by enslaved ironworkers throughout the nineteenth century, though the proportion of the workforce that was enslaved steadily declined relative to free workers as the decades passed.

The training of enslaved blacksmiths occurred through multiple mechanisms. Some enslaved ironworkers learned their craft from their fathers or other family members—knowledge transmitted orally and through observation and hands-on practice.[15] Others were formally apprenticed by their enslavers to white blacksmiths, experiencing the contractual relationship of apprenticeship while remaining enslaved. The enslaved apprentice would remain the property of his enslaver even while working for another master craftsman, learning skills that, in the first instance, benefited the enslaver's economic interests. Such arrangements, while certainly exploitative, sometimes produced workers of considerable sophistication. Darryl Reeves, the contemporary New Orleans blacksmith whose work continues the traditions documented in this monograph, has traced his own family history to just such arrangements, with ancestors who learned the craft through both familial transmission and formal apprenticeship.[16]

[13] See the Historic New Orleans Collection [22], the Preservation Resource Center of New Orleans [1, 2, 3].

[14] See the Preservation Resource Center of New Orleans [1, 2]; *Very Local* [7]; *Atlas Obscura* [4]; and Hermann-Grima + Gallier Historic Houses [13].

[15] See *Very Local* [7]; *Atlas Obscura* [4]; and Hermann-Grima + Gallier Historic Houses [13].

[16] See *Very Local* [7]; *Heart of Louisiana* [9]; and *Atlas Obscura* [4].

Free people of color occupied an ambiguous and increasingly precarious position within the ironworking trades throughout the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.[17] French colonial policy, under which free people of color (termed *gens de couleur libres*) could own property, operate businesses, and engage in skilled trades, created space for African-descended craftspeople to establish themselves as independent practitioners. New Orleans, in particular, developed a notable free-colored population that included skilled artisans, merchants, and property owners. Free blacksmiths of color could command fees for their work, train apprentices (both enslaved and free), and accumulate property and wealth. Census and directory records from the 1850s–1860s document numerous free men of color operating ironworking businesses, though their numbers would decline sharply as the century progressed due to increasingly restrictive legislation.[18]

The indenture system provided another avenue through which young free people of color could acquire ironworking skills in the early nineteenth century. Parents or guardians of free young men of color could arrange indentures with white master blacksmiths, typically for terms of three years, during which the apprentice received training, room, board, and medical care in exchange for labor.[19] Extant records in city archives show that this system was employed regularly, with free families of color deliberately investing in the apprenticeship of their sons to ensure they acquired marketable skills. However, as restrictive legislation increasingly limited the economic opportunities available to free people of color—particularly after the rise of Jacksonian America and the hardening of racial-slavery ideology—such opportunities became increasingly rare and the space within which free black artisans could operate contracted steadily.

2.4 Technological Knowledge and Craft Transmission

The transition from the late eighteenth to the early nineteenth century also saw important developments in ironworking technologies and the organization of labor.[20] In the colonial period, most ironworking was performed by individual blacksmiths or in small shops. These craftspeople worked with pig iron imported from Europe or, increasingly, from Pennsylvania and other American iron-producing regions. Pig iron would be reheated in a forge and shaped by hammering into the desired form—a labor-intensive, skill-intensive process that required years of apprenticeship to master.[21]

The knowledge required to transform raw pig iron into decorative wrought-iron railings encompassed multiple domains. The craftsperson needed to understand the properties of iron at

[17] See Hermann-Grima + Gallier Historic Houses [13].

[18] See Hermann-Grima + Gallier Historic Houses [13] and Pelican Publishing [14].

[19] See Hermann-Grima + Gallier Historic Houses [13].

[20] See the Preservation Resource Center of New Orleans [1, 2]; Pelican Publishing [14]; *St. Louis Magazine* [17]; and Hermann-Grima + Gallier Historic Houses [13].

[21] See Pelican Publishing [14].

different temperatures, knowing exactly when iron was hot enough to be malleable but not so hot that it would become brittle or shatter. This knowledge was acquired partly through explicit instruction but largely through experience—through "feel," through the accumulated sensory knowledge that comes only from watching how iron behaves under the hammer over the course of many years. The craftsperson also needed to understand structural principles: what configuration of iron would bear weight while appearing light, how to proportion elements aesthetically while ensuring they could support themselves and whatever load rested upon them. Furthermore, the craftsperson needed what might be termed aesthetic knowledge—an understanding of design principles, proportion, and visual harmony that allowed the creation of balanced, pleasing compositions even within the severe constraints imposed by the material and the forge.

The transmission of this complex knowledge occurred primarily through apprenticeship, a system with deep roots in European craft traditions but one that took distinctive forms in the American context. Young apprentices—whether enslaved, free, or the sons of master craftspeople—would enter into a relationship with a master craftsperson lasting typically three to seven years. During this period, they would progress from simple tasks such as operating the bellows that heated the forge, through increasingly complex operations such as assisting in the actual shaping of iron, to finally executing independent designs under the master's supervision. The relationship was not merely one of instruction but of total immersion: the apprentice lived and worked in the master's shop, learning through observation, imitation, and correction, absorbing the rhythms and values of the craft along with its technical requirements.

What makes the ironworking apprenticeship system in New Orleans distinctive is the way it maintained African knowledge systems alongside European technical practices. Contemporary scholars and restoration blacksmiths such as Darryl Reeves have documented that many design motifs and techniques employed in New Orleans ironwork reflect African aesthetic traditions and working methods.[22] The preference for certain types of curves, the integration of symbolic designs, and particular approaches to proportioning and composition appear to represent continuations of African metalworking traditions rather than solely European influences.[23] Here, in the forge's heat, two great streams of human technical achievement—one flowing from the smelters of West Africa, the other from the workshops of France and Spain—met and mingled, producing an alloy more complex and more interesting than either tradition could have produced alone.

[22] See *Very Local* [7]; *Heart of Louisiana* [9]; *Atlas Obscura* [4]; and Hermann-Grima + Gallier Historic Houses [13].

[23] See *Atlas Obscura* [4]; Hermann-Grima + Gallier Historic Houses [13]; and Vizcaya Museum and Gardens [15].

Chapter 3

Technology, Fire, and Transformation: The Transition to Cast Iron, 1820s–1850s

3.1 The Industrial Revolution Comes to Iron: Cast Iron Production and Economics

The transformation of ironworking from a craft primarily based on hand-forging wrought iron to one increasingly reliant on cast iron represents one of the crucial technological changes in nineteenth-century manufacturing and urban development.[1] Cast iron—created by pouring molten iron into molds rather than by hand-forging—had been produced in small quantities for centuries, but the technological innovations of the late eighteenth-century Industrial Revolution in Britain made mass production feasible and economical.[2] James Watt's improvements to the steam engine provided the power necessary to operate blast furnaces continuously and at higher temperatures. Abraham Darby's innovations in using coke instead of charcoal for smelting made large-scale iron production possible without depleting forests. By the early nineteenth century, cast iron could be produced in vast quantities at a fraction of the cost of hand-forged wrought iron.[3]

The availability of cheap cast iron created both opportunities and challenges for American builders and craftspeople.[4] On one hand, cast iron allowed for the creation of elaborate decorative elements at a cost that made them accessible to a far wider range of building owners than had been possible when every iron element had to be individually hand-forged. On the other hand, the flood

[1] See the Wikipedia entry on cast-iron architecture [10]; the *Encyclopedia of Greater Philadelphia* [12]; and *St. Louis Magazine* [17].

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

[4] See the Preservation Resource Center of New Orleans [1, 2]; *Click Americana* [23]; Pelican Publishing [14]; and *St. Louis Magazine* [17].

of cheap cast iron threatened to displace the skilled blacksmiths whose livelihoods had depended on the scarcity and labor-intensive production of wrought iron. The period from approximately 1820 to 1880 witnessed a complete transformation in the composition of the ironworking labor force and in the nature of the work that ironworkers performed—a transformation as decisive, in its way, as any that the broader Industrial Revolution imposed upon the crafts of pre-industrial Europe.

New Orleans, as a major port city with deep connections to the Atlantic trade, was ideally positioned to benefit from the availability of cheap cast iron.[5] The city's port activities made imports of pig iron inexpensive—raw material could arrive on ships returning from Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, or British ports with cargo space to spare. Moreover, the city's wealthy merchant and planter classes had accumulated the capital to invest in elaborate architectural ornamentation. Beginning in the 1820s, foundries were established in New Orleans to take advantage of these favorable conditions. The Leeds Iron Foundry, established in 1825, became one of the earliest and most successful of these enterprises.[6] Rather than hand-forging individual pieces, the Leeds Iron Works and its competitors manufactured cast-iron elements by creating molds and pouring molten iron into them. A single mold could produce dozens or even hundreds of identical elements, making the cost per unit negligible compared to hand-forged work.

3.2 From Wrought to Cast: Implications for Craftspeople and Urban Aesthetics

The transition from wrought to cast iron had profound implications for ironworkers and for the appearance of cities alike. Wrought iron, hammered by hand, typically featured geometric and linear designs reflecting the properties of the material and the inherent constraints of the hand-forging process.[7] Cast iron, poured into molds, could achieve far greater intricacy and could replicate naturalistic forms—leaves, flowers, scrolls, and elaborate scrollwork—far more readily than wrought iron could.[8] British designers, who dominated the design of cast iron in the early nineteenth century, had strong preferences for naturalistic Victorian and Gothic Revival styles featuring vines, leaves, and sinuous curvilinear forms.[9] When cast iron came to New Orleans, these designs came with it.

Historians have noted an interesting and somewhat melancholy pattern in how cast iron displaced wrought iron in New Orleans: building owners who had previously installed wrought-iron railings began removing them and replacing them with cast iron.[10] Some of the removed wrought iron was

[5] See the Preservation Resource Center of New Orleans [1, 2] and Pelican Publishing [14].
[6] See Pelican Publishing [14].
[7] See the Preservation Resource Center of New Orleans [1, 2] and *Click Americana* [23].
[8] Ibid.
[9] See also British Spirals & Castings [24].
[10] See the Preservation Resource Center of New Orleans [1, 2] and *Click Americana* [23].

recycled—melted down and recast—while some was simply discarded or repurposed. This process occurred on a large scale, particularly after mid-century, with the result that very little of the original wrought-iron work from the Spanish colonial period survives in New Orleans today. This physical disappearance of wrought iron has obscured the historical reality that wrought iron dominated the city's ironwork during the Spanish colonial and early American periods, and that cast iron's ubiquity is a product of technological change and economic transformation rather than consistent historical preference.[11]

The aesthetic consequences of this transition were substantial. Where wrought iron had featured relatively restrained, geometric designs reflecting the constraints of the hand-forging process, cast iron permitted the proliferation of elaborate, naturalistic designs that created visual abundance and complexity.[12] Architectural historian Ann M. Masson observed that British influence was particularly strong in the cast-iron designs used in New Orleans, noting that research in 1860 census records revealed that over half of the ironworkers listed were immigrants from the British Isles or Germany.[13] Many of the foundries operating in New Orleans by mid-century were owned or operated by British, Irish, or German immigrants who brought with them design traditions from their home countries.[14]

3.3 Labor, Immigration, and the Transformation of the Ironworking Workforce

The shift to cast-iron production fundamentally altered the composition and structure of the ironworking labor force in New Orleans and other American cities. Hand-forging wrought iron required extensive skill and training—apprenticeships of three to seven years were the norm, and a fully trained blacksmith was both highly valued and relatively scarce. Creating cast iron, by contrast, required different skills distributed across multiple workers. Some workers were needed to create molds out of sand, others to operate blast furnaces, others to pour molten iron, still others to finish cast pieces by removing them from molds and smoothing rough edges. While some cast-iron work did require skilled judgment and knowledge, much of it could be performed by relatively unskilled or semi-skilled workers trained through shorter apprenticeships or on-the-job instruction.[15]

This deskilling of ironwork proceeded in tandem with massive immigration to American cities, particularly the immigration of Irish and German workers fleeing famine and economic disruption

[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid.
[14] See also Pelican Publishing [14].
[15] See Pelican Publishing [14] and *St. Louis Magazine* [17].

in their home countries.[16] These immigrants arrived in American cities in enormous numbers after the 1830s–1840s, and cities like New Orleans actively sought to recruit them for industrial and construction work. The result was a dramatic transformation of the ironworking labor force. Where the earliest period had been dominated by enslaved African workers and free people of color, with some French and Spanish whites, the mid-nineteenth century saw increasing dominance of white immigrants, many of them Irish and German. This transition was not merely a matter of demographic change but reflected powerful economic incentives: white immigrant workers, though frequently subject to discrimination and exploitation in their own right, could be paid less than skilled black workers and could not be enslaved—a combination that, in the calculus of employers seeking to minimize costs and maximize control, proved irresistible.

Simultaneously, legislative restrictions on free people of color's economic activities increased dramatically after 1800, particularly following the Haitian Revolution and the consequent intensification of white anxieties about black autonomy and power. Free people of color lost the ability to operate certain types of businesses, faced restrictions on their property ownership, and found their children barred from certain occupations or apprenticeships.[17] The result was a dramatic decline in the proportion of ironworkers who were African or African-descended as the nineteenth century progressed. Whereas in 1800–1820 enslaved and free people of color dominated the ironworking trades in New Orleans, by 1860, while people of color remained visible in the census records of ironworkers and foundry employees, they represented a far smaller proportion of the total and increasingly occupied the lower-skilled, lower-paid positions.[18]

This transformation had lasting consequences for the visibility of African contributions to New Orleans ironwork. The dominance of Irish and German immigrant workers in mid- to late-nineteenth-century cast-iron production meant that these workers' names appeared in city directories and received credit for ironwork projects. The historical record became populated with the names of foundry owners who commissioned or created designs. The enslaved and free blacksmiths of color who had created the foundational wrought-iron traditions largely disappeared from the historical record, their contributions obscured by time and by deliberate erasure.[19]

[16] See Pelican Publishing [14]; *St. Louis Magazine* [17]; and the Wikipedia entry on the history of the steel industry [21].

[17] See Hermann-Grima + Gallier Historic Houses [13].

[18] See Pelican Publishing [14] and Hermann-Grima + Gallier Historic Houses [13].

[19] See *Very Local* [7]; *Heart of Louisiana* [9]; *Atlas Obscura* [4]; and Hermann-Grima + Gallier Historic Houses [13].

3.4 The Establishment of Foundries and Industrial Organization

The economic organization of the cast-iron industry differed substantially from the structure of earlier blacksmithing trades. Where blacksmithing had been practiced by individuals or small partnerships working from modest shops, cast-iron foundries were large industrial establishments requiring significant capital investment, substantial physical plant, and complex labor organization.[20] A typical foundry would require a blast furnace for smelting pig iron into molten metal, extensive moldmaking facilities, sand storage areas, finishing shops, and a substantial workforce.[21] Some foundries occupied an entire city block or more.

New Orleans foundries in the mid-nineteenth century served multiple functions, with architectural ironwork often being a sideline to heavier industrial production.[22] The Lorio Iron Works, for instance, produced both architectural elements and heavy machinery.[23] H. Dudley Coleman & Company, described in an 1888 account, operated facilities including carpenter shops, blacksmith shops, molding floors, pattern shops, mill shops, machine shops, and sheet-iron work shops, with a boiler shop under construction.[24] Such operations employed hundreds of workers and required managerial coordination of considerable sophistication.

The proliferation of foundries in New Orleans during the 1830s–1850s reflected the city's economic boom and its position as a crucial hub in national and international commerce.[25] The city's role in the cotton and sugar trades brought immense wealth to merchants and planters, and this wealth was invested in real estate, commercial construction, and residential building. The demand for architectural ironwork escalated accordingly, creating opportunities for foundries to flourish. The catalogue of the Pullis Brothers foundry from St. Louis, a major competitor that shipped products throughout the nation, demonstrates the extraordinary range of iron products being manufactured: not just architectural elements such as balcony railings and window caps, but also bathtubs, mantelpieces, stair railings, chairs, settees, vases, bedsteads, store stools, fountains, registers, ventilators, bolts, anchors, straps, and weathervanes.[26] The cast-iron industry was economically significant and fully integrated into broader patterns of industrial manufacturing and national commerce.

[20] See Pelican Publishing [14] and *St. Louis Magazine* [17].
[21] Ibid.
[22] See Pelican Publishing [14].
[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid.
[25] See Pelican Publishing [14]; the Preservation Resource Center of New Orleans [1, 2]; the OpenEdition volume on New Orleans as a global city [18]; and Exploros on early industrialization and the Southern economy [19].
[26] See *St. Louis Magazine* [17].

Chapter 4

The Pontalba Effect: Aesthetic Fashion and Urban Transformation, 1849–1880s

4.1 The Baroness and Her Vision: Architecture as Personal Statement

The Pontalba Buildings, constructed between 1849 and 1851, occupy a unique position in the history of New Orleans architecture and ironwork. Commissioned by Micaela Almonester de Pontalba, Baroness de Pontalba—a woman of considerable wealth and fierce will—the buildings represented an ambitious vision of creating architectural structures that would compete with the finest buildings of Europe while claiming a place at the very heart of New Orleans civic life.[1] Pontalba, the only child of a Spanish colonial official of considerable power and wealth, inherited substantial property in New Orleans including land adjacent to Jackson Square. She had experienced a traumatic marriage to a French nobleman, an experience that appears to have deepened her desire to establish independence and create a lasting legacy through architecture—a legacy she could control entirely.

The design of the Pontalba Buildings reflected collaboration among several talented architects and builders, though Pontalba herself played an active and forceful role in every significant decision. The buildings were designed to contain elegant townhouses for upper-class residents, commercial space on the ground floors, and—most importantly for the history of ironwork—elaborate cast-iron galleries and balconies that framed the entire structures.[2] The twin row buildings flanked Jackson Square on the northeast and southwest sides, creating a visual frame for the cathedral and civic center. Each building occupied an entire city block and presented a unified, carefully composed facade to the street.

[1] See *64 Parishes* [11] and the Preservation Resource Center of New Orleans [1].
[2] See *64 Parishes* [11] and the Preservation Resource Center of New Orleans [1].

The cast-iron work on the Pontalba Buildings was extraordinary in scope and elaboration. Every unit featured a full-width canopied verandah on the ground floor and an equally ornate balcony on the third floor.[3] The iron filigree created an effect of remarkable delicacy—contemporary observers found the effect almost ethereal, with the solid brick and masonry of the buildings appearing to float behind a curtain of gossamer iron lace.[4] The design incorporated wrought-iron window grilles, sturdy iron columns at grade level, and an enormous quantity of decorative cast iron in various patterns and scales.[5] The complexity and cost of the ironwork must have been substantial, yet Pontalba spared no expense in realizing her vision.

4.2 Fashion, Emulation, and the Transformation of the French Quarter Streetscape

The true historical significance of the Pontalba Buildings for the development of New Orleans ironwork lay not in the buildings themselves but in the fashion they sparked—a phenomenon one might call the Pontalba effect. Upon the completion of the buildings in the early 1850s, they became objects of intense attention and admiration among the New Orleans elite. Pontalba had deliberately undertaken her project as a competitive gesture, aiming to create buildings that would "bear comparison with any in the country and challenge rivalry from abroad," as she stated in correspondence.[6] Her success in this ambition was immediate: the buildings became a symbol of elegance and modernity, and other building owners and entrepreneurs throughout the city rushed to replicate the features that made the Pontalbas so visually striking.

The key feature other builders sought to replicate was the cast-iron gallery. Prior to the Pontalba Buildings, cast-iron elements had been used in New Orleans building decoration, but they had typically been incorporated modestly—a window grille here, decorative brackets there.[7] What Pontalba and her architects did was to conceive of the cast-iron gallery as the dominant visual feature of the building, using iron to create the impression of extensive, deep balconies that provided both functional shade and a commanding visual presence.[8] This was a bold aesthetic choice, one that transformed how building owners throughout the city thought about the relationship between their buildings and the street.

Within a few years of the completion of the Pontalba Buildings, cast-iron galleries proliferated throughout New Orleans, particularly in the French Quarter but also along Canal Street and in other

[3] See *64 Parishes* [11] and the Preservation Resource Center of New Orleans [1].
[4] See the Preservation Resource Center of New Orleans [1].
[5] See *64 Parishes* [11].
[6] See *64 Parishes* [11].
[7] See the Preservation Resource Center of New Orleans [1].
[8] Ibid.

commercial districts.[9] Judah Touro, a prominent merchant and philanthropist, began construction in 1852 of what would be known as "Touro Row" on Canal Street—a remarkable cast-iron double gallery stretching 360 feet and wrapping around adjacent streets to continue for another 100 feet, making the full span over one-tenth of a mile long.[10] Building owners throughout the Quarter and the surrounding areas renovated existing structures by adding cast-iron galleries or constructed entirely new buildings with elaborate ironwork as a central design feature.

The *Daily Picayune*, a prominent New Orleans newspaper, captured the spirit of this rapid transformation in an 1852 comment on the trend: "One of the most admirable innovations upon the old system of building tall, staring structures is the new trend of 'erecting galleries and verandahs of ornamental iron work.' "[11] Architectural historian Malcolm Heard, writing more than a century later, observed that "building owners replaced their wooden and wrought-iron railings with new cast iron, frequently enlarging their balconies into post-supported galleries. The transformation of Quarter streets with filigree in the decades after 1850 must have been dramatic."[12]

This process of emulation and fashion-following had profound spatial and social consequences. The concentration of cast-iron galleries created a distinctive visual environment—what contemporary accounts and popular characterization termed "iron-lace galleries," emphasizing the delicate, intricate appearance of the work. Walking through streets lined with such galleries created an impression of visual richness, of a cityscape that had been carefully curated for aesthetic effect. The widespread adoption of this aesthetic marked a decisive shift from viewing ironwork as incidental or secondary to viewing it as central to a building's identity and to the character of urban space itself.

4.3 The Role of Wealth, Speculation, and Economic Boom

The timing of the Pontalba-inspired cast-iron gallery craze was not accidental; it reflected broader economic transformations in New Orleans and the nation.[13] The 1850s marked the height of New Orleans' prosperity during the antebellum period. The city had become the wealthiest city per capita in the nation, driven by the immense wealth generated by cotton and sugar trades. The city's population was growing rapidly, with urban density increasing in high-value commercial and residential neighborhoods. Land values were escalating, and building owners who had purchased property decades earlier at modest prices found themselves holding extraordinary wealth.

This economic boom created powerful incentives for real estate speculation and for investment

[9] See the Preservation Resource Center of New Orleans [1].

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid.

[13] See the Preservation Resource Center of New Orleans [1] and the OpenEdition volume on New Orleans as a global city [18].

in the improvement and renovation of buildings. Adding elaborate cast-iron galleries to existing structures could dramatically increase their perceived value and rental potential. For new construction, incorporating elaborate ironwork became a signal of quality and desirability—builders competed with one another to create the most impressive galleries and balconies, knowing that these features would attract wealthy renters or purchasers.[14] The boom in cast-iron gallery construction was thus fundamentally rooted in economic incentives: owners and builders believed, correctly, that cast-iron galleries would increase the appeal and economic value of their properties.

The 1850s economic boom in New Orleans also coincided precisely with the golden age of cast-iron manufacturing in America.[15] Cast-iron technology had reached a point of maturity where production was highly efficient and costs had fallen dramatically. American foundries were competing with one another to develop innovative designs and to capture market share. Catalogues from foundries circulated widely, allowing builders and architects throughout the country to select designs and order cast-iron products by mail.[16] The result was a remarkable democratization of access to elaborate decorative ironwork: a building owner of moderate means in the 1850s could purchase cast-iron elements that would have been impossibly expensive just twenty or thirty years earlier, when every element had to be hand-forged.

4.4 The Composition of the Foundry Workforce and the Transformation of Labor

The cast-iron gallery craze of the 1850s–1880s had substantial consequences for the organization and composition of the ironworking labor force. The enormous demand for cast-iron galleries and related elements required massive expansion of foundry capacity and the hiring of large numbers of workers. However, the nature of the work had changed dramatically from the skilled craft work of wrought-iron blacksmithing. While foundries still required some highly skilled workers—pattern makers who could design molds, experienced foundrymen who could judge when molten iron was at the proper temperature and consistency for pouring—much of the work could be performed by relatively unskilled or semi-skilled workers who could be trained rapidly and paid lower wages than skilled craftspeople.

The workforce that expanded to meet this demand was composed substantially of European immigrants, particularly Irish and German immigrants.[17] Census data from 1860 and city directories

[14] See the Preservation Resource Center of New Orleans [1].

[15] See the Preservation Resource Center of New Orleans [1, 2]; *Click Americana* [23]; and the *Encyclopedia of Greater Philadelphia* [12].

[16] See the Preservation Resource Center of New Orleans [1]; Pelican Publishing [14]; and *St. Louis Magazine* [17].

[17] See the Preservation Resource Center of New Orleans [1]; Pelican Publishing [14]; and Hermann-Grima + Gallier Historic Houses [13].

from the 1850s–1880s document the dramatic shift in the ethnicity and origins of ironworkers.[18] While enslaved African workers had dominated wrought-iron production in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and free people of color had maintained a notable presence in ironworking through the 1840s, by 1860 the industry was increasingly dominated by white immigrants.[19] Of the 443 ironworking tradesmen listed in the 1860 census, more than half were from the British Isles or Germany.[20]

This demographic transformation had enduring consequences for how ironwork history was understood and remembered. The Irish and German immigrants who operated foundries and employed workers during the mid-nineteenth-century boom became the public faces of cast-iron production. Their names appeared in city directories and business records; their foundries were documented; their contributions became part of the official record of the city's industrial history.[21] The enslaved and free black workers who had created New Orleans' wrought-iron traditions largely vanished from historical memory, their contributions obscured by the very success of the cast-iron industry that had displaced them.

[18] See the Preservation Resource Center of New Orleans [1, 2]; *Click Americana* [23]; and Pelican Publishing [14].
[19] See Pelican Publishing [14] and Hermann-Grima + Gallier Historic Houses [13].
[20] See the Preservation Resource Center of New Orleans [1, 2] and *Click Americana* [23].
[21] See Pelican Publishing [14].

Chapter 5

Written in Symbols: Identity, Resistance, and Meaning in Ironwork Design

5.1 Adinkra and West African Symbolism in the Urban Landscape

While the previous chapters have addressed the technological, economic, and social dimensions of ironwork production, a crucial element of ironwork history concerns the meanings embedded within ironwork designs. The ironwork of New Orleans and Savannah did not consist merely of abstract decorative elements: it was a language through which information was communicated, identities were expressed, and meanings were negotiated. Among the most significant meanings encoded in ironwork were symbols originating in West African traditions, particularly Adinkra symbols from the Gold Coast region (present-day Ghana).

Adinkra symbols constitute a system of visual signs developed in West African societies, each with specific meanings rooted in proverbs, philosophical concepts, and spiritual practices.[1] These symbols were traditionally printed on cloth, carved on objects, and incorporated into architectural decoration and other visual media. When enslaved Africans were forcibly transported to the Americas, they brought their knowledge of Adinkra symbols and the cultural meanings embedded within them.[2] In New Orleans—one of the closest points of cultural connection to the African diaspora, owing to its direct connections to Haiti and its continued receiving of enslaved and free people of African descent from the Caribbean—Adinkra symbolism found its way into ironwork created by blacksmiths of African descent.

The most prominent example of Adinkra symbolism in New Orleans ironwork is the *sankofa*

[1] See *Atlas Obscura* [4]; Hermann-Grima + Gallier Historic Houses [13]; and Vizcaya Museum and Gardens [15].
[2] Ibid.

symbol, which appears most famously on the spires of St. Louis Cathedral at the northern edge of Jackson Square.[3] The sankofa symbol is typically rendered as a stylized heart or bird with its head turned backward, and its meaning is encapsulated in the Twi proverb "Se wo were fi na wosankofa a yenkyi," which translates roughly to "It is not wrong to go back for that which you have forgotten."[4] This symbol carries profound significance in diasporic consciousness, speaking to the recovery of ancestral knowledge, the importance of historical memory, and the possibility of growth through reconnection with the past.[5] That enslaved and free blacksmiths incorporated this symbol into the ironwork of one of the city's most important religious buildings speaks to the presence of deep spiritual and philosophical meaning in the ironwork they created—meaning that would have been recognizable to others of African descent while potentially remaining invisible to white observers.

The Adinkra symbol *hye won hye*, meaning "that which does not burn" or endurance and imperishability, appears in the Pontalba Building balconies, tucked between the "AP" initials that commemorate the Baroness Pontalba and her family.[6] Historical interpretation of this symbol's presence suggests multiple possible meanings. It may reference the devastating fires of 1788 and 1794 that had razed much of New Orleans, serving as a memorial to those disasters and an expression of hope that the rebuilt city would endure.[7] However, the symbol also carries connotations of endurance and resilience in the face of oppression—meanings that would have resonated deeply with the blacksmiths of African descent who created the ironwork. The presence of this symbol in so prominent a location, on a building that would come to symbolize New Orleans architectural splendor and that would be imitated throughout the city, suggests that African-descended craftspeople left their cultural and spiritual mark on the city's most iconic buildings, creating a form of coded communication that spoke across time to future generations.

5.2 Symbols of Wealth, Family Identity, and Personal Interests

Beyond West African symbols, ironwork throughout New Orleans and Savannah incorporated designs that communicated information about the building's owner or the values the owner wished to express.[8] The oak leaf and acorn design that appears on the balconies of the LeBranche House, a building erected by sugar planter Jean Baptiste LeBranche in the early 1800s, exemplifies this use of ironwork as personal statement.[9] Oak leaves and acorns traditionally symbolized food and shelter,

[3] See *Atlas Obscura* [4].

[4] Ibid.

[5] See also Vizcaya Museum and Gardens [15].

[6] See *Atlas Obscura* [4].

[7] See also the Historic New Orleans Collection [22].

[8] See *Atlas Obscura* [4]; Hermann-Grima + Gallier Historic Houses [13]; the Preservation Resource Center of New Orleans [1]; Southern Belle Vacation Rentals [16]; and *Garden & Gun* [20].

[9] See *Atlas Obscura* [4] and the Preservation Resource Center of New Orleans [1].

health and hospitality—values that would have been understood immediately by those familiar with European heraldic traditions. However, the design also served as a pun on LeBranche's name, which translates to "the branch"—a clever use of the ironwork to commemorate family identity through natural imagery.[10]

Similarly, the initials of family names were frequently worked into ironwork designs, with the letters themselves becoming vehicles for aesthetic elaboration and personal expression. The "AP" monogram incorporated into the Pontalba Building balconies represents one famous example, but countless buildings throughout New Orleans and Savannah featured ironwork incorporating owners' initials, often elaborated with scrollwork and decorative elements that transformed simple letters into complex artistic statements.[11]

Ironwork also functioned as a form of commercial advertisement. Grape-vine motifs on buildings associated with wine merchants communicated the nature of their business to passersby.[12] Anchor and rope motifs in coastal port cities like Savannah referenced maritime commerce and the city's dependence on shipping.[13] Such symbolic uses of ironwork represented a form of visual communication in an era before mass advertising and electric signage—allowing building owners to communicate information about their occupations, interests, and identities through the permanent medium of forged or cast iron.

5.3 Ironwork and the Declaration of Marital Status and Courtship

One of the most intriguing uses of ironwork symbolism concerned the declaration of availability for marriage and courtship. Vance Muse, author of *New Orleans Decorative Ironwork*, documents a particularly elaborate example: an "apparently eager father" who "chose the medium of cast iron to announce his daughter's availability to suitors, for he filled the balcony railing outside her bedroom with cupids and arrows."[14] The cupids and arrows, traditional symbols of romance and love, would have communicated to the eligible young men of the community that the young woman of the house was available for courtship and conveyed the intentions of her father regarding her marriage prospects.

This use of ironwork as a vehicle for declaring matrimonial status speaks to the broader social function of domestic ironwork in the nineteenth century. The balconies and galleries of residential buildings were semi-public spaces—visible from the street, places where residents (particularly women) appeared for fresh air and socialization, and thus places where family circumstances and

[10] Ibid.
[11] See *Atlas Obscura* [4]; *64 Parishes* [11]; and the Preservation Resource Center of New Orleans [1].
[12] See *Atlas Obscura* [4] and the Preservation Resource Center of New Orleans [1].
[13] See Southern Belle Vacation Rentals [16] and Visit Savannah [8].
[14] See *Atlas Obscura* [4] and the Preservation Resource Center of New Orleans [1].

status could be displayed to the broader community. The ironwork that framed these semi-public spaces thus functioned as a form of nonverbal communication about family circumstances and values, accomplishing through permanent iron what gossip and social calls accomplished through conversation.

5.4 Ironwork in Death: Cemetery Ironwork and Memorial Functions

The spiritual and symbolic dimensions of ironwork extended beyond buildings of the living into the cemeteries that served as repositories for the dead.[15] The cemeteries of New Orleans, known colloquially as the "Cities of the Dead," are famous for their distinctive architecture and ornamentation, and ironwork plays a crucial role in this funerary landscape.[16] Family tombs are often enclosed within or decorated with custom iron gates and fences bearing family names, crafted with the same care and skill expended on domestic ironwork.[17]

The symbolic vocabulary of cemetery ironwork is distinctive and recognizable. Angels signify heavenly protection and the transcendence of the soul to paradise. Weeping willows reference mourning and sorrow. Inverted torches represent the extinguishing of life and the finality of death. Lambs, particularly young lambs, symbolize innocence and often marked the graves of children.[18] The wreaths, urns, and other funerary motifs that appear in cemetery ironwork draw on European funerary traditions but were given distinctive expressions in New Orleans, shaped by the particular cultural and environmental circumstances of the city.

For enslaved and free African-descended craftspeople, the creation of cemetery ironwork carried additional significance. The cemeteries contained the graves not only of wealthy whites but also of enslaved and free people of color. Creating ironwork that memorialized the dead of African descent represented a form of honoring and preserving memory in a society where the humanity of black people was systematically denied and their lives frequently rendered invisible. The skilled work of creating elaborate cemetery ironwork demonstrated the craftsmanship and aesthetic sophistication of black ironworkers while creating a form of permanent memorial that would outlast the frailties of human memory.

[15] See *Atlas Obscura* [4] and Hermann-Grima + Gallier Historic Houses [13].
[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid.

Chapter 6

Comparative Perspectives: Savannah's Iron and the Geography of Southern Ironwork Traditions

6.1 Savannah's Distinctive Ironwork Landscape

While New Orleans' ornamental ironwork has achieved iconic status in American architectural consciousness, Savannah, Georgia possesses equally significant—if somewhat less celebrated—ironwork traditions.[1] The two cities, both Atlantic and Gulf port communities with roots in eighteenth-century colonialism, developed distinctive yet related ironwork traditions whose comparison illuminates how regional, economic, and cultural factors shaped the development of the decorative arts across the broader South.

Savannah, founded in 1733 by James Oglethorpe as a planned colony, developed differently from the French- and Spanish-created New Orleans. The city was designed according to Enlightenment urban planning principles, with a grid of squares intended to facilitate orderly development and civic life.[2] Savannah's early economy depended on rice and slavery more centrally than did that of New Orleans, which had a more diverse economic base grounded in trade, French colonial administration, and eventually sugar. However, by the nineteenth century, both cities had developed wealthy merchant classes sustained by slavery and trade, and both had become focal points for Atlantic commerce and culture.

The ironwork of Savannah, like that of New Orleans, reflects the distinctive cultural synthesis that occurred in these Atlantic port cities.[3] Charleston, just to the north of Savannah, possessed particularly

[1] See Keith Dotson Photography [5]; The59Club [6]; Southern Belle Vacation Rentals [16]; and Visit Savannah [8].
[2] See Visit Savannah [8] and Southern Belle Vacation Rentals [16].
[3] See Keith Dotson Photography [5]; The59Club [6]; Southern Belle Vacation Rentals [16]; and Visit Savannah [8].

notable ironwork traditions featuring elaborate wrought-iron fences, gates, and balconies.[4] Like New Orleans, Charleston's ironwork was created by a diverse workforce including enslaved and free African-descended blacksmiths alongside European and immigrant craftspeople. The comparison of New Orleans, Charleston, and Savannah reveals that the Gulf South ironwork tradition was part of a broader pattern of decorative ironwork development across the American Atlantic South.[5]

6.2 The Symbolism of Savannah's Ironwork: Pineapples, Palmettos, and Maritime Motifs

The symbolic vocabulary of Savannah's ironwork differs in some respects from that of New Orleans, reflecting Savannah's particular history and geography.[6] Pineapple motifs appear frequently in Savannah's gates and balconies, functioning as symbols of hospitality and welcome—the pineapple being an exotic fruit associated with luxury, cultivation, and the generous spirit of the host.[7] This motif appears on prominent homes such as the Owens-Thomas House and the Davenport House, where it communicated the refined taste and cosmopolitan connections of the residents.[8]

Palmetto designs, referencing the South Carolina palmetto tree and associated with the Lowcountry landscape, appear throughout Savannah's ironwork, functioning to ground the ironwork in the local environment and to connect residents to the particular landscape they inhabited.[9] These nature-inspired designs echo the British influence on cast-iron design documented in New Orleans but are given distinctive expression through the incorporation of locally significant plants and imagery.

Maritime motifs—anchors, ropes, and other nautical elements—appear prominently in Savannah's ironwork, reflecting the city's dependence on maritime commerce.[10] These motifs encode the city's identity as a port, communicating through permanent iron fixtures the sources of wealth and importance that sustained Savannah's prosperity. Such maritime symbolism appears in New Orleans as well but is perhaps less pronounced, possibly reflecting the greater diversity of New Orleans' economy beyond maritime trade—an economy that included significant involvement in interior river commerce, sugar production, and finance.

[4] See Keith Dotson Photography [5].
[5] Ibid.
[6] See Southern Belle Vacation Rentals [16] and Visit Savannah [8].
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid.

6.3 Labor, Identity, and the Ironworking Traditions of Savannah

Like New Orleans, Savannah's ironwork was created by a diverse and changing workforce.[11] The city had a notable free-colored population engaged in skilled trades, including blacksmithing and ironworking. Christopher Werner, a prominent Charleston ironworker who created some of that city's most celebrated ironwork, exemplifies the significance of immigrant craftspeople in Southern ironwork traditions.[12] Werner, documented through an account book recently discovered by historian Kelly Ciociola, worked in nineteenth-century Charleston creating elaborate wrought-iron railings, gates, and other decorative elements. His work appears on some of Charleston's most important buildings, yet his contributions were largely forgotten until recent scholarly attention recovered them.

The transition from wrought to cast iron occurred in Savannah as in New Orleans, with similar economic and labor consequences.[13] European immigrants, particularly those fleeing economic hardship in Ireland and Germany, increasingly populated the ironworking trades in the mid-nineteenth century. The displacement of enslaved and free people of color from ironworking occurred in Savannah as it did throughout the Atlantic South, though the process was complicated by the persistence of slavery in Georgia until the Civil War and by the city's distinctive labor dynamics.

6.4 Preservation, Memory, and the Persistence of Ironwork Traditions

One significant difference between New Orleans and Savannah concerns the preservation and commemoration of their respective ironwork traditions. New Orleans' French Quarter was officially designated for historic preservation beginning in 1937, establishing legal and institutional frameworks for the preservation of ironwork and other historic elements.[14] This official preservation effort, while certainly incomplete and shaped by particular assumptions about what was worth preserving, nonetheless created sustained pressure to maintain ironwork and to invest in its restoration. Savannah's historic preservation efforts, while vigorous in their own right, developed along somewhat different trajectories and have not been as focused on the documentation and preservation of ironwork specifically.[15]

Contemporary restoration blacksmith work continues in both cities, maintaining and extending the ironworking traditions of the nineteenth century. In New Orleans, Darryl Reeves has become

[11] See Keith Dotson Photography [5]; The59Club [6]; Visit Savannah [8]; and Southern Belle Vacation Rentals [16].
[12] See *Atlas Obscura* [4].
[13] See The59Club [6]; Visit Savannah [8]; and Southern Belle Vacation Rentals [16].
[14] See the Preservation Resource Center of New Orleans [1].
[15] See The59Club [6]; Visit Savannah [8]; and Southern Belle Vacation Rentals [16].

perhaps the most celebrated contemporary practitioner, explicitly connecting his work to the traditions established by enslaved and free blacksmiths of color and incorporating West African symbolic elements and techniques into his restorations and new work.[16] In Savannah, various restoration and custom ironworking shops continue the tradition, though perhaps with less explicit attention to the African heritage of ironworking traditions.

The differences in how New Orleans and Savannah have commemorated and preserved their ironwork traditions reflect broader differences in how these cities have understood and represented their own histories. New Orleans has marketed its ironwork as a distinctive symbol of the city, incorporating iron-lace imagery into tourism materials and popular representations. Savannah, while certainly acknowledging its ironwork heritage, has emphasized other aspects of its history and landscape—particularly its squares and its Spanish moss–draped live oaks. Both cities, however, remain repositories of exceptional ironwork traditions, and both merit the sustained scholarly attention that their craftsmanship has long deserved.

[16] See *Very Local* [7]; *Heart of Louisiana* [9]; and *Atlas Obscura* [4].

Chapter 7

Conclusion: The Enduring Legacy of Ornamental Ironwork in America's Atlantic South

7.1 Synthesis: What Ironwork Reveals About Southern History

The history of ornamental ironwork in New Orleans and Savannah, traced across the transformative century from the 1780s through the 1880s, illuminates fundamental aspects of American history that often remain obscured in conventional narratives. At the most basic level, this history demonstrates the centrality of enslaved and free African-descended people to the creation of America's cultural landscape. While popular histories and tourism materials often present New Orleans and Savannah as primarily European colonial cities or as products of white entrepreneurship and design, the material evidence of ironwork reveals that people of African descent were active creative agents whose knowledge, skill, aesthetic vision, and labor were essential to the creation of these cities' most distinctive visual character.

The ironwork tradition also reveals the reality of cultural synthesis and creolization that characterized Atlantic port cities. These were not spaces where European forms were simply imposed on colonial populations, nor were they spaces where African traditions remained unchanged in a new environment. Rather, they were dynamic arenas where multiple traditions encountered one another, influenced one another, and blended to create new forms. The ironwork that emerged from New Orleans and Savannah was neither African nor European but rather a distinctive creation that drew on both traditions while responding to the particular circumstances—climate, economics, materials, markets—of the Gulf South.

The technological history of ironwork likewise illuminates broader patterns of industrialization

and labor transformation in nineteenth-century America. The shift from wrought to cast iron was not simply a matter of technological progress but involved fundamental transformations in labor organization, skill requirements, and the composition of the working class. The displacement of enslaved and free black ironworkers by white immigrant workers paralleled similar processes across American industry, reflecting both the profitability of cheaper immigrant labor and deliberate efforts to exclude black workers from skilled trades and craft organizations. Understanding the ironwork industry thus contributes to understanding the broader history of race, labor, and industrialization in America.

7.2 The Symbolism of Iron: What Ironwork Meant to Those Who Created and Used It

Throughout this monograph we have documented how ironwork functioned as a language through which meanings were communicated and identities were expressed. The incorporation of Adinkra symbols into ironwork reveals that enslaved and free African-descended craftspeople maintained connection to West African knowledge systems and spiritual practices, encoding messages about endurance, *sankofa* (return and recovery), and other concepts into objects created under conditions of oppression. For the craftspeople who created this work, the ironwork was not merely a source of income but a medium through which they could express cultural identity, maintain connection to ancestral knowledge, and leave a mark on the built environment that would persist across generations.

The ironwork also communicated messages about wealth, family identity, taste, and aesthetic sophistication to contemporary residents and visitors. The Pontalba Buildings' cast-iron galleries proclaimed that Baroness Pontalba possessed the wealth and vision to undertake ambitious architectural projects. The oak leaves and acorns on the LeBranche House announced both the owner's prosperity and his family name. The cupids and arrows on one merchant father's balcony railing declared to the community the availability of his daughter for courtship and marriage. The elaborate cast-iron galleries that proliferated throughout New Orleans after mid-century signaled participation in a fashionable aesthetic, connection to commercial modernity, and membership in the class of property owners who could afford such embellishment.

Yet this ironwork also communicated across time, speaking to future generations about the character and values of the people who created and used it. The preservation of ironwork into the present day means that contemporary residents and visitors can read the ironwork as a historical text, learning from it about the aesthetic values, economic circumstances, cultural backgrounds, and historical experiences of those who came before. The sankofa symbols on St. Louis Cathedral remain as a testimony to the spiritual and philosophical sophistication of enslaved and free blacksmiths of

African descent. The Pontalba Building galleries remain as a testimony to one woman's ambition and to the aesthetic fashions that commanded attention and resources in the nineteenth-century Atlantic South.

7.3 Why Ironwork Matters Now: Contemporary Relevance and Future Research

The history of ornamental ironwork in the Atlantic South has contemporary significance extending far beyond the interests of historians and historic preservationists. In an era when the contributions of people of African descent to American culture, art, and history remain systematically minimized and erased, the ironwork traditions of New Orleans and Savannah offer material evidence of African and African-American creative agency and sophistication. The irrefutable presence of Adinkra symbols in some of the most celebrated buildings of New Orleans, the documented historical reality that enslaved and free blacksmiths created much of the ironwork that defines these cities, and the contemporary work of practitioners like Darryl Reeves who explicitly connect their practice to these traditions, all offer powerful interventions in how American history and culture are understood.

The ironwork traditions also have significance for understanding how communities remember and commemorate history. The preservation movement's focus on saving historic buildings and decorative elements represents an effort to maintain connection to the past and to recognize the value of previous generations' labor and creativity. However, preservation efforts have often been selective, preserving the buildings and decorative elements that served the interests of privileged communities while allowing the dwellings and possessions of working-class and marginalized communities to deteriorate. Attending seriously to ironwork—including the often-humble ironwork of workers' housing and community spaces—offers a way to democratize preservation efforts and to recognize the contributions of people of all social classes to the creation of community.

Future research directions include more systematic documentation of remaining ironwork, particularly in secondary cities and rural areas where ironwork has received less scholarly attention than in the celebrated French Quarter or historic districts of Charleston and Savannah.[1] The relationship between gender and ironwork creation and use merits additional investigation: most ironworkers documented in historical records are male, yet the balconies and galleries of residential buildings were spaces significantly associated with women's domestic life. How did women experience and interpret the ironwork surrounding them? Did the incorporation of symbols related to courtship and marriage reflect the desires or aesthetic preferences of the young women whose bedrooms overlooked these galleries?

[1] See Keith Dotson Photography [5]; The59Club [6]; Visit Savannah [8]; and Southern Belle Vacation Rentals [16].

The relationship between ironwork and other building arts—carpentry, masonry, plastering—also merits investigation. Ironwork did not exist in isolation but was integrated into buildings as part of comprehensive architectural and decorative schemes. Understanding how different craftspeople coordinated their efforts and negotiated the relationship among different materials and techniques would illuminate the organizational and social dimensions of building creation in the nineteenth century.

Finally, continued documentation of contemporary ironworking practice and the transmission of ironworking knowledge in the twenty-first century remains important work. Blacksmithing and ornamental ironworking are endangered traditions, with fewer young people entering the trade and fewer master craftspeople able to provide apprenticeships. Supporting contemporary practitioners like Darryl Reeves and organizations such as the New Orleans Master Crafts Guild that work to preserve and transmit ironworking knowledge represents an investment in keeping living traditions alive while maintaining connection to the past.

7.4 Final Reflections: The Meaning of Iron

Walking through the streets of New Orleans' French Quarter or historic Savannah on a late afternoon, when the declining sun creates patterns of light and shadow through cast-iron galleries and wrought-iron railings, one cannot help but be struck by the visual beauty of this ironwork. The intricacy of the designs, the way the iron catches light and casts shadows, the sense of three-dimensionality created by the varying depths of different elements—all speak to the aesthetic vision of the craftspeople who created these works. Yet this monograph has argued that the ironwork is significant not only for its aesthetic qualities but for what it reveals about history: about the agency and contributions of people whose names often do not appear in historical records, about the complex cultural syntheses that created the distinctive character of America's Atlantic ports.

The ironwork of New Orleans and Savannah tells a story of endurance. The iron itself has endured across centuries, surviving fires and wars and the forces of urban change that have threatened so much of these cities' architectural heritage. Yet it also tells a story of human endurance tested far more severely than that of any metal—the enslaved and free people of African descent who created the ironwork under conditions of profound constraint and oppression, who maintained connection to ancestral knowledge systems despite systematic efforts to erase them, who exercised creativity and aesthetic vision even as their humanity was denied and their contributions claimed by others or erased from the record.

The ironwork also tells a story of transformation—technological transformation from wrought to cast iron, economic transformation from colonial dependence to capitalist market participation, labor transformation from craft-based to industrial production, demographic transformation through

immigration and the displacement of established communities. Yet through all of this change, ironwork remained a medium through which meaning was expressed and identity was negotiated. The ironwork traditions thus speak to the resilience of human communities in the face of historical change and to the power of material culture—the objects we create and the spaces we inhabit—to carry meaning and communicate across time.

For contemporary residents and visitors, ironwork offers a text to read, a language to decipher, a way of connecting to the people and processes that created the cities we inhabit. By learning to read ironwork—to recognize the symbols embedded within it, to understand the labor that created it, to appreciate the aesthetic vision it expresses—we practice a form of historical consciousness that recognizes we live in spaces created by previous generations, that we inherit both material objects and cultural meanings from the past, and that understanding those inheritances is essential to understanding ourselves. The ironwork of New Orleans and Savannah thus remains not merely a historical artifact but an ongoing resource for understanding what it means to live in community across time.

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