

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Hitler's Horse and Taylor's Tub

"I believe that it is better to tell the truth than to lie. I believe it is better to be free than to be a slave. And I believe that it is better to know than to be ignorant."

On December 28, 1917, the man who wrote the above words told a lie. In fact, it was a doozy. In an article titled "A Neglected Anniversary" published in the *New York Evening Mail*, acclaimed American journalist H. L. Mencken claimed that the bathtub had been introduced into the United States as early as 1842 (the first ones having been made of mahogany lined with lead), and (after much discussion) President Millard Fillmore had a bathtub installed in the White House in 1850. This valuable executive decision made the invention more broadly acceptable in the rest of the nation.



H. L. Mencken

Although the article was a falsehood, it was still being widely quoted as fact many years later. Mencken, himself, commented, "The success of this idle hoax, done in time of war, when more serious writing was impossible, vastly astonished me." Even as recently as 2008, a Kia television ad referenced the story as being gospel. Fillmore biographer Robert J. Scarry (after meticulously "plumbing" the depths of presidential history) found the earliest instance to be a tin tub in 1814, during the James Madison administration. Nevertheless, the Fillmore bathtub hoax continues even to this day.

Vice President Millard Fillmore became the 13th President of the United States, and the last Whig to hold that office, upon the death of President Zachary Taylor in 1850. Taylor was a Louisiana planter and hero of the Mexican-American War. On April 26, 1846, then General Zachary Taylor, called for 5,000 volunteers from Louisiana and Texas to defend the newly annexed state of Texas. In less than two weeks, sugar planter Alcée Louis LaBranche recruited men and helped to organize a mass meeting held in New Orleans. More on LaBranche later.



Taylor-Fillmore Ticket: at least one bathtub was a hoax

The cause of Zachary Taylor's death continues to be somewhat of a mystery. On July 4, 1850, the President consumed copious amounts of iced water, cold milk, green apples and cherries after attending a cornerstone celebration at the Washington Monument. Within a few days, he became severely ill with an unknown digestive ailment. On

the morning on July 9, he spoke the words, "I have always done my duty. I am ready to die. My only regret is for the friends I leave behind me." He died less than an hour later.

On January 24, 1721, the ship "*Les Deux Freres*" carried a German family (Johann Zweig, his wife and two children), who came to the Louisiana colony from Bamberg, Bavaria, Germany. Arriving in Biloxi, Mississippi, in March 1721, Zweig and his wife died before the 1724 census, but his two children survived. The daughter married Joseph Verret, while son Johann married Suzanne Marchand of Grenoble, France, an orphan living with the Ursuline sisters. This marriage created one of the most interesting name changes in Louisiana history.

Legend has it that the young Johann Zweig could not write his name (or, at least, not in French), so for his marriage contract (recorded November 6, 1737) he tried to give the French official an idea of what his name signified. Perhaps pointing to a tree branch or twig (Zweig is German for twig), the French notary replied, "Oui, la branche!", and (Voila!) Johann Zweig became Jean LaBranche and a prominent Louisiana family name was born.

Johann Zweig, dit LaBranche, and his wife Suzanne were the parents of Alexandre LaBranche, who fought as a regimental commander in the Revolutionary War and the Battle of New Orleans. He was also a delegate to the first constitutional convention of the state of Louisiana in 1812. Alexandre married Marie Jeanne Piseros, daughter of a prominent Louisiana trader, and Alcée Louis LaBranche was the fourth of their five children. Alcée Louis LaBranche (1806 – 1861), United States chargé d'affaires to the Republic of Texas, was born on his father's plantation on the Mississippi River in St. Charles Parish near New Orleans.

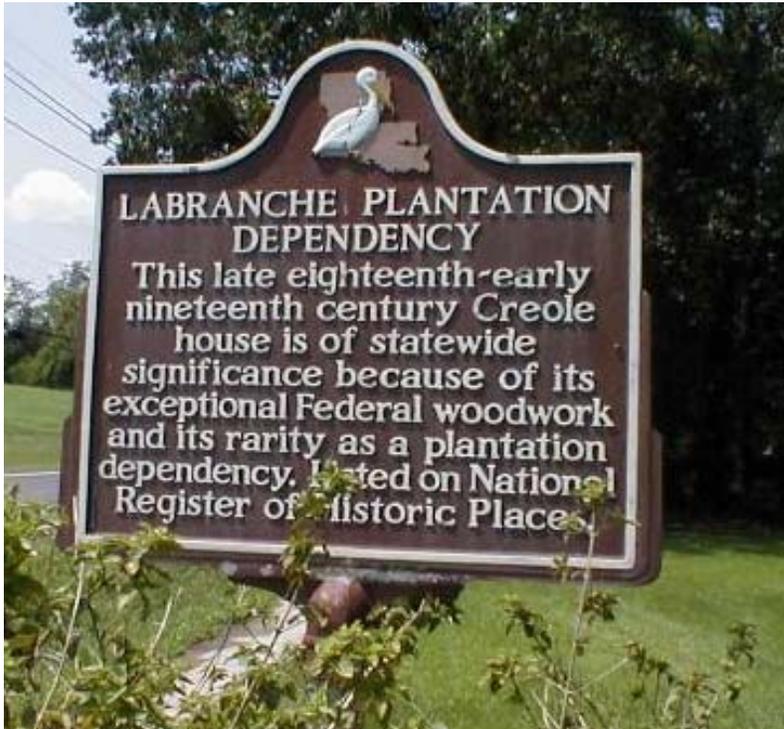
Alcée attended the University of Sorreze in France and became a sugar planter in St. Charles Parish. He served as a member of the Louisiana House of Representatives (1831 – 1833), where they elected him Speaker. In 1837 President Andrew Jackson appointed him the first diplomat from the United States to the Republic of Texas. Houston, Texas, has a street named in Alcée LaBranche's honor.

After running for United States representative in 1842 from the Second District of Louisiana, Democrat LaBranche came up against a slanderous attack by John Hueston, the Whig editor of the *Baton Rouge Gazette*. A duel resulted and in the fourth round, after using double-barreled shotguns, Hueston died of his wounds. LaBranche took his seat, but served only one term.

Alexandre LaBranch's plantation in St. Rose, Louisiana, which was originally built in 1790, was restored in the 1980s by the long-time police chief of Kenner, Louisiana, who the *Times-Picayune* referred to

as the “politically brash and privately generous” Sal Lentini. “Known for his hard-headed political style, Mr. Lentini was soft-hearted in private,” his obit read. The plantation house was destroyed by fire during the Civil War, but the dependency house (reportedly haunted by several ghosts) was built in 1792 by Alexandre La Branche. It was available for tourists and visitors before Mr. Lentini died in late 2010.

The purpose of the dependency house, or *garconnière* (French for bachelor quarters), was to provide vital functions necessary to maintain the plantation households. Ouidé and Marie Perilloux Cambre became the owners in 1902. A charming story claims that people have seen ghostly spirits’ influence on candles and rocking chairs in the dependency house. While the plantation is currently closed to tours and held as private property, an old brochure makes several claims to attractions not listed on the historic marker: its “authentic slave quarters, the largest pecan tree in the state of Louisiana,” and (while not Millard Fillmore’s bathtub, one used by his predecessor) “Zachary Taylor’s bathtub, and the grave of Hitler’s horse - Nordlicht.”



LaBranche Dependency Historic Marker

In St. Charles Parish (known as the German Coast for all of its many early German settlers like Johann Zweig) near the entrance to LaBranche Plantation in St. Rose, Louisiana, just off 11244 River Road, marked by a small stone and brass plaque, is the final resting place of the stallion some believe was the horse of Adolf Hitler. The grave is that of Nordlicht, “Northern Light”, a chestnut thoroughbred who died in 1968. The plaque reads: “NORDLICHT 1941–1968 □ DOUBLE DERBY WINNER AND CLASSIC SIRE”. □ □

Nordlicht's early days were exciting. Born in 1941, he raced the Nazi circuit in 1943 and 1944 and won the German and Austrian derbies. Undefeated, Nordlicht was named horse of the year in 1944, with his image featured on a German postage stamp. The U.S. Army eventually acquired the famous Third Reich horse as a spoil of war and brought him to the United States, where he was purchased for stud by New Orleans surgeon and horse breeder C. Walter Mattingly. Dr. Mattingly became the owner of the LaBranche Plantation in 1948, where Nordlicht spent the last twenty years of his life siring numerous offspring. Dr. Mattingly sold the plantation "with its exceptional Federal woodwork" to the Lentini family in 1983.

It is fascinating that Dr. Mattingly's purchased this St. Charles Parish plantation, since his father was named Charles Borromeo Mattingly. Catholic Saint Charles Borromeo, major figure during the Counter-Reformation, is the patron saint for which St. Charles Parish is named. Saint Charles is one of only four people mentioned at the beginning of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, citing them as responsible for the Council of Trent, which laid the way to the modern day catechism.

In the late 1980s, Clara Rising, a former humanities professor at the University of Florida, hypothesized that Zachary Taylor was murdered by poison. The timing of his death in the middle of the Secession Crisis of 1850 seemed to be too much of a coincidence. She convinced President Taylor's closest living relative, who was also the coroner of Jefferson County, Kentucky, to order an exhumation so that his remains could be tested.

In 1991 Taylor's remains, the first of any President's to be exhumed, were delicately removed from the crypt in which he was entombed almost 141 years before. Tested by neutron activation analysis at Oak Ridge National Laboratory, the arsenic levels were shown to be far too low to indicate any evidence of poisoning. The tests concluded that "Old Rough and Ready" had contracted "cholera morbus, or acute gastroenteritis", as the nation's capital had open sewers, and he may have consumed contaminated food or drink.

The remains of the 12th President of the United States (as well as the only President elected from Louisiana) were returned to the cemetery and reinterred, with appropriate honors, in the mausoleum. There were no bugles blown or volleys fired, but four uniformed officers of the Department of Veterans Affairs stood guard as more than two hundred onlookers quietly looked on from a distance.

The tests were conducted to settle smoldering doubts about Taylor's death of natural causes on July 9, 1850. Many questions were answered, but (with some diehard conspiracy theorists) many still remain.

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