

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Campeachy

On April 29, 1962, President John F. Kennedy hosted a White House banquet honoring the Nobel Prize winners of the Western Hemisphere. Forty-nine Nobel Laureates, or their representatives attended (including Pearl Buck, Mrs. Ernest Hemingway and Mrs. George Marshall). The President opined:

“I think this is the most extraordinary collection of talent, of human knowledge, that has ever been gathered together in the White House — with the possible exception of when Thomas Jefferson dined alone.”

When Dr. Janet Travell first met then young Senator John F. Kennedy, in 1955, he was on crutches and unable to walk down the few steps into her ground-floor office without assistance. He could not bend his right knee or put any weight on the left foot or side of his leg. He suffered a back injury, which continued to cause him discomfort. In order to ease his pain, Dr. Travell prescribed the use of a rocking chair. She was confident it would relieve the tension in his lower back because it helped the muscles to move, contract and relax. This prescription greatly helped JFK, so much so that, upon his election in 1960, he exuded a young and vigorous persona. Kennedy would bring his rocker aboard Air Force One whenever he traveled. He bought additional rocking chairs for Camp David and the Kennedy estates at Hyannis Port and Palm Beach. JFK's rocking chair helped him relax. But, for an earlier president, rest and relaxation came from a “Campeachy Chair” made in New Orleans.

Although it is not known how or where Thomas Jefferson first saw a “Campeachy Chair”, he attempted to obtain several in 1808.

This nineteenth century version of the “lazy boy” actually had its origins in ancient Egypt. It was also called a hammock chair, siesta chair, lolling chair, sling-seat armchair or Spanish chair. Similarly designed chairs with characteristic x-shaped stretchers were known in ancient Greece and Rome, and were quite fashionable in Spain and

France and during the seventeenth century. The "Campeachy" style that was popular in New Orleans made its way to the Crescent City through its New Spain colonial connections. "Campeachy" is an anglicized spelling of *Campeche*, a Mexican state in the Yucatán Peninsula, where a mahogany known as bloodwood or logwood (*Haemotoxylon campechianum*) was grown that was often used to craft the chair. The graceful yet solid chair frame was made of this mahogany with its molded seat of embossed leather or woven cane. Notable is its curule construction, an ancient design in American furniture that focuses on seating furniture that used the Roman *sella curulis*, or folding stool, as a model. In Creole patois, the Campeche style chair was known as a *boutaque*.

The Baroness Hyde de Neuville, the wife of the French minister to Washington, sketched the earliest depiction of a "Campeachy Chair" in 1806, en route to the United States. Renowned architect in both Washington and New Orleans, Henry Boneval Latrobe sketched a gentleman with a cigar seated in a caned *boutaque* chair. The 1818 sketch represents a view from Latrobe's New Orleans hotel window.

Thomas Jefferson just had to have a few of these sling-seat armchairs, so he wrote to William Brown:

". . . the Campeachy hammock, as made of some vegetable substance netted, is commonly to be had in New Orleans . . . I take the liberty of asking you to procure me a couple of them."

Brown ordered, purchased and shipped three of the chairs, but they were lost at sea. The intended recipients of these siesta chairs were Jefferson, Thomas Mann Randolph and Jefferson's close friend, Eliza House Trist.

"The hammocks from Campeachy were sent on in the month of October," wrote Brown to Mrs. Trist, but she never received word of their status. Ten days later Jefferson reported to his daughter that "the Schooner Sampson, Capt. Smith, with the Campeachy hammocks . . . has never been heard of since."

Ten years later, Jefferson finally received his long-awaited New Orleans "Campeachy Chair". Future Governor of Louisiana (1820-1824) Thomas Bolling Robertson, a native of Virginia who was then a representative to Congress from Louisiana, told his father in June 1819:

"I have sent by the North Star . . . for Richmond a Campeachy chair. I have sent one also to Mr. Jefferson; he asked me many years ago to procure him one."

Once the heavenly hammock chair arrived, Jefferson thanked Robertson in November 1819 for his effort, stating, "Age, its infirmities

and frequent illnesses have rendered indulgence in that easy kind of chair truly acceptable.”

Jefferson loved his “Campeachy” in his later years. James Madison had one, too, probably a gift from his neighbor and predecessor president. Ideal for a Renaissance man’s napping, reading and contemplation, Jefferson could nod off without giving the impression he was asleep. His granddaughter, Ellen Randolph Coolidge, often saw him reclining in one at Monticello “in the large parlour” where she said on the “parquetted floor, stood the Campeachy chair made of goatskin, sent to him from New Orleans, where in the shady twilight, I was wont to see him resting.”

When suffering from rheumatism, Jefferson specifically requested the chair:

“While too weak to sit up the whole day, and afraid to increase the weakness by lying down, I long for a Siesta chair which would have admitted the medium position.”

Jefferson referred to “the one made by Johnny Hemmings”, who probably copied the New Orleans chair from some prototype. Hemings (a woodworker and Sally Hemings’ half-brother) made at least one and probably two siesta chairs for Jefferson before the New Orleans example arrived. John Hemings was one of seven slaves that Jefferson freed in his will, allowing him the tools from the joinery as well as the work of his two assistants.

There were other ways to loll in days gone by, and four “burly burgers” of New Orleans went off on a “Fishing Frolic” to Lake Borgne, as related in an August 5, 1855, article in the New Orleans *Daily Delta*:

“Although indifferent amateurs at either fishing or shooting, they were dressed in full professional costume; broad leafed *Campeachy* hats, a black ribbon fastened at one end to the band, and at the other to the button hole; parti-colored French shirts, with prints of fish on the bosom, corduroy frocks with capacious pockets, the buttons of which would form in themselves a history for the zoological student; there being a likeness of a deer on one, of a horse on another, of a buffalo on a third, and so on through natural history.”

Seems like the sports fisherman of today dress just about the same as they did over 150 years ago. “Dogs Playing Poker” as a possible shirt design, however, didn’t come along until 1903.

There are numerous weavers in the area around Campeche, Mexico (some in the town of Bécál), that have been weaving “*Campeachy* hats” made from the *Jippi Jappa* palm for years and years. Mayan women strip the young palm fronds that grow wild in the rainforest (and often in abandoned fields) to make baskets or hats for lolling

Louisiana fisherman.

On August 5-8, 2010, the Historic New Orleans Collection will be presenting "The New Orleans Antique Forum 2010" on Louisiana furniture and its "influences from France, the Caribbean, Canada, and Anglo-America". In the Collection's presentation literature is a beautiful photograph of a "Campeche Chair, ca. 1820", purchased in New Orleans for Elsona Plantation, Thomasville, Georgia. Cybèle Trione Gontar, Adjunct Professor of Art History, Montclair State University (New Jersey), will lecture August 7 on "The Louisiana Campeche Chair". "Forum 2010" will offer many other fascinating subjects and learned lecturers.

Seven Campechy chairs with a Monticello connection are mentioned in various documents, of which five are known today: two chairs descended in the family, four were sold at the 1827 dispersal sale and one was given to Peachy Gilmer in 1821 (five years before Jefferson's death on the 4th of July, 1826).

Peachy Gilmer (1779-1836) was a lawyer by profession and the son of Dr. George Gilmer, Jefferson's friend and physician. Named for his father's brother, Peachy married Mary House (a niece of Jefferson's friend Eliza House Trist) in 1803.

Jefferson formed an enduring friendship with Eliza House Trist when he stayed at her mother's Philadelphia boardinghouse during his service in the Continental Congress. He appointed her son, Hore Browse Trist, port collector for the lower Mississippi River in 1803, upon which she moved with him to New Orleans. Eliza Trist, one will recall, was in on Jefferson's first chair order (but that was after her return to Virginia in 1808).

As for Peachy, even lawyers love to loll at times. It is only fitting that Peachy got a "Campechy".

NED HÉMARD

New Orleans Nostalgia
"Campechy"
Ned Hémard
Copyright 2010