

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Felicity's Still a Saint

In the early decades of the nineteenth century, New Orleans experienced a mostly westward expansion upwards along the Mississippi River. As a result, small communities known as *faubourgs* were developed and afterwards absorbed by the ever-expanding city. These new suburbs sprouted up along the river's bank in the vicinity of Delord Street, at Felicity Road, above First Street, in the neighborhood of Toledano and eventually at Upperline Street.

Felicity Road (now Street) was the upriver boundary of the city until 1852, when the area upriver from Felicity Street became the Fourth District of the City of New Orleans. Because Felicity stood as upper boundary of the developing city for over a century, unique buildings were made to accommodate the pie-shaped streets.

Once part of Bienville's vegetable garden, the area between what is now the Pontchartrain Expressway and Felicity was surveyed in 1807 by the noted architect and city planner, Barthélémy Lafon, who was laying out the *Faubourg Marigny* around the same time. His designs crossed the barriers of several plantations (the *Faubourgs Delord, Saulet, LaCourse* and *Annunciation*) to include all properties up to Felicity Street, lining up the streets with the earlier *Faubourg Sainte Marie*. A lover of Greek mythology, Lafon is responsible for naming streets after the nine muses: Calliope, Clio, Erato, Thalia, Melpomene, Terpsichore, Euterpe, Polymnia and Urania.

Jacques François Enoul Livaudais, owner of a plantation measuring about ten arpents on the Mississippi, situated above that of Thomas Saulet, sold on May 12, 1807, to Robin Delogny that half of his property which adjoined Saulet's plantation. It was that very year when Messrs. Delogny and Livaudais hired Mr. Lafon to lay out their properties into lots and squares. Delogny called his subdivision *Faubourg LaCourse* and Livaudais called his *Faubourg Annunciation*.

Faubourg Annunciation extended from *Faubourg LaCourse* to the lower

line of *Faubourg Religieuses* (aka *Faubourg Nuns*), or Felicity Street. It seems that Mr. Livaudais, attorney-in-fact of the religious order of the *Dames des Ursulines* (Ursuline Nuns), owners of the plantation immediately above his, being of a religious nature himself, named his *faubourg* "*Annunciation*", while Mr. Delogny (who was fond of race horses) named his *faubourg* "*LaCourse*" (hence the name Race Street, or *Rue de La Course*). Robin Street is obviously named after Robin Delogny.

Faubourg Religieuses was bounded above by St. Andrew Street and below by Felicity (with St. Mary in the middle). The Ursuline nuns, after deciding not to build a new convent on the site, enlisted Lafon to make a plan of subdivision on September 18, 1810, opening up lots for purchase. By an act of the Legislature dated April 1, 1833, the *Faubourgs Religieuses*, *Lafayette* and *Livaudais* were separated from the City of New Orleans and formed into a distinct corporation called the City of Lafayette, thus narrowing the limits of New Orleans. The City of New Orleans' upper line was at that time Felicity Street with its lower boundary being the *Canal des Pêcheurs* (an earlier name for Canal Street).

The new village of Lafayette was a desired destination for the Americans. Having been outvoted by Creole majorities on the city council, they eagerly flocked to this new haven, building palatial mansions in the area known today as the historic Garden District. This plan of separate government continued until 1852 with the consolidation of the two cities into one. Felicity and the two "sister" streets of the old *Faubourg Nuns*, St. Mary and St. Andrew were actually named for three "sisters" of the Ursuline Order. How that came to be is most interesting.

It all begins with the Ursulines, a Roman Catholic religious order for women founded as the *Company of St. Ursula* in the 1500s by Saint Angela de Merici. The order's primary aim was the education of girls and the care of the sick and needy. In the following century, the Ursuline Sisters were the first Catholic nuns to land in the new world. In 1639, Marie Guyart (who took the name *Marie de l'Incarnation*) and two other Ursulines arrived in Canada. Almost ninety years later, fourteen French Ursuline sisters landed in New Orleans in 1727, the first nuns in what is now the United States.

The Ursuline Convent established in Québec in 1639 by Mother Marie of the Incarnation is the oldest institution of learning for women in North America. Alternately, the old Ursuline Convent in the French Quarter is believed to be the oldest building in the Mississippi Valley and the only structure of the original colony still standing. The earlier New Orleans convent had deteriorated badly by 1745, such that the current building was designed and completed about 1750.

The mission of the Ursulines, sent to New Orleans by Louis XV, was to establish a hospital for poor sick persons and to provide an education for young girls of wealthy families. One notable alumna was the Baroness Pontalba. And yet the nuns understood their purpose was to educate Indian and African-American girls, as well. The Ursulines also worked in health care and established an orphanage, with Sister Francis Xavier as the first woman pharmacist in the New World. They continue today to educate girls and young women of New Orleans.

The New Orleans Ursulines of the 1800s had three capable sisters in their ranks. The first was Mother Superior Sister Ste. Marie Olivière (hence the name St. Mary Street); second was Sister Ste. André Madière, the Convent's *Dépositaire* (St. Andrew Street); and last (but not least), was Sister Ste. Félicité Alzac, Mother Ste. Marie's assistant (Felicity Street). Two other streets nearer the river, Nuns and Religious, are also reminders of when the Ursulines were once property owners in the neighborhood.

An inattentive mapmaker somehow omitted *Sainte* from *Félicité*, but that did not stop Felicity from meaning happiness and bliss. There are three Catholic saints with that name: Felicitas of Padua, a ninth century saint; Saint Felicity, who (along with Saint Perpetua) are third century co-martyrs commemorated by name in the second part of the Canon of the Mass; and Saint Felicitas of Rome, who (after watching each of her seven sons martyred before her eyes) was beheaded at Rome in the year 165. Each of the eight refused to worship pagan gods. This process was anything but blissful. But her unwavering belief in God must have assured her an inner happiness unknown to most.

The patron saint of Sister Ste. Félicité was probably Felicitas of Rome, who was a pious widow deeply devoted to caring for the poor. Also, there is a municipality known as *Sainte-Félicité* on the south shore of the St. Lawrence River in Québec that is named for the martyred Felicitas of Rome.

Today there are new women and men full of missionary zeal. The Felicity Street Redevelopment Project is a non-profit organization dedicated to the revitalization of the Lower St. Charles Corridor neighborhood, an area bounded by St. Charles Avenue (formerly *Cours de Nayades*), Oretha Castle Haley Boulevard (once the vibrant Dryades Street), Calliope Street and Jackson Avenue. Once an integral and vital part of New Orleans life, the area contains stately and significant residential and commercial buildings that are waiting to be reclaimed and provide housing for the re-population of the neighborhood.

Their annual fundraiser and art auction, "Magic in Melpomenia VI" will mark the Felicity Street Redevelopment Project's eleventh year of service to the Lower St. Charles Corridor. This worthy cause will be

hosted at the Pontchartrain, 20131 St. Charles, on May 19, 2011.
John and Bonnie Boyd are this year's Chairs, *felicitystreet@gmail.com*.

A most felicitous time is expected.

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