

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*

*By Ned Hémar*

### **Egyptian Visitors**

For two-and-a-half years beginning in November 1976 until April 1979, fifty-five priceless treasures from the tomb of Egyptian Pharaoh *Tutankhamen* toured the United States (leaving their home in Egypt's National Museum in Cairo for only the fifth time since their amazing discovery in 1922). New Orleans was one of only six host cities for the U.S. exhibition, and King Tut's 1977 visit to the New Orleans Museum of Art (NOMA) exceeded all expectations. Tut fever swept the country, and the New Leviathan Oriental Fox Trot Orchestra entertained locals in 1977 with Harry von Tilzer's composition, "Old King Tut". Steve Martin (and his Toot Uncommons) debuted the hit song "King Tut" on the April 22, 1978, episode of Saturday Night Live. "He gave his life for tourism."

That was certainly the case in the Crescent City where the boy king drew 225,000 visitors per month for a total attendance of 900,000. This generated \$70 million in tourist revenue for New Orleans.

In October 2003, there was another wonderful exhibit that came to NOMA. With 143 objects on display from 1550 B.C. to 332 B.C., "The Quest for Immortality" was a larger exhibit but without quite the same stir. The artifacts focused on Egyptian burial processes, mummies, rituals and tenets associated with the afterlife. There was a full-scale reconstruction of the sarcophagus chamber from the tomb of *Thutmose III* (1479-1425 B.C.) and an unwrapped mummy (*Nefer Atehtu*).

But New Orleans had witnessed Egyptian visitors a long time before. During the War Between the States, a Yankee sea captain dropped anchor at Alexandria, Egypt, with a half-empty ship. He purchased an impressive quartzite funerary statue of *Nedjem* (meaning "sweet one", c. 2500-2350 B.C.), along with some others, to use for ballast. This statue had been placed in the Temple of *Ptah* in ancient Memphis, but its eternal resting spot was disturbed when it was excavated around 1840. On its way back to the States, the ship was captured by

Confederate forces. Its cargo ended up (along with the Egyptian statue of *Nedjem*) in the New Orleans Custom House on Canal and Decatur Streets. That was only appropriate since this impressive structure has at its entrance four imposing columns surmounted by lotus-type Egyptian capitals like those of the Temple of Luxor.

After the Civil War, *Nedjem* went to Boston, where it stayed in a garden for years (followed by a stay in the collection of Boston's Museum of Fine Arts). In 1975, it was sold to the University of Memphis, along with forty-three other artifacts. These Egyptian antiquities form the core of the permanent collection of the Institute of Egyptian Art and Archaeology. That, too, is appropriate since Memphis, Tennessee, is named for the Old Kingdom of Egypt's ancient capital. And *Nedjem* was from ancient Memphis, whose ruins lie twelve miles (20 km) south of Cairo on the Nile's west bank.

One Egyptian visitor, *Aedes aegypti* (commonly known as the yellow fever mosquito), invaded the cities of New Orleans and Memphis with a vengeance. An epidemic in Haiti in 1802 helped decimate an army of forty thousand troops sent to the island by Napoleon and hastened the Louisiana Purchase. The 1853 outbreak in Louisiana claimed almost 8,000 residents of New Orleans. Numerous outbreaks of yellow fever hit Memphis during the 1870s, culminating in the unsparing 1878 epidemic. It claimed over 5,000 Memphian lives, with another 20,000 fatalities along the extent of the Mississippi River Valley. Recent years have brought another unwanted Egyptian mosquito, carrier of the West Nile Virus.

Besides the Custom House, Egyptian architectural elements can be seen around the Crescent City. Cypress Grove Cemetery, where Canal Street ends amidst its Cities of the Dead, is most noted for its distinctive Egyptian pylons. Then there's the former sixth precinct police station on the 2200 block of Rousseau Street near Jackson Avenue in the Irish Channel. Once a courthouse of the City of Lafayette, it was built in 1836 and remodeled in 1843 by James Gallier, Sr. Notable for its Egyptian Revival architecture (added by Richard Fletcher in the 1890s), it has stunning columns with papyrus capitals, large corbels at the cornices and three winged solar disks above the door and windows (symbols of protection). The Egyptian god *Thoth* is said to have used his magic to change *Horus* into such a sun disk with outstretched wings on either side.

A certain police commissioner of the City of New Orleans may have been impressed by this particular station house, for his sepulchre in Metairie Cemetery is an actual pyramid with a Sphinx in front and a winged solar disk above the entrance. A Ptolemaic figure stands across the portal from the Sphinx. The remarkable gentleman who chose such an incredible resting place was Lucien Bonaparte Brunswig (1854-1943).

Born in Montmédy, Meuse, France, Brunswig emigrated to the United States where this almost penniless farmer's son landed a job as a pharmacist's apprentice. By 1882, George Finlay asked Brunswig to join his wholesale drug firm in New Orleans. The firm prospered and Brunswig became involved in other community affairs besides serving four years as Police Commissioner. Vice President of *L'Athenée Louisianais*, he was also a valued member of the Louisiana Historical Society and vice president of the Board of Trade. He married a local girl, Marguerite Wogan, after the death of his first wife. Finlay died in 1885 and Brunswig took on a new partner in 1887, F. W. Braun, and founded a pharmaceutical distributing company. He set his sites on the nascent California market, dispatching Braun west to Los Angeles. In 1903, Brunswig sold his New Orleans business and he too moved to L. A. to supervise the expansion of his company. After his death, the Brunswig Drug Company merged in 1969 with the Bergen Drug Company to form Bergen-Brunswig. In 1994 the company introduced AccuSource, a state-of-the-art computerized electronic ordering system in conjunction with Apple Computer. Bergen-Brunswig merged in 2001 with the AmeriSource Health Corporation to form AmeriSourceBergen, a \$40 billion a year operation.

Another annual visitor to New Orleans is a familiar tune, Mardi Gras' favorite grand march from the opera *Aïda*, named for an Ethiopian princess enslaved in the court of the Pharaoh. Written by Giuseppe Verdi, it was first performed at the Khedivial Opera House in Cairo on December 24, 1871. Rex would visit New Orleans for the first time less than two months later.

Other New Orleans carnival krewes have an Egyptian influence. *Thoth*, which rolls the Sunday before Mardi Gras, is named for one of the more important deities in the Egyptian pantheon. Depicted with the head of an ibis, he was the heart and tongue of *Ra*. The Krewe of *Osiris* and its beautiful ball take the name of the Egyptian god of the afterlife. *Osiris* was the eldest son of the sky goddess, *Nut*, Earth god, *Geb*. *Osiris* (wed to his sister, *Isis*) is the father of *Horus*. The jackal-headed god *Anubis* was the most important god of the dead before *Osiris* replaced him during the Middle Kingdom. You can see dog statuary in front of some New Orleans homes that resemble this deity, or modern-day Ibizan hounds.

Another krewe that hosts an elegant ball is the "Caliphs of Cairo", named for the Abbasid Caliphs that ruled there from 1261-1517. Lady maskers have their Krewe of Cleopatra, which parades on the New Orleans West Bank. The famous Egyptian monarch put an asp to her breast in Alexandria, named for Alexander the Great.

Alexandria, Louisiana, however has no Egyptian connection. Alexander Fulton was a Pennsylvania businessman who received a large land

grant from Spain in 1785. The town was laid out in 1805 and incorporated in 1818 (the year before Memphis' founding by Andrew Jackson, John Overton and James Winchester) and named for Fulton's infant daughter who had died.

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