

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*

*By Ned Hémard*

### **The Obelisk with the Odd Inscription**

Obelisks are tall, four-sided tapering monuments which are crowned by a pyramid-like shape at their peaks. These Egyptian monoliths became popular during the Enlightenment and connected with the mortuary arts as symbols of timelessness and memorialization.

When it comes to obelisks, Americans immediately think of the Washington Monument in Washington, D. C. New Orleanians recall the Egyptian obelisk known as the Chalmette Monument (in Chalmette, Louisiana) rising 100 feet 2 ½ inches above the ground upon which the Battle of New Orleans was fought in 1815.

Then there are cenotaphs. They look like tombs but are actually monuments erected in honor of a person (or persons) whose remains lie elsewhere. The word comes from the Greek *kenos*, one meaning being “empty”, and *taphos* for “tomb”. Oftentimes this is the result of their bodies not being found.

Such was the case with architect James Gallier, Sr., and his wife. In St. Louis Cemetery #3, one can find an impressive cenotaph erected by James Gallier, Jr., to the memory of his father and stepmother who both perished when the “Evening Star” was sunk during a hurricane off the coast of Georgia on the morning of October 3, 1866.

Because of its past history as a racecourse, Eberhard Deutsch has written of Metairie Cemetery’s “sardonic characterization as a haven for the quick and the dead”. It is also the New Orleans location for a monument that is both an obelisk and a cenotaph, with a most unusual inscription.

Rising magnificently above the surrounding above ground vaults, the Langles Cenotaph's inscribed words are strangely cryptic: "Angele Marie Langles, 105 La. 39".

Missing is the date of her birth, June 4, 1864, in New Orleans to Jean Langles and his wife, Pauline Costa Langles. Also missing is the date of her death when she was lost at sea with 550 other souls aboard the French steamer *La Bourgogne*. The tragedy occurred on the early morning of July 4, 1898, when the steamer collided with the British iron sailing ship, *Cromartyshire*, in a dense fog off the Newfoundland Banks.

Another fact not mentioned on the cenotaph's inscription was that Angele's mother, Pauline Costa Langles, also died that fateful morning. She and her only child had divided their time between their native New Orleans and residences in Paris and Pau, France. She was 52 and robust, while her daughter was 35 and frail. Both had extensive real estate holdings in the Crescent City. In June of the same year, mother and daughter each executed simple, valid, reciprocal olographic wills. Harry H. Hall, prominent New Orleans attorney, was named executor of the testator's estate in each of these lengthy wills.

The monument also failed to mention that the sinking of the ship was a catastrophe without honor or chivalry. The crew threw women and children into the sea to save their own lives. 163 or 164 persons aboard *La Bourgogne* were rescued, of which 120 were members of the steamer's crew who had sacrificed women, children and other passengers to watery graves.

The collision naturally brought about extensive litigation in England, France and the United States. Apart from fault issues concerning the disaster, there were unusual factors concerning who died first (mother or daughter). A lengthy legal dispute over this principal question was eventually decided by the Louisiana Supreme Court. Who died first or did they die simultaneously? Substantial subordinate questions had important legal consequences.

Under Article 936 *et seq.* of the Louisiana Civil Code (in identical terms to the corresponding articles of France's Code Napoleon), the court's decision was that the daughter (although frail) was presumed to have outlived the robust mother because of the daughter's youth.

Mr. Hall was thus mandated by the Supreme Court (entered April 23, 1900) to erect a monument to Angele's memory at a cost of \$3,000. But the puzzled executor wasn't sure what to have inscribed on the base of the obelisk. Date of birth and death wouldn't tell the whole story, so he had the legal reference to the case ("105 La. 39") engraved upon the towering monument so all could learn the circumstances concerning this interesting bit of New Orleans history.

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