

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

A New York Hill

with a New Orleans Pedigree

Staten Island, one of the five boroughs of New York City, has a neighborhood situated upon a hill of the same name, both of which are named for a native-born New Orleanian, Suzette Bosque Claiborne Grymes (August 11, 1796 – August 6, 1881). The hill and neighborhood are known as Grymes Hill, rising 310 feet above sea level at its greatest elevation.



A view from Grymes Hill, Staten Island, New York

Suzette's husband was an illustrious attorney named John Randolph Grymes (December 14, 1786 – December 3, 1854), but (before her marriage to Grymes) she was married to Louisiana's first governor, Virginia-born William Charles Cole Claiborne (who died November 23, 1817). Suzette Bosque Claiborne Grymes' story is one you will find quite interesting.

She was described in the *New Orleans Democrat* and the *New York Times* as "a very notable lady" and "the famous beauty and belle of the Territory of New Orleans". Born in New Orleans of "wealthy and commanding people, who lived in grand style in a large and elegant old mansion in the lower suburbs of the city," she was the daughter of

Don Bartolomo Bosque (born in Catalonia, Spain), a military officer in the service of Spain, who came with his family to Louisiana. Don Bartolomo was one of the last Spanish officials retained after the transfer of the Louisiana colony back to France. Sons and daughters were born to this family, but the sons had "a too strong tendency to resort to the duello".

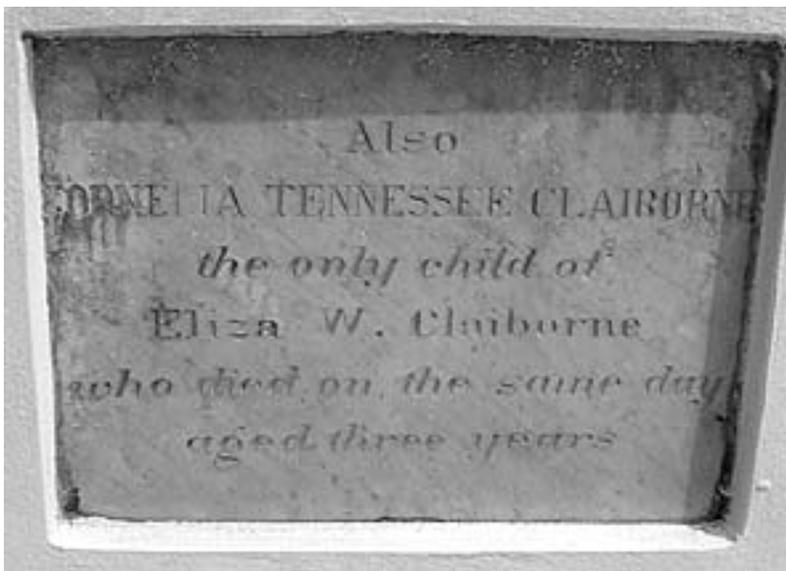
The otherwise hospitable Bosque family entertained "the prominent men of all parties in the State" at their elegant home, including the young Governor Claiborne. Appointed by President Thomas Jefferson, Claiborne had come down to New Orleans to oversee the transfer of the Louisiana Territory to U.S. control after the Louisiana Purchase in 1803. Relations with the local Creole population were at first strained, owing to the fact that Claiborne was young and untested and (on his arrival) spoke no French. In addition, he was early on confronted by sadness upon the death of his first wife, Eliza Wilson Lewis (1784 – 1804) of Nashville, and his young daughter, Cornelia Tennessee (aged three years), on the same day. They both died from yellow fever, and Claiborne's private secretary Micajah Lewis (Eliza's brother) was killed instantly in a duel when his pistol misfired. Young Lewis died defending Claiborne's reputation. Eventually, Claiborne was able to win the hearts of the New Orleans populace.



Governor William Charles Cole Claiborne whose crucial electoral vote was cast for Thomas Jefferson (who won the Presidency by one vote)

Claiborne then married Marie Clarisse Duralde ("a charming young lady of one of the oldest, wealthiest, and most influential creole families in the State"), whose family was connected by marriage to that of the great orator, Henry Clay of Kentucky. Marie Clarisse gave birth to a son (also named William Charles Cole Claiborne and the forebear of a number of prominent New Orleanians) and daughter (also named Clarisse), but the second Mrs. Claiborne died in New Orleans on November 29, 1809. The young Governor was now twice a widower.

Claiborne married a second beautiful Creole wife in 1812. Suzette was only sixteen years old. It was also the same year that Louisiana became a state. Having served two terms as governor under territorial rule, he began his third term as the state's first governor. He was later elected to the U.S. Senate, but died before occupying the office. This time, in 1817, Suzette Bosque, was the one widowed.



Tomb inscription for Cornelia Tennessee Claiborne

After the Governor's death, Suzette Bosque Claiborne traveled to Europe where she resided for some time in Paris, attending to the education of her young children. There were two born to the couple:

1) Sophronia Louise (born c. 1813) married Antoine Jacques Philippe de Mandeville de Marigny, becoming the daughter-in-law of Bernard de Marigny (founder of the eponymous faubourg).

2) Charles William W. Claiborne, born December 20, 1815 (Clerk of the United States Court in New Orleans), was notorious for his defalcation (misappropriation of funds entrusted to him). On June 19, 1874, the *New York Times* reported the amount to be "about thirty thousand dollars" and that he had "been a great patron of the cockpit in this city, and noted as one of the greatest connoisseurs and raisers

of game fowl in the South." His "great delight in that kind of sport," namely cockfighting (along with wagers made), may have contributed to his sudden departure for Europe. He later died in Cuba.



Patrons of the cockpit

Returning to Louisiana from the continent after a few short years, the beguiling Widow Claiborne resumed her former position in New Orleans society, attracting the eye of "a gay bachelor of most imposing and elegant bearing, great devotion to fashion, and endowed with the gallant and chivalric traits characteristic of the Virginia cavalier." That was the description the *New Orleans Democrat* attached to the man they called "one of the ablest lawyers and the most impressive advocates in the State."

Suzette's marriage to the "brilliant lawyer" of New Orleans, John Randolph Grymes (originally from Orange County, Virginia), was "an event of almost as much social importance and éclat as her previous marriage" to Governor Claiborne, the paper explained. Grymes had

moved to New Orleans in 1808 and took the oath of office as district attorney for the state of Louisiana on May 4, 1811. Grymes served in the Battle of New Orleans as an aide to General Jackson and was complimented for his dispatches to the War Department. The *Times Picayune* reported, "beautiful and accomplished, superbly endowed by nature and charmingly cultivated," Madame Claiborne "could not be permitted to wear forever the weeds of widowhood," so she and Grymes were married in New Orleans on December 1, 1822, ten years after her marriage to Governor Claiborne and just over five years after his demise.

Grymes was, according to Louisiana historian Charles Gayarré, "an elegant *distingué* looking man, above the middle size, always fashionably well dressed, always systematically courteous." In addition, wrote Gayarré, he was a lawyer with "a lucid, logical mind," who "speaks with the richest fluency, never being at a loss or hesitating about a word," but also a man with "a decided taste for luxurious living, for horse-racing, cock-fighting, and card-gambling.

He was U.S. district attorney, State attorney-general and a member of the state legislature. While there, he fought two duels and in one was severely wounded.

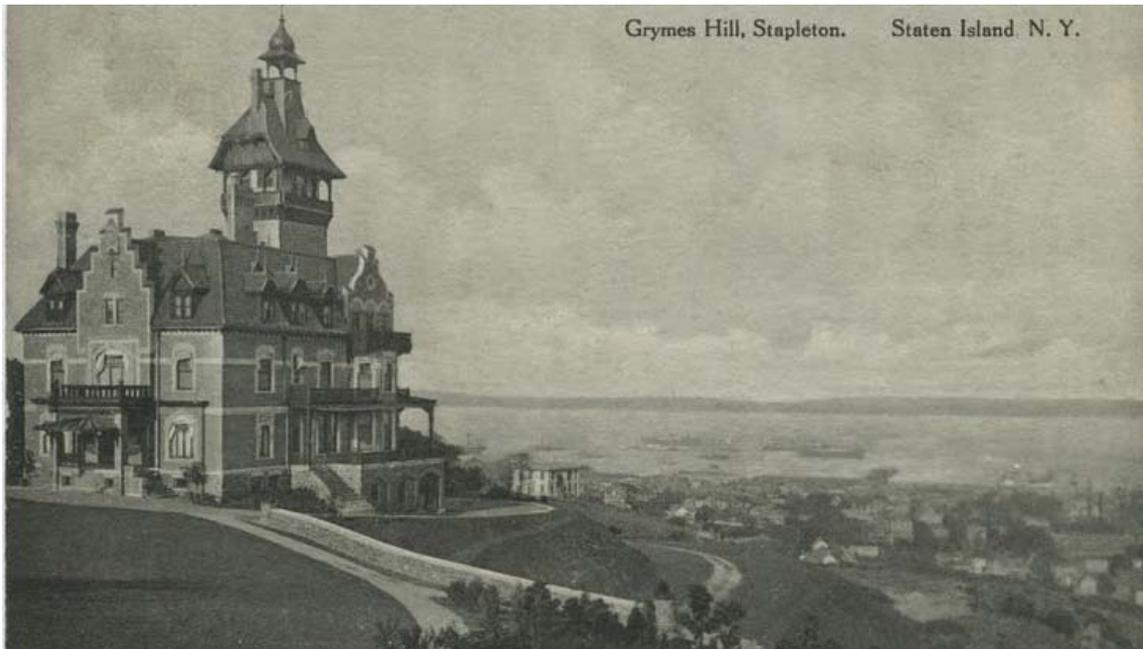
As an attorney, he was one of Andrew Jackson's counsels in the United States Bank case, he opposed Daniel Webster in court against Myra Clark Gaines and he reportedly earned one hundred thousand dollars in the batture case against Edward Livingston.

In one historic trial, Grymes resigned his position as district attorney, to defend buccaneer Jean Laffite's brother, Pierre, on a charge of piracy. Grymes and Edward Livingston were each offered twenty thousand dollars. The legal team failed to secure Pierre's release, but the Baratarians orchestrated a successful jailbreak and *Voilà!*, Pierre was free after all. Nevertheless, the gentleman privateer agreed to honor his debt to the attorneys Laffite invited them to his island stronghold to collect. Grymes accepted, enjoyed Laffite's hospitality, but lingered too long (so the story goes) engaging in games of chance. Ever the gambler, Grymes lost both his fee and Livingston's.

Like Thomas Jefferson and Robert E. Lee, Grymes is a descendant of William Randolph and Mary Isham. His father (John Randolph Grymes, Sr.) was a loyalist during the American Revolution and joined the royal army under Lord Dunmore. He went to England, married in London and returned to Virginia and became a wealthy planter.

Married life for Grymes and his wife was for some time a happy one, and became the parents of two beautiful daughters (Medora and Athenais) and a son (also named John Randolph Grymes). At some point, however, there came what the *Democrat* described as "some

interruption in their domestic relations" and with her husband's full approval, Mrs. Grymes "removed to New York in order to superintend the education of her children."



Postcard view of the Horrmann residence, atop Grymes Hill

It was in 1836 when Suzette Grymes purchased land on the Staten Island hill named for her. Building the first mansion on the hill, she called her villa "*Capo di Monte*" ("Top of the Mountain"). Some of the most prominent people in New York City also chose to build grand estates on Grymes Hill. Jacob Hand Vanderbilt (brother of the Commodore) built his home in 1847, and Sir Edward Cunard of the shipping and passenger line family built his about three years later. Civil War general William Greene Ward followed in 1865. The largest estate on Grymes Hill was Horrmann Castle, which was built in 1891 and demolished in 1968. In 1908, a home was built for Louis A. Stirn, a silk importer. In 2006, the Stirn mansion became a New York City Landmark.



In 1920, philanthropist Dr. Louis A. Dreyfus and his wife donated 1.9 acres of land to the City of New York, Hero Park, dedicated in honor of the men from Staten Island, who had died in World War I.

Today, Grymes Hill is one of Staten Island's more notable luxury home areas, and the estates of yesterday have become home to several institutions such as Wagner College in 1918. The Wagner campus includes 16 acres that were once the Vanderbilt estate, as well as the 38-acre Cunard estate. The Ward mansion is also part of the college.

In 1843, Medora Grymes, idolized by her father, married Samuel Cutler "Sam" Ward (nephew of General Ward of Grymes Hill) and by 1846 bore two sons. Sam's first wife was Emily Astor, daughter of William Backhouse Astor. Sam, of the firm of Prime, Ward and King, was a poet and author who combined gourmet food, fine wines and excellent conversation into a special type of "social lobbying" in Washington, D.C., over which he excelled for more than a decade. Sam was a Democrat with many connections in the South, putting him at odds with his sister, Julia Ward Howe, who would later write "The Battle Hymn of the Republic". Sadly, Medora urged Sam to begin speculating on Wall Street. In September 1847, the financial world was shocked to learn that Prime, Ward and Co. (King had prudently withdrawn) had collapsed. Medora retired to Paris, where she lived for many years.



"King of the Lobby" Sam Ward caricatured by "Spy" in Vanity Fair

Sister Athenais wed a wealthy New York banker, Louis A. von Hoffman (one of the founders of the Knickerbocker Club), and enjoyed a marriage of wealth and happiness and good fortune. A daughter, also named Medora, later married "one of the wealthiest and most distinguished noblemen in Europe," wrote the *Democrat*. He was a Paris-born *Marquis* who decided to make his fortune in cattle in the Dakotas territory. He acquired 26,000 acres and constructed a 26-room mansion. In his small town of Medora, he built a hotel, saloon, brickyard, stores, a newspaper and a Catholic Church. He went to trial for killing three cowboys who had accosted him and was acquitted three times. The faithful Medora moved into her husband's jail cell each time. Before becoming President, Teddy Roosevelt and the *Marquis* almost fought a duel over competing cattle businesses, but eventually settled the dispute amicably.

Medora's sister, Pauline, married the *über* wealthy German industrialist Baron Ferdinand von Stumm whose family owned the Neunkirchen Iron and Steelworks. One of von Stumm's paintings, a de Goya portrait, now hangs in the National Gallery in Washington. But, as for John Randolph Grymes, the "great old lawyer and Democrat died" December 1854 "in extreme, but dignified poverty."

Suzette Bosque Claiborne Grymes, on the other hand, survived her husband by over a quarter century. It is estimated that she had built up a significant estate, having realized a substantial sum of money prior to her purchase of the property on Grymes Hill, which she managed with great diligence and care. She died in Paris August 6, 1881. Her obit in the *Times Picayune* ("Death of a Venerable Lady") explained, "For many years his widow has resided in Paris. Possessed of great wealth, she maintained her establishment there in elegant style, and her home was the resort of scholars and famous men, of the gifted and those of gentle blood, attracted thither by her wonderful charms of mind and person. She conversed freely and correctly in the seven leading languages of Europe, and age seemed scarcely to impair her attractiveness."

There is an impressive portrait (painted c. 1842) of John Randolph Grymes at the Historic New Orleans Collection. The handsome attorney, who loved to gamble, is wearing a green tailcoat with gold buttons with a gold and coral stickpin. Whatever his fortune, he was always in fashion.

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