

"De La Louisiane"

The historic marker on the pink stucco Brennan's Restaurant at 417 Royal Street reads in part, "*Banque de la Louisiane*, built in 1795 by Vincent Rillieux". Rillieux, the great grandfather of artist Edgar Degas, purchased the site a month after the great fire of December 8, 1794, had destroyed earlier buildings on the site and more than 200 houses and stores in the French Quarter. But how did Rillieux's residence become the *Banque de la Louisiane*?

Mariè Étienne (Stephen) Zacharie, native of Lyon, France, came to America after the Revolutionary War and settled in Baltimore, where he engaged in commerce transported in his own ships. He lost some of these vessels in maritime clashes following the United States and France severing relations in 1798. Facing financial ruin, Zacharie was off to France to call on the powerful Talleyrand for help. Prosecuting a claim for indemnity, he ran into an older friend first, Francois Barbé-Marbois (who convinced his old schoolmate that getting his claim recognized was futile); but, hoping to help out his old chum, confided to him a huge state secret – that France was negotiating for the sale of Louisiana to the United States. (You may remember Barbé-Marbois on a U.S. postage stamp from 1953 commemorating the Louisiana Purchase. He's the one alongside James Monroe and Robert Livingston.)

Barbé-Marbois advised Zacharie to forget past losses and return at once to America and settle in New Orleans, assuredly the richest spot for future commercial success. Zacharie headed there at once and profited by the flow of wealth that began to course through the beautiful City in the Crescent. He founded the *Banque de la Louisiane* in 1804, the first after the Louisiana Purchase. He installed Julien Poydras as president, preferring for himself the humble but all-important position of cashier. (And New Orleans got Poydras Street.)

Stephen Zacharie and his wife, Ann Waters, had a son named Jacques (remembered as James Waters Zacharie, "merchant prince and renowned illustrious host"). Born in Baltimore, he came to New Orleans as a young man with his family and built his own private mansion in 1837. This residence at 725 Iberville Street (formerly 107-109 Customhouse Street) would (like his father's bank) one day carry the name "*La Louisiane*". In 1881, Louis Bézaudun converted the property into the Hotel and Restaurant "*de La Louisiane*" and through

many years and numerous owners it has retained its fame as a place for fine dining.

James Zacharie's daughter, Amelia Louisa Zacharie Howard (a native of New Orleans) was chosen to write an article entitled "Moorish Women as I Found Them" for *The Congress of Women: Held in the Woman's Building, World's Columbian Exposition, Chicago, U.S.A., 1893*.

Mrs. Howard, a teacher, traveled extensively across America, Europe and the north coast of Africa. She married first B. D. Howard, a New Orleans lawyer, and after his death became the wife of his brother, Richard Austin Howard, in 1857. The second Howard rose to the rank of major in the Confederate Army and was captured by Federal troops near the Red River in 1863. Major Howard died of cholera in Louisiana in 1866.

Amelia Howard wrote of her intriguing visit to Tangiers, once belonging to Portugal and "part of the dower given to Catharine of Braganza", wife of Charles II, King of England. Upon arriving, Mrs. Howard was convinced that the forty thieves had apparently not met their demise after all. "They are all here," she wrote. "Forty times forty in number, and as much alive as in the days of Ali Baba ... they snatch satchels and valises in spite of all efforts to retain them".

She wrote about the differences between Algiers and Tangiers and added, "The dress of the Algerine differs somewhat from that of the Tangerine, the conspicuous difference being in the drawers or trousers, those in Algiers being very large, loose and baggy." This is no reflection on residents of New Orleans' west bank, also known as "Algerines".

She continued to opine, "The French occupation of Algiers has done away with many old customs and has rendered the people less bigoted. Any stranger taking off his or her shoes can go all over the mosques, while in Tangiers strangers have been nearly killed for attempting this."

"Anxious to see the inside of an ordinary Moorish house", the American consul enabled her to do so. She was "astonished to notice that our male guide was allowed to enter everywhere, to see the ladies face to face without veils. I judge by this that the veil or drapery stands in the same light as our bonnets or hats."

She asked herself a final question: "Are we women of another race, striving upward and onward feverishly toward a higher goal—are we any happier, any better women than these simple-minded creatures with no interests outside of their homes?"

"I have not yet answered the question to my own satisfaction," she replied, "and so I leave it to you."

As for the significance of Amelia Howard's observations on Moorish women: In the words of the Louisiana singing duo "Dale and Grace" in their 1963 hit record, "I'm Leaving It Up to You".

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New Orleans Nostalgia
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