

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Banquettes and Baguettes

"In the city's early days, city blocks were called islands, and they were islands with little banks around them. Logically, the French called the footpaths on the banks, *banquettes*; and sidewalks are still so called in New Orleans," wrote John Chase in his immensely entertaining history, "Frenchmen, Desire Good Children...and Other Streets of New Orleans!" This was mostly true in 1949, when Chase's book was first published, but the word is used less and less today.

In *A Creole Lexicon: Architecture, Landscape, People* by Jay Dearborn Edwards and Nicolas Kariouk Pecquet du Bellay de Verton, one learns that, in New Orleans (instead of the French word *trottoir* for sidewalk), *banquette* is used. New Orleans' historic "*banquette cottage* (or *Creole cottage*) is a small single-story house constructed flush with the sidewalk." According to the authors, "In New Orleans the word *banquette* (Dim of *banc*, bench) 'was applied to the benches that the Creoles of New Orleans placed along the sidewalks, and used in the evenings.'" This is a bit different from Chase's explanation.

Although most New Orleans natives today say sidewalks instead of *banquettes*, a 2010 article in the *Time-Picayune* posited that an insider's knowledge of New Orleans' time-honored jargon was an important "cultural connection to the city". The article related how newly sworn-in New Orleans police superintendent, Ronal Serpas, "took pains to re-establish his Big Easy cred." In his address, Serpas "showed that he's still got a handle on local vernacular, recalling how his grandparents often instructed him to 'go play on the neutral ground or walk along the banquette.'"□□

A French loan word, it comes to us from the Provençal *banqueta*, the diminutive of *banca*, meaning bench or counter, of Germanic origin. The word "bank" comes from the Old Italian *banca*, which also has the same Old High German source. Benches were used as exchange counters, or desks, during the Renaissance by Florentine bankers, who used to make their transactions on these benches covered with green tablecloths.

The Crescent City has been an important contributor of French loan words and expressions to American English. *Café au lait*, *beignet*, *Mardi Gras* and *faubourg* are but a few.

Today *banquette* can still mean a type of bench, especially a long upholstered one, or a sofa having one roll-over arm. It can also be a built-in (usually upholstered) bench along a wall, often used in restaurants.

Other definitions include: A platform lining a trench or parapet wall upon which soldiers may stand when firing, or a ledge or shelf (as on a buffet).

Banquette, used as an old raised sidewalk, appears often in the literature of Louisiana authors. In *The Awakening*, Kate Chopin (1851 - 1904) wrote, "The boys were dragging along the banquette a small 'express wagon,' which they had filled with blocks and sticks."

In *A Sentimental Soul*, Chopin penned the following narrative:

"She flitted back to her store through the darkness, herself like a slim shadow. The November evening was chill and misty. A dull aureole shot out from the feeble gas jet at the corner, only faintly and for an instant illumining her figure as it glided rapidly and noiselessly along the banquette."

There's even a book entitled *Along the Banquette: French Quarter Buildings and Their Stories* by Edith Elliot Long. It's a compilation of individual columns on specific houses in the French Quarter, first written back in the 1960s.

Today in the United States, the most common type of sidewalk consists of poured concrete. But in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, sidewalks of wood were quite prevalent. In New Orleans, they were often constructed of salvaged flatboat wood. These boat boards came from flatboats that were dismantled after coming down the Mississippi River to trade in New Orleans. Brick sidewalks were in widespread use in earlier times, as well, as evidenced by the ubiquitous array of St. Joe bricks all over uptown.



Banquettes as sidewalks or seating, both are worthy of examination. They offer a seating solution that is functional, but often with more pizzazz than the typical sofa or chair configuration. Sometimes built-in, they can also be an armless sofa at a dining table or perhaps a window seat in a bay window.

But more to one's liking than any bench or sidewalk is quite naturally the *baguette*.

Now the ladies must not get too excited, aware as they are that a *baguette* can mean an elongated, linear type of gemstone cut. Meaning a "rod or wand," a *baguette* is a popular rectangular cut often used on each side of a focal diamond. The cuts from which the modern *baguette* is derived have been observed in paintings and jewelry since the mid-sixteenth century.

Also coming to mind are the sleek and chic, trendy Fendi *baguette* purses, with the bold logo and colors. Just the right size for the essentials of life, they require more dough than a *boulangerie*.

Yes, you've guessed it. The *baguette* to which I'm referring is a long thin loaf of French bread, commonly made from basic lean dough (in France, defined by French law). Curiously, the word itself was not used to refer to a type of bread until around 1920, but what is now known as a *baguette* (perhaps one of the most popular present-day

symbols of French culture) may have existed centuries before. Long loaves were baked at least as far back as the reign of Louis XIV.

Linguistically, *baguette* is often translated as “wand”, and before the bread appellation appeared, it was used to describe a magic wand (*baguette magique*), a baton or a glass rod used in chemistry. The word also has many other meanings, most of which imply a stick or wand-like object. A French *baguette* is usually 2 or 2 1/3 inches in width and a usual length of about 26 (but as much as 40) inches.

But in New Orleans, what we call French bread is unique. It is not the same in France where the shape, color and size may look the same, but differs greatly in texture and flavor. New Orleans French bread is lighter with a thinner crust, and inside there are numerous pockets of air. This thin brittle layer leaves happily produced crumbs all over one’s table and lap. Local bakers achieve these bubbles of air and light texture by employing special yeast, not widely available for home use. New Orleans commercial bakery ovens also have water lines running through them that keep the moisture level high.

Steam (or deck) ovens were first brought to Paris in the early nineteenth century by August Zang (1807 - 1888). Zang was an Austrian artillery officer who opened the first (and greatly influential) Viennese bakery in France, the *Boulangerie Viennoise*, in 1838 or 1839. He also introduced Paris to the *pain viennois* and the Austrian *kipferl* (which became the *croissant*). Some French authorities credit him with originating the *baguette*, as well.

In New Orleans, French bread lengths were re-engineered once Bennie and Clovis Martin developed the po-boy. The traditional French bread’s tapered ends meant that a good deal of each loaf was wasted, so the Martins worked with baker John Gendusa to create a 40-inch loaf that kept a uniform, more rectangular shape from one end to the other. It’s difficult these days to find the original version (thin and pointy sometimes at the ends and wider and thicker in the middle). Galatoire’s has always been great at offering both varieties for diners.

The major producer of traditional New Orleans-style French bread today is Leidenheimer's Bakery (since 1896), which has acquired quite a number of local French bread bakeries in recent years. The bakery began its operation producing heavy brown German loaves, but switched to the classic New Orleans-style with a crisp outer crust and yet fluffy center. “Happy Baker” Alois Binder continues to bake great classic loaves, as does the John Gendusa Bakery. For a more authentic French loaf, *La Boulangerie* on Magazine has been touted as New Orleans’ own little slice of Paris.

Many people believe that the Crescent City's water (or its humidity) gives local French bread its structural and textural uniqueness, or some say the use of hard wheat flour.

Outside France, *baguettes* are also made with other doughs; for example, the Vietnamese *bánh mì* uses a high proportion of rice flour, as compared to whole wheat *baguettes*. Local Vietnamese bakers, trained two generations ago by the French in Vietnam (once part of French Indochina), bake exceptional *baguettes*. Dong Phuong Bakery at 14207 Chef Menteur Highway offers a "unique twist on the New Orleans Po-boy". Boasting "the best french bread in the city," Dong Phuong's *bánh mì* is "as much of a staple food as rice for many Vietnamese." They proudly "use this light, crispy thin-crust bread" for their sandwiches. You can purchase the *bánh mì* loaves at their bakery, or you can enjoy a delicious Vietnamese po-boy made with Dong Phuong bread at Café Minh in Mid City.

The Hi-Do Bakery in Terrytown and *Chez Pierre* in Kenner are also excellent Vietnamese French bread bakeries.

The word "*bagatelle*" comes from the Italian *bagattella*, meaning a trifle, or little decorative nothing. The *Château de Bagatelle* is a small neoclassical party pad in the *Bois de Boulogne* of Paris. In 1777 a party was held there in honor of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette. It featured a new billiard-like table game featuring cue sticks, which players used to shoot ivory balls up an inclined playfield with fixed pins. The new game was named "*bagatelle*" and became quite the rage throughout France and as far away as New Orleans. Bernard de Marigny's love of games of chance prompted him to name a street in his faubourg "*Bagatelle*". A continuation of the *Rue de Bourbon* into the Marigny, "*Bagatelle*" later became Pauger Street (named for French engineer Adrien de Pauger). The game of *bagatelle* evolved into various forms that eventually resulted in the modern pinball machine.

With a leisurely stroll along the *banquette*, the realization sets in that New Orleans' role in the history of the *baguette* is no mere *bagatelle*.

NED HÉMARD

New Orleans Nostalgia
"*Banquettes and Baguettes*"
Ned Hémard
Copyright 2012