

Surveying Louisiana: Cartographic Records in the Southeastern Architectural Archive

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While primarily known for its architectural holdings, the Southeastern Architectural Archive (seaa.tulane.edu),¹ a research repository located at Tulane University, houses cartographic materials associated with four generations of surveyors/engineers that document over 150 years of mapping endeavors. The records chronicle the region's division into long lots, the creation and expansion of canals and sewerage systems, and the development of *faubourgs* and more recent subdivisions. The collection includes survey sketches, field notebooks, chain of title research, historic maps, auction announcements, and correspondence.

The collection's origins trace to the entry of Dominick E. Seghers (né Dominique Édouard Seghers; 1849–1911) into the surveying business in 1868. The family continued in the field for over one hundred years when Dominick's grandson, Guy Seghers, Sr., ceased operations and sold the family's tracings to Lawyers' Title Company. In 1978, his son, Guy Seghers, Jr.—known as “Buddy”—attempted to sell the family's remaining records to the Louisiana Land Surveyors' Association for \$20,000 (Walker 1978). The association refused the offer but expressed its wish that the family's records be made available to local surveyors. When Buddy died the following year at the age of 49, his father decided to donate the records to Tulane University in memory of his son. The Louisiana Land Surveyors' Association was grateful for this donation as it ensured that the records of what its president referred to as the “vanishing American” would be permanently accessible (Walker 1980).

Although the SEAA owns a large collection of historic fire insurance atlases, it is not a repository known for its cartographic holdings. The Guy Seghers Collection was deposited into the SEAA shortly after its acquisition due to the large format of the surveys and stands apart from the archive's other holdings, since it does not represent the work of an individual architect or architectural firm. A staff member drafted an undated internal memorandum that acknowledged the complexity of the records and the difficulties that a researcher would have using them (SEAA n.d.). Without action on the questions and concerns addressed in this internal document, the collection was partially and minimally processed. Over the next 30 years, the collection was consulted less than 20 times, mostly by older property attorneys associated with the Lawyers' Title Company.



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1. Modeled after Columbia University's Avery Archive, the SEAA was founded in 1980 to document the built environment of the Gulf South region. The archive's foundational holdings consisted of antebellum architectural drawings that had been used for instruction in the Tulane University School of Architecture.

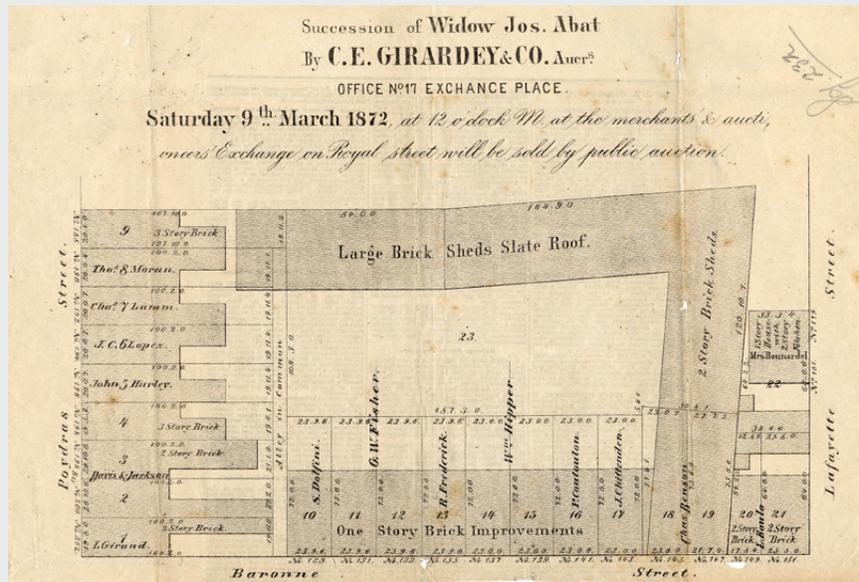


Figure 1: Succession of Widow Jos. Abat, 1st District, Square 232. Auction. 9 March 1872. Lithograph.

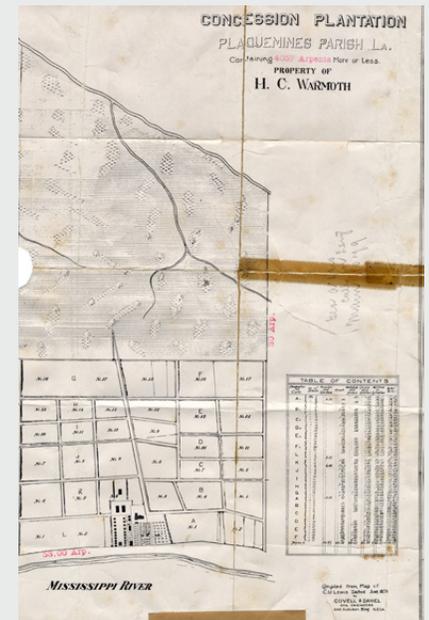


Figure 2: Covell & Daniel, Concession Plantation, Plaquemines Parish, LA containing 4057 Arpents More Or Less / Property of H.C. Warmoth / compiled from map of C.U. Lewis Dated June 1879.

Since Hurricane Katrina, methodologies associated with architectural research have changed from single-property research queries regarding architectural authorship to an investigation of the historical matrix, the many imbricated layers of the built environment. Due to the changing nature of these inquiries and an increased international focus on the southeastern Gulf region, last year the SEAA staff began to fully process the collection: opening oversized tubes of cartographic materials that had never been examined let alone inventoried, weeding duplicative materials from the files, creating preservation surrogates when necessary, and developing a comprehensive finding aid (SEAA 2013).

By far, the largest quantity of documents consists of lot surveys, generally work commissioned by a single property owner or land development concern (Figure 1). Files may include chain of title research, correspondence, tracings of earlier surveys, and calculations associated with most commissioned surveys. Additionally, since the Seghers frequently collected and inherited surveys of their competitors and former competitors, their records are embedded with original maps, blueprints, bluelines, photostats, and photocopies of historic maps and surveys.

Many records document the subdivision of former plantation tracts. The family's surveys of Plaquemines Parish center on such tracts: plantations such as Concession (Figure 2) and Orange Grove (a.k.a. Braithwaite), neither of which survived the twentieth century. When Braithwaite's land holdings were subdivided, the Braithwaite Land & Liquidation Company retained the services of the Seghers Family—then operating as Ricketts, Seghers, and Dibdin—to survey the land and to develop an advertising map (Figure 3).

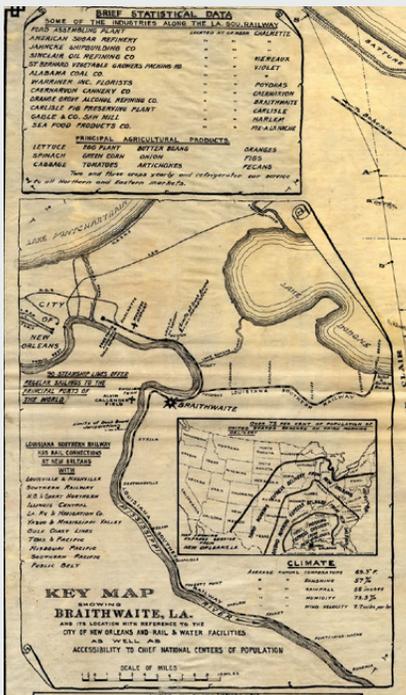


Figure 3: Ricketts, Seghers, & Dibdin. Key Map Showing Braithwaite, LA. And Its Location with Reference to the City of New Orleans and Rail and Water Facilities as well as Accessibility to Chief National Centers of Population. New Orleans, 1931. [Detail of map].

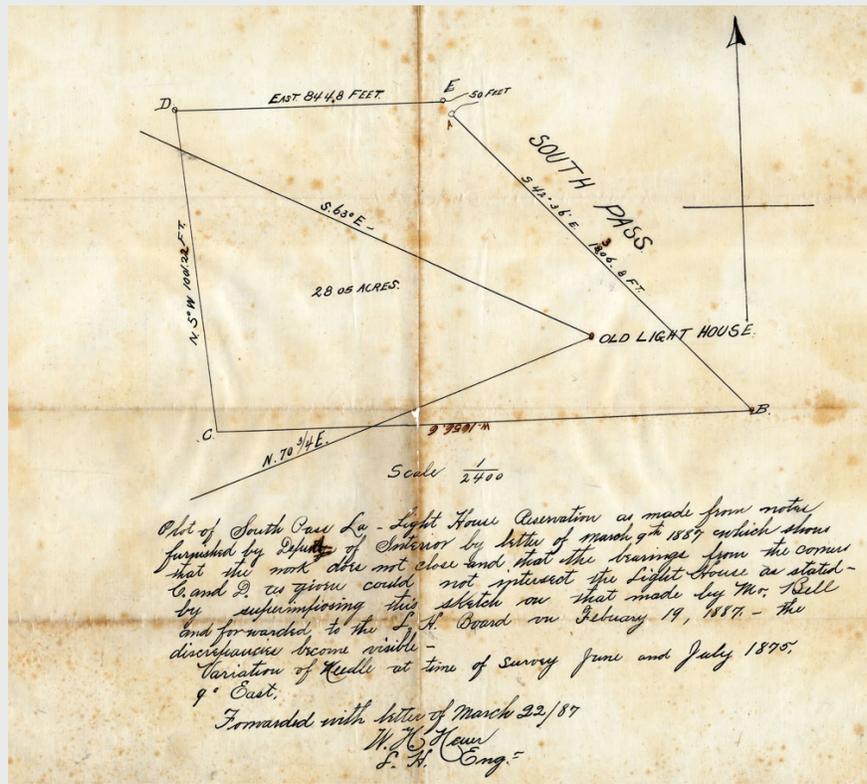


Figure 4: W. H. Heuer. Plot of South Pass La-Light House Reservation as made from notes furnished by Deputy of the Interior... 22 March 1887. Ink on tracing vellum.

Records associated with various attempts to control water or chart transportation routes also feature prominently. One early letter, written by surveyor John Communy to city surveyor Louis H. Pilié regarding a draining machine on Orleans Street, itemized his difficulties procuring appropriate materials (Communy 1862). Another series of correspondence documents late nineteenth-century attempts to resurvey the South Pass Light House reservation on the Mississippi River due to discrepancies in earlier surveys and geological markers lost to subsidence and erosion (Figure 4). The Seghers gathered such documentation and filed it according to geographic location.

The Seghers were drawn to Plaquemines Parish when oil speculation began to boom along Louisiana's wetlands. Guy J. Seghers, Sr. solicited the U. S. Coast Guard to develop a correct survey of the area between the Southwest Pass and the South Pass of the Mississippi River (Seghers 1959). He gathered together earlier surveys to document the need for more precise mapping (Figure 5). The Coast Guard responded that it believed there was a need for such a survey but the organization lacked the authorization to commission it and the funds to support it (Brallier 1959).

The dearth of accurate surveys for Plaquemines Parish resulted in considerable litigation. The Seghers frequently became involved in legal claims, especially as expert witnesses. Notably, the Seghers records include a large body of cartographic work associated with Hog Island and a complicated legal case involving the

region's wetlands, navigable waters and Louisiana succession rights. For this case, *Kuchenig v. California Company*, the Seghers gathered consecutive surveys of the island, as well as textual documentation chronicling inaccurate geographic data.

In 1960, a Missouri resident named Fred Kuchenig retained the services of New Orleans attorney Hughes J. De La Vergne, II, in connection with claims of ownership of a tract of land in Breton Sound, Plaquemines Parish. De La Vergne then hired Guy Seghers, Sr. to determine whether, in his opinion, there was an encroachment on the Kuchenig land by the California Company which was conducting speculative drilling operations off of Hog Island. Seghers ordered official plats, copies of the E. D. Richardson and A. J. Powell survey (1845–46), field notes and surveys associated with surrounding townships, coast and geodetic surveys (as well as descriptions of extant and lost triangulation stations), obtained oil company speculation plats, hydrographic surveys, aerial photographs, and oyster commission maps (Figure 6). He made multiple trips to Plaquemines Parish and hired boat transportation to the surviving triangulation stations. After considerable investigation, Seghers identified “The California Company Well No. 2” as situated on the Kuchenig property. In 1951, the State of Louisiana’s Mineral Board had leased the land to the California Company, which drilled a mineral well and removed oil, gas, and other hydrocarbons. Based on the Seghers research, Kuchenig petitioned the court to recognize his sole ownership of the property and demanded that California Company account for all oil and gas extracted from this land. The case dragged on in multiple lawsuits that reached the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals more than once. Final court decisions are not included in the Seghers holdings.

While files such as *Kuchenig* provide substantive representation pertaining to Plaquemines Parish, the Seghers office records mostly document greater metropolitan New Orleans, consisting of Jefferson, Orleans, and St. Bernard Parishes.

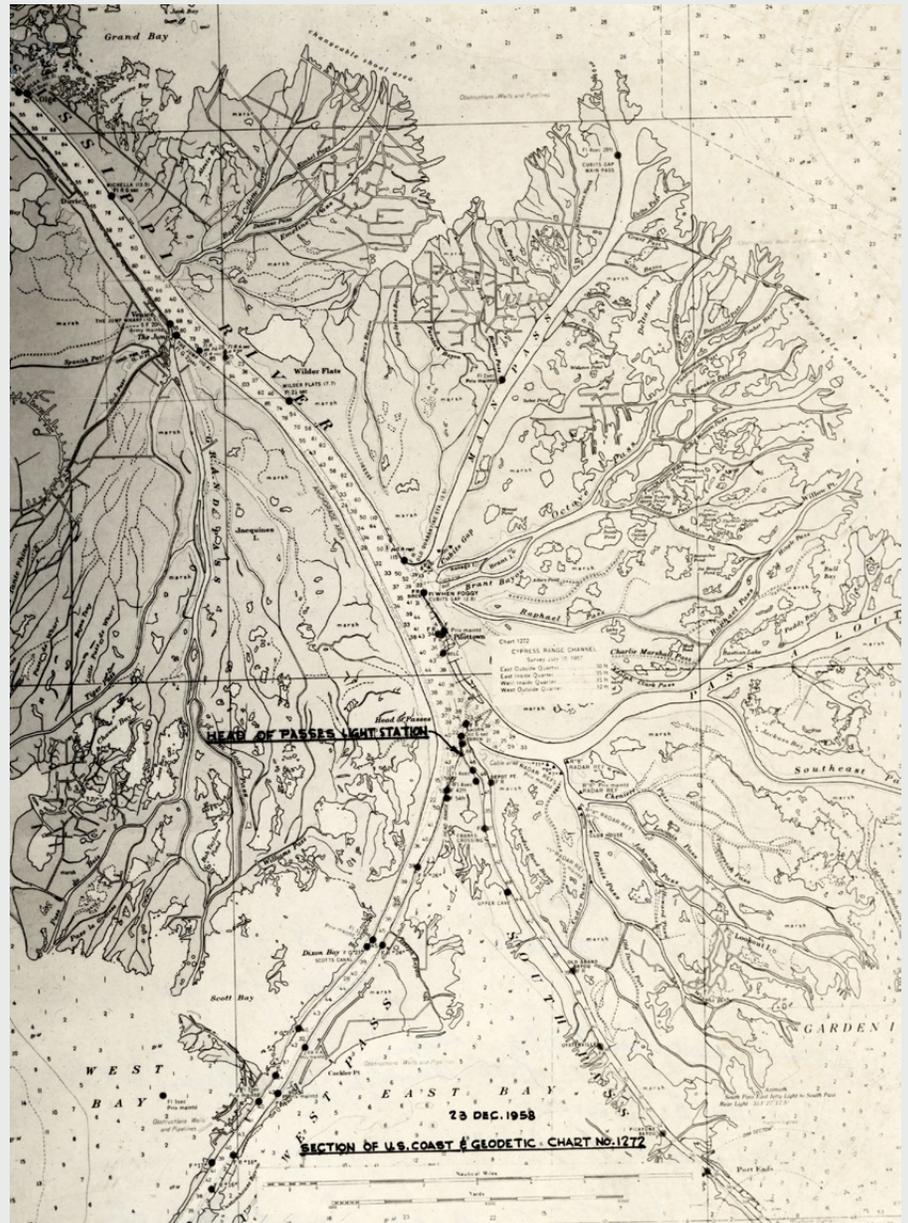


Figure 5: Section of U. S. Coast & Geodetic Chart No. 1272. 28 December 1958. Photostat.



Figure 6: Western Shore / Isle Au Breton Sound from Deep Water Pt. to California Pt. Louisiana. 1868-1869. U. S. Coast Survey by C. H. Boyd. Detail of photostat.

By the early twentieth century, population increases prompted land speculation in the development of new subdivisions. The Seghers business records include hundreds of subdivision surveys, as well as lot surveys within subdivisions. Often times, those records are augmented with historic plats associated with early land grants and plantation tracts. Major and minor subdivision surveys may be found in the collection: Lake Vista, Lake Terrace, Pontchartrain Park, Derby Place, Gentilly Terrace, Green Acres, Metairieville, and even one called “Own-Your-Own” subdivision (Figure 7). This latter development was originally surveyed by civil engineer S. E. Calongne in 1926 but greatly expanded in the 1960s with surveys completed by John M. Krebs. The Seghers files include the Calongne and Krebs surveys, as well as their own surveys for the Conservative Homestead

Association and individual property owners. Multi-generational documentation of a given land area is a typical feature of individual files.

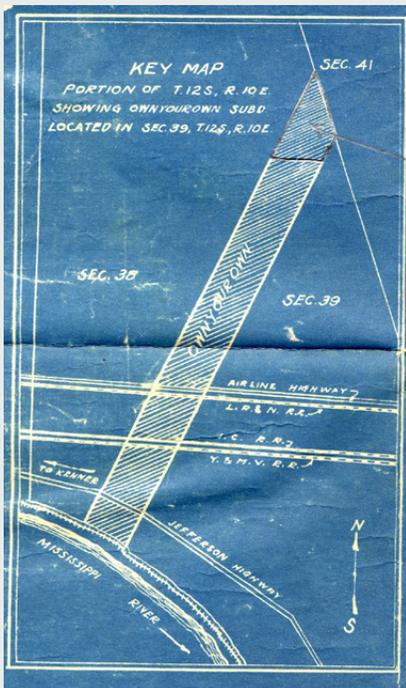


Figure 7: S. E. Calongne, Key Map of Ownyourown Subdivision, Jefferson Parish, LA. Upstream Realty Company, 10 November 1926. [Detail of blueprint].

The vast coverage presented by the collection proves especially noteworthy. Since the Seghers family business outlasted its rivals, the collection reflects not only changes to land management strategies and property ownership but also to the surveying profession. While the family’s earliest records suggest the Louisiana profession’s domination by *arpenteurs*, by the 1950s, the family was increasingly providing structural engineering assessments to the city’s modernist architects. Clients included municipal, parish, state, and federal governments, the Dock Board, the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers, the Roman Catholic Church, plantation owners and major oil companies. Viewed comprehensively, the collection provides researchers with an incredible variety of cartographic documentation.

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