

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Lusher Lore

Alcée Fortier (1856-1914) was an historian and educator. Fluent in English, French, Italian, German, Portuguese and Spanish (not to mention being a master of Sanskrit, Greek and Latin), he taught at New Orleans city schools and became renowned Professor of Romance Languages at the University of Louisiana (now Tulane). He later became dean of Tulane's Graduate College. Lecturing at Tulane, Harvard, Yale, Columbia, Johns Hopkins and many other universities, Fortier penned the "History of Louisiana, 4 vols. (1904)", as well as other numerous works on literature, language, history, folklore and dialect studies of Louisiana Acadians, Créoles and Isleños. Alcée Fortier Senior High School on Freret Street in New Orleans, named for this prolific author, is today the Lusher Charter School-Alcée Fortier Campus.

Lusher, currently a K-12 public charter school, is proud of its comprehensive incorporation of the arts throughout its curriculum (with award-winning programs in creative writing, performing arts, dance, drama, music and visual arts). New Orleans is the only city in the nation where the majority of public school students now attend charter schools. These schools receive public money (and private donations) but are not subject to some of the rules and regulations that apply to other public schools.

Founded in 1917, Lusher's Willow Street campus was at first just for grades K-6. Then, after Benjamin Franklin High School vacated in 1990, Lusher moved its sixth grade into the historic Carrollton Courthouse and then expanded to include seventh and eighth grades (while keeping Willow Street K-5). In 2003 the school discussed the possibility of becoming a charter school and opening up a high school the following school year. At first denied, in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the school got its wish. Tulane University stepped up to provide \$1.5 million for Lusher to reopen and operate as a charter school. In turn, Lusher opened its doors to children of Tulane faculty and staff, as well as those of Dillard, Loyola and Xavier Universities.

But who was Robert Mills Lusher, for whom the school was named?

The story begins on the Island of Hydra in Aegean Sea. The Doges of Venice ran the island from 1204 until 1566, when it became part of the Ottoman Empire. However, the Ottoman Empire's heavy tariffs and tax levies constrained Hydra's economic success. In addition, a plague in 1792 killed a large part of the population. Many from the island moved away. In 1794, Andrea Demetrios left Hydra for New Orleans where he was a merchant for many years. He married Marie-Anne-Céleste Dragon (daughter of Greek-born Miguel Dragon and Marie-Françoise Chauvin Beaulieu de Montplaisir). Their son, Alexander Dimitry, was born in New Orleans February 7, 1805. He would go on to marry the daughter of Robert Mills (architect of the Washington Monument) and travel with Robert M. Lusher (Mills' nephew) to New Orleans. What follows is how Alexander Dimitry's journey began.

This remarkable person graduated from Georgetown College and soon afterward (1830-1835) became editor of *L'Abeille de la Nouvelle-Orléans* (*The New Orleans Bee*). He was a crack pistol shot and an accomplished fencer, having participated in several duels, either as principal or second. He was a college professor in Baton Rouge (1827-1829) and like Alcée Fortier, was a master of languages (eleven in all). From 1834-1842 he was employed at the U. S. Post Office in Washington, D.C. In 1835, Alexander Dimitry married Mary Powell Mills, daughter of Robert Mills, architect best known for his federal buildings and monuments, including the Department of Treasury Building, the U.S. Patent Office building (now the National Portrait Gallery) and his crowning achievement, the Washington Monument.

Robert Mills (1781-1855), according to biographer John M. Bryan, "helped establish the architectural image of American government." With "buildings from New Orleans to Newburyport, Massachusetts", Mills was also a writer, cartographer, and dabbler in technology – steam engines, railroads and the telegraph, and he knew President Andrew Jackson". He was a colleague of James Hoban, architect of the White House. And he also knew Thomas Jefferson, who recommended him to architect Benjamin Henry Latrobe. Mills moved to Philadelphia in 1802 to become Latrobe's associate and student. In South Carolina, he designed county courthouses in at least eighteen counties, some of the public buildings in Columbia, as well as a few elegant private homes. He designed a Marine Hospital for New Orleans, which was built with modifications by local architects. He was never paid for this work. "Mills always claimed to be the first native born American to study specifically to become an architect," although Charles Bulfinch was born earlier.

Educator Robert Mills Lusher, born May 17, 1823, to George Lusher and Sarah Mills, was the nephew of architect Robert Mills. Both he and Robert Mills were born in Charleston, South Carolina, and (according to his obit in the *New York Times*) Lusher served his uncle as "a clerk and student at Georgetown College".

In 1842, Robert Mills Lusher, accompanied Professor Alexander Dimitry and his wife (Lusher's cousin) to Louisiana. There both he and Dimitry began a "long career in connection with education in Louisiana": Dimitry (who on his return to Louisiana in 1842 created and organized the free school system there) and Lusher "by assisting to organize public schools in the Third District of New-Orleans". Dimitry was state superintendent of schools from 1848-1851. From 1854-1859 he served as translator to the state department in Washington. He was then appointed U.S. Minister to Costa Rica and Nicaragua until 1861, the start of the Civil War. During the war he became chief of a bureau in the Confederate post office department, and in 1868 he was made Assistant Superintendent of the New Orleans Public Schools.

In 1847 and 1848, Robert Mills Lusher was editor of the English edition of *Le Courrier de la Louisiane* (*The Louisiana Courier*) which the *New York Times* described as "the Democratic organ of that day". From 1848-1862 Mr. Lusher "served as a minute clerk of the United States court". During the Civil War, he "filled several places of importance in a civil capacity". Immediately thereafter, in 1865, he was elected State Superintendent of Public Education – and again in 1876 until the 1879 constitution. Lusher was elected by the city council to the board of directors of the New Orleans Public Schools. Along with Professor W. O. Rogers, he established the *Louisiana Journal of Education*.

Robert Mills Lusher also established the first normal school in Louisiana. The first one in the United States was in 1839. A normal school is a school created to train high school graduates to be teachers and to establish teaching standards or "norms" (hence its name). In 1685, Saint Jean-Baptiste de la Salle founded what is generally considered the first normal school, the *École Normale*, in Reims. De La Salle High School on St. Charles Avenue is named for him. Most normal schools are today called teachers' colleges; but, in some places, the term normal school is still used.

Lusher was for many years the Louisiana agent of the Peabody Educational Fund, established after the Civil War by Massachusetts entrepreneur and philanthropist, George Peabody (1795-1869) "for the promotion and encouragement of intellectual, moral or industrial education among the more destitute portions" of the Southern States. The purpose of this 1867 fund was to promote elementary education. In 1869 Peabody donated another \$1 million for the promotion of Southern education. Rev. Dr. B. Sears, General Agent for the Peabody

Educational Fund, wrote a letter May 22, 1867, to the Hon. R. M. Lusher, delighted with his efforts:

“Nothing that has reached me from the various Southern States has given me such unmingled satisfaction as the perusal of your report, just received. It is, in most respects, just such a document as the Trustees of the Peabody Educational Fund, in like circumstances, would have written. We have already determined that all our efforts shall be to secure the objects you advocate.”

Lusher was married (first) to Augusta Salomon and (second) to Alice Lamberton. Robert Mills Lusher, long-serving and able education administrator, died in New Orleans, November 22, 1890.

George Peabody is acknowledged today as the father of modern philanthropy, having established the practice later followed by other successful business leaders, such as Andrew Carnegie, Johns Hopkins and John D. Rockefeller. Today’s philanthropists include Bill Gates and New Orleans’ beloved Saints quarterback, Drew Brees. A beautiful multipurpose stadium was completed at the Lusher Charter School-Alcée Fortier Campus in Summer 2009 with a generous donation from the Brees Family Foundation, and named the Brees Family Field.

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