

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

What's in a Name?

As Shakespeare had Juliet say, "That which we call a rose□by any other name would smell as sweet." Maybe so, but in New Orleans there's more to a name than meets the ear.

The Crescent City is home to many sweet-sounding names, especially those of the ladies. What could be more beautiful names than those of Voodoo practitioner Marie Laveau or sarong siren Dorothy Lamour? Actually Dorothy was born Mary Leta Dorothy Slaton, but her parents' marriage lasted only a few years. Her mother re-married a man named Clarence Lambour, and Dorothy took his last name. Lambour became Lamour, a much better choice in that it oozes love (*toujours l'amour*). She took it along with her on all those "Road" pictures with Bob Hope and Bing Crosby.

Inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame after having recorded over 60 singles for the Imperial label, placing 40 songs in the R&B top 10 charts and 11 top 10 singles on the pop charts, Antoine Dominique "Fats" Domino, Jr. is a New Orleans musical legend with a Creole name to match. It flows from the lips mellifluously like a beignet washed down with *café au lait*. A sure sign that a name has star potential is the fact that someone has tried, in some way, to usurp its power. In the case of "Fats", American Bandstand host Dick Clark's wife Barbara took the name, changed it around ever so slightly and bestowed a new name to an up-and-coming Rock and Roll personality.

A hefty teenager brought up in South Philadelphia, Ernest Evans would entertain customers with songs after school at his various jobs. At a recording session for Dick Clark, Barbara Clark asked Evans what his name was. "Well," he told her, "my friends call me 'Chubby'." As he had just completed doing his impression of "Fats" Domino, she smiled and instantly came up with his new stage name: "Chubby" as in "Fats" and "Checker" as in the game of checkers (or the game of DOMINOs). With that clever little play on words, Ernest Evans would forever use the name "Chubby Checker" and twist his way to fame.

As in one of Charles Caleb Colton's most famous quotes, "Imitation is the sincerest (form) of flattery", "Fats" was imitated in song. In addition, a play on his name was another sincere and flattering copying of a beautiful name - not just in its sound, but in the prestige it carried. It was, after all, Mr. Domino's overwhelming talent that gave his name power.

Now, in other parts of the country (Jamestown, Virginia, for example) the name "John Smith" may conjure up the very image of a valiant captain. But for New Orleanians, I'm afraid, that name is far too simple and dull. For the incubation of a truly heroic name, we must travel just below the Crescent City to the parish of St. Bernard, past its cypress swamps and oak *chéniers*, to the plantation home known as Contreras. The master of the plantation and father-to-be, Jacques, could trace his French and Welsh lineage all the way back to the thirteenth century. Jacques' grandfather had come to Louisiana during the reign of Louis XIV, and his ancestors included Ducros and Cartiers (names of distinction in these parts). Jacques' wife had an even more distinctive pedigree, her family (De Reggio) descending from an Italian noble family of dukes that migrated first to France and founded a French line that made its way to Louisiana.

On May 28, 1818, Jacques decided to give his son a remarkable gift: "a rich, ringing name to befit his ancient heritage. Pierre Gustave Toutant-Beauregard." His biographer T. Harry Williams went on to write, "It would sound well in the future annals of fame. It would also stamp its bearer as different outside of the bayou country. That sonorous appellation would stand out in the Confederacy like pompano en papillote in a mess of turnip greens."

And, it so happened that this Gallic-American "Napoleon in Gray" had an aristocratic bearing and personality to match his name. He had more "glamor and drama", wrote Williams, "than any three of his Anglo-Saxon colleagues in gray rolled into one. His brooding heavy lids and brown liquid eyes regarded the world impassively until, when he felt himself slighted, they flashed in anger.

There was something in this "resounding name of Beauregard, in his Creole origin in South Louisiana, in his knightly bearing" that suggested a more exotic environment than the South of Jefferson Davis," (who Beauregard didn't much care for). When the President of the Confederacy died in New Orleans, Beauregard refused to attend the funeral. "I didn't like him when he was alive, he offered. "And my opinion has not changed in the last two days." He never forgave Davis for relieving him as western commander during the Mississippi campaign in June 1862. Run down and feverish, he took a brief sick leave without informing his commander-in-chief. Davis replaced him.

Graduating second in his class at West Point, his Army buddies gave him many nicknames: "Little Creole", "Bory", "Felix", "Little Frenchman" and "Little Napoleon". Many of these names suggest his five-foot-seven frame. P. G. T. Beauregard is how he is commonly referred to today, but he rarely used his first name as an adult and signed correspondence with the shortened and de-hyphenated G. T. Beauregard.

In 1841, Beauregard married a young lady with an equally beautiful French name, Marie Laure Villeré, paternal granddaughter of Jacques Villeré, the second governor of Louisiana. She died in 1850, while giving birth to their third child. Ten years later, the dashing widower married Caroline Deslonde, a sister-in-law of John Slidell, later a Confederate diplomat. She died in New Orleans in March 1864.

Beauregard was the only Confederate general involved in every phase of the Civil War. And he was an accomplished engineer. He fired the first shot on Fort Sumter and fought on after Appomattox. He was colorful, chivalric, prideful, self-confident and arrogant. Some in the South idolized him more than Robert E. Lee, but some of his pursuits after the war offended some die-hards. He earned \$30,000 a year for showing up twice a month to preside over the drawings of the Louisiana Lottery. Many purists believed this beneath the dignity of a chivalric hero.

What else did he and his monumental name represent? "A vague air of romance, reminiscent of an older civilization," wrote Williams. "When he spoke and when he acted, people thought of Paris and Napoleon and Austerlitz and French legions bursting from the St. Bernard Pass onto the plains of Italy."

And one can visualize this Creole cavalier's stately bearing by visiting his noble equestrian statue by Alexander Doyle at Bayou St. John and the entrance to City Park (where Esplanade meets Beauregard Circle). Since the general didn't use Pierre, P. is missing from his name on the statue. Or one can visit his Chartres Street residence, the Beauregard-Keyes House, operated today as an historic house museum.

To conclude this monograph on names, I must mention two names of Native American origin: Pontchatoula and Tchoupitoulas.

Pontchatoula is a town in Tangipahoa Parish, Louisiana, famous for its annual "Strawberry Festival" with a name that means "falling hair". Not in the sense that Rogaine is needed, but the town's name is derived from the Choctaw words *pashi* meaning "hair" and *itula* or *itola* meaning "falling, hanging or flowing". Pontchatoula or "hanging hair" expresses the beauty of the surrounding area exemplified by the Spanish moss hanging profusely from the trees.

As for Tchoupitoulas, John Chase included an "Old New Orleans Anecdote" in his "Frenchmen, Desire, Good Children" about a policeman finding "a dead horse lying in the street at the corner of Common and Tchoupitoulas streets." After numerous futile attempts to spell Tchoupitoulas and thereby record the incident in his notebook, he dragged the dead horse "a block down the street." The officer then wrote, "Dead horse in the street at the corner of Common and Magazine."

By the time WWL's Phil Johnson told this story to Charles Kuralt (American Peabody Award winning journalist famous for his "On the Road" segments on the CBS Evening News), the horse became a "dead mule" and Magazine Street became "Camp Street". That's how he reported it in his book, "Charles Kuralt's America".

He loved that New Orleans had streets named for the Muses, rolling lyrically off the tongue like "Polymnia, Euterpe, and Terpsichore, pronounced Terpsy-core." He wrote how "it slowly dawns on you that New Orleans rejoices in the most lyrical street names in the world. Where else can you take a walk down Narcissus Street, or Venus, Adonis, or Bacchus? Not only are the gods so honored, but also all the best human impulses, Community, Concord, and Compromise. On my way to the Pontchartrain lakefront one day, riding with a cab driver who blessed himself with the sign of the cross as we passed each Catholic church (but not the other churches), I took note of the names of the streets we crossed: Abundance, Treasure, Pleasure, Benefit, and Humanity. Then I remembered the name of the wide thoroughfare on which we were traveling, a boulevard so familiar that nobody thinks any more about the meaning of its name - Elysian Fields! The paradisiacal home of the blessed after death is best known, in temporal New Orleans, as the fastest way to get from the river to the lake."

People, places and the streets leading up to them: What's in a name? In New Orleans, quite a lot.

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