

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*

*By Ned Hémard*

### All Because of an Indian Diamond

In May 1716 gambler and economist John Law established *Le Banque Générale Privée*, which developed the use of paper money. In August 1717 the bank was tied to the Mississippi Company, which was designed to help both the fledgling French colony in Louisiana as well as the French treasury. The founding of New Orleans was but a year away and all part of Law's grand scheme. Yet Philippe II, Duke of Orléans and Regent of France, had his sights set on something spectacular. It was a stunning 141-carat cushion brilliant diamond, and he just had to have it. And John Law brokered the sale.

This historic stone (originally 410 carats in its uncut state) was found by a slave in a diamond mine on the Kistna River in India about 1701. Hidden away in a gaping self-inflicted wound in his leg, the stone's unusual hiding place was divulged to an English sea captain when the slave reached the coast. Half interest was offered for safe passage to a free port, but the greedy mariner murdered the slave and stole the lustrous gem. An Indian merchant sold it for just over £20,000, about twenty times what he paid the captain. Thomas Pitt, the English buyer in Madras, had it cut into its 141-carat form. In 1717 Pitt concluded a profitable sale to the Duke of Orléans for £135,000, with John Law acting as agent. The mysterious Orléans diamond (*Le Régent* as it has come to be known) became one of the crown jewels of France.

Thomas Pitt, mostly by this fortunate transaction, was able to raise his family to a position of wealth and political influence. He did so by buying a manor and its surrounding borough of Old Sarum, thereby gaining a seat in the House of Commons. His grandson and great-grandson would serve as British prime ministers. Grandson William Pitt the Elder was the guiding mind that orchestrated the expansion of the British Empire, and he achieved his greatest fame as Secretary of State during the Seven Years' War (plus a Pitt Street in New Orleans).

The Seven Years' War (known as the French and Indian War in the United States) was described by Winston Churchill as the first world war. It pitted (pardon the pun) England against France in a power struggle for North American dominance, but it involved all major world powers. And it all started with the notorious "Jumonville Affair".

Tensions arose between the French and English over lands along the Ohio River, rich for farming and trading. A young George Washington, by 1754 a Lieutenant Colonel, was deployed to the area where a British fort had been knocked down and replaced with Fort Duquesne (named for the governor-general of New France). On May 28, 1754, his men ambushed a French Canadian scouting party led by Ensign Joseph Coulon de Villiers, Sieur de Jumonville. Washington lost control of his troops who massacred almost all their prisoners. Jumonville surrendered, but Washington's Indian ally, a Seneca chief, abruptly cleaved open Jumonville's skull with a hatchet. This event shed the first blood and marked the beginning of the Seven Years' War.

To avenge the death of his brother, Captain Louis Coulon de Villiers led the sacking of Fort Necessity (a redoubt near Fort Duquesne) and forced Washington's first and only military surrender. This he signed a few minutes before midnight on July 3, 1754. The future first president was granted "*les honneurs de la guerre*", and his sword was returned. How history would have changed had Louis Coulon de Villiers been less magnanimous! His brother Francois Coulon de Villiers was knighted by the King of France and came to Louisiana in 1764, serving as *Alcalde* and Probate Judge for the Spanish Crown, who by then ruled Louisiana (also a result of the war). His portrait hangs in the Cabildo, and his heirs have been prominent New Orleans citizens. Fort Duquesne eventually fell to the British who built Fort Pitt in its place. Named for William Pitt the Elder, grandson of a diamond seller, it has emerged as Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

The most tangible result of the war was the end of France's power in the Americas. Had not the French Regent desired a diamond, Pitt may never have risen to a position to direct England's victory over France. England's cost of winning the war prompted the imposition of taxes on the American colonials. They rebelled, Washington had another chance to do a better job as military commander, and the French came to the aid of the rebels culminating at Yorktown. The cost to France for such assistance was one of the causes of the French Revolution, which did not sit well with European monarchs. Crowned heads Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette lost theirs after each wore *Le Régent* (he on his 1775 coronation crown and she as an adornment on a black velvet hat). Napoleon rose to power and got Louisiana back only to sell it the United States in 1803. He embellished his sword with the giant gem. Later the Empress Eugenie, wife of Napoleon III, looked quite stunning with the exquisite bauble mounted on a Greek diadem. The historic diamond has been on display at the Louvre since 1887.

In October 2006 a 603-carat diamond known as the "Lesotho Promise" (tenth largest white diamond ever found) was sold at auction for \$12,000,000. Stay tuned for the next exciting episode.

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