

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

### Chantilly Lace, But No Pretty Face

It would come as no surprise to many that on any given evening some individual would be making his way down New Orleans' famous Bourbon Street with "an almost stupid foolishness, an indomitable obstinacy" or "an insatiable self-interest". Yet they might be intrigued to discover that Saint-Simon (renowned French writer of memoirs), used those very words to describe Louis Henri Joseph, Duc de Bourbon et d'Enghien, Prince de Condé (the very man for whom Bourbon Street was named).

Born in 1692, the Duke of Bourbon was head of the cadet Bourbon-Condé branch of the French royal house from 1710 until his death in 1740. He was the son of Louis III de Bourbon, Prince de Condé and Louise-Francoise, Louis XIV's illegitimate daughter. Louis II, known as the Great Condé, was his great grandfather. Deaths in the French royal family propelled *Monsieur le Duc* (a title applied mainly to him and not the other dukes) to a high hereditary standing in the line of succession (just below King Louis XV and the Duc d'Orléans).

The Duke has been described as "moderately good looking as a young man, but being over-tall he afterwards began to stoop", and this is said to have caused him to become "as thin and dry as a chip of wood". And due to a hunting accident as a young man "when the Duc de Berry put out one of his eyes", he was disfigured in his facial appearance.

Louise-Francoise, mother of the duke, had as brothers the Duc du Maine and the Comte de Toulouse. Her sister was married to the Duke of Chartres. These siblings were each the illegitimate offspring of Louis XIV and his mistress, Madame de Montespan. The names Dumaine, Toulouse and Chartres accompany Bourbon in the street nomenclature of the New Orleans French Quarter. John Chase in his "Frenchman, Desire, Good Children" explains how on the original city map either John Law or engineer Adrien de Pauger decided to place the royal bastards du Maine and Toulouse on either side of Orleans (the Regent in the center) with alternating saints between them.

The Duc d'Orléans had become Regent just three years before the founding of New Orleans when Louis XV was only five years old. The Duke of Bourbon was included in the first Regency Council, and in 1718 he replaced the Duc du Maine as superintendent of the of the king's education (and both du Maine and Toulouse were demoted). And he struck it rich by speculating (if you call it that) in John Law's paper money banking scheme known as the *Système* (1716-1720). He bought paper notes from the bank and redeemed them on March 3, 1720, for twenty five million livres in gold. Most of the other investors lost everything, for the bank failed later that day for lack of reserves. The duke, however, profited enough from Law's enterprise to refurbish and rebuild the *Château de Chantilly*.

The chateau's history dates back over two millennia when a native of Roman Gaul named Cantilius constructed a fortified villa there. The town of Chantilly is named for him and is located just north of Paris. In the 17th century it began making its fine handmade bobbin lace, but the silk laces produced in the 18th century gained Chantilly lace its fame. One can just imagine *Monsieur le Duc* in a resplendent satin coat with Chantilly lace sleeves.

The grounds at Chantilly already had a famous menagerie, which philosopher John Locke had visited (and took an interest in its birds of prey). In 1719, the duke began to embellish the estate at Chantilly with the *Grandes Écuries* (Great Stables), for legend has it that he believed that he would some day be reincarnated as a horse. He asked architect Jean Aubert to create something suitable to his rank, and the 186 meter long stables are considered by many to be the most beautiful in the world. The duke imported over 150 fine horses from England, and entertained the Regent's daughter with a fabulous party at the chateau that lasted five days.

The Regency ended in 1723 when the king reached the age of majority. The Duke of Bourbon then served as the king's *Premiere Ministre* until 1726.

There are those who believe that Bourbon Street was named for the Kentucky whiskey, or that "Chantilly Lace" is only a song title. Many know of the hit song recorded by a young man from Sabine, Texas, named J. P. Richardson, Jr. Better known as "The Big Bopper", he perished in a plane crash along with Buddy Holly and Ritchie Valens on February 3, 1959 ("the day the music died").

Bourbon County, Kentucky, came into being over three score years after Bourbon Street (yet it was named for the French royal family). The area would be divided into other counties, but the "Old Bourbon" region was the source of that excellent American corn whiskey known the world over as Bourbon.

Bourbon Street visitors have been entertained by artists as unique as Al Hirt and Clarence "Frogman" Henry; and the street has been home to people as different as "Evangeline the Oyster Girl" to Lindy Boggs (serving in the House of Representatives and as U.S. Ambassador to the Vatican). This historic thoroughfare was once punctuated by the city's magnificent French Opera House, and is home today to the fine dining of Galatoire's.

And Bourbon Street has the distinction of being featured in the James Bond movie "Live and Let Die", followed by the Duke of Bourbon's chateau and Great Stables appearing in "A View to a Kill". In these and the other Bond films, 007 utilized a much more sophisticated way of expressing, "Oh, Baby! You know what I like!"

## **NED HÉMARD**

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