

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

The Pelican Briefly

On learning that the British were planning to keep control of Hudson Bay, Louis XIV assembled a fleet of ships in order to recapture Fort Bourbon, at the heart of the fur trade. In 1697, Canadian Pierre Le Moyne, Sieur d'Iberville commanded one of these French warships (the 500 ton *Le Pélican*, well-equipped with 44 guns). On that September morning, Iberville's *Pélican* (temporarily separated from her sister ships) came face to face with three British vessels carrying supplies to the nearby fort. Greatly outnumbered, the *Pélican* crew triumphed over its enemy and was victorious at the Battle of Hudson's Bay. One British ship sank, one retreated and one was captured complete with cargo. The *Pélican*, however, ran aground a few days after the battle, significantly damaged by the ravages of a fierce storm.

During four months of raids, Iberville was responsible for the deaths of more than 200 English settlers and the burning and looting of thirty-six settlements. This Newfoundland campaign was the most cruel and destructive of his career. For these and other efforts, Iberville was chosen by Louis Phélypeaux, comte de Pontchartrain, the *Secrétaire d'État de la Marine*, to lead the expedition to rediscover the mouth of the Mississippi and to colonize Louisiana. His fleet set sail from Brest on October 24, 1698, and in January they reached Santa Rosa Island (off Pensacacola), Mobile Bay, Massacre Island (later named Dauphin Island) and anchored between Cat Island and Ship Island in the Mississippi Sound. In February, he and his brother Bienville landed at Biloxi.

Mobile (*Fort Louis de la Louisiane*) was established by Iberville and Bienville in 1702 at Twenty-seven Mile Bluff on the Mobile River (well before New Orleans' founding in 1718). Before long, the French Marines in Mobile were lonely for the opposite sex. Some had taken Choctaw wives. After returning to France, Iberville captained a ship christened the *Pélican* and arrived back in Mobile on August 1, 1704. Carrying with him twenty-three "well-bred" girls to the burgeoning Louisiana colony, the young men could now marry and start families of

their own (a real catalyst for permanent settlement).

These objects of the men's attention were known as "*Pélican girls*" (for the ship that brought them) or "*les filles à la cassette*", for the little trunk or *cassette*, containing a *trousseau*, provided each young lady by the Company. Gabrielle Savarit married Jean-Baptiste Saucier and Geneviève Burel married Claude Trépanier. Soon every single *fille* had found a fella. Later on, especially when a later group was sent to New Orleans, they were known as *filles du Roi* (girls of the King) or once again "*les filles à la cassette*" ("casket girls"), appropriately named for their chests of personal belongings.

Some of the *Pélican* girls brought with them an unwanted guest, yellow fever, after the ship stopped in Havana. In fact, Iberville (ship captain, explorer and founder of the French colony of Louisiana) died from the disease in Havana in July of 1706, just shy of his forty-fifth birthday.

The French, however, were not the first to name ships after the sea bird with the ample beak.

This brings us to the interesting tale of the "Pelican Portrait". Paintings of Queen Elizabeth I of England abound, but perhaps none quite as interesting as the portrait attributed to Nicholas Hilliard circa 1575-1578 (held by the National Portrait Gallery in London). Elizabeth was possibly the first monarch to fully realize the importance of public relations in the preparation of her image for viewing by her subjects. The work shows a stylized image of the queen with a closed imperial crown positioned above each shoulder. Centered on the queen's breast amongst a profusion of pearls is a pelican pendant symbolizing purity, charity and redemption. The necklace signifies the monarch's selfless love of her subjects, just as the pelican (according to legend) pricks its own breast to nourish her children with her blood. Elizabeth wore a pelican jewel in several state portraits to remind her people of this continuing selfless devotion.

But there is another symbolic and perhaps secret tribute contained in the "pelican pendant". The *Pelican* was the name of the English galleon captained by Sir Francis Drake in his famous circumnavigation of the globe between 1577 and 1580. But mid-voyage the ship was renamed in honor of Drake's principle sponsor, Sir Christopher Hatton, politician and Lord Chancellor of England. According to speculation, Hatton was also Queen Elizabeth's lover. For these reasons, Drake renamed his ship the *Golden Hind*. This was not because of any affectionate nickname the queen may have had for her paramour (or his hind), but Hatton's armorial crest just happened to be a golden *hind* (heraldic term for a female deer).

"Which will bring us back to doe, a deer, a female deer ..."

Sorry. Couldn't help it.

It is said by some that Louisiana's first governor, William Charles Cole Claiborne, was the first to suggest that the brown pelican appear on Louisiana's seal (white pelicans often fish in groups, while the brown pelican of Louisiana and North America usually plunge-dives for its prey). Whoever's idea it was, the pelican feeding its young was on the seal as early as 1804. In medieval Europe, the attentive nature of the pelican resulted in its being a symbol of the Passion of Christ and of the Eucharist. In heraldry, it was referred to as "a pelican in its piety" or "a pelican vulning (wounding) herself". There is even a folktale from India about a pelican killing her young and through contrition resurrecting them with her own blood.

According to an LSU study, the pelican symbol was used unofficially to rally Andrew Jackson's troops at the Battle of New Orleans in 1815 and was used on all sorts of flags (some red, others blue). A blue pelican flag was displayed when Louisiana seceded from the Union, and Admiral Farragut removed a pelican flag from the Old State Capitol upon capturing Baton Rouge during the Civil War. The pelican symbol was described in state law in 1902, and the state flag currently used was legalized July 1, 1912. Its description requires "a pelican vulning herself".

Founded in 1887, the New Orleans Pelicans baseball team became part of the Southern Association in 1901 and was cheered from 1915-1957 at Pelican Stadium (aka Heinemann Park). The team's last two years were played in City Park, after which it disbanded in 1959. The brown pelican is featured prominently on the seal of LSU, Louisiana State University, but down in New Orleans it is also the Tulane team mascot. "Riptide" the Pelican replaced "Gumby" the Green Wave. The name "Riptide" was selected by the administration after the student body voted for the name "Pecker".

Naturalist John James Audubon, who lived in Louisiana, wrote in his journal about pelicans and "the sound of the splash they make as they drive their open bills", as they go down "again and again". "What voracious creatures they are!" he wrote.

Al Capone, too, had a pelican experience. The island upon which he was imprisoned is named for the winged wonder. Spaniard Juan Manuel de Ayala charted San Francisco Bay in 1775, naming the island "*La Isla de los Alcatraces*" (The Island of the Pelicans) from the archaic Spanish *alcatraz* (meaning pelican), from the Arabic *al-ġaṭṭās* (meaning sea eagle).

It is satisfying to see these magnificent birds along the Gulf Coast today in great profusion. Dixon Lanier Merritt penned the famous limerick about this social and gregarious sea diver:

A wonderful bird is the pelican.

His bill will hold more than his belly can.

He can take in his beak

Enough food for a week,

But I'm damned if I see how the hell he can.

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