

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*

*By Ned Hémond*

### **New Orleans in 1867**

What was the condition of the City of New Orleans in 1867? Not all that great. It was experiencing a period of post-war economic depression, and it desperately required an influx of entrepreneurial capital to reboot the city's business and industrial base along with the skilled labor to make that a reality. The port needed to be revived, markets had to be expanded and all of this was to be accomplished during a period of fierce competition with the burgeoning railroad centers of the North. And things were off to a shaky start.

Just a short time before on the morning of October 3, 1866, the paddle-wheel steamer "Evening Star" went down in a raging hurricane 180 miles east of Tybee Island, Georgia. *En route* from New York City to New Orleans, only 17 of 278 passengers survived the ship's demise (Kendall puts the number at 7 of 250). The passenger list was right out of a novel. Besides Civil War veterans, businessmen and families, there was an wide assortment of "entertainers" (circus performers, magicians, comedians, French opera singers, a ballet troupe and "ladies of the evening"). The New York Times reported that as many as ninety-five prostitutes perished including a Mrs. King "of New-Orleans notoriety" who "owned a mansion on Basin-street valued at \$75,000". Her mission was described as an "unholy errand". One of the "Star" madams had a beautiful pair of ponies on board and a fine new carriage.

The French opera troupe was a group of almost sixty artists recruited by impresario Paul Alhaiza for the upcoming season of the French Opera House. His relatives, Mr. and Mrs. Charles Alhaiza, and the entire cast were lost in the disaster. The French Opera House was built in 1859 on the corner of Bourbon and Toulouse Streets under the direction of architect James Gallier, Jr. It was the scene of many grand operas and carnival balls until it was destroyed by fire in 1919. Gallier's stepmother and architect father, James Gallier, Sr., were among those who perished on the "Evening Star". Another great loss to New Orleans was General Henry William Palfrey who has many descendants living in the city today. In addition, there were on board twenty-two performers of the Spaulding and Bidwell Opera Troupe recruited for the New Orleans Academy of Music. All of them were lost but two.

By February of 1867, the aura of the city was much improved. The Federal occupation had cancelled four years of Mardi Gras celebrations, so it was much welcomed when the Mistick Krewe of Comus returned to the street in the form of edible items. The theme was the "Triumph of Epicurus", a three-course dinner lit by candelabra. *Papier-mâché* figures with legs paraded as oversized oysters, mutton, cigars, sherry and coffee. There was nothing like a good meal to improve the city's spirit.

Also that month, the city's boosters commissioned a series of photographic views to promote the Crescent City to European investment and immigration at the 1867 World Exposition in Paris. Photographer Theodore Lilienthal (1829-1894) was hired for this important task, which he completed by the end of May with a portfolio of 150 large-format albumen prints. Entitled "*La Nouvelle Orléans et ses Environs*", it was trimmed in gold and assembled in an elegant portfolio of red Morocco.

The Louisiana pavilion at the Exposition boasted a cypress cottage, various manufactured

products and crafts. Also represented were artist Mariè Adrien Persac and James Gallier, Jr. Prizes were awarded to the cypress cottage, Theodore Lillienthal's work, Louisiana cotton and the "gem salt" from Avery Island, to name a few. Lillienthal's photographs were presented to Napoléon III in recognition of France being the city's "ancient mother". After the Emperor's death, the collection moved with the Empress Eugenie to her *palais* on Lake Constance in Switzerland (today a museum) where they ended up in storage until 1995. Some of these excellent scenes of churches, factories, mansions and more were lost; but in 2000 an exhibit of 126 of the views was held at the Newcomb Art Gallery and the New Orleans Museum of Art. Now accessible in a book by Gary A. Van Zante, the photographs include views of Gallier Hall, the St. Charles Hotel and the French Opera House.

Gardner's City Directory of 1867 had a most interesting map of Lakeview. The streets were all neatly laid out in a grid pattern, and some of the street names are still around today like Harrison Avenue, Polk and Fillmore. They also extended out across most of what is now City Park. But it was all on paper, for back then most of Lakeview was still swamp land.

Swampy terrain and stagnant water caused another serious problem in those days. An October 1867 article in the New York Times painted a picture of the "beautiful days and balmy nights" in New Orleans under which "lurked a deadly disease that decimated" its people. Yellow fever continued into the fall of that year with at least 3,000 lost, and it was postulated that the numbers might increase "before the disease shall have been extirpated by Winter weather." This deadly "Yellow Jack" wreaked havoc on human lives, business and trade through the port.

The New-Orleans Times announced on November 26, 1867, that Myra Davis Clark Whitney Gaines had returned to New Orleans "to prosecute her claims to the estate of her father, Daniel Clark." She was described as "that spirited lady and most persevering and indomitable of plaintiffs", and the article goes on to state that "The judicial proceedings in her case, if collected together, would form a series of volumes as large and as numerous as the Encyclopedia Americana."

Daniel Clark was the American Consul when Spain ruled New Orleans, and amassed a fortune as a merchant and importer. This political schemer also bought up as much New Orleans real estate as he possibly could. He fathered Myra by a Creole courtesan named Zulime des Grange and died leaving a huge estate and a lot of unanswered questions. There was a fraudulent will in question, as well as one that was destroyed or missing. There was doubt as to whether or not Clark and Zulime were legally married. The court battles Myra pursued lasted over 65 years while the value of the New Orleans land grew. She was never able to reclaim Clark's property, and it would have ultimately been impractical without harming thousands of landowners. But her perseverance was legendary, and she kept up her litigation until her death in 1885.

At the end of the year (December 23, 1867), the first African-American woman millionaire was born Sarah Breedlove to former slaves on a cotton plantation in Delta, Louisiana. This entrepreneurial lady developed her own line of hair care products, and made her fortune as Madame C. J. Walker. Orphaned at the age of seven, her company employed as many as 3,000 people. When she died, she left thousands of dollars to orphanages, organizations, schools and the Tuskegee Institute.

"There is no royal flower-strewn path to success," Madame Walker once observed. "And if there is, I have not found it – for if I have accomplished anything in life it is because I have been willing to work hard." Madame Walker died the same year the French Opera House burned down. Like Myra Clark Gaines, she never gave up. And like New Orleans, recovery and success can eventually be achieved after periods of extreme hardship. It's all been done before.

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