

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

A Dollop of Trollope

The fourth child of Mayer Amschel Rothschild, Nathan Mayer Rothschild (1777 – 1836) set up the London office of the Rothschild family banking dynasty. From 1809 Nathan began to deal in gold bullion, and developed this as the cornerstone of his business. From 1811 onward, he engaged in the transfer of money to pay Wellington's troops, on campaign against Napoleon, and later to make subsidy payments to British allies, as well. His four brothers helped coordinate activities across the Europe, developing a network of agents, shippers and couriers to transport gold – and vital intelligence – across the continent.

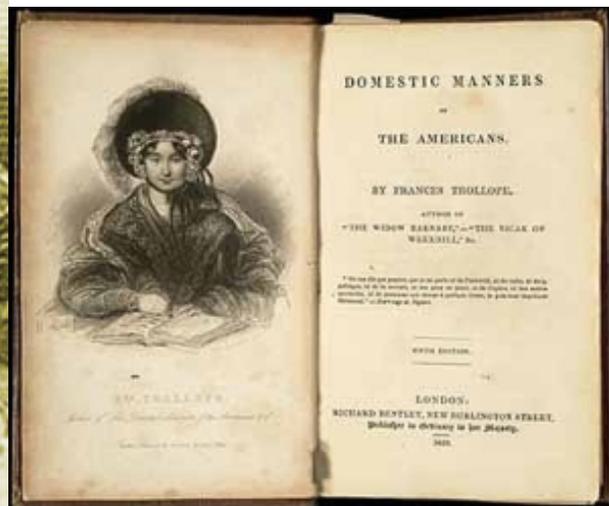
According to a long-believed legend, the Rothschilds made millions of their fortune thanks to brother Nathan Rothschild's foreknowledge of the outcome of the Battle of Waterloo and his successful speculation on the price of British bonds. No doubt it was gratifying for Rothschild to receive the news of Napoleon's defeat first, thanks to the speed of his couriers – more than one full day before the Cabinet received Wellington's official despatch. But despite the value of obtaining word ahead of time, that news was anything but good from Nathan's point of view. He was banking on a protracted military campaign.

The Rothschild fortune was made not because of Waterloo, but despite it. Now Nathan and his brothers were sitting atop a pile of cash that the government no longer needed – to pay for a war that was over. With the coming of peace, great armies would be disbanded and allied coalitions dissolved. Cleverly he found a way out: he and his brothers could use their gold to make a massive and risky bet on the bond market. In July 1815, Nathan made "great purchases" of British government bonds, gambling that the British victory at Waterloo (and the prospect of less government borrowing) would send the price of British bonds soaring skyward. Nathan purchased even more as the price began to rise, despite his brothers' entreaties to realize profits. Nathan held his nerve until late 1817, selling at a 40 per cent profit (worth around 600 million today).

The end of the Napoleonic Wars was not good for everyone financially. It fueled a frenzy of speculation on the London stock exchanges and many of Britain's fashionable set, author Charles Dickens' family, the family of popular Victorian novelist Anthony Trollope and many others, were financially ruined in the recession following Waterloo.

Anthony Trollope (1815 – 1882) was the fourth son of Thomas A. Trollope, a barrister, and Frances (Milton) Trollope. Born less than two months before the Battle of Waterloo, he became one of the most prolific and respected English novelists of the Victorian age. Some of his most-loved works, collectively known as the *Chronicles of Barsetshire*, all take place in the imaginary county of Barsetshire. He also penned penetrating novels on society (including the role of women), politics and other timely controversies of his time. The BBC, many readers will recall, aired several television-drama serials based on Trollope's works. The 26-episode adaptation of all six Palliser novels, *The Pallisers*, first broadcast in 1974.

At the end of 1827, the year Anthony entered Winchester College, his mother Frances (Fanny) Trollope (1779 – 1863) arrived in America hoping to better the family's fortunes. Winchester College and its founder Bishop William of Wykeham, share the motto, "Manners makyth man". Anthony's mother Frances would go on to write *Domestic Manners of the Americans* and pretty much disparage many of the citizens of the young republic and their manners. Overall, she concluded that Americans accumulated wealth far more easily than they acquired civility. New Orleans was one of her stops.



Frances Trollope

It was apparent, from her arrival in the Crescent City, that America did not offer a great first impression. Trollope's diary states, "I never beheld a scene so utterly desolate as this entrance of the Mississippi." She should have been elated at that sight of land after a seven-week crossing, the last three days of which were occupied by the terror of being chased by rogue pirate ships across the Gulf of Mexico.

As luck would have it, Fanny and her entourage, which included the noted abolitionist, bluestocking libertine and utopian, Frances (also a Fanny) Wright (1795 – 1852), arrived at the docks just as the City of New Orleans was beginning to celebrate the anniversary of General Jackson's great victory over the British in the Battle of New Orleans. It must have been extremely awkward for the English visitors that the city was commemorating the rout of the British and the death of Ned Pakenham on the field of battle. Major-General Pakenham was, after all, Wellington's brother-in-law and close acquaintance of Trollope friend Sir Galbraith Lowry Cole, lately of the Iron Duke's staff.

The controversial Frances Wright had attempted to recruit enlightened Europeans to take part in the building of a new world, and Frances Trollope answered the call. She accompanied Wright to America, expecting to escape for a time her English creditors. Trollope was a well-read, lively, openhearted woman. She could be caustic in her observations, but by no means radical in her politics like Wright; yet she had a real aversion to the ills of slavery. In addition, the freethinking Mrs. Wright (responsible for her friend Trollope's traveling to America) championed free love, birth control, emancipation and communal living. She aimed to purchase some slaves, liberate them at her "Nashoba Commune", and educate them in the finest tradition of English civility. The Nashoba scheme ended up a flop and failed completely due to poor planning and insight. The commune was located within a 2,000-acre woodland, which now includes present-day Germantown, Tennessee, now suburban Memphis. Wright later ferried her 30 freedmen to Haiti and deposited them as free citizens before returning to Scotland and becoming a foe of marriage and numerous other traditions of western society.

The New Orleans Argus dated December 26, 1827, contains notices of slaves, real estate and horses for auction. Another advertisement proclaimed a new Commercial Club (*Cercle du Commerce*) for gentlemen being formed by a Mr. Lafont and open by subscription. *L'Abeille de la Nouvelle-Orléans* (*The New Orleans Bee*) on the same date ran ads for the Commercial Club both in English and French. Another ad in both the *Argus* and *L'Abeille* touted a grand ball at the Jackson Ball Room on Saturday night. Also, at "the corner of Orleans and Bourbon sts." for an admittance of one dollar, one could attend a "Grand Ball" held "every Wednesday and Saturday". Right away, the New Orleans Quadroon culture caught Frances Trollope's watchful eye.

Not legally recognized as wives, the lovely Quadroons became *placées* in relationships known as *mariages de la main gauche* (or left-handed marriages). Here's what Mrs. Trollope wrote about New Orleans and the light-skinned young women of color who were brought up to be the mistresses of Creole gentlemen:

"Our stay in New Orleans was not long enough to permit our entering into society, but I was told that it contained two distinct sets of people, both celebrated, in their way, for their social meetings and elegant entertainments. The first of these is composed of Creole families, who are chiefly planters and merchants, with their wives and daughters; these meet together, eat together, and are very grand and aristocratic".

She went on to describe the city's other set:

"The other set consists of the excluded but amiable Quadroons, and such of the gentlemen of the former class as can by any means escape from the high places, where pure Creole blood swells the veins at the bare mention of any being tainted in the remotest degree with the Negro stain.

Of all the prejudices I have ever witnessed, this appears to me the most violent, and the most inveterate. Quadroon girls, the acknowledged daughters of wealthy American or Creole fathers, educated with all of style and accomplishments which money can procure at New Orleans, and with all the decorum that care and affection can give exquisitely beautiful, graceful, gentle, and amiable, these are not admitted, nay, are not on any terms admissible, into the society of the Creole families of Louisiana."

"They cannot marry," complains Mrs. Trollope, "yet such is the powerful effect of their very peculiar grace, beauty, and sweetness of manner, that unfortunately they perpetually become the objects of choice and affection. If the Creole ladies have privilege to exercise the awful power of repulsion, the gentle Quadroon has the sweet but dangerous vengeance of possessing that of attraction. The unions formed with this unfortunate race are said to be often lasting and happy, as far as any unions can be so, to which a certain degree of disgrace is attached."

It is unlikely that Fanny Trollope had given much thought to writing for publication at that time, for English ladies were expected to keep their opinions to themselves back then. But her travel diary was full of observations, and she detected the minutest differences between U.S. citizens and the British subjects of George IV. Many agreed with some of her complaints about America, especially women nursing infants in the orchestra sections of theatres, and even more about public spitting. Occasionally, she recorded a few praiseworthy passages

about Americans. She thought they were helpful, good-hearted, frank in their discussions, and pious.

On the steamboat ride up the Mississippi River from New Orleans, the crude personality of Fanny's fellow passengers became manifest. She observed, "The gentlemen in the cabin (we had no ladies) would certainly neither, from their language, manners, nor appearance, have received that designation in Europe; but we soon found their claim to it rested on more substantial ground, for we heard them nearly all addressed by the titles of general, colonel, and major."

In this new classless American society being carved from an ever-growing frontier, every man coined his own title (colonel, major or captain). The uneven appearance, worn shoes and clothing, however, gave the uncouth imposters away. Fanny also took notice of all the American men chewing tobacco and spitting, missing spittoons constantly as ladies dodged the streams heading for the hems of their skirts.

Frances Trollope dwelt among "the great unwashed" for several years, primarily in the Cincinnati area. One of her projects there was the setting up of a bazaar (a horrible architectural monstrosity) for the sale of English goods, which proved unsuccessful.

Anthony stayed in England throughout his mother's travels to the United States (she returned in 1831) and quickly made a name for himself as a writer, soon earning a good income. His father's affairs, on the other hand, went from bad to worse. He gave up his legal practice entirely and fled to Belgium in to avoid arrest for debt. Frances' *Domestic Manners of the Americans* came out in 1832 and was a profitable best seller. The English were fascinated by her rants against drinking whiskey and water for breakfast and other complaints about American customs.

Back in Europe, she was a friend of Charles Darwin, John Stuart Mill, George Eliot and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Harriet Martineau, one of her contemporaries, came to America for a few years and published a more favorable review of the American people and their form of government – *Society in America*, three volumes, 1837. Her work was seen as a direct contradiction to Fanny Trollope's mostly unkind review. Trollope's book had a great influence upon Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Trollope's and Frances Wright's published ideas on the evils of slavery influenced Stowe's own work, *Uncle Tom's Cabin, Or Life Among The Lowly*, published in 1852.

It was harsh customs and poor manners that kept New Orleanians and other Americans, in Fanny Trollope's view, from ever being able to take their place among Britain and other European countries. There was much she did not like about this breakaway nation, but there was one thing from the Old South she truly loved – the mint julep!

She was simply ecstatic writing about its restorative powers “from the overwhelming effects of heat and fatigue”. Only “a large glass filled to the brim with the fragrant leaves of the nerve-restoring mint” would do, with “fine white sugar” and “many lumps of the solidly pellucid crystal-looking ice”. Best of all, she called for “a whole wine-glass full of whiskey poured upon it,” creating “a delicious sensation of coolness, under a tropical sun”. For Trollope, it must have packed a wallop.

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