

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Passing Through New Orleans

There have been numerous times through the centuries that the phrase “passing through New Orleans” has been used. Sometimes the occasions and circumstances were happy, while some were frighteningly sad.

Unwelcome visitors “passing through New Orleans” included the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito and the yellow fever deaths it brought. More than 41,000 victims died from the scourge of yellow jack in New Orleans between 1817 (the first year of reliable statistics) and 1905 (the Crescent City's last epidemic). Then there were all those hurricanes that, too, came uninvited. Who in the city can forget witnessing Hurricane Katrina passing through New Orleans on weather radar?

But there was a multitude of welcome cargo, and the visitors that brought it alongside the city's docks. President Thomas Jefferson could not understate the importance of this when he wrote, “There is on the globe one single spot, the possessor of which is our natural and habitual enemy. It is New Orleans, through which the produce of three-eighths of our territory must pass to market.”

By 1802, when Jefferson wrote those words, over one million dollars in American trade was floating down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers to this great port city. This comprised two-thirds of the commerce “passing through New Orleans”. Flatboats came down the Mississippi filled with flour, beef, bacon, pork, Indian corn, oats, peas, beans, cotton, tobacco, lard, tallow, live-stock, poultry, wines, whiskey, cider, furs and hides, marble, feathers and lead. Abraham Lincoln twice piloted a flatboat carrying produce to New Orleans, from Indiana in 1828 and from Illinois in 1831. He was only “passing through”. Greater dreams were yet to be fulfilled.

On November 6, 1860, Lincoln was elected the sixteenth president of the United States. During that year, the City of New Orleans was in a position of unprecedented economic, military, and political power. The Mexican American War, along with the Texas Annexation, had put New Orleans at the epicenter for expansion. In 1860 New Orleans was one

of the greatest ports in the world, with 33 different steamship lines, and trade now worth 500 million dollars "passing through" the city. As far as population, the city not only outnumbered any other city in the South, it was larger than the combination of the largest four other cities, with an estimated population of 168,675.

But things never stay the same along the mighty river. The Southern states seceded, and soon New Orleans was captured by Union Flag Officer David G. Farragut. He ran his fleet past Forts Jackson and St. Philip on April 24, 1862, and captured the Crescent City the following day. The Union Blockade and cotton embargo had done damage to the port economy, leaving many without work. The value of goods passing through New Orleans had gone from \$500 million to \$52 million from 1860 to 1862.

"Le monstre Butler" (as one of my French relatives wrote of the occupying general) was then put in charge. But he, too, was just "passing through New Orleans". It is said he pocketed some local silverware before being relieved by President Lincoln, hence his other moniker: "Spoons" Butler.

The Port of New Orleans is today the fifth largest port in the United States, based on the volume of cargo handled. It also has the longest wharf in the world, 2.01 miles long, which can accommodate fifteen vessels at one time. The Port of New Orleans handles about 84 million short tons of cargo a year, but (combined with the Port of South Louisiana, based in LaPlace) the total is 283 short tons of cargo a year. This makes the dual port system the largest in the world by bulk tonnage, and the world's fourth largest by annual volume handled. In this sense, the Port of New Orleans considers itself as being "at the center of the world's busiest port complex."

With such a cosmopolitan allure, the Crescent City has often been host to many interesting guests just "passing through New Orleans". Some of them have been royal.

The future French King Louis-Philippe fled France and the guillotine under the Reign of Terror. In 1798 he was the guest of Julien Poydras in Pointe Coupée and entertained at the New Orleans residence of Bernard de Marigny's father.

Britain's Prince Charles and his wife Camilla also visited New Orleans briefly in November 2005 to glimpse the ravages of Hurricane Katrina and visit but a few of the thousands of residents whose lives were turned topsy-turvy by the storm.

Few, however, remember the long ago visit of a couple on their way to their honeymoon. Jérôme Bonaparte, Napoleon's youngest brother, served in the navy and was sent to the West Indies. On a visit to the

United States he met a Baltimore beauty named Elizabeth "Betsy" Patterson, whom he married on December 24, 1803, at a ceremony presided over by Archbishop Carroll of Baltimore. Betsy's father, William Patterson, was an Irish-born Catholic, who arrived in North America prior to the American Revolutionary War. He was the wealthiest man in Maryland after Charles Carroll of Carrollton, a signer of the Declaration of Independence. Despite the wealth of the family, Napoleon refused to recognize Jérôme's marriage (since he was a minor) and had little difficulty in changing the mind of the impetuous Jérôme. He ordered his brother back to France, had the marriage annulled and (in 1807) made Jérôme King of Westphalia and secured a new match with the German princess Catherine of Württemberg. Jérôme would go on to fight in the Russian campaign, and led a division at Waterloo. He was more remarkable for his extravagant irresponsibility than for administrative or military skill.

But before all this went down, there was some youthful romance involved. Jérôme and Betsy decided to enjoy their honeymoon at Niagara Falls. They would leave by stagecoach from New Orleans. They were, after all, only "passing through".

What was a stagecoach ride from New Orleans like? Although a few years later, according to Eliza Ripley writing on the *Social Life in Old New Orleans*, "Nine passengers filled the interior of the coach, and four or five, if need be, could ride on top. The rumble (we always called it boot) was filled with baggage. The vehicle had no springs, but was swung on braces, which gave it a kind of swaying motion that always made me sick. However, we managed to start off in fine style, but every time there was a stop to change horses all of us alighted, stiff and tired and hot, to 'stretch our legs,' like Squeers in Dickens' 'Nicholas Nickleby.' At noon we rejoiced to hear our coachman's horn, a grand, loud blast, followed by toot, toot! — one toot for each passenger, so the tavern man would know how many plates to lay, and his wife how many biscuits and chicken legs to have ready."

The young lovebirds Jérôme and Betsy, in choosing Niagara Falls as a honeymoon destination, were not the first. It is said that Theodosia Burr holds that distinction. She was the daughter Aaron Burr, not yet Vice President of the United States. But the French seemed to enjoy visiting this remarkable natural wonder, so Jérôme and Betsy decided to spend their honeymoon there, too. Returning home with glowing reports, Napoleon's little brother and his first wife made the Falls famous for young newlyweds. Since then, it has gradually gained a reputation as the undisputed honeymoon capital of the world.

Famous painter Gilbert Stuart had as his most notorious sitters the beautiful Betsy Patterson and her spouse Jérôme Bonaparte. He began their portraits soon after their marriage, but left them unfinished after Jérôme demanded that he drop everything else to complete them

quickly. Stuart intended to exhibit his portraits of "great and eminent personages" in his two-room Washington studio designed by his friend, architect Benjamin Latrobe, but illness thwarted this plan.

After Napoleon recalled Jérôme, he also forbade Betsy entrance into France. This forced her to stop off in England, where on July 7, 1805, she gave birth to the couple's son, Jerome Napoleon Bonaparte. Betsy took her young son back to Baltimore where they lived with her father. In 1815, by special Act of the Maryland Legislature, she secured a divorce.

After the battle of Waterloo Mrs. Patterson Bonaparte returned to Europe where she was eagerly received in the most exclusive circles and much admired for her beauty and wit. She and Jérôme never saw each other again but once after his marriage to the Princess of Württemberg. This chance encounter was in a picture gallery in Florence, Italy, years afterwards. They recognized each other instantly, but the gentleman who accompanied the lady led her away. The following morning Jérôme Bonaparte departed the city.

A most interesting irony is that Betsy's brother's widow married Richard Wellesley, 1st Marquess Wellesley, older brother of Arthur Wellesley, 1st Duke of Wellington, who defeated Napoleon at Waterloo. Jérôme was there, too.

The story of Betsy and Jérôme's marriage and annulment is the basis for the 1928 movie *Glorious Betsy*. The title role was played in the film by actress Dolores Costello, grandmother of Drew Barrymore.

Jérôme would become a sponsor of the gifted New Orleans composer of International fame, Louis Moreau Gottschalk. Jérôme and Betsy's grandson, Charles Joseph Bonaparte, would go on to serve as United States Secretary of the Navy and United States Attorney General under Theodore Roosevelt. He would found the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) in 1908. The *New Orleans Picayune* wrote of Charles Joseph Bonaparte that despite his illustrious ancestry "there is no more thorough and loyal American as he."

So many remarkable stories over time have been "passing through New Orleans".

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