

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*

By Ned Hémard

### **New Orleans' Title to Albania**

Albania, nestled between the Adriatic and Ionian Seas, was known in ancient times as Illyria. Shakespeare would go on to use this romantic setting for his play, "Twelfth Night". History records an Illyrian tribe known as the *Albanoi* living there in the second century, but by medieval times these Albanians referred to themselves as *Arbëresh* (or *Arbreshe*).

People of Albanian ancestry have played a significant role in the history of New Orleans, most notably after the influx of immigrants from a village in Sicily named *Contessa Entellina*. The town had its beginnings as a military garrison of *Arbreshe* soldiers and their families in the years 1450-1462. While Skanderbeg (the Dragon of Albania) was fighting off the Turks back home, these Albanian soldiers were sent to Sicily to help Alfonso V (King of Aragon, Naples and Sicily) defeat some rebellious barons of Naples. Soon afterward, more permanent structures were completed on property acquired from Count Alfonso Cardona. More *Arbreshe* and Greek settlers came in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.

The town was officially founded in 1467 and named for the Contessa Cardona-Peralta dei Colonna. Skanderbeg died the following year, leaving the door open to Turkish rule. The *Entellina* was added to the town's name in the nineteenth century to signify its location near the site of an ancient Trojan military fortress named *la Rocca di Entella*.

Beginning in the 1850s many *Contessioti* (or citizens of *Contessa*) immigrated to many cities in the United States, but most made their way to New Orleans. They worked hard and prospered in the Crescent City, bringing with them their culture, religion, language and dreams of a better life. The street names of *Contessa Entellina* are names all too familiar as family names of New Orleans: *Vias Schiro, Ciaccio, Clesi, Sciambra* and *Cuccia*. In 1886, the *Contessa Entellina* Society was formed in New Orleans to preserve the rich *Arbreshe* heritage.

So how is it that the City of New Orleans put Albania up for auction in 1957? Well, it had every right to. It had clear title. It was, after all, bequeathed to the city in 1912. Simply stated, Albania was not the country on the shores of the Adriatic but a stately plantation home on the banks of Bayou Teche. And once again, geopolitics played a part.

Francois Charles Grévenberg was made a Spanish Don and acquired a land grant of 10,000 acres for meritorious military service to Spain during its war with the English in 1780. This land near Jeanerette, Louisiana, became known as Albania Plantation, as well as "Little Kingdom". Fire destroyed the original home in the 1830s, but Don Grévenberg's son, Charles Alexandre Grévenberg (1797-1851) would between 1837 and 1842 construct a magnificent Greek Revival edifice almost completely of cypress milled on the property. He was a most successful and innovative sugar baron. His son (also named Charles Alexandre) took over upon his father's death, cultivating 3,000 acres of sugar cane, 1,000 acres of indigo and much additional acreage to other crops. Life on the new Albania Plantation was certainly sugarcoated, but then the Civil War came.

Charles Alexandre Grévenberg, *père et fils*, had both attended Yale University. It was there that Charles *fils* met a Jamaican sugar planter named Isaac Delgado. To help the Confederate cause, Charles and his mother mortgaged Albania Plantation in 1861 to help fund Nathan Bedford Forrest's cavalry. A breeder of thoroughbreds, Charles donated almost his entire stock of mature Arabians to Colonel Forrest's regiment. He then signed on as the Colonel's aide-de-camp and died after being wounded during a cavalry charge near Fallen Timbers at Shiloh in 1862.

Things were difficult for his family, but the loan was liquidated before the end of the war. The need for working capital, however, had Albania once again mortgaged to Delgado and his brother, Samuel. A storm destroyed the sugar cane crop in 1884, and the Delgados foreclosed the following year.

Isaac Delgado's name is well known in New Orleans for his legacy that funded the city's art museum

(now known as the New Orleans Museum of Art) and the Delgado Community College. A large part of this legacy was the Grévemberg family's Albania Plantation.

Direct descendant of Albania's builder, Colonel Francis C. Grevemberg became Superintendent of the Louisiana State Police, raided gambling establishments, ran for governor and was the subject of a Hollywood movie on his life.

Isaac Delgado died in 1912, leaving Albania Plantation and the rest of his estate to the City of New Orleans. In that same year, Turkish rule finally ended in Albania.

In 1957, the city auctioned off the Albania plantation house to James and Emily Cyr Bridges. She was the daughter of Lieutenant Governor Paul Cyr, and she and her husband turned Albania into an antiquarian's delight. When James Bridges died in 1968 in an accident, Emily's interest waned and Albania slipped once more into disrepair. She died in 2003.

The current owner of Albania is the famed New York painter, Hunt Slonem. Considered as one of the world's most renowned living artists, he was just the person to restore this historical gem to its former glory.

For "All The King's Men" (James Carville, executive producer), Albania served as the Stanton home in the 2006 version of Robert Penn Warren's classic political novel. With its original entrance facing Bayou Teche, the mansion was ideal for the scene where Jude Law arrives by water.

Although the city sold the plantation house, it didn't sell *all* of Albania. It continues to operate the sugar plantation through the Delgado-Albania Plantation Commission ... still a sweet deal for New Orleans.

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