

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*

*By Ned Hémard*

### Changing Course

If one were to ask a pedestrian on Magazine Street what was meant by the term "*Rue de La Course*", there could be a number of different answers. As a matter of course, a student might answer that it was the name of his favorite coffee emporium. While true, older natives might come up with an answer more complex.

If this cryptic introduction is making one a bit blue, the mood should actually be one of indigo. Now this has a little something to do with Duke Ellington's classic jazz composition, "Mood Indigo", although the Duke's co-composer Albany Leon "Barney" Bigard (born in New Orleans) provided the main theme. He had learned it in the Crescent City from his clarinet teacher Lorenzo Tio, who called it a "Mexican Blues". What's in a name? Obviously a great deal.

"*Rue de La Course*" is as romantic a name as "Mood Indigo", and both got their start in New Orleans. The first came about because of a man who made his fortune growing indigo. After all, how could there have been the great American institution of blue jeans without indigo. The dye is synthetically manufactured today, but back in the old days it was an important crop. The plantation owner's name was Robin Delogny, and his 6,000-acre working indigo plantation is known today as Destréhan Plantation.

Monsieur Delogny was only to live in this great mansion for two years before his death in 1792. His son Pierre Robin Delogny bought the house in a public auction later that year; and a decade later, the elder Robin Delogny's daughter Marie-Claude-Céleste and her husband Jean Noël Destréhan made it their home and enterprise. Jean Noël's father had been the Royal Treasurer for the Louisiana Colony. When his father died, his brother-in-law Étienne de Boré became his guardian. It is little wonder that they stopped planting indigo and started planting sugar, and in just two years Jean Noël was the largest sugar producer in the region.

To get back on course, son Pierre Robin Delogny had some plans of his own. Jacques Francois Enoul Livaudais owned a sizeable plantation of ten arpents on the Mississippi. On May 12, 1807, he sold half of this land to Pierre Robin Delogny. They both in turn had Barthélémy Lafon survey and lay out their property into lots and squares. Monsieur Livaudais (attorney-in-fact of the Ursuline nuns) named his subdivision "Faubourg Annunciation", while Monsieur Delogny was inclined toward horseracing and named his "Faubourg La Course". "*Rue de La Course*" is today called Race Street, which denotes its translation (meaning racecourse). There's an Annunciation Street and a Constance Street (named for Pierre Robin Delogny's wife). There was once a Robin Street, which was changed in 1852 to Euterpe (although there still exists a Robin Street Wharf).

As for Race Street (where the first "*Rue de La Course*" coffee shop opened at 1500 Magazine, at the corner of Race ... now the Mojo Coffee House), it was originally supposed to lead to a racecourse. But there were many lofty plans that did not come to be.

Besides having horse races held in the area, Delogny's plans also included a *Prytanée* and a *Colisée*. None of these three goals materialized. The New Orleans coliseum was not to have been gladiatorial like the Romans, but like the *Colisée de Paris* (a dance hall). And the *Prytanée* was to have been a preparatory school or college.

The prospectus for Delogny's faubourg included these concepts and announced that "There will be put up for sale, as for the present all the lands of the said frontage, from the road that will be established immediately behind the levee on the bank of the Mississippi River, as far as the Cours des Dryades in the rear, either by separate lots or by squares."

Although ideas unrealized, New Orleanians are fond of their Prytania and Coliseum Streets (as well as Coliseum Square). The planned racetrack was to have been between the *Colisée* and the river, which locals commemorate each day as they race for that needed cup of java.

By 1847, New Orleans had four racetracks: the Eclipse, the Louisiana, the Bingaman and the Metairie. Five years later, the city had the Union (which is the site of the Fair Grounds today). The Metairie track certainly changed course by becoming a cemetery, but the oval layout of the track was preserved.

"Rue de La Course" today has other locations, one of which is in a converted bank at the corner of Carrollton Avenue and Oak Street. Changing course is a natural occurrence in a city that has both coffee and the "sport of kings" as a main course. And don't forget po-boys as a main course. Benny and Clovis Martin, the inventors of this New Orleans culinary original, both arrived in New Orleans in 1914 from Raceland, Louisiana. Par for the course.

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