

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*

*By Ned Hémard*

### **“Down on St. Claude and Dumaine”**

“You will see the Zulu King

Down on St. Claude and Dumaine

You know, you'll see the Zulu King

Down on St. Claude and Dumaine

And if you stay right there

I'm sure you'll see the Zulu Queen.”

The 1949 *début* version of *Mardi Gras in New Orleans* by Henry Roeland Byrd (Professor Longhair) for the Dallas-based Star Talent label does not include the above lyrics. Longhair's original recording explicitly mentions the intersection of “Rampart and Dumaine”, which was the location of Cosimo Matassa's famous J & M recording studio. Also, one of Champion Jack Dupree's recordings was entitled *Rampart and Dumaine*, his Crescent City version of *Frankie and Johnny*. But Fess did substitute “Saint Claude and Dumaine” in the lyrics of his updated recording ten years later at Cosimo's studio. The 1959 version of *Mardi Gras in New Orleans* was retitled *Go To the Mardi Gras*. It's the one with the iconic piano intro and incredible whistling solo that moves everyone's feet to join that second line.

In the early 1960s, an urban renewal project made it impossible to view either the Zulu King or the Zulu Queen at “St. Claude and Dumaine”. A large portion of the dwellings comprising Faubourg Tremé's midsection had been demolished and stood vacant for some time before the creation in the 1970s of the 31-acre Louis Armstrong Park, home to the city's first New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival.

Louis Armstrong Park did not end up exactly as planned, along the lines of the Tivoli Gardens in Copenhagen, Denmark. But that's where the famous street corner of song is today, in the middle of the park. Below is what the intersection of "St. Claude and Dumaine" looked like over a century ago:



This view of *St. Claude and Dumaine Streets, Faubourg Tremé* was painted in 1895 by Paul E. Poincy (1833 – 1909). Dumaine Street divides the scene and is paved with cobblestones between the streetcar tracks. Further along St. Claude Street can be seen the steeple of St. Augustine Church (1842) in the distance. A sample of early city electrification can be observed by the single electric light suspended by wires over the center of the crossroads.

But how did it all begin?

Bernard de Marigny (1785 – 1868), Creole nobleman, gambler, playboy and politician, got the ball rolling in his role as founder and developer of the Faubourg Marigny in 1808. He came up with some fascinating street names for his new subdivision (after games like Craps and Bagatelle, but not forgetting Love, Poets and Music). He had a *Rue des Grands Hommes* (Great Men Street) and a *Rue des Bon Enfants* (Good Children Street). Because it lined up with the Rue St. Claude in the Faubourg Tremé, Good Children was renamed St. Claude Avenue.

Also, there was Faubourg Tremé, the oldest neighborhood of “free people of color” in the United States. The area was first developed in 1725, when *Chevalier* Charles Antoine de Morand, in the employ of the *Companie des Indies*, set up the city's first brickyard in the area of Bayou Road. Morand also obtained possession of much of the adjacent land and developed a large plantation upon the acreage. Morand died in 1756. In the mid-1770s, Charles Morand, *fils*, sold the land to the Moreau family (whose daughter Julie married Claude Tremé, a French hatmaker who then acquired title to the property).

By 1798, Claude Tremé had laid out several streets perpendicular to Bayou Road. Among them was *Rue St. Claude*, named for his patron saint. St. Claude (c. 607 – 696 or 699) was a priest, monk and bishop of Besançon, France. After his death, St. Claude (Claudius) became one of the more popular saints of France. Tremé also established *Rue du Marais* from present day St. Philip to Bayou Road, and another street he called *Rue Ste. Julie* for his wife (today Esplanade).

That same year, Tremé and his wife began to subdivide and sell lots to a diverse array of people that included French and Spanish colonial settlers, Haitian Creole refugees (white and black) and *gens des couleur libres* (free people of color, many of whom were artisans, craftsmen and musicians). Quite a number of the buyers were women. Creole cottages began appearing on the 60-foot lots.

In 1810, Tremé sold the remainder of his plantation, except for a few lots, to the City of New Orleans for \$40,000, making it the city's first subdivision — earlier subdivisions of Faubourg Ste. Marie and Faubourg Marigny were private undertakings.

What about the street perpendicular to Tremé's *Rue St. Claude*? While Claude was a saint, Dumaine was a bastard — a royal one, however.

Louis-Auguste de Bourbon was born in 1670, the eldest son of Louis XIV of France and his *maîtresse-en-titre*, Madame de Montespan. Named Louis after his father and Augustus after the Roman Emperor, young Louis-Auguste was three years old in 1673 when the Sun King legitimized his children by Madame de Montespan by means of letters patent from the *Parlement de Paris*. At this time, Louis-Auguste received the title of *duc du Maine*. Louis XIV did not hide the fact that the young *du Maine*, even with one leg shorter than the other, was his favorite son. The king's love was shown by providing Louis-Auguste the very best tutors and bestowing him with titles and gifts. In 1680, the king officially made his son a *prince de Bourbon*, giving him an even higher legitimate status at court.

When Louis XIV died in 1715, his last will and testament granted the regency to both the *duc d'Orléans* and the *duc du Maine*. However,

the next day, the *duc d'Orléans* ensured the annulment of Louis XIV's will in the *Parlement de Paris*. Displeased by these actions and egged on by his ambitious wife, Louis-Auguste, joined in the Cellamare Conspiracy against the then Regent of France, Philippe d'Orléans. For this he was arrested, imprisoned and later pardoned (1720).

The "Streetcar Named Desire" made famous by Tennessee Williams once ran through the St. Claude Avenue community. A streetcar line on St. Claude Avenue is slated to be resurrected and will run from the train station to what is known as the North Rampart Street and St. Claude Avenue corridor. The first leg of the project will now end at Elysian Fields Avenue rather than Press Street due to cost concerns.

Today along St. Claude, one can find the Hi-Ho Lounge, the Saturn Bar, Frankie and Johnny's Furniture Store, the St. Roch Market and the New Orleans Healing Center. The center will consist of a co-op grocery, yoga studio, street university, green business incubator, healing arts collective, interfaith center, organic food restaurant and performance hall. In addition, a stretch of St. Claude (after all these years) will have a new name.

On June 16, 2011, the New Orleans City Council voted unanimously to rename St. Claude Street in the Faubourg Tremé to honor Henriette Delille, the New Orleans-born free woman of color who in 1847 founded the religious order that became known as the Sisters of the Holy Family. The vote affects only the 1000 through 1800 blocks of St. Claude, from St. Philip Street, at the edge of Louis Armstrong Park, to Pauger Street, where St. Claude Street and McShane Place merge to form St. Claude Avenue. The avenue that was once named "Good Children" by Bernard de Marigny will remain St. Claude Avenue.

The idea for the change originated with the Historic Faubourg Tremé Association and proposed by City Councilwoman Kristin Palmer. Much confusion has occurred over the years because St. Claude Street lies one block on the lake side of North Rampart Street, and then turns briefly into McShane Place before becoming St. Claude Avenue. Those not familiar with the area sometimes assume that St. Claude Street is either the same or a continuation of North Rampart Street. In some ways it is. Some people were opposed to the name change because it eliminates that final connection between the historic street corner in Professor Longhair's Mardi Gras anthem.

But the real reason for the name change is to honor Henriette Delille, who lived and did good works in the Tremé neighborhood. Until the vote, no street in Tremé was named for a "person of color" and now there is. Last year, the Catholic Church declared Henriette Delille to be "venerable", two steps away from sainthood. When (or if) she is canonized, she would be the first native-born African-American declared a saint by the Catholic Church. For just a stretch of blocks,

it's a trade of an existing saint for a future one. And hometown Saints are something New Orleanians just can't get enough of.

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