

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Genteel Beginnings

Pierre Dreux was there at the very founding of New Orleans in 1718. In an early manuscript, "English gentleman" Jonathas Darby recorded that Monsieur "de Bienville cut the first cane, M. M. Pradel and Dreux the second, and tried to open a passage through the dense cane break."

How do we know that an "English gentleman" was around during the early years of New Orleans? By the records of the Superior Council of Louisiana (February 18, 1737) in which was entered the "marriage contract of Sr. Jonathas Darby, English gentleman, son of deceased Sr. Jonathas Darby, English gentleman, Doctor of the University of Oxford, and of Dame Anne Segre, a native of Lininsong, England, now residing in New Orleans, Province of Louisiana, on one side, and Demoiselle Marie Corbin, minor daughter of Sieur Jean Corbin, called Bachemin and of Dame Judith Le Hardy, a native of Saint Malo, assisted by Pierre Dreux, her tutor and brother-in-law."

Pierre had been Marie Corbin's brother-in-law since 1733, when he (an "officer of militia") was married to Anne Corbin Bachemin, Marie's sister.

"Gentleman" Darby was granted a large concession of seventeen arpents in 1720. Pierre Dreux's brother, Mathurin Dreux, who had sailed for Louisiana from the French port of La Rochelle in January, 1719, later that same year began to acquire large amounts of Louisiana land. His holdings eventually totaled 173 1/2 arpents. The acreage of his choosing was along Bayou St. John and Bayou Sauvage and included a high ridge. This area in the vicinity of the ridge, he believed, was least likely to flood.

Historian Grace King wrote about the prosperous Dreux brothers:

"Their names are seldom met separately. The record of the family, still carefully preserved, begins bravely with the name of the Comte de Dreux, fifth son of Louis VI of France (1108 - 1113) and quietly travels

down across the names of Kings of France and Dukes of Brittany, through centuries, until it comes to the Marquis Dreux-Breze, Grand Master of Ceremonies under Louis XVI, to whom was addressed Mirabeau's thundering answer, 'Go and tell your master that we are here by the will of the people, and will leave only by force of arms!'"

The "Marquis Dreux-Breze"? Yes, seems New Orleans had a Drew Brees ("Dreux-Breze") long before the Saints.

Pierre Dreux (born 1695) and his younger brother Mathurin (1698 - 1772) were born at Savigné-sur-Lathan, Anjou-Touraine, France, the sons of Louis Dreux-Breze and Francoise Harant. Together with his brother Pierre, Mathurin Dreux constructed a grand and elegant home with ample rooms, fine galleries and beautiful gardens. The Dreux holdings became known as "Gentilly", and the brothers became known as the "Sieurs de Gentilly". A stretch of Bayou Sauvage became known as Bayou Gentilly, and the "Gentilly Ridge" would later play an important part in the Battle of New Orleans. Andrew Jackson was convinced the British would make their approach to New Orleans via the "Plains of Gentilly", another name for the "Gentilly Ridge" of high, dry ground east of the city between the swamps.

The Brothers Dreux each married, and they all prospered in Gentilly. Mathurin's granddaughter (in 1784) would marry Louisiana Governor Jacques Philippe Villeré. Successfully operating their land as a plantation, the Brothers Dreux engaged in various enterprises such as cutting timber, raising cattle and brick manufacture. The brickyard was still in operation in 1796, when Xavier Célestin Delfau de Pontalba visited the site and bought five thousand bricks, at eleven dollars per thousand. The Dreux holdings stayed in family hands for generations, and today a street honors the two brothers. Originally named St. James Street from Elysian Fields to Peoples Avenue, it was renamed Dreux Avenue in 1924.

Gentilly today is a broad, mostly middle-class and racially diverse section of the city. Its first development was along the former banks of Bayou Gentilly on the ridge. In addition, there was Milneburg, built on elevated piers on the shore of Lake Pontchartrain. Gentilly Road was built on the ridge, and was the eastern path out of town to the Chef Pass. This high ground became Gentilly Boulevard and U. S. Highway 90.

So just what are the boundaries of Gentilly, and how did it come to be so-named?

Today's most commonly accepted boundaries of the Gentilly neighborhood are Lake Pontchartrain to the north, France Road to the east, Bayou St. John to the west and the Louisville and Nashville Railroad to the south. For a number of years, New Orleans East was

known as Gentilly East, extending Gentilly past the Industrial Canal.

Historian John Smith Kendall laid out the boundaries differently in his "History of New Orleans" (published in 1922):

"The suburb of Gentilly ... lay within the limits of the city, and disappeared when the expanding city enveloped it with streets and houses. It occupied part of what was known as Gentilly Ridge, the highest tract of land in the municipal area. Several miles of the ridge lie at an elevation of about 14 feet above the river front. It begins at the intersection of the Bayou Road, Grand Route St. John and the Gentilly Road, and extends down to Chef Menteur. Gentilly Road ran from Grand Route St. John to a point two miles below the People's Canal. In the latter part of the eighteenth and the early part of the nineteenth century plantations and brickyards lined this road on either side for much of its distance. They extended in depth on the city side to the Marigny Canal and on the lake side to the boundary of the extensive properties belonging to Alexander Milne. When the Jesuit Fathers first settled in Louisiana they selected the high land facing Bayou Sauvage for agricultural purposes."

As for the appellation Gentilly, it is the name of a commune in the southern suburbs of Paris, France, 2.5 miles from the city's center. First recorded in the 6th century as *Gentiliacum*, a royal estate perhaps named for *Gentilius*, a Gallo-Roman landowner. Pepin the Short, father of Charlemagne, resided in Gentilly, as did Blanche of Castile (1188 – 1252), who is said to have owned a castle there (with the remains of underground vaults, still existing). Other etymologists believe the name is connected with the Latin *gentilis* (meaning "gentile", "pagan" or "foreigner") referring to foreign goldsmiths who may have settled there in the Early Middle Ages. Saint Eligius, or *Saint Éloi* (patron saint of goldsmiths, metalworkers, coin collectors, horses and those who work with them), lived there. He died in 660.

Twelve hundred years later, on January 1, 1860, the city of Paris grew by annexing neighboring communes. On that occasion, about half of Gentilly was annexed to Paris, and today forms two neighborhoods in the 13th arrondissement of Paris: Glacière and Maison-Blanche (a Maison-Blanche in Gentilly, imagine that).

On December 13, 1896, about half of the territory of Gentilly was detached and became the commune of Le Kremlin-Bicêtre, leaving Gentilly as a rump commune after these two losses of territory.

The words "gentile" and "gentleman" both come from the Latin *gentilis*, belonging to a race or *gens*, and *man*, cognate with the French word *gentilhomme* (and similar in other Romance languages). In the original signification, "gentleman" denoted a well-educated man

of good family and distinction, or nobleman. "Genteel" came by way of the Middle French *gentil*, and signifies someone of good breeding or refined; polite; elegant; stylish; or belonging or suited to polite society (like "Sr. Jonathas Darby, English gentleman").

All of this is fascinating, but Gentilly in France is not the reason there is a Gentilly in New Orleans. Mathurin Dreux acquired his many arpents of land "situated at a place called Chantilly" – not Gentilly!

It was all because of Louis Henri de Bourbon, *duc de Bourbon, duc d'Enghien, duc de Guise, duc de Bellegarde, comte de Sancerre* (1692 - 1740), whose family home was the *Château de Chantilly* (see my earlier article, "Chantilly Lace, But No Pretty Face").



Louis Henri, Duke of Bourbon

Grace King believed that the Dreux property "was called Gentilly from home sentiment (Gentilly being a commune in the Department of the Seine)".

But Charles Gayarré in his "Louisiana: Its History as a French colony: Third Series of Lectures" explained the real reason:

"The Marquis of Vaudreuil, in order to put an end to the doubts which had arisen as to the precise extent of the New Orleans district, decreed

that ... it embraced also Bayou St. John, and that part of the country, back of the town, which was originally called Chantilly, from the princely seat of the Condés in France; but which, in our days, is known under the appellation of Gentilly, into which Chantilly has been gradually corrupted."

I must add a few additional comments on the commune of Le Kremlin-Bicêtre.

A French commune can be large or small: a city in excess of one million inhabitants, a town of ten thousand people or a ten-person hamlet. In the case of Le Kremlin-Bicêtre, it is one of the most densely populated municipalities in Europe.

"Commune" and "Le Kremlin" sound very communistic, but the commune's name has its roots in England (as well as Russia). Once just a hamlet called simply Bicêtre (within the greater commune of Gentilly), Le Kremlin-Bicêtre is most famous as the location of the Bicêtre Hospital. At one time, the hospital housed the notorious Marquis de Sade.

Bicêtre is the French corruption of Winchester (*Vinchestre* became *Bichestre*, and finally Bicêtre). John of Pontoise, Bishop of Winchester (England), built a manor there at the end of the 13th century; and the Bicêtre Hospital was built several centuries later on the manor's ruins.

In 1813 the hospital acted as a major receiving station for evacuated casualties of the *Grand Armée* returning from Napoléon's failed invasion of Russia – hence the name Le Kremlin.

So if "Winchester" can be gradually corrupted into "Bicêtre", it's not hard to imagine how the area of New Orleans once known as "Chantilly" became "Gentilly".

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