

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Baronne and Carondelet

Two major thoroughfares in downtown New Orleans, Baronne and Carondelet streets, had their origins during Spain's colonial rule over Louisiana. France had secretly ceded to Spain the Isle of Orleans, which included the Crescent City, and the area of Louisiana west of the Mississippi River. When some of the French colonists learned of the transfer in 1764, they became furious and drove out the Spanish governor. But Spain sent Alejandro O'Reilly to put down the rebellion and take firm control of its new possession in 1769.

The Spanish made a number of great decisions in governing Louisiana, including allowing some 4,000 Acadian (Cajun) refugees from Nova Scotia to settle and prosper in the colony. British troops had driven them from their homes in eastern Canada, and in South Louisiana they settled chiefly along the Teche, Lafourche, and Vermilion bayous. Louisiana prospered under Spain's colonial administration. The government was stable, and business and commerce were encouraged.

During America's Revolutionary War (1775-1783), the Spanish allowed agents of the Continental Congress to use New Orleans as a base to ship supplies up the Mississippi and Ohio rivers to the struggling Thirteen Colonies. A good deal of financial aid was arranged through intermediary Oliver Pollock. These activities more-or-less coincided with the term of Bernardo de Gálvez as Spanish governor of Louisiana (1773-1783), who greatly aided the American colonies in their fight for independence from Britain. Gálvez defeated the British at Manchac, Baton Rouge and Natchez (in 1779) and defeated British forces at Mobile (in 1780) and Pensacola (in 1781), reconquering Florida for Spain.

Francisco Luis Hector, barón de Carondelet (born in 1748 of Flemish descent in Noyelles-sur-Mer, Flanders) was named governor of El Salvador in 1789, and was a Knight of Malta. After his term had ended, Spanish authorities named Carondelet governor of the Spanish

colonies of Louisiana and West Florida from 1791 to 1797.

The Carondelet Canal, also known as New Orleans' Old Basin Canal, was begun under Governor Carondelet's order in June of 1794, and was in operation until 1938. The 1.6-mile long canal was dug for the purpose of draining the vast swamps in the rear of the city, and the governor also believed that by bringing the waters of Bayou St. John into a "turning basin" close to the city "ramparts" he would greatly facilitate the commerce of New Orleans. The canal commenced at Bayou St. John, which in turn connected with Lake Pontchartrain, and continued inland to what was then the back end of town, just behind the *Vieux Carré* in the *Faubourg Tremé*. The banks along the canal were once known as the "Carondelet Walk".

Besides having a canal and a street named in his honor, the barón de Carondelet had a wife who would also have a major downtown street a block away named for her. A "*baronne*" in Spanish is a baroness – a baron's wife or widow. Baronne Street is named for the governor's spouse, María de la Concepción Castaños y Aragorri. The baronial couple had wed years before in Barcelona, Spain, in 1777.

It is said that the Baron de Carondelet maintained a hunting lodge on Duck Lake, which was a weed-choked muddy pond popular for hunting geese and snipe in the vicinity of Carondelet and Poydras Streets. The Baroness "planted a rose garden in the Ville Gravier" on what is now Baronne Street, but (as John Chase writes), "the only thing to take root was her name". The "Ville Gravier" was renamed the Faubourg Ste. Marie after Bertrand Gravier's wife died. University Place was once named Philippa (probably only on the surveyor's maps) for the daughter of the Baron and Baroness Carondelet. And as an added historical note, Carondelet, Baronne and Rampart Streets at one time bore the mythical names Apollo, Bacchus and Hercules.

It was during Carondelet's governorship that the governor intrigued with western settlements such as Kentucky in order that they might leave the United States. This brought about Pinckney's Treaty (also known as the Treaty of San Lorenzo, signed in *San Lorenzo de El Escorial* on October 27, 1795), which established intentions of friendship between the United States and Spain. It also spelled out the boundaries of the U.S. with the Spanish colonies and guaranteed the United States navigation rights on the Mississippi River. The two countries agreed on the southern boundary of the United States with the Spanish colonies of East and West Florida.

The Louisiana sugar industry really got serious under Carondelet in 1795, after Étienne de Boré developed a method of granulating sugar commercially on a large scale. Louisiana planters turned to growing sugar cane as a major crop. It all began a few years earlier in 1751

when Jesuit priests planted sugar cane plants, with the help of some experienced field workers, right about where the Jesuit Church now stands on Baronne Street. The cane, known as "*Créole*", was sweet tasting and ideal for chewing. However, it was very susceptible to damaging frosts that occurred in the less than tropical area of New Orleans. The sugar was of lesser quality and could not be shipped back to France until a new cane variety, "*Otaheite*" (Tahiti or *Bourbon* cane), was imported from Saint Domingue around 1797. Étienne de Boré's new process was a major force by then.

It is said the *Bourbon* cane was introduced into the West Indies from the island of *Bourbon* (now called *Réunion* Island, in the Indian Ocean off Madagascar), but came originally from the coast of *Malabar* in Southern India, where it was found growing spontaneously. Some suspect it was in reality none other than the *Tibboo Leeut* of Singapore (sometimes called the "*Otaheite*" cane) that thrived in its new environment somewhat altered by the difference in soil and climate. *Tibboo* is the Malay name for sugar cane.

When Carondelet's term as governor of Louisiana came to an end, he was named President of *La Real Audiencia de Quito* in Ecuador from 1799 until his death in 1807. The *Palacio de Carondelet*, or the Carondelet Palace, is today the seat of government in the Republic of Ecuador, located in the historical center of the city of Quito.

But the most remarkable thing about Carondelet is that, like the "*Otaheite*" cane, it becomes *Bourbon* when it continues on the other side of Canal Street.

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