

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémond

Generals on Horseback

General Jackson (although from an earlier war) strikes a great equestrian pose in front of the St. Louis Cathedral, while the city's Creole General Beauregard is in the saddle guarding the Bayou St. John entrance to City Park and the New Orleans Museum of Art. Although not astride his horse "Traveller", Robert E. Lee is standing tall upon a 60-foot high marble Doric column in the center of what used to be Tivoli Circle facing northward in the direction of his former adversary. He has a commanding view of the Crescent City and is situated comfortably high in case of rising floodwaters. He was after all a member of the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers.

The St. Charles streetcars circle their way past the Circle Bar and around this impressive monument on their way to Carrollton, and it is Mardi Gras parades instead of military ones that file past the general now during Carnival. Most people do not realize that Lee's Union counterpart and President of the United States, Ulysses S. Grant, visited New Orleans on more than one occasion.

He came to the city not only before, but also after and during the war. His first visit was in 1845 shortly after traveling to St. Louis, Missouri, to ask the parents of Julia Dent (his future wife) for her hand in marriage. Grant's Fourth Infantry had been sent to New Orleans in July to await orders, and in September he sailed from the great port city for Corpus Christi, Texas. Soon he was promoted to a full second lieutenant. Although a fearless and expert horseman, Grant was assigned as a regimental quartermaster in charge of supplies. He served in Mexico under Zachary Taylor and Winfield Scott, and he did see action in battle.

Between the Mexican War and the Civil War, New Orleans saw a different kind of action. Two thoroughbred brothers, "Lexington" and "Lecomte", sons of "Boston", had major match races in New Orleans at the Metairie Track in 1854 and in 1855. "Lecomte" won the first year, but "Lexington" won the rematch. "Lexington" went on to a stunning career as a breeding stallion, and he topped the sires list of winners for sixteen years (fourteen of those years in a row!). One of his sons was "Cincinnati", General Grant's battle charger and a gift from an admirer. Grant believed this "was the finest horse he had ever seen" and turned down \$10,000 in gold for him. There is a fine statue of the general mounted atop his favorite steed at Vicksburg, Mississippi, the town he worked so hard to besiege (May 25 to July 4, 1863).

After he was victorious, he returned to New Orleans (but it was almost his last visit). And it was a horse that almost proved his undoing. It was in August of 1863 (soon after Vicksburg) that Grant came to strategize with General Nathaniel Banks about movements west of the Mississippi River. He reviewed Banks' troops on September 4, 1863, at Carrollton, when the horse he was given to ride went wild. Spooked by a streetcar, the large and nervous horse ran off with him. In his "Memoirs", Grant wrote that the horse "was vicious and but little used, and on my return to New Orleans ran away and, shying at a locomotive in the street, fell, probably on me. I was rendered insensible, and when I regained consciousness I found myself in a hotel near by with several doctors attending me." The general said his "leg was swollen from the knee to the thigh" and this swelling "almost to the point of bursting, extended along the body up to the arm-pit. He described his pain as "beyond endurance".

He was immobilized in the hotel bed for over a week until a litter could carry him to a steamboat for passage back to Vicksburg. There he "remained unable to move for some time afterwards." The formidable horseman was on crutches for at least two months after the event.

This did not end Grant's love affair with horses. Two of his other horses were "Jeff Davis" and "Egypt". They along with "Cincinnati" all lived in the White House stables when Grant became president in 1869. The "vicious" New Orleans entry, however, was scratched.

Grant owned many horses in his lifetime, and "Jeff Davis" was so named because Grant acquired it during his Vicksburg Campaign from the Mississippi plantation of the President of the Confederacy. Coincidentally, Lee's horse "Traveller" was first named "Jeff Davis" and later "Greenbrier". Lee renamed him "Traveller" for his rapid, springy step.

Grant also had a horse named "Butcher Boy" and two stallions that were presented to him by the Sultan of Turkey. These Arabians were named "Leopard" and "Linden Tree".

Grant came back to New Orleans after his presidency, even though Comus of 1873 portrayed him as his Darwinian missing link, a lowly tobacco grub. He enjoyed his later visit dining out at Spanish Fort on the lakefront, and he was also welcomed as a guest at the Boston Club.

"Cincinnati" was the horse Grant rode to Wilmer McLean's house at Appomattox on April 9, 1865, where Robert E. Lee surrendered. "Traveller" then carried Lee home to his farm and other horses. When the shooting finally stopped, Lee's famous iron gray gelding would carry him 100 miles from Richmond, Virginia, to Lexington (great name for a racehorse), where he would serve as president of Washington and Lee. "Traveller" was buried with honors next to Lee's Chapel on the university grounds, where the general is entombed.

Now it's up to you to figure out: "Who's buried in Grant's Tomb?"

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