

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Rosecliff

"Rosecliff!" No, not "Rosebud!" ... "Rosecliff!" And yet the name provides all the ingredients of wealth and position as those possessed by Citizen Charles Foster Kane.

Great wealth seemed to gravitate to Newport, Rhode Island. At first it was pirate booty. In the 1720s, under pressure from the Crown, colonial leaders arrested and hanged many pirates in Newport. They were buried on Goat Island.

Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century it was wealthy southern planters fleeing the heat, such as George Noble Jones, who began to build summer cottages on Bellevue Avenue (such as the Gothic Revival "Kingscote" in 1839). Eventually Yankees such as the Wetmores, making their fortunes in the Old China Trade, built mansions at Newport. George Peabody Wetmore was two-term governor and three-term senator of Rhode Island, and his family home was "Chateau-sur-Mer". Yankee traders were soon followed by the richest families in America. The Astors and Vanderbilts had to have their "cottages", too, during the nation's "Gilded Age". Cornelius Vanderbilt II had "The Breakers" built in 1895 overlooking Newport's seagirt cliffs.

Then there was "Belcourt Castle", the former summer cottage of Oliver Hazard Perry Belmont. It was constructed (1891-1894) for the heir of August Belmont, a Hessian Jew who came to America in 1837 as an agent for the Rothschilds and accumulated big bucks as a banker. Newport has the oldest standing synagogue in the United States.

And then some of the wealth came from the West. Theresa Fair Oelrichs (known as Tessie), a silver heiress whose father James Graham Fair was Senator of Nevada and one of the four partners in the rich Comstock Lode, was married to multimillionaire Hermann Oelrichs of the Norddeutscher Lloyd Steamship Line. They bought the land in 1891 (with sister Virginia "Birdie" Fair) upon which "Rosecliff"

was to be built (Birdie would go on to marry Cornelius Vanderbilt II). Only the best architect, Stanford White, was chosen for the project. His architectural career began as the principal assistant to New Orleans born architect Henry Hobson Richardson, famous for his "Richardsonian Romanesque".

While listening to the suggestive song, "I Could Love a Million Girls" atop the Madison Square Garden Roof Garden (a building White designed), White was shot point blank and killed in 1906 by Harry Thaw, jealous husband of the beautiful Evelyn Nesbit. This artists' model and "Floradora" girl was played in the movies by Joan Collins in "The Girl in the Red Velvet Swing" and Elizabeth McGovern in "Ragtime".

In designing "Rosecliff" (1898-1902) for Tessie Oelrichs, White adapted Mansart's *Grand Trianon* of Versailles, but afforded the splendid H-shaped mansion great rooms for dinners, dances and receptions. So well aligned are the rooms that they offer dramatic internal vistas *en filade*. The central *corps de logis* is taken up with the huge 40 by 80 feet ballroom. Mrs. Oelrichs soon took to entertaining on a grand scale, so that she became one of the three great hostesses of Newport's social scene (along with Mrs. Belmont of Belcourt and Mrs. Stuyvesant Fish). Tessie's *tour de force* was her "Bal Blanc" of August 19, 1904, to celebrate the Astor Cup Races, in which everything was silver and white (from swans and orchids to hydrangeas and lilies). Yachting has always been popular in Newport, where a series of races for the America's Cup were held for many years.

The magnificent ballroom of "Rosecliff" was used in the 1956 film, "High Society", which featured New Orleans' own Louis Armstrong. It was also used in scenes from "The Great Gatsby", "The Betsy" and "Amistad". "Rosecliff" also influenced the interior design of Louisiana's Governor's Mansion. The elegantly swagged window treatment in its Rotunda is made of Monroe Documentary silk by Scalamandré, so named because the original hangs in "Rosecliff".

"Rosecliff" stayed in the Oelrichs family until 1941, and went through several ownership changes until purchased in 1947 by Mr. and Mrs. John Edgar Monroe of New Orleans. Mr. Monroe was a prominent businessman and philanthropist (born in New Orleans February 11, 1897), who gave generously to Loyola University and other Catholic institutions. In 1960, the university received \$1 million to purchase 500 acres in northwest Kenner (hence the name Loyola Drive). But Loyola decided against relocation and began selling parcels of the land in 1970 to grow the endowment. Another \$1 million went toward Loyola's music and communications complex, and \$7.5 million

established the J. Edgar and Louis S. Monroe Library at Loyola. It is very technologically advanced and was ranked 10th in the "Best College Library" category by The Princeton review.

Mr. and Mrs. Monroe fell in love with "Rosecliff" and visited every summer to escape the southern heat. They gave parties with a Mardi Gras theme, where costumes were *de rigueur*. The Monroes' parties were more laid back and had much more of a *joie de vivre* than the formal *soirées* of Mrs. Oelrichs. And, in 1971, Mr. and Mrs. Monroe donated the entire estate and its contents (along with a \$2 million endowment) to the Preservation Society of Newport County. It is open to the public for tours, and Mr. Monroe would often go back to the estate for charity events until his death in 1991. His wife Louise died in 1989. They had no children. Mr. Monroe's nephew Robert John "Bobby" Monroe, New Orleans native and generous member of his community, served the last fifteen years of his life as president of the J. Edgar Monroe Foundation. He died in 2007.

John F. Kennedy and Jacqueline Bouvier were married in St. Mary's Church in Newport in 1953. The following year, the Newport Jazz Festival was established and has been held every summer since then. It was established by jazz pianist-turned-impresario George Wein with prompting by socialite Elaine Lorrillard. Wein was running Boston's Storyville jazz club, a little bit of New Orleans in "Bean Town", when she approached him with the idea.

George Wein and his "Festival Productions, Inc." was later contracted to produce the first New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival in 1970. George put together a core group of talented artistic advisers like Harry Souchon, Ellis Marsalis and Richard B. "Dick" Allen, curator of Tulane University Hogan Jazz Archives. It was Dick Allen's recommendation that Archives employee Allison Miner and Quint Davis help produce the first Jazz Fest at Congo Square. The rest is history.

Newport and New Orleans each share a love of jazz and a caring philanthropist (of Irish stock like Tessie Fair Oelrichs) named J. Edgar Monroe.

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