

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Big Apple and Big Easy

Walt Whitman described slang as “the start of fancy, imagination and humor, breathing into its nostrils the breath of life.” He had a brief but formative stay in New Orleans in 1848, where he no doubt experienced countless examples of the city’s varied vernacular.

It is not, therefore, unexpected for this unique metropolis to be called everything from “The Crescent City” to “The City that Care Forgot”. Dating back to at least 1910, the “Care Forgot” tag was from an ad referring to “Quaint, Historic New Orleans”. It didn’t mean to imply that the residents don’t care, but that care (that troubled apprehensive state of mind, and its causes) had seemed to pass the city by. That’s hard to swallow after all the wars, yellow fever and hurricanes. Nevertheless, the city does bear an incredibly beautiful patina.

And then there’s “The Big Easy”, less poetic perhaps, but nonetheless earthy and true. The phrase originated in New Orleans, and its origin follows. But is the reader aware that “The Big Apple” (nickname for New York City) also came forth from “The Birthplace of Jazz”?

There have been numerous false origin stories for the expression, from Damon Runyon referring to New York by that term (maybe because of his “Apple Annie” character) to its connection to a 1937 hit song by that title. Bob Emmerich wrote “The Big Apple”, performed by Tommy Dorsey’s Clambake Seven. Buddy Bernier wrote the lyrics and Edythe Wright crooned the lead vocals. But neither Runyon nor the song had anything to do with New York City acquiring this sobriquet.

Then there was another bogus New Orleans origin story that popped up in 1966. The epithet “Big Apple” was said to come from the Spanish phrase “*manzana principal*”. “*Manzana*” is Spanish for apple but also an informal expression for a city block (“an assemblage of houses bounded on every side by a street”). Spanish speaking natives of New Orleans, so the story went, used the expression to mean main block, or the downtown area. The early jazz musicians translated that

phrase into "Big Apple" around the turn of the last century. Since downtown was "where the action was" in New Orleans, "The Big Apple" came to mean "the big town".

John Ciardi, a word researcher, bought this "*manzana*" theory and wrote about it in the *New York Times* in the 1970s. "Big Apple" came from jazz, and jazz came from New Orleans, he figured, but this story has no historic foundation. It's just another false etymology. Yet there is a connection to Jazz. Barry Popik, a lawyer-writer (living in Texas) and contributor-consultant to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (among others) has uncovered the true New Orleans origins. Here's how it really happened.

John J. FitzGerald (1894-1963) was a turf reporter living in New York that popularized the phrase "The Big Apple" as a moniker for the New York City racetrack scene. His column carried the title and byline "Around the Big Apple with John J. FitzGerald". He first heard the term, equating "the big time" with New York City horseracing, in the year 1920 from African-American stable hands in New Orleans. And what horses don't like apples, especially big ones? A decade later, jazz musicians began using the name to signify New York as the "big time" place to perform, the new Capital of Jazz.

"Big time" and "big town" are important elements leading up to the use of the "Big Apple" trademark. The *New York Morning Telegraph* was a sports newspaper where the "big time" had been used as an expression quite often for about ten years before "The Big Apple" appeared.

And although "the big apple always being on top" fact was not specifically spelled out in FitzGerald's "Big Apple" turf columns, he and his readers were surely aware of the concept. An 1885 ditty in the *New York Mail and Express* explains it well:

"This is an apple, large and round.
At the top of the barrel always found.
This is an apple, small and mean.
Always at the bottom seen."
—*Bridgewater Independent*.

By the 1970s, the nickname became relentlessly promoted through the "Big Apple Campaign" of Charles Gillett, then president of the New York Convention and Visitors Bureau. It replaced "Fun City" as the international description of the city Washington Irving once called "Gotham".

In 1996, a plaque was placed on the hotel where FitzGerald lived from 1934-1963 to commemorate "The Big Apple" and pay tribute to the man who popularized the term. The plaque, which told the story of

the New Orleans parentage of "The Big Apple", was removed by the hotel a year later and was never re-attached.

Meanwhile, back in New Orleans over a century ago, one would have heard talk in some circles of "The Big Easy" (even back then). Seems there was a dance hall in Gretna by that name that existed around the turn of the century, when jazz great Buddy Bolden played his cornet all over town. Pop Foster's autobiography makes reference to just such a club, known as "The Big Easy".

In 1970, James Conaway, a police reporter, wrote a crime novel set in New Orleans called "The Big Easy". Later on, Dennis Quaid and Ellen Barkin steamed up the screen in a 1987 movie of the same title. The film, all shot on location in New Orleans, was a big hit but had the rest of the country believing everyone in the city called each other *chèr*.

But credit for popularizing "The Big Easy" (as a term of endearment for the city with an easy-going pace and a relaxed attitude) goes to columnist Betty Guillaud. She, more than anyone, made the nickname a household word in the early 1970s. Betty had a wonderful gossipy column in the old *States-Item* newspaper, and in it she compared the meandering pace of New Orleans to the hurry-up style of New York, "The Big Apple". Betty used "The Big Easy" as a loving counter-promotion to the then "I Love New York City" hype. If New York was the "Big Apple," then New Orleans was the "Big Easy" ... where everything was slower, simpler and more laid-back.

The two cities came together in September 2005 (after Hurricane Katrina) in *From the Big Apple to the Big Easy*, New York City's spectacular benefit concerts for the people of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. These extravaganzas were a collaborative effort between Madison Square Garden and Radio City Music Hall. City artists (the Neville's, Irma Thomas, Allen Toussaint, the Meters, the Dirty Dozen Brass Band, Clarence "Frogman" Henry, and the Dixie Cups) were joined by Simon and Garfunkel, Elton John, Jimmy Buffett, Ry Cooder, Bette Midler, Elvis Costello, Lenny Kravitz, John Fogerty and Buckwheat Zydeco. The concert raised over \$9 million, helped by Presidents George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton, who spearheaded the Bush Clinton Katrina Fund.

Barry Popik has not found it "easy" in "The Big Easy" to bring attention to New Orleans' vital role in making New York "The Big Apple". He has argued that despite the facts that "The Big Apple" comes from New Orleans, and that it indirectly contributed to New Orleans' own "Big Easy" appellation, New Orleans has done almost nothing to recognize its own place in this interesting saga.

Popik has personally provided the New Orleans Fair Grounds racetrack with the "Big Apple" history, but complains it's nowhere on the Fair

Grounds web site.

And he continues, "I've written many detailed letters to the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* newspaper. The 'Big Apple' story has not been published there. And, as with New York City, the story hasn't made the local television or radio news in New Orleans, even for a second."

He's contacted the mayor's office. "A simple proclamation (a mere piece of paper)," he hopes.

"Maybe the stablehands had sons or daughter who are still alive," he muses.

And he laments, "The mayor wouldn't help."

Well, there's a new mayor in town. Hopefully things will change.

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"Hillary Clinton Visits New Orleans"
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