How Irish?

Historians go hi-tech to show makeup of Crescent City neighborhood

As graduate students in history at UL Lafayette, Maegan Smith, '16, and Victoria Throop, '16, created an online, interactive reconstruction of the Irish Channel in 1880. It marries technology and old-fashioned historical detective work to examine one of the evergreen questions about the storied New Orleans neighborhood – just how Irish was it?

They found the Irish Channel embraced a diverse population. In 1880, there were not just Irish residents, but French, English, German, African-Americans, Italians, Scots, Dutch and native-born Louisianians of varying ancestry.

Throop acknowledges that other scholars also have concluded that the Channel was "probably not that Irish." But the Irish Channel Project does something previous published studies could not. It tills well-worn historical ground with a technological edge.

It uses GIS – which stands for geographical (or geospatial) information system – to resurrect the residents who called the working class, multiethnic neighborhood home nearly 140 years ago.

"It really is a great tool for historians. So much of history is spatial. There is so much data in location," Throop explained.

Mary Churay was another history graduate student and Smith and Throop's classmate.

Churay's family had ties to the Irish Channel. As the trio discussed potential class projects, they realized the neighborhood was a crossroads for each of their individual interests. Churay studied religious history. Throop examined ethnicity, while Smith's field was spatial history. A previous job working with the Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development had exposed Smith to GIS.

They made a website, irishchannelproject.com, that would enable them to present their results to as wide an audience as possible. Mapping technology would also differentiate their work from other scholars' research.

GIS enabled them to present their primary source research in a graphical form. They harvested details from the 1880 U.S. Census and studied contemporary city directories. Maps from the period and an 1883 city atlas revealed locations and sizes of long-gone buildings.

They then entered the data into ArcGIS, a website that translated it into plot points on a base map of the Irish Channel today. The dots are color-coded. Clicking on any of the nearly 2,000 points will reveal a sidebar that details information about what was

St. Mary's Assumption Church on Josephine Street, right, served a congregation composed mostly of Germans when it opened in the Irish Channel in 1860. The congregation of St. Alphonsus on Constance Street, left, was predominantly Irish.

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at the location in 1880.

Purple dots are residences. These points contain the most information: the head of household's name, race, age, marital status and occupation; where they and their parents were born; and how many family members, boarders and servants lived there.

Each dot tells a story. Throop said there's an appeal to clicking on illuminated data points and finding even the most basic information about long-dead New Orleanians. "Humans are essentially nosy, and this is digging into people's business," she observed.

For example, Richard Hauk was a Russian-born organist who in 1880 lived on Washington Avenue. Andrew Hall resided across the street. Born a slave, he was an African-American laborer from Mississippi. On the same block were Moses Levy, a peddler and native of France, and Mary Small, a widow who ran a store that sold "notions," or sewing accessories. Small's parents had emigrated from Ireland.

Ethnic neighborhoods remained in flux due to the constant arrival of immigrants from Western Europe. The Port of New Orleans was the principal debarkation point in the South, and second only to New York, during much of the 1840s and 1850s.

After Churay left the University, Smith and Throop decided to continue the project on their own. When using it for a class fell through, they worked independently on weekends, holidays and late at night.

The pair received graduate degrees in May 2016, but continued to work on the project after taking full-time jobs.

They completed it in spring 2017, after more than a year of work, and presented it at the National Public History Conference in Indianapolis. The marriage of the humanities and digital scholarship is a relatively new phenomenon, so they entertained a host of questions.

Smith and Throop want to use GIS to create a site for educators that traces how New Orleans' ethnic makeup changed over time. They've also discussed expanding their focus beyond the official Irish Channel Historic District.

They've received emails from Irish Channel residents and relatives of people who once lived there. They've considered soliciting photos and other local history to offer a more-detailed view of the people who called the neighborhood home more than a century ago.

"Historians really want to bring the past to life," Throop said. "This technology is an interactive way to do just that."