

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*

*By Ned Hémard*

### **But first, is it Gentilly or Chantilly?**

Eminent Jacksonian historian and professor emeritus at the University of Illinois at Chicago, Robert V. Remini, wrote about Andrew Jackson's preparations for the arrival of the British before the Battle of New Orleans:

"Sweeping northeastward from the city, however, was a narrow ridge of dry land called the Plains of Gentilly; a road, Chef Menteur, followed this ground and connected the Rigolets with the city. Most citizens believed the invasion would come along this route, but they also believed it could be defended easily because of the extensive swamps on either side of the plains."

There was "no mystery about the origin" of the name "Gentilly," wrote John Churchill Chase in *Frenchmen, Desire Good Children...and Other Streets of New Orleans!* He explained that "Mathurin and Pierre Dreux" were two brothers who were given "a choice of concessions" and "selected the high ground along Bayou Sauvage." Chase's explanation was, "They named their plantation Gentilly, because they had come from the commune in the department of the Seine of that name. In colonial New Orleans these two were known as the Sieurs of Gentilly." That high ground became Gentilly Road and Chef Menteur Highway (U.S. 90), and after the Battle of New Orleans was over, the road eastward out from the city.

Chase was only echoing historian Grace King, who believed that the Dreux property "was called Gentilly from home sentiment (Gentilly being a commune in the Department of the Seine)".

But Louisiana historian Charles Gayarré, writing much earlier in his *Louisiana: Its History as a French colony: Third Series of Lectures*, explained the real reason:

"The Marquis of Vaudreuil, in order to put an end to the doubts which had arisen as to the precise extent of the New Orleans district, decreed

that ... it embraced also Bayou St. John, and that part of the country, back of the town, which was originally called Chantilly, from the princely seat of the Condés in France; but which, in our days, is known under the appellation of Gentilly, into which Chantilly has been gradually corrupted."

So, the area of "Gentilly" was originally called "Chantilly," named for "the princely seat of the Condés in France." But why was that?

### **Chantilly Lace, But No Pretty Face**

It would come as no surprise to many that on any given evening some individual would be making his way down New Orleans' famous Bourbon Street with "an almost stupid foolishness, an indomitable obstinacy" or "an insatiable self-interest". Yet they might be intrigued to discover that Saint-Simon (renowned French writer of memoirs), used those very words to describe Louis Henri Joseph, Duc de Bourbon et d'Enghien, Prince de Condé (the very man for whom Bourbon Street was named).

Born in 1692, the Duke of Bourbon was head of the cadet Bourbon-Condé branch of the French royal house from 1710 until his death in 1740. He was the son of Louis III de Bourbon, Prince de Condé and Louise-Francoise, Louis XIV's illegitimate daughter. Louis II, known as the Great Condé, was his great grandfather. Deaths in the French royal family propelled *Monsieur le Duc* (a title applied mainly to him and not the other dukes) to a high hereditary standing in the line of succession (just below King Louis XV and the Duc d'Orléans).

The Duke has been described as "moderately good looking as a young man, but being over-tall he afterwards began to stoop", and this is said to have caused him to become "as thin and dry as a chip of wood". And due to a hunting accident as a young man "when the Duc de Berry put out one of his eyes", he was disfigured in his facial appearance.

Louise-Francoise, mother of the duke, had as brothers the Duc du Maine and the Comte de Toulouse. Her sister was married to the Duke of Chartres. These siblings were each the illegitimate offspring of Louis XIV and his mistress, Madame de Montespan. The names Dumaine, Toulouse and Chartres accompany Bourbon in the street nomenclature of the New Orleans French Quarter. John Chase in his *Frenchman, Desire, Good Children* explains how on the original city map either John Law or engineer Adrien de Pauger decided to place the royal bastards du Maine and Toulouse on either side of Orleans (the Regent in the center) with alternating saints between them.

The Duc d'Orléans had become Regent just three years before the founding of New Orleans when Louis XV was only five years old. The

Duke of Bourbon was included in the first Regency Council, and in 1718 he replaced the Duc du Maine as superintendent of the of the king's education (and both du Maine and Toulouse were demoted). And he struck it rich by speculating (if you call it that) in John Law's paper money banking scheme known as the *Système* (1716-1720). He bought paper notes from the bank and redeemed them on March 3, 1720, for twenty five million livres in gold. Most of the other investors lost everything, for the bank failed later that day for lack of reserves. The duke, however, profited enough from Law's enterprise to refurbish and rebuild the *Château de Chantilly*.



*Louis Henri, Duke of Bourbon*

The chateau's history dates back over two millennia when a native of Roman Gaul named Cantilius constructed a fortified villa there. The town of Chantilly is named for him and is located just north of Paris. Chantilly became famous for its fine handmade bobbin lace, a tradition dating from the 17th century. By the 18th century these intricate and delicate silk laces were highly sought after, and favored by Madame du Barry, Marie Antoinette and many others at the royal court. Chantilly lace is renowned for its extreme detail and fine outlined pattern. One can just imagine *Monsieur le Duc* in a resplendent satin coat with Chantilly lace sleeves.

The grounds at Chantilly already had a famous menagerie, which

philosopher John Locke had visited (and took an interest in its birds of prey). In 1719, the duke began to embellish the estate at Chantilly with the *Grandes Écuries* (Great Stables), for legend has it that he believed that he would some day be reincarnated as a horse. He asked architect Jean Aubert to create something suitable to his rank, and the 186 meter long stables are considered by many to be the most beautiful in the world. The duke imported over 150 fine horses from England, and entertained the Regent's daughter with a fabulous party at the chateau that lasted five days.



*Château de Chantilly*

The Regency ended in 1723 when the king reached the age of majority. The Duke of Bourbon then served as the king's *Premiere Ministre* until 1726.

Chantilly is also noted for its cream, in reality, whipped cream, so named, it is thought, by the *maître d'hôtel* at the *Château de Chantilly* in the mid-17th century.



*Horse racing past Chantilly's Grandes Écuries, or Great Stables, an architectural masterpiece of the 18th century*

And although many Millennials find "brown furniture" nothing special and china and silverware too much bother, my good friend, Dufour Woolfley, has reminded me I should not fail to mention one of the most popular flatware designs in silver history: *Chantilly* by Gorham. Designed by William Christmas Codman for Gorham Silver in 1895, it has become Gorham's flagship sterling silver pattern and the silverware service of choice on the US Presidential jet, Air Force One.

There are also those who believe that Bourbon Street was named for the Kentucky whiskey, or that "Chantilly Lace" is only a song title. Many know of the hit song recorded by a young man from Sabine, Texas, named J. P. Richardson, Jr. Better known as "The Big Bopper", he perished in a plane crash along with Buddy Holly and Ritchie Valens on February 3, 1959 ("the day the music died").

Bourbon County, Kentucky, came into being over three score years after Bourbon Street (yet it was named for the French royal family). The area would be divided into other counties, but the "Old Bourbon" region was the source of that excellent American corn whiskey known the world over as Bourbon.

Bourbon Street visitors have been entertained by artists as unique as Al Hirt and Clarence "Frogman" Henry; and the street has been home to people as different as "Evangeline the Oyster Girl" to Lindy Boggs (serving in the House of Representatives and as U.S. Ambassador to the Vatican). This historic thoroughfare was once punctuated by the city's magnificent French Opera House, and is home today to the fine dining of Galatoire's.

And Bourbon Street has the distinction of being featured in the James

Bond movie "Live and Let Die", followed by the Duke of Bourbon's chateau and Great Stables appearing in "A View to a Kill". Unusual for the average French chateau, the *Château de Chantilly* has a racetrack for horses. First held in 1834, horse racing at Chantilly was quite popular with the English. As was 007, who in these and other Bond films, utilized a much more sophisticated way of expressing, "Oh, Baby! You know what I like!"



*"Oh, Baby! You know what I like!" howled The Big Bopper*

### **More on Gentilly**

Of the two brothers Dreux, Pierre Dreux was there at the very beginning, at the city's founding in 1718. In an early manuscript, "English gentleman" Jonathas Darby recorded that Monsieur "de Bienville cut the first cane, M. M. Pradel and Dreux the second, and tried to open a passage through the dense cane break."

Pierre Dreux's brother, Mathurin Dreux, who had sailed for Louisiana from the French port of La Rochelle in January, 1719, later that same year began to acquire large amounts of Louisiana land. His holdings eventually totaled 173 1/2 arpents. The acreage of his choosing was along Bayou St. John and Bayou Sauvage and included that historic high ridge. This area in the vicinity of the ridge, Dreux believed, was least likely to flood.



*Chantilly lace corset, admired by Boppers and Bourbons alike*

Historian Grace King wrote about the prosperous Dreux brothers:

“Their names are seldom met separately. The record of the family, still carefully preserved, begins bravely with the name of the Comte de Dreux, fifth son of Louis VI of France (1108 - 1113) and quietly travels down across the names of Kings of France and Dukes of Brittany, through centuries, until it comes to the Marquis Dreux-Breze, Grand Master of Ceremonies under Louis XVI ... ”

The “Marquis Dreux-Breze”? Yes, seems New Orleans had a Drew Brees (“Dreux-Breze”) long before the Saints.

Pierre Dreux (born 1695) and his younger brother Mathurin (1698 - 1772) were born at Savigné-sur-Lathan, Anjou-Touraine, France, the sons of Louis Dreux-Breze and Francoise Harant. Together with his brother Pierre, Mathurin Dreux constructed a grand and elegant home with ample rooms, fine galleries and beautiful gardens. Such were the lives of the “Sieurs de Gentilly”.

Bayou Sauvage became known as Bayou Gentilly, and the high ground of the “Gentilly Ridge” would figure prominently in the defense of the city and providing a thoroughfare to the hunting and fishing grounds of the area known as the Chef Menteur. The initial development of Gentilly took place along the former banks of Bayou Gentilly on the ridge. In addition, there was Milneburg, built on elevated piers on the shore of Lake Pontchartrain.

The Brothers Dreux each married, and they all prospered in Gentilly. Mathurin’s granddaughter (in 1784) would marry Louisiana Governor Jacques Philippe Villeré. Successfully operating their land as a

plantation, the Brothers Dreux engaged in various enterprises such as cutting timber, raising cattle and brick manufacture.

Today's most commonly accepted boundaries of the Gentilly neighborhood are Lake Pontchartrain to the north, France Road to the east, Bayou St. John to the west and the Louisville and Nashville Railroad to the south. For a number of years, what we call New Orleans East was known as Gentilly East, extending Gentilly past the Industrial Canal.

The area of New Orleans known as "Gentilly," as we have learned, was "gradually corrupted" from "Chantilly." But where does the actual name "Gentilly" come from? The "Gentilly" in France is a commune in the southern suburbs of Paris, 2.5 miles from the city's center. It was first recorded in the 6th century as *Gentiliacum*, a royal estate perhaps named for *Gentilius*, a Gallo-Roman landowner. How the evolution from one name to the other took place, abruptly or gradually over time, is not known. Only remember that Mathurin Dreux first acquired his many arpents of land "situated at a place called Chantilly" – not "Gentilly!"

## **NED HÉMARD**

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