

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Noble Drummer

New Orleans' Earl Palmer delivered his uniquely fashioned backbeat for Fats Domino and Little Richard before traveling to California to become one of the music scene's most active session drummers and a member of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. This author had the distinct pleasure of meeting Earl Palmer a few years before his death in 2008 at age 83. He was the veteran of countless recordings and four wives, but a much earlier New Orleans drummer was the veteran of four wars.

His name was Jordan Bankston Noble, born in Georgia October 14, 1800. The October 29, 1855, issue of the *Daily Picayune* reported New Orleans' admiration for "Old Jordan", the city's affectionate name for the drummer that got his start in the Battle of New Orleans:

"The Continental Guards had a moonlight drill on Friday night last, in citizens' dress, and preceded by Jordan's famous drum and fife band, they passed through the principal streets to the Place d'Armes, in the Second District, where they went through a number of interesting evolutions. On leaving there they marched to the house of one of their officers, where a handsome collation had been prepared for them, and where a couple of hours were passed in the pleasantest manner. A number of toasts were drunk, and among them one to the health of Old Jordan, the drummer of Chalmette. This was received with the utmost enthusiasm, and the veteran was brought in and responded in a strain of native eloquence which pleased and surprised every one present."

Just a little over five years before Louisiana seceded from the Union, the Crescent City drank with enthusiasm to the good health of one the city's numerous *les gens de couleur libres* (or free persons of color). Of African-European parentage, Noble stated in an autobiographical letter (dated October 19, 1881) to Edward C. Wharton, associate editor of the *New Orleans Picayune*, that he had moved to New Orleans as a young boy just two or three years before Packenham's

advance across the plains of Chalmette.

As Andrew Jackson's drummer during the Battle of New Orleans, the brave fourteen-year-old (who enlisted in the 7th Regiment of the U.S. Army) beat out a continuous drum roll throughout the din of battle that foggy January morning. "Young Jordan" also served in the Florida War in 1836 (his second war), and the *Daily Picayune* 1855 article went on to state that (besides serving "Old Hickory"), Jordan served in his third war "under Gen. Taylor, on the fields of Mexico, and it had been his fortune to have come under the immediate observation of these distinguished men, both of whom had taken him by the hand and complimented him for his services, not caring whether his skin was white or black. His country had acknowledged those services by placing him on a footing with her other defenders, and bestowing on him the same reward."

For his fourth war, Jordan Noble played a part in organizing the Native Guards. General Benjamin F. Butler's 1st Regiment of the Louisiana Native Guards was sworn into service on September 27, 1862, the first black soldiers to be officially mustered into the Union Army during the Civil War. The 2nd and 3rd Regiments were organized during the following two months, respectively.

The famous drummer boy of Chalmette had a service record in the United States Army totaling nine years and nine months.

Before his fourth tour of duty, Jordan and other free veterans of color were first invited to participate in the city's annual January 8th Parade in 1851. A durable fixture of the celebration, he marched along the major thoroughfares of New Orleans each year playing upon his worn-out drum and leading the other men of color who fought defending New Orleans that January back in 1815. Noble himself instituted a New Year's Day tradition where he and his fife and drum corps beat out the same reveille that he played on the Chalmette Battlefield. Reveille is not always played upon a bugle but can also be played on the drums, and Jordan and his band saluted the officials of city government, military and the press each year with his historic refrain. The 1855 article described this "reveille" as one "which roused the hardy sons of America to the conflict from which they came out clothed with never-dying glory."

Besides city events, Noble's fife and drum corps also entertained visitors at the World's International and Cotton Centennial Exposition (hosted by New Orleans in 1884). At a time when nearly one-third of all U.S. cotton was handled by the Port of New Orleans, the World Cotton Centennial (as it was also called) ran from December 16, 1884 (when President Garfield opened the festivities via telegraph) until June 2, 1885.

Thirty years before, the *Daily Picayune* described Jordan with “locks silvered by the snows of age, speaking in a solemn and earnest manner of the noble deeds of a past generation”. It went on to state that “Jordan, in addition to furnishing the best field band that ever paraded our streets, is now the Armorer of the Continental Guards, and long may the gallant veteran continue to charm the ears of the present generation with his exquisite drumming”.

“Old Jordan” was up there on the dais during the city’s Emancipation Celebration on May 11, 1864, and he represented the city’s Fourth District in the Abraham Lincoln Memorial Commemoration on April 21, 1865. Both events took place in Congo Square (later Beauregard Square and today Louis Armstrong Memorial Park).

Jordan’s three children were at his side on June 20, 1890, at his home on Dryades Street (today Oretha Castle Haley Boulevard) when (just shy of ninety-years-old) that a final drumbeat rolled for the city’s beloved veteran. The *New Orleans Picayune* came out the following day with Noble’s printed biography and picture.

Along with Napoleon’s death mask, maps, paintings and historic documents, one can view one of Noble’s actual drums on exhibit at the Louisiana State Museum at the Cabildo. A beautifully painted snare drum made in Philadelphia c. 1860, New Orleans’ “Noble Drummer” used this one later on in his long and appreciated career.

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