

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Profiles in Clay

The name is "Bond ... Flemish Bond".

The name is not "Flemish" because of Ian Fleming, and (Sorry, James) what is being talked about here is not easily shaken nor stirred.

If one feels as if he has come up against a brick wall, he is in the right place. For the subject matter in question is "bricks".

A visit to 820 St. Louis Street will demonstrate that "Flemish Bond" has a solid presence in the French Quarter. Constructed in 1831 of hard brick from Philadelphia (more durable and of lighter hue than soft local brick), the Hermann-Grima House's bricks are laid out in "Flemish Bond". This is when the brick courses run in an alternating pattern of headers (the short ends) and stretchers (the long sides), achieving an attractive and sturdy result. Remember that (unlike the running bond on modern dwellings which is only one brick thick) these older homes are two bricks deep. The headers and stretchers alternating every other brick offer sturdy construction. Very often seen in New Orleans is "American Bond", or "common bond", where stretchers run for five courses (sometimes more) before an entire row of headers appears.

Now that we've sufficiently bonded, let's travel back in time to the village of Fochabers in Moray, Scotland. There a stubborn young man named Alexander Milne had obtained employment as a footman to the local Duke. With a fine head of red hair, Milne also had a head like a brick. He refused to trim his ginger locks to wear the powdered wig required of him, so he was fired. It was off to America for him, where by 1790 he had settled in New Orleans. There he dealt in hardware and purchased significant tracts of land along Bayou St. John and on the lakefront, which he wisely predicted would gain value. He also made a great deal of money from his brick-making business, for the city was going through a major rebuilding period after the great fire of 1788. In fact, there were two major fires, and the Spanish established new building codes requiring native brick walls with tile roofs. When the old Scot died at age 96, he had bequeathed a significant portion of his estate to house New Orleans orphans and \$100,000 to build Milne's Free School back in Fochabers.

Those early Creole cottages built after the great fires were constructed of *brique entre poteaux*, or brick between posts. Since local brick was soft, the brick surface was almost always covered with either plaster or weather boards.

Another early name in the brick business was that of Évariste Blanc. The 1842 City Directory lists his brickyard at the corner of Julia and St. John Streets. In those days, that was located right by the turning basin of the New Basin Canal. Évariste Blanc lived in the Faubourg St. John and, in 1855, Esplanade Avenue was opened to the Bayou on land obtained from the Blanc family. That same year, Fanny Labatut Blanc (now widow of Évariste) offered a piece of ground (along with 300,000 bricks) for the erection of a parish church. Not too much happened until 1904 when Mother Frances Cabrini, who would later become America's first canonized saint, went searching up and down Esplanade looking for land to build an orphanage. This project of hers accelerated the founding of Holy Rosary Parish and the use of

the original Blanc donation for that purpose. Blanc daughter, Sylvanie Blanc Denègre, was active in seeing this plan come to fruition. But she died in 1910 at the age of 93, before the final church building was completed.

Perhaps the most recognizable name in bricks around New Orleans (if one does not count Elmer's "Gold Brick" line of chocolate) is the "St. Joe Brick". With "St. Joe" boldly stamped on each brick, they are frequently apparent among paving bricks Uptown and in the Garden District. They have been used in many modern buildings from the Hockaday School in Dallas to the Savannah Hilton in Georgia. Irish-born Joseph McCarron was the original "St. Joe" who began his brick enterprise in St. Tammany Parish. Peter W. Schneider acquired the plant in 1891, and it is today one of the few brick plants to use the soft-mud process (where the clay is formed into bricks within wooden molds). Its distinctive characteristics, color and texture make this brick popular with architects around the country.

In 1886 on Front Street in Slidell, another hand-operated brick plant was established by Swiss-born Fritz Salmen. As his business prospered, brothers Albert and Jacob joined him (with lumber and shipbuilding added to the company's activities). The Schneider family acquired this brick plant for their "St. Joe" operation in 1931. And "Camp Salmen" has been enjoyed by thousand of Scouts through the years.

Providing high-quality bricks from the Faubourg Delachaise (bounded by Louisiana Avenue, Magazine, Tchoupitoulas and Peniston Streets) was the Delachaise Brick Works on Foucher Street. This facility occupied a four-block area according to the Robinson's Atlas of 1883, which showed it across from another four-block area (closer to town) that was Delachaise Park. On Charles Zimpel's older map in 1834, this was the location of the Delachaise Plantation house. Most of the homes in this neighborhood were built between 1855 and the turn of the century.

Robinson's Atlas also showed a "Brick-Yard Street" in New Orleans running from St. Bernard to Bayou St. John, between the Fair Grounds and what is today the I-610.

It is said that Voodoo gatherings once took place in an abandoned brickyard on Dumaine Street. Police harassment drove the participants further out into the vicinity of Milne's property, near Bayou St. John and along the shores of Lake Pontchartrain. Bonfires blazed, drums pounded and dancers gyrated to those early rhythms. It's a common bond deep within each native son and daughter.

Allen Toussaint said, "Those things that are most dear cannot be drowned – the grooves and the second line, the way you feel inside when you hear Professor Longhair. Even when you're sitting down, that's in you."

In his song "Brickyard Blues" he wrote:

"Play somethin' sweet, play somethin' mellow
Play somethin' I can sink my teeth in like Jello
Play somethin' I can understand
Play me some Brickyard Blues"

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