

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Medical Charges

Francois Charles Delery was born on January 28, 1815, in St. Charles Parish. His ancestors were among the first European settlers in the greater New Orleans area. He left Louisiana for France in 1829 where he was educated in the Medical School of Paris. Returning to the Crescent City in 1842, he became well respected in his profession. He was a regular contributor to the city newspapers on a wide range of practical subjects, and after the epidemic of 1867 he wrote a book with the purpose of destroying the myth of Creole immunity to yellow fever. He served as City Physician in the years leading up to the Civil War and was president of the Board of Health from 1857-1858. He even wrote a one-act comedy.

With all the characteristics of a Renaissance man, he also had the reputation for being an inveterate practical joker. He devised a plan to present a newly purchased goose heart to cardiologist Joseph Rouanet for his diagnostic appraisal. After taking a "gander" at the specimen, Dr. Rouanet subsequently returned a positive exposition of the heart's pediatric abnormalities. Dr. Delery followed up this result with an essay entitled "The Doctor and the Goose" (which prompted being challenged to a duel). Both doctors fired and missed on the first round. Fortunately honor was satisfied, and no one was hurt. Perhaps they enjoyed some *pâté de foie gras* after tempers subsided.

Another great New Orleans physician could be called "one gentleman of Verona", for that was where he was born on July 31, 1805. Of Austrian parentage, Karl Aloysius Luzenberg was educated at Landau and at Weissenburg College in Alsace. In 1819, he and his father (who had been a commissary in the Austrian army) arrived in Philadelphia. He attended lectures at Jefferson Medical College in 1825 and came to New Orleans in 1829. On a European visit from 1832-1834, he was made a corresponding member of the Academy of Paris. He continued to perform successfully a multitude of extremely difficult operations.

Dr. Luzenberg was one of the original professors who signed the prospectus creating the Medical College of Louisiana (later Tulane University). He played a vital role (along with Dr. Thomas Hunt) in the founding of the college. He served as the school's first Professor of Surgery and succeeded Hunt as Dean in 1835, serving until 1839. In 1843, he founded and presided over the Medico-chirurgical Society. Dr. Luzenberg founded the Franklin Infirmary in New Orleans and served for many years on the board of Charity Hospital. He is credited with being the first doctor in North America to prevent the pitting associated with small pox by the exclusion of light.

Still, he did have his detractors. After personal claims of a successful cataract operation, some of his contemporaries commented that "his merits lie within very narrow limits" and that he is "abrupt in speech, uncouth in manners, irritable and petulant in temper, and arrogant and overbearing in his demeanor". To Dr. Luzenberg, these sounded like fighting words. He had handled any number of these previous challenges before, but they were wisely settled short of duels. Some even alleged that he honed his marksmanship on suspended cadavers. Members of the medical society group that made these numerous comments were "called out" by Dr. Luzenberg, but they refused to duel. The Doctor's second challenged one of them himself, and he also declined to fight. For this the cheek-turner was called "a consummate coward and a dastardly poltroon", but to no avail. The whole thing became more and more involved until finally the authorities stepped in to cool things down.

Then there's the story of Dr. Samuel Choppin who was born in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, on October 20, 1828. He and Dr. John Foster were "competing" house surgeons at Charity Hospital in the 1850s. "Competing" doesn't begin to describe how intense it became between these two combatants. They each claimed to be caring for a wounded law student and, in the process, began tearing up each other's prescriptions. These actions were followed by fistcuffs bedside with the patient helplessly awaiting attention. Off the fighting physicians went, meeting outside the hospital, to draw their weapons. Two shots rang out. Foster's aim was good, and his first shot severed Dr. Choppin's jugular vein. Choppin's shot grazed his own hand. Then Foster shot through Choppin's thigh. They each missed each other on the third round, after which Choppin pulled out his Bowie knife. Finally some medical students separated the angry surgeons. Dr. Choppin pulled through his ordeal, but the neglected law student died of his wounds.

"Ignorance of the law is no excuse."

NED HÉMARD

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