

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Happy Folly

He was a civil engineer, architect, surveyor, theatrical promoter, cartographer, builder, appraiser, publisher, urban planner, major in the militia and smuggler (secretly in cahoots with Lafitte). Always seeking new opportunities, he successfully made and sold iron from his foundry, designed a magnificent public bathhouse for the city (never built) and acquired a huge tract of land in the eastern area of the city. And don't forget all the streets he laid out, especially the Muses.

When Barthélémy Lafon died, this prolific polymath died a bachelor. But his life was not without love. In one of his early (but later rescinded) wills, he bequeathed a house on his eastern New Orleans plantation to his quadroom paramour. In this will he mentions the name he gave to his plantation, "*L'heureuse Folie*", or "Happy Folly".

Prior to Lafon, this plantation of more than 34,000 acres belonged to Gilbert Antoine de St. Maxent, military officer and wealthy merchant influential in the founding of St. Louis, Missouri. A grant from the king dated March 10, 1763, gave St. Maxent ownership of his New Orleans plantation "to a point called Chef Menteur" for some 31 years (until his death in 1794). The acreage was then purchased by Louis Brognier de Clouet, who sold it to Lafon in 1801.

Lafon was instrumental in engineering preparations for the Battle of New Orleans (in conjunction with Arsène LaCarrière Latour), and the battle itself was almost fought on Lafon's property (until they realized the redcoats were approaching Chalmette). A false report received on December 14, 1814, had the British landing at Chef Menteur. Major Lacoste, who commanded a post at the confluence of Bayou Sauvage and the Chef, pulled troops back three miles along the *chemin du Chef Menteur*, or Chef road. Running along the bayou (as it does today), this old Indian trail was improved by Andrew Jackson for military use (should the British return up "the Plains of Gentilly"). And Lafon had espoused developing this eastern thoroughfare as a major mail route to Washington City, the nation's capital, as early as 1805.

On September 29, 1820, an obituary in *Le Courier* reported that the death of "Lafon, the engineer, geographer and architect" was "much lamented" by those who had come to "appreciate his talents and his heart." His succession began the following year, and his holdings had been left to a brother in France. Jean-Pierre Lafon came to New Orleans to claim his inheritance, but died soon after his arrival. Jean-Pierre's children then acquired the property and, on October 3, 1827, sold it to another unique individual named Antoine Michoud.

Michoud (born 1782) was from a long line of eccentric characters to have made their home in the Crescent City. His father had served in the province of Dauphine as Administrator of Domains under Napoleon. After the Emperor's fall, Antoine voluntarily exiled himself to New Orleans in 1817. There he opened a shop on Royal Street (in the Pavie house), between Toulouse and Conti, where he offered all manner of objects "lately arrived from France". His advertisement proclaimed a "magnificent clock", Napoleonic "engravings of the principal

battles", the Emperor's portrait "by one of the best pupils of David" and further works of "subterranean cities" like Pompeii. It seems just like a walk down the Royal Street of today.

Michoud soon rented retail space in Monsieur Seignouret's newly erected (1816) edifice, later to become the Brulatour residence and home to WDSU. He was even appointed Consul of the Kingdom of Sardinia and Savoy (which post he held for 30 years), but (after becoming a commercial broker) his business devolved into that of being a glorified junk dealer. He moved around, dabbled in real estate and was burned out in 1854. A friend described Michoud's inventory as "rusty nails, ancient anchors, corks without bottles", while another acquaintance offered a place for him to stay after the fire.

Antoine graciously demurred, "*un petit chez soi vaut mieux qu'un grand chez les autres*", or "a little home of one's own is much better than a grand place of another".

Although a curiosity in his retail dealings, Michoud had uncannily put the Chef Menteur land back together again. Some of the lots had been separated from the Lafon estate in order to satisfy debtors. Antoine had rejoined every last one by 1853. Soon after the occupation of the city by Union forces, this strange gentleman (who preferred to be addressed as "*Chevalier*") passed away on July 24, 1862.

This eastern sugar plantation now went to his nephew, Jean-Baptiste Michoud, who (although he had never seen the land) sold a 100-foot right-of-way for the railroad and a site for the *Point-aux-Herbes* Lighthouse. He died in 1877, leaving the land to his son, Mariè-Alphonse Michoud. A plat done in the early 1880s shows Alphonse's plantation to be 34,056 acres. He sold some right-of-ways like his father, but the land remained otherwise intact until 1910 when Alphonse sold the property to John Stuart Watson for \$410,000. Watson immediately sold it to his own concern, the New Orleans Drainage Company. Then along came a man prominent in the development of Gentilly Terrace, Colonel Roch Eugene Edgar de Montluzin du Sauzay (whose name was as grand as his dreams).

After working out substantial financial details with the Chicago bank who had gotten the property back after Watson's firm defaulted on its notes, the Michoud tract on June 12, 1923, became the Faubourg de Montluzin. But just as the winds of war brought about changes during Napoleonic times, a great new war involving Europe (as well as the entire globe) brought about heroic efforts in eastern New Orleans.

A gigantic facility containing 43 acres of air-conditioned space (under one roof) was built on what is today 832 acres of the Michoud land for the building of plywood cargo planes at the Higgins Aircraft Plant. At first a shipyard was planned for Higgins Industries to build Liberty ships, but that idea was scrapped. Under the direction of dynamo Andrew Jackson Higgins, of PT boat and D-Day landing craft fame, the aircraft plant employed some 5,000 workers during World War II. It was then leased to the Dock Board for industrial development. War loomed once again, and the Korean conflict saw the site leased to Chrysler Corporation for the production of Sherman and Patton tank engines (until July 1953). De Montluzin, during the 36 years he owned the greater tract, spun off and developed some 1,000 acres and granted the U.S. Government permission to build a 7.5-mile stretch of Intercoastal Canal through the property. In 1959, he sold the rest of the huge parcel to New Orleans East, Inc.

According to an article in Time Magazine (April 19, 1963), "Texas wheeler-dealers" Clint and John Murchison were on a roll. It stated that "The Murchisons' two potentially most profitable projects are New Orleans East, a plant site and residential development that covers one-third of the total area of the city of New Orleans, and Terra Verde", a Florida development.

In 1961, JFK asked the country to commit itself to "landing a man on the moon", so that in 1961 the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) acquired the Michoud facility for the assembly of *Saturn* first stage rocket boosters. Rocket expert Dr. Wernher von Braun participated in a ceremony there in 1963. By 1966, the labor force at Michoud was 11,500.

And by 1969, the Eagle had landed.

Today NASA's Michoud Assembly Facility is used for the fabrication of the Space Shuttle's external fuel tanks. One of the world's largest manufacturing plants, Michoud's lead contractor Lockheed Martin employs approximately 2,000 people.

As for "Happy Folly" and shooting for the moon, it has been a most interesting journey from "rusty nails" to modern space technology. As Epicurus said, "It is folly for a man to pray to the gods for that which he has the power to obtain by himself."

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