

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Julie and Julia, or *Amour Sans Dot*

"Julie and Julia" is the title of Nora Ephron's 2009 movie adaptation of two bestselling memoirs, starring Meryl Streep as "French Chef" Julia Child and Amy Adams as Julie Powell. But "Julie and Julia", when studying the history of New Orleans, appears to be one and the same extraordinary character: Julien Poydras.

Poydras Street (today New Orleans' business corridor) was widened to a broad 134-foot-wide boulevard in the mid 1960s. John Chase explored the name origins of both Poydras and Julia streets in his "Frenchmen, Desire, Good Children: And Other Streets in New Orleans". He mentioned the legend that Julia Street was possibly named for Poydras' black cook, a slave he freed for being such an excellent chef. And there was a "Julia Mathew," Chase wrote, "a free woman of color. But this Julia lived at 28 Levee (Decatur) Street. And in contradiction of the legend is the fact that Julie was the *petit nom* or nick-name, of Julien Poydras. And on early maps Julia Street is written Julie."

Julien de Lallande Poydras was born at Rezé near Nantes, France, served in the French Navy, and was captured by the British in 1760 and taken to England. He escaped and headed for Saint-Domingue, and arrived in New Orleans in 1768.

Jacques Tissot, French painter, was born at Nantes, France, and studied at the *École des Beaux Arts* in Paris. He fought in the Franco-Prussian War and left Paris for England. His painting entitled "*Sans Dot*" shows two women dressed in black in a park, one old and one young. It is possible that the younger woman is wistfully eyeing a passing gentleman.

"*Sans Dot*" means "without a dowry", a condition that would profoundly influence the young Julien Poydras. Bouvier's Law Dictionary (1856 edition) states that "this French word" for dowry, *dot*, "is adopted in Louisiana", as well.

Poydras, reported a 1939 Times Magazine article, "son of poor peasants at Nantes in France, loved a peasant girl. She had no *dot*, he had no money, and her parents took the French view of love without francs." Young Julien, "deprived of his intended" ended up in Louisiana broken-hearted. But he was destined for great things.

Upon Poydras' arrival in New Orleans, he began a merchant's life traveling to nearby settlements and slowly building his fortune. He had trade connections in Baton Rouge, Opelousas, Natchez (Mississippi), Nagodoches (Texas), Arkansas, Ouachita and St. Louis (Missouri). At the King of Spain's own expense, Poydras penned the first poetry published in Louisiana in 1779 (a poem entitled "*La Prise du Morne du Baton Rouge par Monseigneur de Gálvez*", praising the young Spanish governor's capture of Baton Rouge from the British).

In 1804, after establishing a cotton gin and store on False River in Pointe Coupée Parish, Poydras built a friendship with the new American governor, William Charles Cole Claiborne, and became a local official. This led to his election as president of the first legislative council of the Territory of Orleans. On January 26, 1805, Poydras purchased from Don José Faurie the residence at 417 Royal Street (now Brennan's Restaurant) as the site of the new *Banque de la Louisiane*. He was to be its first president.

Poydras donated £100,000 toward the founding of the Female Orphan Asylum in New Orleans, and was elected to the House (Eleventh Congress, serving from 1809 to 1811). In 1812, he was chosen as a presidential elector for James Madison. He was also elected president of the state's first Constitutional Convention and president of the newly formed state senate (and reelected state senate president in 1820). He built and endowed the Poydras Asylum in 1817 on the corner of Julia and St. Charles streets.

Eliza Ripley in her "Social Life in Old New Orleans" wrote about Julia Street and the thirteen magnificent brick row-houses known as Julia Row. "Henry Clay," she revealed, "was a frequent visitor whenever he came to the Crescent City". "Even the well-known architect Henry Hobson Richardson lived on Julia row with his family," wrote Mrs. Ripley.

When Poydras (the owner of six plantations) died at his estate in Pointe Coupée Parish on June 23, 1824, he bequeathed to that parish the sum of \$30,000 (according to his will dated April 16, 1822). The interest on that sum was to be used "for a dowry for indigent girls of the Parish". He also bequeathed \$20,000, the interest of which was to be used towards contributing to the upkeep of an "Academy or College", to be established in Pointe Coupée Parish.

The romantic philanthropist left an equal amount to West Baton Rouge Parish for the same purpose and with the same stipulations. He forever remembered his true love being "*sans dot*" all those years before. And he left property to the Charity Hospital.

Pointe Coupée eventually shifted the Poydras inheritance to the building of one or more public schools in 1888, but West Baton Rouge (except during the Civil War), distributed the Poydras interest to (as Time Magazine described) "dark, full-breasted Creole brides".

The amounts have differed through the years based on those eligible and their needs. In 1841, just three newlyweds received \$966.21 (at a time when farm land was available for fifty cents an acre). In 1923, Wilma Landry Courtade bought a roomful of furniture with her \$150 dowry. In 1939, Elizabeth Thibodeaux St. Romain, Myrtle Peavy Ashley and nineteen other newlyweds received their *dots*. 1986 saw seventy-three couples divide \$4,963.17. That meant only \$67.98 for Natalie Ourso, barely "enough to pay for a weekend at a Holiday Inn in Biloxi".

In 2008, Mary Anita Tullier talked about her years in charge of the dowry as a clerk for the West Baton Rouge Police Jury. "I told them it was meant to be a dowry, and they were supposed to pass it directly to their husbands." Not all of the brides were happy with that arrangement. But people worldwide were curious about this dowry fund. "Sam Donaldson even came here and interviewed me once," Tullier said. And NPR revisited the "Long-lasting Effects of the Poydras Dowry" on the February 22, 2005, edition of *All Things Considered*.

Julien Poydras (who, in his lifetime, was considered quite progressive in his attitudes toward slavery) was originally buried in Old St. Francis Cemetery in New Roads, but was reinterred on the grounds of the old Poydras High School on Main Street (also in New Roads). He never married. His obituary stated that he would "be remembered by the innocent creatures who, by his wise providence and humanity, shall have been sheltered against the misfortune and danger which result from misery, for a weak defenceless sex".

And it's all because,
In that time that was,
Love couldn't get hot
With a dame without *dot*.

NED HÉMARD

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