

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*

*By Ned Hémard*

### **A Rose By Any Other Name**

Her name was Rose, and one day she would become an empress (the direct ancestor of the present heads of the royal houses of Belgium, Denmark, Luxembourg, Norway and Sweden). It all started with a hurricane.

Travel back in time to *Les Trois-Îlets* (The Three Small Islands), a picturesque village on the Caribbean island of Martinique. The year is 1766. A baby girl named Marie Josèphe Rose Tascher de la Pagerie had been born there three years earlier and was now living on the first floor of a *sucrierie* (sugar factory) on her family's plantation, with France over 4,000 miles away. And then disaster struck.



*Les Trois-Îlets, Martinique*

On August 13-14, 1766, a huge and treacherous hurricane ravaged the island so that its effects were felt for some twenty years after. It commenced at ten o'clock in the evening with a strong northwest wind followed by an earthquake. Some one hundred souls lost their lives, and upwards of thirty-five ships foundered or were stranded.

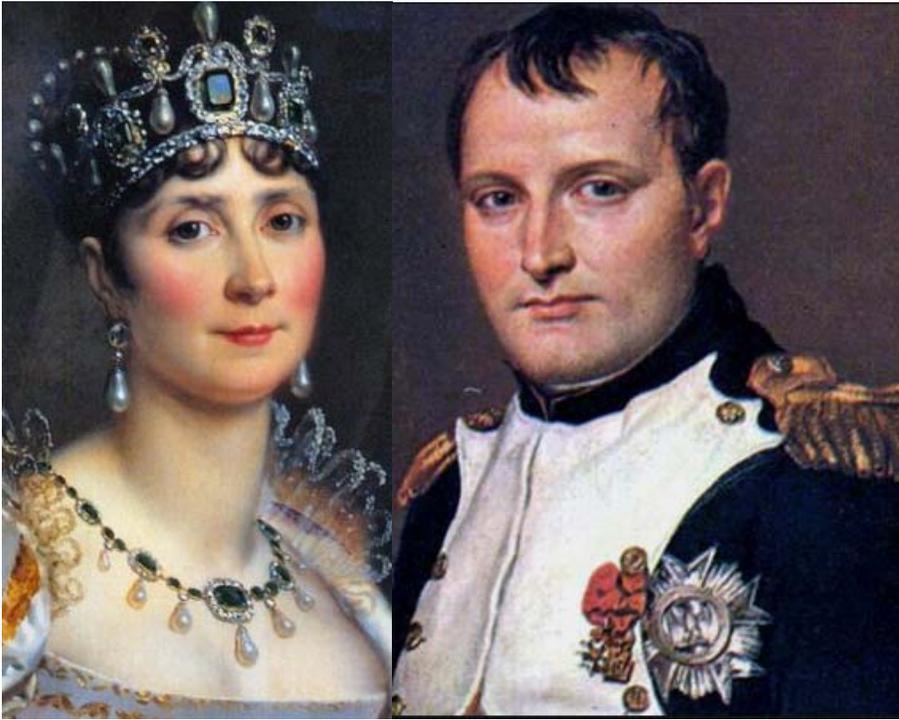
Rose's family suffered financial hardship in the aftermath of this terrible tempest. Rose's *Tante* Edmée (who had been the mistress of Francois, vicomte de Beauharnais, of the French aristocracy) devised a plan. She promoted an advantageous marriage of Rose's younger sister, Catherine-Desirée, to the vicomte's son, Alexandre. This beneficial maneuver would keep the Beauharnais money in the hands of the Tascher family, but the 12-year-old girl died before she could leave Martinique. It was then that Rose (at only sixteen years of age) dutifully took her sister's place and left for France in 1779.

She wed Alexandre two months later, and they would have a marriage that was not extremely happy (although it produced two children, Eugène and Hortense). Alexandre remedied all of this unpleasantness by a visit to the guillotine on July 23, 1794, leaving Rose an attractive and charming widow.



*Heady times, but not "the best of all possible worlds" for aristocrats*

The following year, Rose met an ambitious young general six years her junior. He wrote to her, "the memory of last night's intoxicating pleasures has left no rest to my senses." One thing he did not love about her was her name. At his request, Rose was from then on to be known as Joséphine. And who was to deny him? He was, after all, Napoléon Bonaparte.



*Joséphine de Beauharnais, née Rose Tascher de la Pagerie  
and her husband, Napoléon Bonaparte*

Joséphine and Napoléon married on March 9, 1796 and were crowned Emperor and Empress of the French in 1804 at *Notre Dame de Paris*. Many will find it interesting that the day before their wedding, the couple signed a quite progressive prenuptial agreement. There was some fudging in the marriage contract on their six-year age difference. Napoléon is listed as one year older, with Joséphine rejuvenated by four.

Two days after the wedding, Napoléon left his bride to lead the French army in Italy, but kept in close personal touch with love letters full of intense romantic emotion. He wrote, "I hope before long to crush you in my arms and cover you with a million kisses burning as though beneath the equator." And even at the time of the following words he was the Emperor of almost all of Europe, he wrote, "Without his Josephine, without the assurance of her love, what is left him upon earth? What can he do?" And much of the correspondence between the imperial couple was naughty: "A kiss on your heart, and one much lower down, much lower!" Or this one: "How happy I would be if I could assist you at your undressing, the little firm white breast, the adorable face, the hair tied up in a scarf *à la créole*." Obviously, conquering countries was not Napoléon's only passion.

Eventually Joséphine agreed to a divorce so Napoleon could have an heir. He married his new wife, Marie Louise of Austria, two months later and they became the parents of Napoleon II of France.

Joséphine's daughter, Hortense, married Napoleon's brother Louis. Their son became Napoleon III. Joséphine's granddaughter, Joséphine, daughter of Eugène, married Sweden's Oscar I, son of Napoleon's ex-fiancée, Desirée Clary Bernadotte. (Desirée came alive on screen, played by Jean Simmons to Marlon Brando's Napoleon.)

After Napoléon's marriage to Marie Louise, he and Joséphine remained friends. He ordered that she retain the rank and title of empress, granted her full ownership of the *Château de Malmaison* and a pension of 5 million francs a year. In exile on the island of Elba, Napoléon's last word spoken on his deathbed was Joséphine's name.

Napoléon Bonaparte has always been part of the history of New Orleans, most conspicuously by his sale of New Orleans and the whole of Louisiana to the United States. But he has also been part of the city's culture in many other wonderful ways: Bonaparte's death mask at the Cabildo, Napoleon Avenue, Dresden Napoleon figurines in Royal Street shop windows or perhaps those prints of the Emperor on the walls of Brennan's (and there's always the wonderful legend about pirates waiting to smuggle him back to the Napoleon House on the corner of Chartres and St. Louis streets). And with him, Joséphine has never been too far away.



*Napoleon House*

A recent news release confirmed that, on April 30, 2015, the historic Napoleon House, purchased by Joseph Impastato in 1920, will be purchased by restaurateur Ralph Brennan from the Impastato family.

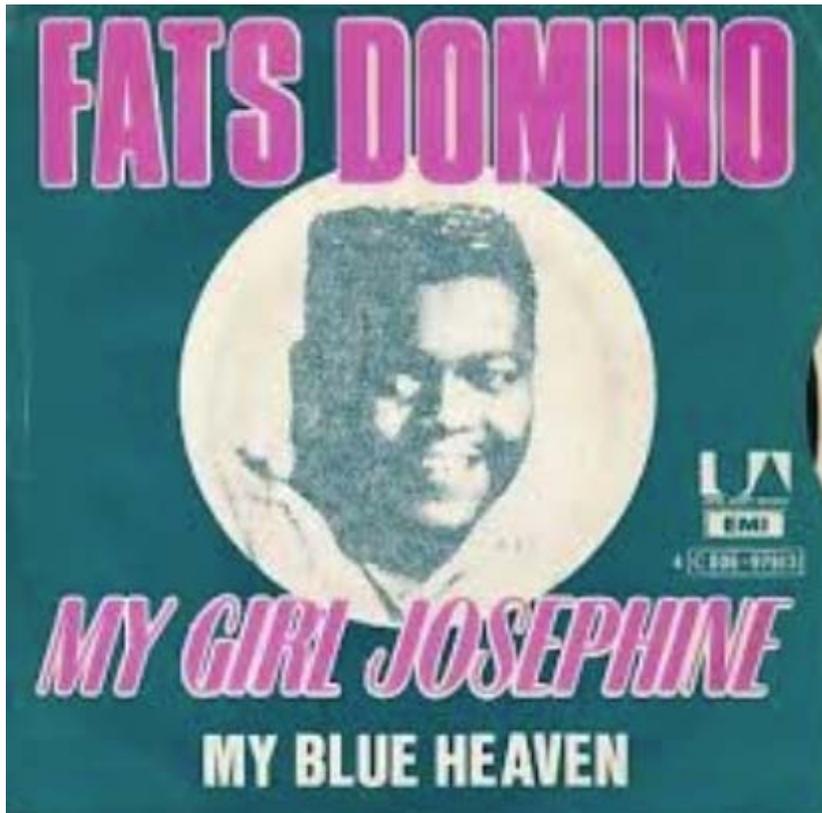
John Chase tells the story of how Josephine Alley in New Orleans, a number of years back, went about a name change. Locals wanted to change Josephine Alley (off North Rampart between Piety and Desire) to the more elegant Beauharnais Alley. In the process, it was discovered that Josephine Alley was not named for the Empress Joséphine at all, but for a certain "neighborhood personality". So they renamed it Rosalie Alley for yet "another neighborhood personality". Today (and for several years now) yet another local celebrity, Mambo

Sallie Ann Glassman (Voudou priestess) hosts an annual prayer ceremony to ward off hurricanes at the Achade Meadows Peristyle at 3319 Rosalie Alley.



*Sights along Rosalie Alley*

New Orleans also has a Josephine Street that once again is named for someone else. How this came about revolves around the story of yet another plantation and the widow who owned it. Margarethe Wiltz began subdividing her land in 1824 and named the streets. One was named Grand Route Panis for her second husband, Jacinto Panis. That street is today Jackson Avenue. Curiously, it is believed that Panis was in charge of the firing squad that executed Margarethe's first husband, Joseph Milhet. (Seems there is just as much romance and irony in New Orleans as in France.) Josephine Street was most likely named for a Wiltz relative, Marie Josephine Wiltz (born October 22, 1828).



And to set the record straight, there is no evidence that Napoleon ever uttered the words "Not tonight, Josephine". That was the title of a song performed in 1915 by Florrie Forde, an Australian-born music hall singer. A big hit from four years earlier was "Come Josephine in My Flying Machine", made popular by Ada Jones and Billy Murray. But for New Orleanians, the big year for song was 1960. Three of the songs in Billboard's top 100 for the year had New Orleans in the title: "New Orleans" by Gary (U.S.) Bonds, "Way Down Yonder in New Orleans" by Freddie Cannon and "Walking to New Orleans" by Fats Domino.

Fats had another quite appropriate hit that year: "My Girl Josephine".

## **NED HÉMARD**

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