

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*

*By Ned Hémard*



*In 1798, French General Humbert's army, 1019 men strong, sailed from Rochefort in three frigates to fight the British in Ireland. He fought them again in Chalmette in 1815. On January 8, 2015, he was honored in a special ceremony at St. Louis Cemetery No. 1.*

*Here is his remarkable story.*

### **He Fought Pakenham Twice**

Jean Joseph Amable Humbert (August 22, 1755 – January 3, 1823) was a capable French general who participated in the French Revolution and early Napoleonic wars. He led what was ultimately a

failed invasion of Ireland to assist Irish rebels in the "Rising of '98" - sometimes referred to as *Bliain na bhFrancach*, or in English as "The Year of the French". Humbert later ended up in New Orleans, where he made history in a most unusual way.



*Le Général Humbert*

Born in Saint-Nabord, Vosges, France, Humbert was a sergeant in the National Guard of Lyon when the French Revolution broke out in 1789. He rapidly advanced through the ranks to become brigadier general on April 9, 1794, and saw battle in the Western campaigns before being allocated to the Army of the Rhine.

In 1798, the year Napoleon commanded the French army in Egypt in the Battle of the Pyramids, Humbert was entrusted with a most important assignment. He was to aid the Irish rebels in their attempts to overthrow British rule in Ireland. The Irish Rebellion of 1798 (In Irish: *Éirí Amach na nÉireannach Aontaithe*) had already begun when General Humbert (in command of three frigates, the *Concorde*, *Franchise*, and the *Médée*) landed August 22, 1798, at Kilcummin,

County Mayo, Ireland, with a French force of 1,019 men, two or three women, three cannon and approximately 3000 muskets.

Upon Humbert's coming ashore, a local musician took out a penny whistle and produced a spirited jig. According to the folklore of the area, the French general (much to the delight of the gathering) danced a step or two. Not long after his arrival, Humbert's troops combined with Irish rebels surprised and routed a much larger British force at Castlebar, often referred to as the "Castlebar races". On August 31, 1798, he decreed the free "Republic of Connacht", with the expressed aim of next taking Dublin.



*Humbert's brilliant victory at the "Races of Castlebar," at which he soundly routed the English forces under General Lake*

The general's success so alarmed the British authorities that they quickly dispatched Lord Cornwallis (who Washington and the French had defeated at Yorktown) to contain him. Humbert's overall invasion attempt failed, for it wasn't long before the Cornwallis forces cornered and captured him at Ballinamuck, County Longford, in September later that year. The "Republic" was lost. Lieutenant Edward Pakenham was among the victors, serving with the 23rd Light Dragoons in Ireland. General Gerard Lake was particularly impressed by Pakenham's distinguished service. He was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel of the 64th Foot.

General Humbert was treated well by the British and repatriated in a prisoner exchange, but hundreds of the captured Irish rebels were summarily executed.

Humbert was later sent to fight against the Austrians in Switzerland. In 1803, the same year Napoléon was to sell Louisiana to the United States, Humbert was sent off to Saint Domingue to join the French

forces against Toussaint L'Ouverture's rebellion. There Napoléon's brother-in-law, General LeClerc, died of yellow fever (as did so many of the French soldiers sent there). Soon Humbert became involved in an indiscreet romantic entanglement with General LeClerc's widow and Napoléon's sister, Caroline. Napoléon became enraged when he discovered news of this tryst, stripped Humbert of his rank and exiled him to Brittany. Humbert eventually emigrated to the United States in 1808, where he made his way to New Orleans.

In New Orleans, Humbert made the acquaintance of smuggler and privateer, Jean Lafitte. He and the famous pirate-turned-patriot would soon play an important part in the last days of the War of 1812. In the closing days of 1814, with British forces fast approaching the strategic port city on the Mississippi, the demoted brigadier general (59 years old at that time) offered his military services to General Andrew Jackson - and he accepted.

The British invasion forces were to be headed by the now-famous General Edward Pakenham (Humbert's former enemy in Ireland). Pakenham had (before this mission) distinguished himself bravely in the Peninsular War in Spain under the Duke of Wellington (*his* brother-in-law). The "Iron Duke" married Pakenham's sister, Kitty, in 1806.

The fearless French general went off on a scouting party with a detachment of mounted Tennessee riflemen, who scattered for cover when hotly fired upon by the British. The general could not understand the behavior of these "*sauvages*" (as he called them). Jackson knew his rough-and-tumble men were not cowards, but were only acting wisely in such circumstances. But upon hearing the French general's protestations, Jackson feigned anger as he asked his men for an explanation.

"Wall, general," one answered, "not understanding French, and believing our commander was a man of sense, we construed his orders to retire out of the reach of the cannon balls, so we just kinder counter-marched."

On the day of the final battle, January 8, 1815, Jackson sent Humbert (proudly decked out in his French uniform) to the opposite side of the Mississippi to retake the American position. Jackson, however, had neglected to give Humbert written authority, so the local American officer on the west bank, David B. Morgan, refused to submit to orders from a foreign citizen. Humbert returned angrily to Old Hickory's headquarters and valiantly spent the rest of the day as Jackson's aide. Meanwhile, in attempting to storm the American breastworks, the British were overwhelmingly subdued and Pakenham lay dead on the Chalmette Battlefield.



*Pakenham's death at the Battle of New Orleans*

With the British in retreat, Jackson and his aides (surveying their position through a spyglass) were cautious in approaching the enemy's camp. It was then that the keen-eyed Frenchman surpassed the acumen of Jackson's backwoodsmen. "They are gone," Humbert said. That sentinel is a "dummy," he observed, and so poorly made that it isn't even a good scarecrow – as evidenced by that crow flying so nearby.

Jackson was pleased with the old veteran of the Napoleonic wars and commended him in the General Orders of January 21, 1815, for having "continually exposed himself to the greatest dangers with characteristic bravery." He pronounced Humbert "a man in whose bravery I have unbounded confidence." The French general had similar feelings for Jackson, as well.

Pakenham's body was returned to the Emerald Isle in a cask of rum and buried in the Pakenham family vault in Killucan in Westmeath, Ireland. Jean Humbert had fought in battle against Pakenham twice, and now the Irish British Army Officer was being returned "in good spirits" to Ireland (where Humbert fought against him sixteen and one-half years before).

Humbert remained in the Crescent City after the Battle of New Orleans, and found a new career in teaching school at a French College. Before his service to General Jackson at Chalmette, Humbert met Juan Mariano Buatista de Picornell y Gomila, a Spanish

revolutionary, who in 1813 joined with him in an unsuccessful attempt to create a Mexican insurrection against Spain. Lafitte's Baratarians were to be involved in coordinating the supply and reinforcement of the land army by way of the Texas coast, but the entire invasion plan was thwarted. *Père Antoine*, aka Father Antonio de Sedella, was Spain's leading spy in New Orleans, and it was he, it is said, who informed Spanish authorities in Havana of the plot.

Humbert spent his final years in New Orleans, where he died (not quite eight years after Major-General Pakenham) on January 3, 1823. Before his death, he became somewhat of a local celebrity, appearing from time to time inebriated in public while dressed in his old French military uniform. He was the recipient of a small pension from the French Government, but (with faltering footsteps each day to and from his ramshackle lodgings) he provoked the jeering of neighborhood boys. They thought it peculiar that he was daily arrayed in the former toggery of his rank, including sword, cocked hat and military cloak.

The *Picayune* called Humbert (who began his career as a humble peddler of rabbit skins) "a quasi-crank, a feeble old parody" of a French officer. "But notwithstanding this vagary, the general always bore himself proudly." General Jean Joseph Amable Humbert was buried in St. Louis Cemetery No. 1 and was, like his old adversary Pakenham, very well-preserved.

Sadly, Humbert's original vault was demolished. An article in the *San Francisco Call*, dated October 31, 1897, had this to say about General Humbert's resting place:

"At his death he was buried in a plat in the St. Louis Cemetery, New Orleans.

# A QUEER RESIDENT OF OLD NEW ORLEANS.

General Humbert, Whose Genius for  
War Lifted Him

From a Peddler of Skins to a French  
Commander,

After Leading an Ill-fated Expedition  
to Ireland,

And Helping Jackson at Chalmotte,  
Became a Picturesque Wreck  
for Boys to Jeer.



*Picayune* headline, July 26, 1897

*St. Louis Cemetery No. 1*

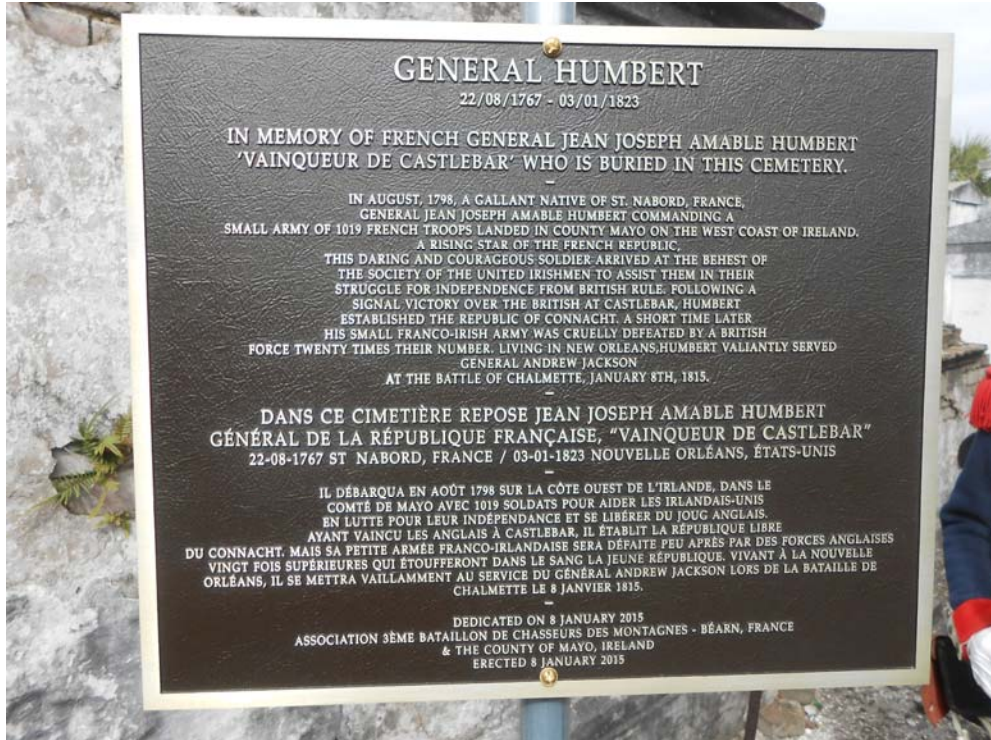
His eccentricities of dress while he lived were respected by his friends and he was carried to the tomb in his French uniform, with his martial cloak around him and his sword and cocked hat by his side. Nothing very definite is known as to what society conducted the obsequies of the old soldier, but it is stated that the tomb was subsequently demolished by reason of removal, an incident of periodical occurrence in all growing centers of population. At the opening of the tomb the skeleton was taken up, articulated and preserved by the lodge under whose auspices he was interred. Recent inquiries by Irish citizens of New York, who desired to erect a monument to his memory, failed to locate the old hero's bones. The Irish are proverbially a warm-hearted race, grateful for deeds of valor done on their behalf, and it is to be hoped that, under the stimulus of next year's pilgrimage and a great popular movement to commemorate those who fell in '98, some effort will be made to locate more definitely the mortal remains of this valiant hero of Castlebar."

An 1897 article in the *Picayune* related a similar fate. Some time before 1852, "the skeleton of the hero of Castlebar" was found to be "in so perfect a condition that it was taken out ... was kept in the lodge until the lodge was demolished and a new one was built."

Still, the present location of the general's remains in St. Louis No. 1 remains a mystery.

**January 8, 2015**

Having written the above biographical sketch of General Jean Joseph Amable Humbert, I was privileged recently to receive an invitation to be present at the dedication of a plaque in honor of the gallant "Général de la République Française" and "Vainqueur de Castlebar". Among the numerous bicentennial events commemorating the Battle of New Orleans, this was one of special historic significance.



The plaque honoring General Humbert "who is buried in this cemetery" contains this brief biography in both English and French:

"In August 1798, a gallant native of St. Nabord, France, General Jean Joseph Amable Humbert commanding a small army of 1019 French troops landed in County Mayo on the west coast of Ireland. A rising star of the French Republic, this daring and courageous soldier arrived at the behest of the Society of United Irishmen to assist them in their struggle for independence from British rule. Following a signal victory over the British at Castlebar, Humbert established the Republic of Connacht. A short time later his small Franco-Irish army was cruelly defeated by a British force twenty times their number. Living in New Orleans, Humbert valiantly served General Andrew Jackson at the Battle of Chalmette, January 8, 1815."

The plaque was erected and dedicated that day by *l'association 3ème Bataillon de Chasseurs des Montagnes* of Béarn, France, and the



County of Mayo, Ireland. On hand for the ceremony that chilly January 8, 2015 (in addition to *les soldats reenactors* from France, as well as a contingent of American reenactors), were the Honorary Consul of Ireland in Louisiana, Chief Judge James F. McKay, III, of Louisiana's Fourth Circuit Court of Appeal, and *Le Consul général de France à La Nouvelle-Orléans*, Gregor Trumel.



*Judge Jim McKay and Consul Général Trumel unveil the plaque*

A short biography of the heroic Humbert was given in French and English, and since the *chasseurs* (or fighters) were from Béarn, mention was made of the various New Orleans connections with Béarn and Pau (the capital of the historic Béarn province, located in the *Pyrénées* mountains and in the plain at their feet, in southwest France). Pierre Clément de Laussat, for example, was born in Pau on November 23, 1756. Serving as colonial prefect, he took possession of the Louisiana colony from Spanish officials (as stipulated in the Treaty of San Ildefonso) only to cede control to the United States three weeks later as a result of the Louisiana Purchase. And impressionist painter Edgar Degas' "A Cotton Office in New Orleans" is in the *Musée des Beaux-Arts*, Pau, France. The museum purchased the famous painting in 1878.



*Members of l'association 3ème Bataillon de Chasseurs de Montagnes des Pyrénées with Honorary Consul McKay and Consul Général Trumel*

Also from Béarn (but omitted from the speech) was Jean Galatoire, founder of Galatoire's, and who can forget the Béarnaise sauce created to accompany those wonderful soufflé potatoes?

*Consul Général Gregor Trumel* offered some moving words on the gallant General Humbert, who fought for freedom, and he decried the "barbarism" of the recent Islamic terrorist attack killing twelve at the Paris headquarters of the satirical weekly *Charlie Hebdo*. Freedom of expression is but one of the important freedoms fought for by Frenchmen, Irishmen and Americans alike. General Humbert, he said, was symbolic of the fight for *liberté*. A moment of silence was observed for the victims of the *Charlie Hebdo* attack.

Judge McKay spoke, too, of the strong ties between the French and the Irish (even within his own family). When it comes to the Irish and the French, "They never forget," he said.



*Familiar faces of the 3ème Bataillon de Chasseurs de Montagnes des Pyrénées, pictured here at the bicentennial of the Battle of Orthez in 2014, an Anglo-Portuguese victory under the Duke of Wellington over French forces during the Peninsular War*

*Le Marseillaise* and the Star Spangled Banner were both proudly sung, the drum rolled and a bouquet of roses with the words, “*Au Général Amable Humbert*”, was placed at the base of the plaque.

Judge McKay promised that a concerted effort would be made to discover, after almost two centuries, the exact final resting place of the “Hero of Castlebar”. Having been chosen as “Hibernian of the Year” in 2013 by the Ancient Order of Hibernians in Louisiana, and being married to a Soniat, there’s plenty of Irish-French motivation for him to find the illusive but colorful *Général*.

## **NED HÉMARD**

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