

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Joe and Rose Kennedy at the Ball

The New Orleans Mint, the only building in America to have served both as a U.S. and Confederate Mint, was built in 1835 during the presidency of Andrew Jackson. He had been a strong proponent for its construction in order to help finance development of the nation's western frontier. As a general in the U.S. Army, Jackson had saved the city from invading British forces on January 8, 1815, in the famous Battle of New Orleans. This National Historic Landmark (currently the oldest surviving structure to have served as a U.S. Mint) operated in the Crescent City as a branch mint from 1838 to 1861 and from 1879 to 1909. During these years of operation, it produced over 427 million silver and gold coins of almost every American denomination, with a total face value of over \$307 million.

In 1854, the federal government hired a young West Point engineer, Louisiana native Pierre Gustave Toutant Beauregard to work on the Mint's physical structure. Seven years later the American Civil War began, with General Beauregard center stage ordering the siege of Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor, South Carolina. It was during the war that this renowned Creole general would secure his place in American history as one of the Confederacy's most capable generals.

After Union forces under Farragut occupied New Orleans in 1862 and raised the U.S. flag atop the Mint, a riverboat gambler and Southern sympathizer named William B. Mumford ascended the roof and tore the flag down and ripped it to shreds. Union General Benjamin Franklin Butler ordered Mumford to be executed, and he was hanged from a flagstaff projecting horizontally from the building. The Mint was closed for most of the Civil War and Reconstruction.

But a few years earlier, the Mint was the scene of much gaiety and excitement. It involved Joe and Rose Kennedy, but not the founding parents of the immensely important political family known as the Kennedy dynasty (one of triumphs and tragedies, assassinations and accidents, politics and a President in 1960). No, this particular event

involved a different Joe and Rose Kennedy, and it took place much earlier: 1850 in New Orleans.

Joseph Kennedy was also the name of the second superintendent of the New Orleans branch mint, serving from 1839 to 1850. He and his family, like other officers, were provided apartments in the mint building. Late in his tenure (his last year), Superintendent Kennedy decided to hold a debutante ball within the Mint for his daughters Rose and Josephine. Debutante balls, it seems, were going on in New Orleans well before the advent of the city's Carnival krewes.

Eliza Ripley, New Orleans socialite and writer born in Lexington, Kentucky, as Eliza Moore Chinn, was the daughter of Judge Richard Henry Chinn and Betsy Holmes. She became Mrs. Ripley upon her second marriage in 1873 to Dwight Ripley of Norwich, Connecticut. She attended this spectacular *soirée* and reported that the Mint was "made ample for the gay festivities by utilizing committee rooms, offices and every apartment that could be diverted for the crowd's comfort — so, we wandered about corridors and spacious rooms, but never beyond the touch of a *gendarme* — officers, soldiers, policemen at every step. These preparations gave a rather regal air to the whole affair."

She also admitted she had "never heard of a society ball in a United States mint building, before nor since, but the Kennedys, who gave this one, were a power in the social world at that time — and ambitious beyond their means. Rose and Josephine, the two oldest of quite a flock of daughters, were debutantes that winter. Both were handsome and accomplished."

Mrs. Ripley (in her *Social Life in Old New Orleans*) opined, "Rose was also a famous pianist, even in those days when every woman strove to excel in music, and it was customary to entertain even a casual caller with a sonata. Gottschalk declared Rose Kennedy rendered his famous 'Bamboula' better than he did himself, and to hear her was to rise and dance."

Of course, Mrs. Ripley was referring to the famous internationally acclaimed musical composer, Louis Moreau Gottschalk.

"Who, she asked the readers, "was at that fancy ball? Everybody who was anybody in the fifties." (The 1850s, that is.) "The Eustises — George and Mathilde, George as 'a learned judge' (he was son of Chief Justice Eustis), and Mathilde in pure white and flowing veil was a bewitching nun. George, years after, married the only child of the banker-millionaire, W. C. Corcoran, in Washington. Mathilde married Alan Johnson, an Englishman."

There was also, she wrote, "Mrs. John Slidell, of 'Mason and Slidell' fame, a 'marquise,' in thread lace and velvet, her sisters, the Misses Deslonde, 'peasant girls of France'." In 1860, P. G. T. Beauregard (who'd worked on fireproofing the Mint and strengthening the basement's structural arches) married one of these Deslonde "peasant girls", the daughter of sugar planter André Deslonde. Her sister, Mathilde Deslonde, had been married since 1835 to John Slidell (later Confederate diplomat to France during the Civil War).

Also at the ball was "Col. and Mrs. John Winthrop, 'gentleman and lady of the nineteenth century,' the jolly colonel announced. Who fails to recall, with a smile, the Winthrops, who lived in Royal Street, near Conti; near neighbors of the — long departed — Bonfords? The genial colonel became a tottering old man, asking his devoted wife 'who and where are we?' before he peacefully faded away. Young De Wolf of Rhode Island, nephew of Col. Winthrop's, 'an Arab sheik,' wore probably the only genuine costume in the room — a flowing robe that was catching in every girl's coiffure, and every man's sword and spurs, in the dance."

Since 1981 the Mint has served as one of five branches of the Louisiana State Museum in the French Quarter. The others are the Cabildo, Presbytère, Madame John's Legacy and the 1850 House (at 523 St. Ann in the Lower Pontalba). Damaged by Hurricane Katrina in 2005, after over two years of renovation and repair, the Mint reopened as a museum in October 2007. Located at 400 Esplanade Avenue, the Mint sits at the northeastern edge of the *Vieux Carré*, which used to encompass the entire city under French and Spanish rule. Back in 1792, the Spanish governor François Louis Hector, Baron de Carondelet, erected Fort San Carlos (later Fort St. Charles) there. The fort was demolished in 1821.

But in 1850, lovely crinoline belles were abundantly present. Eliza Ripley made "no special mention of the chaperons, but, Creole like," she wrote, "they were present in force. Cuthbert Slocomb was a *mousquetaire*, and Augusta, in red and black, 'Diablotan,' a vision of beauty and grace. She married the Urquhart mentioned in 'Musical History of Louisiana,' as the father of Cora Urquhart Potter." Mrs. Urquhart later lived with her daughter, Mrs. Ripley related, "at Staines on the Thames, in a stone house that was a lodge of Windsor Castle in the time of Henry VIII. Cuthbert Slocomb married a Miss Day; his widow and daughter, Countess di Brazza, survive him. Ida Slocomb was the noted philanthropist of New Orleans, the widow of Dr. T. G. Richardson."

A "stately Mrs. Martin Gordon" chaperoned "her exceedingly pretty sister, Myrtle Bringier, who became the wife of Gen. Dick Taylor, and whose descendants are among the few of those mentioned above still living and reigning in New Orleans society," added Mrs. Ripley.

"The belles," Eliza Ripley wrote, were able to retire "to their boudoirs for a season, but the beaux had to go to business, and what a sight some of them were for a whole week after the fancy dress ball! They had hired costumes from members of the French opera troupe, and their faces were 'made up' with rouge that could not be washed off; had to wear off in a purplish stain." Mrs. Ripley's brother costumed as Louis XIV on that occasion, and "he scrubbed his cheeks until he made them almost raw." Quite a few young men arrived for work the next few days in a purple haze.

She also explained that "shortly after that grandest and most unique entertainment Mr. Joe Kennedy's term expired and he retired into private life. Beautiful Rose fell into a decline and died early. What fortunes befell that family I know not. They seem to have faded away. The Kennedys were a large family in those days, closely allied to the Pierce and Cenas families, all of which were socially prominent. And now their names are 'writ in water.' I should like to know how many of this old Creole society are living today! I was eighteen, one of the youngest of the group, in the fifties."

How many grand New Orleans stories there are yet to tell by those who were eighteen in the other fifties — the 1950s!

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