

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

The Sweetheart of New Orleans

The town of Nîmes is the capital of the *Gard département* of southern France, created from the ancient province of Languedoc. A sturdy fabric first produced there (*serge de Nîmes*) eventually had its name shortened to denim (*de Nîmes*). This rugged cotton twill was also popular in Genoa, Italy. Italian sailors wore britches made of this material, and Christopher Columbus was said to have used it for his ships' sails. The French word for these trousers originated from their word for Genoa. The French *bleu de Gênes*, from the Italian *blu di genova*, is how "blue jeans" got their name.

The *Gard département*, settled by the Romans in classical times, is also home to the commune of *Pont-Saint-Esprit*, situated on the Rhône River. The Ardèche River flows into the Rhône, just to the north of the town's medieval bridge. The commune's residents are called *Spiripontains*. One such *Spiripontain* was a cabinetmaker, Michel Bouvier (1792 – 1874), who was the ancestor of John Vernou "Black Jack" Bouvier III, father of First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis. Michel Bouvier left France in 1815 after the defeat of Napoleon Bonaparte and settled in Philadelphia. *Pont-Saint-Esprit* was also the point of origin for a special Lady known as the "Sweetheart" of New Orleans.

A diminutive but beautiful statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary, fondly called "Sweetheart", was brought to the Crescent City by one of the Sisters from the monastery of *Pont-Saint-Esprit* in France. Barely twelve inches in height, the petite plastered statue was destined for disposal when Sister Félicitée discovered it in the attic of her convent in France in 1785. Anguished to see this image of the Blessed Mother so carelessly disregarded, Sister Félicitée fell to her knees in prayer:

"My good Mother, if you will take away promptly the obstacles that stand in the way of our departure, I will carry you to New Orleans, and I promise to have you honored there by every means in my power."

Within a month her petition was promptly granted, and Sister Félicitée brought the tiny but important statue along with her on her voyage to the Ursuline Convent in New Orleans.

The French Ursuline nuns have been doing good works in Louisiana since the earliest days of the colony. Founding their convent in 1727, the Sisters established what is the oldest school for girls in the territory of the modern-day United States. But at the turn of the nineteenth century with much political and religious unrest in Europe, eighteen of the nuns, fearing the anti-clerical sentiment of the French Revolution, fled to Havana, Cuba. Only six remained in New Orleans.

This became a problem for Sister Saint André Madière of the Ursuline Convent (St. Andrew Street is named for her), as it created a shortage of teachers in New Orleans. She requested sisters from France to come to America to aid the struggling convent and wrote her cousin, Mother Saint Michel Gensoul, for help. The Catholic Church was suffering from the politics of the revolution and Mother Saint Michel, knowing that the Church was in distress in both her homeland and abroad, was moved to approach Bishop Fournier of Montpellier for a transfer. But Bishop Fournier believed he could ill afford the loss of one more nun, as many had been killed or fled during the Revolution. He responded to Mother Saint Michel, "The Pope alone can give this authorization. The Pope alone!"

The Pope had problems of his own. Following the death of Pius VI in 1799, by then virtually France's prisoner, the conclave to elect his successor met in November 1799 in Venice. Out of three candidates, Barnaba Niccolò Maria Luigi Chiaramonti was elected as a compromise, surely not the choice of die-hard opponents of the French Revolution, and took the name of Pius VII. He was crowned in March 1800, in a rather unusual ceremony, wearing a *papier-mâché* papal tiara, since the French had seized the original. He then left for Rome, sailing on a barely-seaworthy ship, which did not even have cooking facilities.

But Mother Saint Michel Gensoul was determined to get the Pope's answer. As Napoleon's prisoner at the time, it was highly unlikely that any form of communication could be made with him. Mother Saint Michel knew well the uncertainty of the Holy Father even receiving her missive. Mother Saint Michel prayed before a statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary and said, "O most Holy Virgin Mary, if you obtain for me a prompt and favorable answer to this letter, I promise to have you honored at New Orleans under the title of Our Lady of Prompt Succor." "Prompt Succor" means "a quick and favorable response, or prompt help". Sending her petition on March 19, 1809, Mother Saint Michel received a letter from the Pope granting her request on April 29, 1809. Mother Saint Michel commissioned a statue of the Blessed Mother holding the Infant Jesus. Bishop Fournier blessed the statue and the work of Mother Saint Michel, and she and several postulants were soon

on their way to New Orleans. They arrived at the Old Ursuline Convent on Chartres Street in December 1810, and so did the statue Mother Saint Michel had promised. That striking, large, gold statue was placed in the monastery chapel and is venerated by the people of New Orleans. It now resides in the Shrine on State Street, on the campus of Ursuline Academy and Convent.

Our Lady of Prompt Succor, also known as *Notre-Dame de Bon Secours*, is the Patroness of Louisiana, the Archdiocese of New Orleans, and the city of New Orleans. Her feast day is celebrated on January 8, and she enjoys a reputation of performing miraculous life saving intercessions for the Crescent City. Whether in the form of a modest but beautiful little statue named "Sweetheart" holding the Infant Jesus or a statue of Madonna and child draped in gold, Our Lady's "quick and prompt aid" has helped the city and its residents overcome losses from great fires, floods, disease and wars.

The Ursuline Convent had been spared from a devastating 1812 fire that wreaked havoc in the *Vieux Carré*. An order was given to evacuate the convent when a nun named Sister Anthony placed a small statue of Our Lady of Prompt Succor on a window seat and Mother Saint Michel began to pray aloud, "Our Lady of Prompt Succor, we are lost unless you hasten to our aid!" After these prayers to *Notre-Dame de Bon Secours*, the wind changed direction and turned the flames away. The Ursuline Convent was spared from destruction. Upon seeing this unbelievable turn of events, witnesses unanimously cried out, "Our Lady of Prompt Succor has saved us!"

The most famous example of the loving protection of "Sweetheart" in her role as Our Lady of Prompt Succor came throughout the night of January 7–8, 1815, as the residents of New Orleans and the Ursuline nuns prayed fervently that the city would be spared loss of life in the Battle of New Orleans. On the morning of January 8, the Very Reverend William Dubourg, Vicar General, offered Mass at the altar on which the statue of Our Lady of Prompt Succor had been placed. The Prioress of the Ursuline Convent, Mother Ste. Marie Olivier de Vezin, made a vow to have a Mass of Thanksgiving sung annually should the American forces win. General Andrew Jackson was up against overwhelming odds, including a greater number of British soldiers, highly trained in the Napoleonic conflicts in Europe. Old Hickory, publicly, and in a letter to the Sisters, acknowledged "heavenly intercession" in that victory. The nuns, in turn, nursed many of the injured British soldiers back to health. The very definition of "succor", after all, means "to give assistance to in time of want, difficulty, or distress". Jackson's letter resides in the Ursuline Museum on State Street.

Every year, since 1815, that solemn vow has been kept to honor Our Lady of Prompt Succor in a Mass of Thanksgiving on January 8 celebrated by the Archbishop of New Orleans in the National Shrine.

This promise has been honored, without fail, for that many years, and is attended by many devotees from across the Nation.

Ursuline Academy in New Orleans is the oldest continually operating Catholic school and the oldest girls school in the United States. Ursuline holds many other firsts in the nation: the first convent, the first female pharmacist, the first woman to produce a book of literary merit, first free school and first retreat center for ladies, first classes for female slaves, as well as free women of color (the Creole women of a unique New Orleans group known as *gens de couleur libres*, or free people of color) and Native Americans.

"Sweetheart" as the provider of "Prompt Succor" to the city is prayed to often. New Orleanians ask for her intercession whenever a hurricane threatens the city, reciting the prayer:

"Our Lady of Prompt Succor, hasten to help us!"

Even when the worst happens, as in the case of Hurricane Katrina, prayers are made to Our Lady of Prompt Succor to help those who have lost so much to recover and start anew.

Something else wonderful happened on January 8, at least to those who find happiness in the joy of music. Exactly 120 years to the day after the American victory at the Battle of New Orleans, Elvis Presley was born.

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