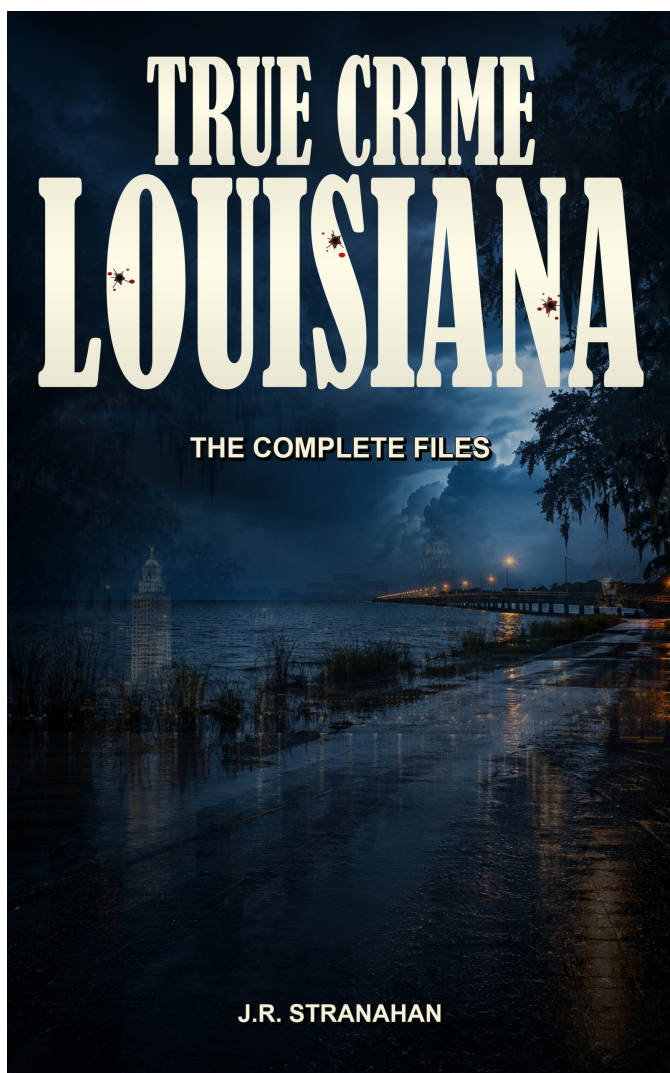


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Chapter One: The Doors Left Open

The name arrived after the fear.

During 1918 and 1919, New Orleans newspapers reported a succession of nighttime attacks in and around small groceries and the rooms attached to them. Intruders entered homes. Axes or hatchets found on the property became weapons. Door panels were removed or broken. Some people died, others survived with serious injuries, and the police never established in court that one person committed every crime later placed beneath the title the Axeman of New Orleans.

That last limit is essential. The public label creates a single figure. The surviving evidence creates a group of incidents with similarities, differences, uncertain connections, and no final identification. A responsible history can describe the pattern without pretending the pattern solved the case.

The first attack commonly included in the sequence occurred in May 1918 at the home and grocery of Joseph and Catherine Maggio. The Maggios were part of the city's Italian community, which supplied neighborhood groceries and other family businesses while enduring open prejudice and suspicion. The couple slept in rooms connected to the shop. During the early morning hours, an attacker entered through a rear door and used an axe and a razor. Catherine died at the scene. Joseph died soon afterward.

Joseph's brothers, who lived nearby, found the couple after hearing distress. Police examined the entry point and the tools. Period reporting described a panel cut from the door, an axe left in a bathroom, and a razor associated with a family barber shop. Investigators questioned relatives and considered whether the placement of the razor pointed inward rather than toward a stranger. No charge followed.

The details entered print quickly, and quick publication shaped everything that came later. A removed door panel, a weapon left behind, and a family grocery became recognizable features. When another household was attacked, a reporter could connect it to the Maggio case before detectives had proved a common offender. Readers could do the same. The resemblance was real. The conclusion remained uncertain.

Louis and Harriet Besumer were attacked in June 1918 in rooms behind their grocery. Both survived the immediate assault, although Harriet later died. Reporting about the case became tangled with questions about Louis's identity, his personal life, and accusations Harriet was said to have made while injured. Those side stories gave newspapers material, but they did not produce a reliable identification of the attacker. The case demonstrates how an unsolved violent crime can absorb every unusual fact around a victim until speculation looks like evidence.

Anna Schneider, who was pregnant, survived another attack that August. Her husband returned home to find her injured. Accounts differed about the weapon and what she could remember. The absence of a dead victim did not lessen the terror. It widened it. Survival meant there might be testimony, but severe trauma could leave perception and memory incomplete. Newspapers asked whether the same person had returned. Police had to decide whether similarity was investigative value or public pressure.

Joseph Romano, an older man living with relatives, was attacked later that month and died from his injuries. His nieces discovered him after hearing sounds in the house. Once again, an entry point and a household axe figured in the accounts. Once again, no arrest resolved the question.

By then, New Orleans was not simply reacting to separate crimes. It was living inside a narrative. Newspaper headlines supplied continuity. Police statements were parsed for confidence or contradiction. Hardware stores could sell stronger locks, but many families lived behind stores whose arrangement was shaped by work rather than

security. A grocery was not only a public room with a counter. It might be the family's livelihood, kitchen, and sleeping quarters. Closing the shop did not create a clean boundary between business and home.

That vulnerability fell heavily on Italian immigrant families. The city's Italian and Sicilian communities had already been targeted by organized violence and public stereotyping. The 1891 lynching of eleven Italian men in New Orleans remained within living memory. In the Axeman coverage, ethnicity sometimes became an investigative fact, sometimes a sensational hook, and sometimes an invitation to revive prejudice. Later retellings can repeat that harm by treating the victims as a type rather than as individual people.

Charles and Rosie Cortimiglia lived across the river in Gretna with their young daughter Mary. In March 1919, the family was attacked at home. Mary died. Charles and Rosie survived serious injuries. The case initially appeared to offer what the earlier crimes had not: living witnesses and suspects who could be named.

Rosie identified neighbors. The accusation led to convictions, but it did not end the uncertainty. Her identification was later withdrawn, and the convictions were overturned or the men were released as the case collapsed. The episode is a warning against using the word solved merely because a frightened city obtained defendants. A prosecution can reach a verdict and still fail as a reliable account of what happened.

Mary Cortimiglia's death also exposes a distortion in the legend. The Axeman is often marketed as a figure of theatrical menace, part demon and part jazz impresario. A child killed in her home does not fit that playful image. Neither do parents carrying injuries after surviving beside her. The story becomes more honest when the clever nickname is kept at a distance and the family is allowed to remain at its center.

Only days after the Cortimiglia attack, a letter sent to a newspaper claimed the Axeman identity. The Historic New Orleans Collection preserves the cultural artifact that grew from it, a piece of sheet music titled *The Mysterious Axman's Jazz*. Its account dates publication of the

letter to March 16, 1919. The writer boasted of being beyond capture, announced another attack, and promised to spare places where jazz was being played at the appointed hour. [Historic New Orleans Collection, The Mysterious Axman's Jazz](#)

There is no surviving proof that the letter's author committed any of the attacks. The letter did prove an intimate understanding of publicity. It converted diffuse fear into an appointment. A household could do something. Musicians played. Dance halls filled. People gathered around instruments and phonographs. No attack was reported at the threatened hour.

The absence of an attack did not authenticate the promise. It made the promise famous. If the writer was the assailant, the stunt demonstrated control. If the writer was a hoaxer, it demonstrated that a stranger could borrow a killer's authority simply by placing words in print. Either way, the city responded because uncertainty had already made the threat credible.

Jazz was still emerging as a term and a commercial sound. New Orleans musicians had built its forms through a much longer history of African American performance, Caribbean influence, brass bands, ragtime, blues, dance music, and improvisation. The Smithsonian's history locates the synthesis in the city's diverse musical life and notes how New Orleans musicians carried the sound outward. [Smithsonian, Jazz](#)

The Axeman letter did not create that music. It exploited it. Later storytelling often reverses the relationship and allows the killer to become a colorful chapter in jazz history. The HNOC artifact offers a better way to see it. A local composer and publisher turned fear into sheet music because the city was already a place where music answered public life. The murderer, or the person pretending to be the murderer, borrowed the city's culture. The culture did not belong to him.

The attacks did not stop permanently after the jazz night. Steve Boca, a grocer, survived an assault in August 1919. Sarah Laumann survived

another in September. Their accounts added to the pattern but did not supply a dependable identity. In October, Mike Pepitone was killed in his home. His wife found him and reported seeing men fleeing. The Pepitone case is often treated as the end of the series.

The ending is not clean. Later writers proposed suspects and extended the timeline backward or forward. One popular theory connected the attacks to a man killed years later in California by the widow of Mike Pepitone. The Historic New Orleans Collection notes that a suspect emerged and was later killed by the widow, but it also states that no one was ever arrested for the New Orleans crimes. That is the proper legal bottom line. A theory is not an identification. An act of revenge elsewhere is not a verdict on the earlier files.

Historical true crime is unusually vulnerable to false precision. Names migrate between Catherine and Katherine, Besumer and Besemer. Dates can refer to the night an attack began or the morning a victim was discovered. A later list may include crimes that contemporary investigators treated separately. Even the number of dead changes depending on which incidents a writer attributes to the unknown assailant.

For that reason, this chapter does not certify a canonical victim list. It follows the group of cases most consistently associated in period reporting and later institutional history, while marking the connection as reported rather than proved. The HNOC describes a reign of terror from May 1918 through October 1919, mostly involving Italian grocers, with at least six people killed. That formulation is careful because it does not claim every attributed incident had one author. [Historic New Orleans Collection](#), [Axeman collection highlight](#)

The setting also deserves correction. The phrase New Orleans at night can summon gas lamps, music, and old streets polished into atmosphere. The households attacked were working spaces. Stock had to be ordered. Floors had to be swept. Accounts had to be kept. Family members slept near the merchandise because a neighborhood grocery

demanded long hours and because separating home from business cost money.

The entry method mattered in part because it used that arrangement against them. A door panel could be removed. A tool owned for practical work could be found and turned on the person who owned it. The intruder did not need to carry a conspicuous weapon through the city. This was less a supernatural ability than an exploitation of ordinary architecture.

Police in 1918 did not have the forensic systems that later generations expect. Fingerprint practice existed, but crime-scene control, laboratory capacity, evidence storage, and cross-case databases were limited. A tool handled by a household, an attacker, relatives, and officers could not easily provide a clean identification. Blood typing was primitive. DNA analysis was many decades away. Newspaper reporters could reach a scene before its meaning had settled.

Those limitations do not mean investigators learned nothing. Repeated entry through doors, tools found at scenes, the focus on attached residences, the timing, and survivor descriptions all offered leads. The question was whether they described one offender, an imitator, or a cluster of crimes made to look unified by publicity. Without a reliable confession, a traceable weapon carried from scene to scene, or physical evidence preserved for modern testing, that question stayed open.

The case also sat within extraordinary public conditions. The United States was at war in 1918. Influenza would kill people across New Orleans and the world. Labor, migration, policing, and public health strained families already negotiating a city divided by race and class. An unsolved attacker did not replace those pressures. He entered them.

The nickname simplified fear into a man with a single tool. It also gave commerce something to sell. Sheet music could be bought. Newspapers could promise another development. Later books, tours, podcasts, and television programs could return to the letter and the night of jazz. The families received no comparable mechanism for keeping the ordinary

dimensions of their lives in view.

Joseph and Catherine Maggio had kin close enough to hear distress through adjoining rooms. The Besumer household became public property while Harriet was still dying. Anna Schneider survived while carrying a child. The Romano nieces entered a room no family member should have to enter. Charles and Rosie Cortimiglia lost Mary and then watched an accusation fail. Steve Boca and Sarah Laumann survived events that would be repeatedly rearranged inside someone else's legend. Mike Pepitone's family lived with both loss and a theory that never became a judgment.

To say the files are unresolved is not to say every theory is equally plausible. It means the available public record has not crossed the line from inference to proof. There was no arrest that survived scrutiny, no trial establishing a common perpetrator, and no official identification accepted as final. The most famous communication may have come from a killer, a prankster, a journalist, or someone seeking attention. Its authorship is part of the mystery, not a solution to it.

The city's response on the threatened jazz night is often told with a smile. Bands played and the killer stayed away. The image is irresistible because it lets New Orleans defeat terror by becoming more fully itself. The truth is less comfortable. People played because a series of families had already been attacked and because the police had not stopped the offender. Music that night was celebration, commerce, disbelief, courage, and fear at once.

What remains after a century is a set of names, fragments of reporting, public artifacts, and a caution. A dramatic offender can become clearer in memory as the evidence supporting him becomes weaker. The Axeman now seems like a single, sharply drawn figure because culture finished the portrait the investigation could not.

The doors, by contrast, remain practical evidence. They placed a family business beside a sleeping room. They showed where an intruder entered. They explained why a tool might be available. A removed panel

is less colorful than a demonic letter, but it is closer to the event.

That difference defines the file. The legend asks what kind of monster loved jazz. The record asks which households were entered, who was harmed, what police could prove, and why the proof stopped short. The first question keeps a villain alive. The second keeps faith with the people whose doors he crossed.

A neighborhood business after dark

The grocery-home arrangement deserves closer attention because it shaped both risk and investigation.

Before supermarkets and widespread automobile ownership changed shopping, small groceries served blocks and walking neighborhoods. Owners knew customers, extended credit, received deliveries, and kept long hours. Living behind or above the shop reduced costs and kept the family close to the business.

The arrangement also meant cash, food, tools, and sleeping people occupied connected rooms. A customer could learn the layout through ordinary visits. An unlocked or thin rear door might serve deliveries. An interior panel could be weaker than a modern security door.

Investigators therefore had to consider people with business knowledge. Employees, delivery workers, customers, relatives, creditors, and competitors all had ordinary reasons to know the premises. That broad access made a stranger theory plausible and suspect identification difficult.

Robbery might appear obvious when a grocery was attacked, but accounts repeatedly noted money or valuables left behind. Failure to take property could indicate another motive, interruption, panic, or a staged appearance. It did not prove that money had never been intended.

The use of household tools similarly allowed multiple readings. An intruder might avoid carrying a weapon. A domestic attacker might

choose what was available. A later imitator might reproduce a detail already published. The object alone could not decide among them.

Police comparison across scenes required recordkeeping. Detectives needed measurements of entry holes, photographs or drawings, tool dimensions, wound characteristics, and witness timelines. Without consistent documentation, the pattern depended on memory and newspaper shorthand.

The city did not have today's integrated incident database. Detectives in neighboring jurisdictions might learn of a similar attack through personal contact or the same newspaper read by the public. The Cortimiglia case in Gretna made cross-river coordination essential.

Jurisdiction could fragment evidence. New Orleans police controlled city cases. Jefferson Parish authorities and local departments had their own responsibilities. A suspect cleared in one file might not be formally compared in another. Shared publicity connected the crimes more quickly than shared forensic systems.

Italian grocers also operated under social pressure that could inhibit cooperation. Immigrant communities confronted language barriers, distrust, extortion, and stereotypes that police sometimes mistook for criminal secrecy. A family reluctant to discuss finances or relationships might be protecting privacy rather than an offender.

The public label Black Hand was often applied broadly to crimes involving Italian victims, whether or not organized extortion was established. That frame could direct investigators toward ethnic conspiracy and away from a local personal motive. It could also encourage newspapers to present families as participants in hidden networks.

No responsible reconstruction should adopt that stereotype. If a threat letter, payment demand, or identified organization appears in a source, it can be described. Ethnicity alone does not establish organized crime.

Women in the attacked households carried another archival imbalance. Newspapers frequently identified them as wives and described injuries while devoting more space to male relatives questioned by police. Their work in the grocery and household may have been essential but less formally recorded.

Survivors such as Anna Schneider, Rosie Cortimiglia, Steve Boca, and Sarah Laumann became sources under conditions no investigator would choose. Some were severely injured. Some feared another attack. Their statements could change as consciousness, memory, and outside influence changed.

Investigators must document the exact question and answer rather than only a conclusion. A leading question can place a name into a witness's mind. Repeated interviews can strengthen genuine recall or contaminate it. A newspaper's paraphrase removes even more context.

The Cortimiglia accusation shows how pressure can harden uncertainty. Once defendants were in custody, confirming evidence may have received more attention than contradictions. The failure of those convictions did not make the family's suffering less real. It showed that grief and fear cannot carry proof alone.

Community safety measures followed. Families strengthened doors, watched alleys, kept weapons, or stayed awake in shifts. Those actions may reduce opportunity while increasing accidental danger. Armed neighbors searching for an unknown intruder can mistake one another.

The jazz night offered a collective response that did not require identifying a stranger in an alley. It created noise, company, and public movement. Those practical effects may have felt safer than the letter's supernatural bargain.

The business district after dark was not empty. Bakers began early, streetcars moved workers, delivery routes started, and residents occupied rooms above shops. An attacker could disappear into legitimate movement. Witnesses might recall only a figure passing

among many.

Modern readers often imagine the unknown offender selecting picturesque old streets. The attacks belonged to working neighborhoods that have since changed through demolition, road construction, flood, and development. Exact sites may no longer look like the period photographs.

Mapping remains useful if uncertainty is preserved. A map can show clusters, distance, river crossings, and travel routes. It cannot prove an offender lived at the center or followed the shortest path. Geographic profiling offers hypotheses, not retroactive identification.

The neighborhood grocery therefore provides more explanatory power than the demon letter. It shows who was accessible, why tools were present, how entry might occur, and why witnesses knew so many potential suspects. The legend asks the city to imagine an inhuman visitor. The architecture reveals a human offender exploiting ordinary life.

What the Axeman file can prove

The strongest facts in the Axeman record are also the least theatrical. Multiple households were attacked. Several victims operated or lived beside small groceries. Entry was often described through a damaged door panel. A tool from the property was frequently reported as the weapon. Some victims survived. No one was convicted of the connected series.

Those facts establish a public safety crisis without proving a single offender. Similar methods can point to one person, but published details can also teach later offenders what to copy. Once newspapers had described the door panels and household axes, an imitator did not need private knowledge to reproduce them.

Victim selection is equally difficult to interpret. Italian grocers appear repeatedly. That can indicate a targeted offender, a practical focus on businesses with attached living quarters, the way police and

newspapers classified incidents, or some combination. The record does not support a confident statement that the attacker held a specific ethnic ideology. It supports the narrower fact that Italian families bore much of the harm and public scrutiny.

The survival of several victims did not lead to a consistent description. Darkness, sudden awakening, head injuries, and brief exposure limited what anyone could see. Later summaries sometimes merge uncertain descriptions into a single portrait. The honest conclusion is that witnesses provided impressions, not an identification capable of closing the case.

The letter introduced a second evidentiary problem. Its writer knew the public story because anyone reading the newspapers knew it. The demand for jazz demonstrated knowledge of the city's culture, not necessarily knowledge of the crime scenes. Unless a communication contains information only the offender and police could know, authorship cannot be authenticated by confidence and menace.

The letter's success was social rather than forensic. It caused behavior. Musicians found work, rooms filled, families gathered, and journalists received a ready-made civic drama. The absence of an attack at the threatened time became part of the story even though the statistical meaning of one quiet night was slight.

The investigation also lacked a durable evidence archive visible to modern researchers. If biological material, tools, or door fragments survive, their provenance and chain would need to be established before testing could mean anything. A hundred-year-old object with an attractive label is not automatically evidence from an offender.

Modern forensic genealogy has encouraged hope in old cases. It has also encouraged careless claims that any preserved blood could produce a name. Testing requires a suitable sample, protection from contamination, a lawful and ethical comparison process, and enough contextual evidence to show the profile belongs to the attacker rather than a resident, relative, responder, or later handler.

The Axeman files were created before those preservation needs existed. Officers and family members moved through scenes. Household weapons naturally carried household biological material. Newspaper descriptions suggest items were handled and displayed. Even a useful profile would have to be interpreted inside that history.

Historical suspects present the opposite problem. A writer can select a person whose travels and biography fit parts of the timeline, then treat missing records as confirmation. If the suspect was never arrested, questioned under reliable conditions, or linked by physical evidence, the theory cannot be upgraded by repetition.

One later revenge story illustrates the danger. The widow of Mike Pepitone killed a man in California whom she blamed for her husband's death. The event creates a compelling ending because it supplies a suspect and punishment. It does not show what evidence she possessed, whether her belief was accurate, or whether that man committed earlier attacks. Her act proves belief and loss, not the identity of a serial offender.

The collapse of the Cortimiglia prosecutions carries a different warning. A city desperate for an arrest can place enormous weight on a wounded survivor's identification. Recantation does not automatically reveal which statement was true. It does establish that the conviction could not safely carry the certainty the public wanted.

That uncertainty should not be used to mock early investigators. They worked with the tools, laws, record systems, and social assumptions of their time. The useful question is which decisions preserved truth and which narrowed it. Treating every attack as one series may have helped police compare methods. It may also have caused unrelated leads to be overlooked.

The newspaper archive allows a partial reconstruction of those decisions. Reports show when names entered public discussion, when suspects were released, and how police characterized a scene. They can reveal changes in the official theory. They rarely provide full

interview transcripts or the complete reason a detective rejected a lead.

Readers should therefore resist a modern demand for a solution. An unresolved historical case is not a puzzle guaranteed to contain enough pieces. Time removes witnesses, destroys context, and separates objects from documentation. Sometimes the most truthful result is a bounded account of what remains.

What remains here is enough to restore the victims to their homes and work. Their cases show how a practical arrangement common to immigrant businesses created vulnerability. They show how public fear can attach itself to a nickname. They show how a letter can overshadow a homicide and how a city can transform fear into music without solving the violence that caused it.

The legend promises one hidden face. The evidence offers a more difficult responsibility: remember each household without forcing every door into the same hand.

Sources for Chapter One

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