

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Interesting Observations

An observation has been defined as “the action or process of observing something or someone carefully in order to gain information.” In the scientific sense, it consists of collecting useful knowledge of the outside world by gathering information using scientific tools or instruments. Among mere mortals, such as we, it employs the senses and, for that reason, may or may not be accurate.

Countless visitors to New Orleans over the years, or in some cases the natives themselves, have made some fascinating observations concerning the Crescent City. These observations range from being extremely prescient to downright wrong, but more often than not - exceedingly interesting.

For you, dear readers, I present just a few.

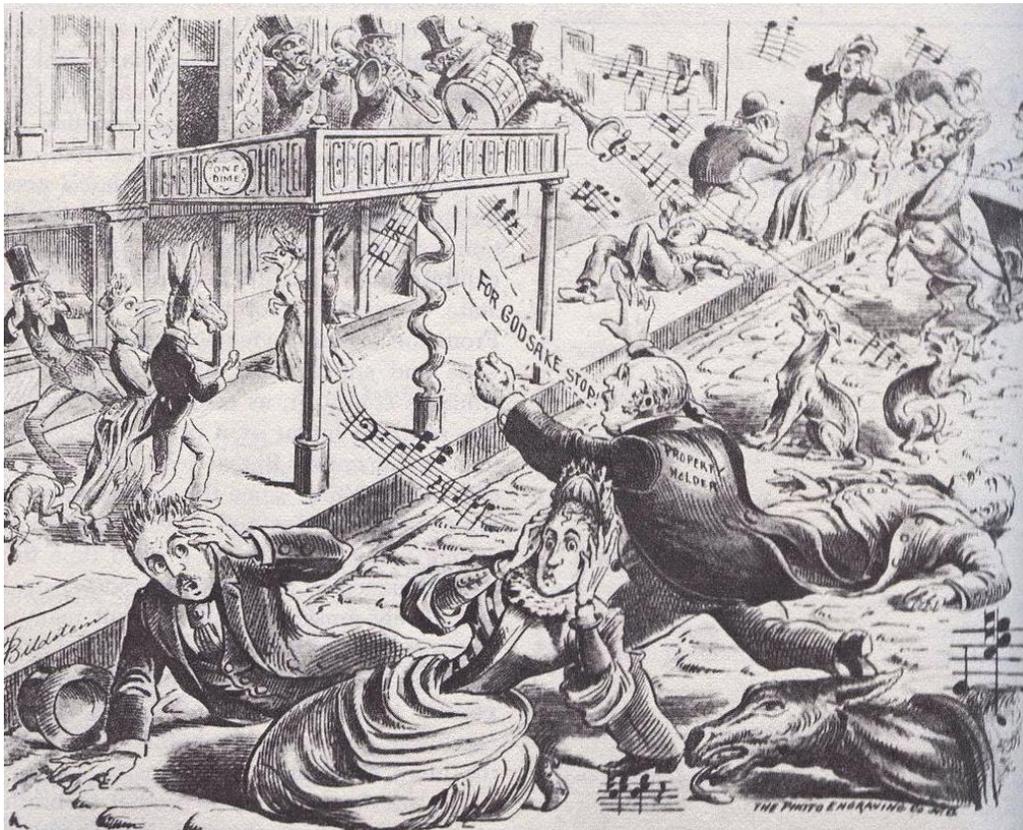


Original Dixieland 'Jass' Band's recording of first jazz record, 1917

An observation on the subject of "Jass and Jassism" in the New Orleans *Times-Picayune*, dated June 20, 1918:

"In the matter of the jass, New Orleans is particularly interested, since it has been widely suggested that this particular form of musical vice had its birth in this city – that it came, in fact, from doubtful surroundings in our slums. We do not recognize the honor of parenthood, but with such a story in circulation, it behooves us to be last to accept the atrocity in polite society, and where it has crept in we should make it a point of civic honor to suppress it. Its musical value is nil, and its possibilities of harm are great."

The cartoon below, which appeared on the cover of *The Mascot*, November 15, 1890, shows the New Orleans public being offended by the cacaphony produced by an African-American band at Eugene Robinson's Dime Museum. The late Al Rose called this "the earliest known illustration of a jazz band" even though the use of similar instruments by early jazz bands some 15 years later is not evidence that this foursome was actually playing "jass". The genre was not documented in a musical context until the *Times-Picayune* first mentioned "jas bands" in an article dated November 14, 1916.



Is the "atrocity" being performed here an early form of jazz?

Since that time when the *Times-Picayune* called "jass" a "form of musical vice", we, as New Orleanians, have changed our tune and are indeed very proud parents of the musical form that began as "jass" and ended up as "jazz", the popularity of which has spread like wildfire around the world.

As for the destiny of New Orleans as a great city, the following interpretation appeared a century earlier in the *Kentucky Gazette*:

NEW-ORLEANS

Extract of a letter to a gentleman in this place, dated New-Orleans, March 10, 1818.

"This city is destined at no distant period to become to the United States, what Alexandria was to Egypt, or what Paris is to France; the emporium of its commerce, its wealth, its population, and its political greatness, in relation to the rest of the world; and also the hot bed of contagion, luxury, effeminacy, crime, treachery, and civil discord."

Later in the letter:

"The city is built in the shape of a crescent, the curve of the river constituting a safe and commodious harbor in which there are at this time 250 sail of vessels. With what transports does the eye of patriotism repose on this spectacle! It is the august evidence of the present prosperity of our country, and the earnest of her future political glory."

Pretty interesting observations, considering they were made almost 200 years ago.

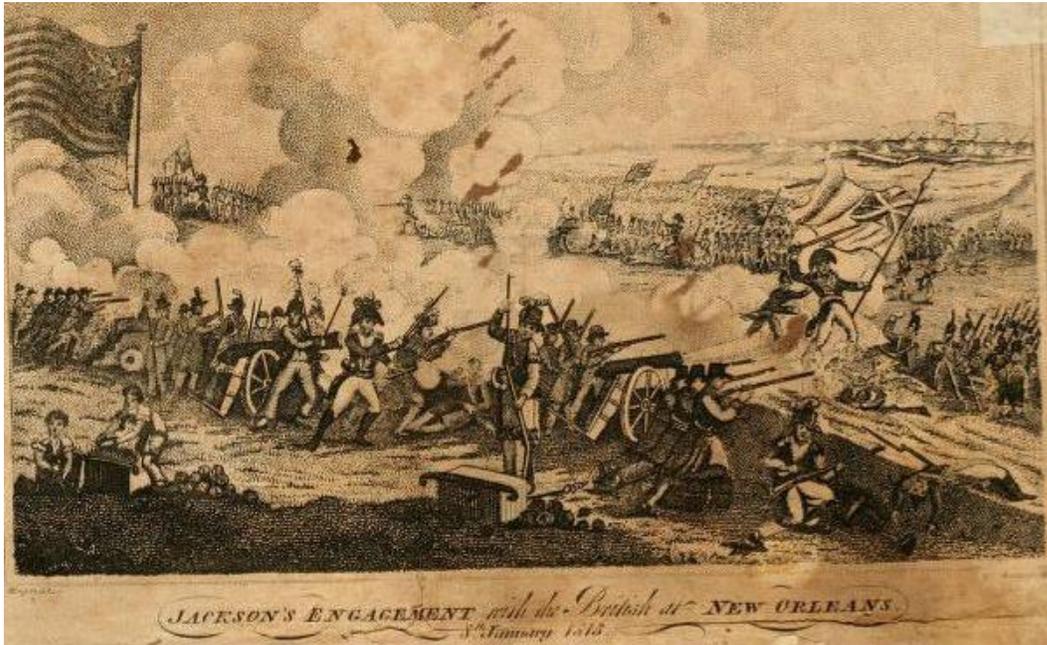
Ever wonder what the British viewpoint was after the Battle of New Orleans? What follows are excerpts from a letter written from the banks of the Mississippi, dated January 16, by a British officer on the staff of the expedition, as published in the *Essex Register*, Salem, Massachusetts, May 17, 1815:

"Here we are lying wet in sugar cane huts, after having met with a severe repulse, on Sunday the 8th of January, in a general assault on the strongly fortified position of the Yankees, covering the capital of this country."

"The enemy's position was uncommonly strong, in the form of a crescent, flanked on the right by the Mississippi, on the left by a thick wood and an impassable morass; the whole covered with innumerable artillery, and all loop-holed for the musketry, with a narrow plain in front, not more than half a mile wide, by which only we could approach them."

"The river is a fine one; but believe me, there is nothing else in this quarter worth coming 6000 miles to see."

They were miserable and we were referred to as Yankees.



Jackson makes it tough for the British, January 8th, 1815

Our next observation on New Orleans was by Lee Bailey, who according to *Saveur Magazine* "was the original food-and-lifestyle guru. Writing and photographing in a pre-Martha Stewart world, he was a pioneer in suggesting that a meal's setting was just as important as the food." He was, as *The New York Times* described in his 2003 obituary, "an expert on the stylish life." Lee, who lived in Manhattan and in Bridgehampton, New York, had this to say about the Crescent City:

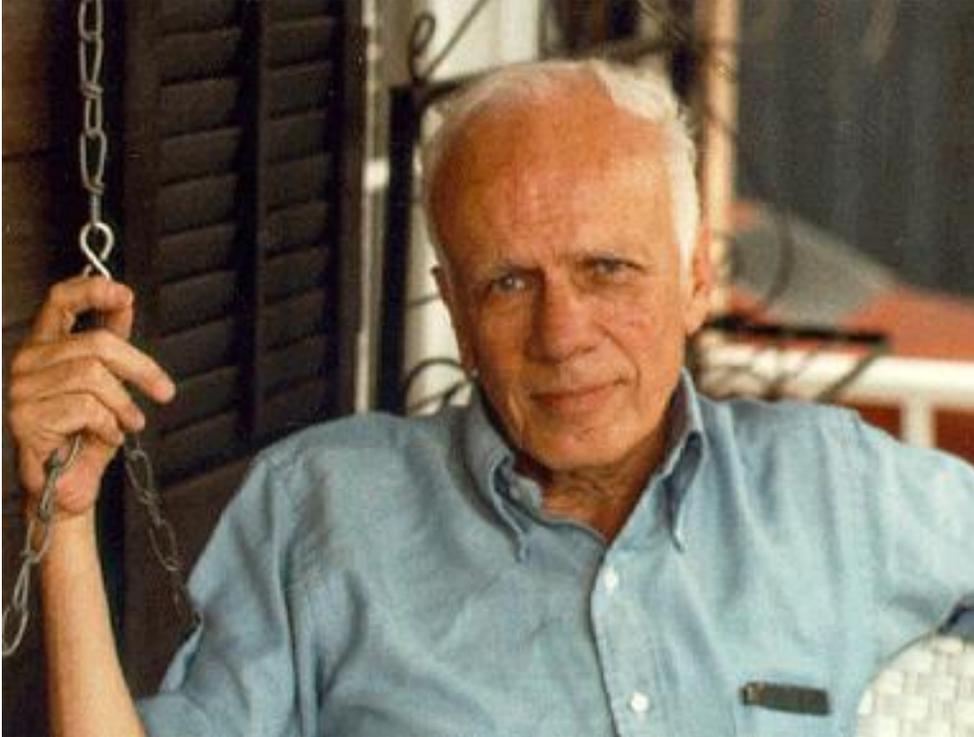
"New Orleans is jazz, easy livin', the blues – and "When the Saints Come Marchin' In." It's Bourbon Street, St. Charles Avenue, and a street called Desire. It's the ghosts of Satchmo, Lillian Hellman, and Tennessee Williams. It's Mardi Gras, strippers, strong coffee, bars that never close, live oaks, and magnolias. It's uptown society and downtown artists."

Ohio writer Howard Saxby wrote down these observations of New Orleans in 1901:

"In New Orleans a fellow never need be broke. There are too many quarters there. A french quarter goes just as far as an American quarter. New Orleans, too, is a swell name to pronounce. It has no

'ville' nor 'burg' about it, and gives a man a chance to show that he or his ancestors were once abroad."

Author Walker Percy, whose novel *The Moviegoer*, published in 1961, won the U.S. National Book Award for Fiction, called New Orleans the only "foreign city" in the United States:



American author Walker Percy

"I think it's very important for a writer to get a perspective on his background and you can do that in New Orleans. It gives you distance. You can see the clash of two cultures here. There's the Latin, Mediterranean, Catholic influence and there's the WASP, white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant South. The main reason I live in Covington is it's on the border. You have these two clashing cultures coming together, and it's very conducive to writing."

And, of course, we must not forget the huge part African Americans have contributed to our city's culture and history. Author and journalist Lolis Eric Elie made the following astute observation about our metropolis and its people:

"There's much that is great and wonderful about New Orleans, but nothing is more impressive than the fact that the richest elements of this city's culture are participatory."

That clearly includes food, music, Mardi Gras and so much more. As for the city's cuisine, considering all the fabulous restaurants in New

Orleans, Lolis would say that the finest cooks are to be found right in your own home. On that subject he opined:

“My guess is that none of the fine chefs in town would accept the challenge of putting their gumbo against somebody’s mother’s gumbo.”

Chef Extraordinaire Susan Spicer described the city’s culinary heritage this way, as quoted in an article by Emily Hingle in the February 2013 issue of *Where Y’at*:

“It truly is one of the most delicious indigenous cuisines in the world, due to the confluence of all these different cultures – the French, Spanish, West Indies, African, Italian and now of course, Vietnamese and Latin American. We are also so incredibly lucky to have the Gulf of Mexico and all the bounty it provides. We’re a little bit spoiled with our crab, crayfish, shrimp, oysters and fin fish ... And I could truly eat a different gumbo every day of my life!”

New Orleans is indeed composed of many rich ingredients, which observers over the years have interpreted in numerous and varied ways. But just like your mother’s gumbo, everyone’s tastes are a little different. So it is with their observations.

NED HÉMARD

New Orleans Nostalgia
“Interesting Observations”
Ned Hémard
Copyright 2017