

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*

*By Ned Hémard*

### A Most Memorable Year

In 1840, the population of New Orleans reached 102,192, making it the third largest city in the United States. New York was first and number two Baltimore was ahead of the Crescent City by a mere 120 people according to U.S. Census figures.

The explosive growth was a result of the increasing importance of the Mississippi River trade. 1840's steamship arrivals were 1,573 strong, and the freight tonnage had increased from 67,560 tons in 1814 (the year before the Battle of New Orleans) to 537,400 tons of recorded freight in 1840.

An important vessel arrived on January 8, 1840, at the Carrollton Wharf. Aboard the Steamer *Vicksburg* was Andrew Jackson, now an ex-president, disembarking for the 25th anniversary celebration of the victory over British forces at the Battle of New Orleans. He was on hand the following day for the laying of a cornerstone in the *Place d'Armes* for the base of his uncompleted equestrian statue by Clark Mills. The park is today Jackson Square.

While in town Jackson sat for a portrait by Edward Dalton Marchant, which served as the basis for a watercolor on ivory likeness of "Old Hickory" by James Tooley, Jr., now in the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C. Marchant painted other presidents, including Lincoln and John Quincy Adams.

John Quincy Adams was known as "Old Man Eloquent" and he accepted a sensational legal case in 1840. The year before, Africans being transported aboard *La Amistad* from Havana, Cuba, were led in a revolt by one of their fellow captives Sengbe Pieh (known in America as Joseph Cinqué). The ship's navigator tricked them on their course for home and freedom, and instead they were taken to Connecticut to be sold as slaves. Adams' efforts led the United States Supreme Court to issue a final verdict in the Amistad Case: the captives were free!

Today the Amistad Research Center at Tulane University is the nation's largest independent archives of African American history and culture, as well as that of other ethnic groups.

Another fascinating bit of African American history took place in New Orleans in 1840. Jules Lion (d. 1866), an excellent artist, lithographer and free person of color, is credited with introducing the new Daguerreotype process in New Orleans. After having returned to the city from France, he organized on March 15, 1840, the first public exhibition of "the 'magic box' invented by Monsieur Daguerre in Paris" (Anne Rice's description in her 1840s novel about *gens de couleur libres* entitled "Feast of All Saints"). It is extraordinary that Lion became the city's first Daguerreian in 1840, for the process had been invented just the year before by chemist and artist Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre. An image produced directly upon a highly polished plate of photo sensitized silver followed by exposure to slightly heated mercury fumes, it was then placed under glass enclosed in a velvet-lined folding case. This early photographic method had no negative and couldn't be reproduced, but Frederick Douglass saw its democratizing effects. To him it was a means to have "impartial portraits". Lion went back to his lithographs. He did three portraits of Andrew Jackson and a stunning lithograph of the St. Louis Cathedral just as it looked in 1840.

Other free persons of color were active in 1840 when they organized the Negro Philharmonic Society led by black violinist Constantin Debarque.

And it was in April of 1840 that culinary history was made. A 16-year-old son of a Marseilles wool merchant opened a small boarding house on Rue St. Louis that would become Antoine's Restaurant. Antoine Alciatore founded the oldest restaurant in the city, as well as the oldest family run restaurant in the United States. Internationally famous and renowned for its many signature recipes, Antoine's continues its long tradition of excellence after some rough treatment from Hurricane Katrina.

The Irish of New Orleans saw the construction of St. Patrick's Church at 724 Camp Street. Architect James Gallier, Sr., completed the Gothic Revival structure in 1840. Yellow fever had greatly diminished the Irish work force that dug the New Basin Canal, but in 1840 the 60 foot wide canal to the lake was complete enough to accommodate shallow draft vessels drawing six feet. Over the next decade the canal was widened to 100 feet and enlarged to 12 feet deep.

1840 saw the birth of Godchaux's Department Store on Canal Street when Leon Godchaux arrived in Louisiana from Heberville, France. He started off small selling his wares along the Louisiana roads, and soon his business flourished. He also owned several sugar plantations with refining capabilities, including sites in Napoleonville, Raceland and Reserve. The Department Store was also known for its refined style, and it survived until 1986 as one of the favorite places for New Orleanians to shop.

An 1840 event in another city would have a profound effect on New Orleans culture for many years to come. The Cowbellion de Rakin Society of Mobile, Alabama, presented its first parade with floats depicting a specific theme: "Heathen Gods and Goddesses". This was followed by a masked ball. The Mistick Krewe of Comus would come to New Orleans seventeen years later using the Cowbellions as a model for its organization and all future Mardi Gras krewes.

The Cowbellions had begun in Mobile some ten years before their 1840 parade when a somewhat intoxicated cotton broker named Michael Krafft and six of his buddies "borrowed" rakes, bells, pitchforks and hoes from a local hardware store, marched down the street and caused a commotion. Their celebrations were on New Year's Eve, but New Orleans adopted the concept to Mardi Gras. The Mobile group ventured to New Orleans for events even before the founding of Comus. The "New Orleans Daily Delta" announced a Christmas Eve ball in 1855: "The Cowbellions. – These mysterious individuals have made full preparations to give a series of Mask and Fancy Dress Balls, at the neat little Pelican theatre."

And today, since Comus no longer rolls its splendid parade on Mardi Gras evening, a foot parade emerges around twilight from Antoine's *en route* to the Comus Ball. History is made once again at the 1840 restaurant Antoine Alciatore began on St. Louis Street. Some doubloons and cups are tossed to the crowds, and some *papier-mâché* heads are to be seen (and perhaps some bells, rakes and hoes). Can you imagine rakes and hoes in the French Quarter?

## **NED HÉMARD**

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