

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

History's Muse

New Orleanians honor all of the nine Muses of Greek Antiquity (especially in the city's street nomenclature), but they then go on to mispronounce these ladies' lovely names. The unique local mangling of the Muses is not without a logical and excusable explanation. It is simply akin to what John Chase called a Creole "corruption of the French pronunciation" rather than a direct derivation from the classical Greek. The Greeks would have accented the second of four syllables - if the name happened to have four syllables. Therefore, the last three syllables of Terpsichore would be classically pronounced like "chicory" (Turp-sick'-or-ee), while the last three syllables of Melpomene would mimic the sound of "hominy" (Mel-pomm'-in-ee).

One mystified blogger wrote:

"Calliope was a Greek goddess, I think. (Pardon me for not looking it up.) It's also a musical instrument. I've always heard it pronounced 'ca-LI-o-pee'. But there is a Calliope St. in New Orleans and the locals pronounce it 'CALLY-ope'. Why is that?"

The Muses, the personification of knowledge and inspiration in the arts (especially literature, poetry, music and dance) are the daughters of Zeus (aka Jupiter or Jove) and Mnemosyne (the goddess of memory). Seems like the goddess of memory partied too hard, since everyone in the Crescent City forgot how to say her daughters' names correctly.

Clio, the Muse of History, is particularly troublesome to local inhabitants. Most say "Klī-oh" while others offer "Clee-oh", but the unbelievable "See-ell-ten (C-L-10)" has also been heard "in and around da neigh-ba-hood". However, not everywhere in town does the Muse of History get such chaotic treatment.

There's a small triangular park bordered by Esplanade Avenue, Bayou Road and North Tonti known as Gayarré Place, honoring New Orleans historian Charles Étienne Gayarré. Just across the avenue at 2306 Esplanade is the house in which French impressionist painter Edgar

Degas lived during his stay in New Orleans with his Musson relatives. At the center of Gayarré's park is a statue atop a terra-cotta base representing the Goddess of History - Genius of Peace. The original monument (before its relocation on Esplanade) was displayed at the 1884 New Orleans World's Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition.



The Gayarré Place Monument

21st President of the United States Chester Alan Arthur (who became President after Garfield's assassination) opened the Fair via telegraph on December 16, 1884, and the Exposition ran until June 2, 1885. Although the Fair succeeded in offering many great attractions to visitors, the planning and construction of the fair was marred by scandal. Corrupt Democratic State Treasurer Edward A. Burke left the country after absconding with over \$1.7 million dollars of state money (including most of the fair's budget). Burke, who was Director-General and CEO of the Fair, lived out his days in Honduras as a wealthy landowner. What could have possibly gone wrong with the Secretary of the Exposition named Richard Nixon and the Treasurer named John Lafitte? Not a joke. These were actually the officers.

The site of the Cotton Centennial Exposition is today the Audubon Park and Audubon Zoo in Uptown New Orleans. Before serving as the Exposition grounds, Audubon Park was the plantation of Étienne de Boré, New Orleans' first mayor and the first to commercially granulate sugar. De Boré, appropriately, was also the grandfather of historian Charles Étienne Gayarré. (For more information on Étienne de Boré, read my article entitled "*Mousquetaires and Mouseketeers*".)



Charles Étienne Gayarré

Besides his work as a Louisiana historian, Gayarré (January 9, 1805 – February 11, 1895) was also a politician and author of essays, plays

and novels. He was born in New Orleans on his grandfather's plantation, the present-day Audubon Park. After studying law in Philadelphia, he was elected a member of the Louisiana House of Representatives in 1830. Four years later, he was elected to the United States Senate, but poor health prevented him from taking his seat. For the next eight years he travelled to Europe collecting historical material from the Spanish and French archives.

Gayarré was again a member of the state House of Representatives in the years 1844-1845 and once more in 1856-1857, and from 1845 to 1853 he served as Louisiana's Secretary of State. He lost a significant fortune supporting the Confederacy during the Civil War, after which he decided to dedicate his remaining career chiefly to history.

The Muse of History served Gayarré well, having written the *Histoire de la Louisiane* (1847); *Romance of the History of Louisiana* (1848); *Louisiana: its Colonial History and Romance* (1851), reprinted in *A History of Louisiana*; *History of Louisiana: the Spanish Domination* (1854); *Philip II of Spain* (1866); and *A History of Louisiana* (four volumes, 1866).

Charles Gayarré had a long and prosperous association with the Louisiana Historical Society, of which he served as President from 1860 to 1888.

The Gayarré Place Monument was a donation of George Hacker Dunbar, who resided nearby at 2453 Esplanade Avenue. He had served in Fenner's Battery, Louisiana Light Artillery, during the Civil War and was married to Louise Toutant Beauregard (niece of General P. G. T. Beauregard). The original statue of the "Goddess of History" was vandalized in 1938, and the current statue of marble and cement is a replacement.

Gayarré, one might be surprised to discover, is not the only historian to be honored with a park on Esplanade. Alcée Fortièr Place is a park bounded by Esplanade Avenue, Grand Route St. John and Mystery streets. A 1926 ordinance dedicated the familiar park right across Esplanade from Café Degas.

Philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer offered this quote on history:

"Clio, the muse of history, is as thoroughly infected with lies as a street whore with syphilis."

But this quote by historian Will Durant is the one that resonates with me:

“Civilization is a stream with banks. The stream is sometimes filled with blood from people killing, stealing, shouting and doing the things historians usually record, while on the banks, unnoticed, people build homes, make love, raise children, sing songs, write poetry and even whittle statues. The story of civilization is the story of what happened on the banks. Historians are pessimists because they ignore the banks for the river.”

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