

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

It Wouldn't Be Prudent

Two kinds of mallards are popular in New Orleans: The first is *Anas platyrhynchos* at which avid duck hunters love to take aim. Other hunters search out the other variety: Prudent Mallard, purveyor in the 1840s and 1850s of monumental beds, armoires and *duchesses* (these are not female ducks). For those more acquainted with the green-headed variety, Mallard is accented on the second syllable and capitalized. A *duchesse* is a marble top dressing table for which Mallard is noted (he provided one for Isabel Puig of 624 Royal Street, on display at the Louisiana State Museum's beautifully furnished 1850 House at 523 St. Ann Street on Jackson Square). Mallard's beds were four-poster half-tester canopy beds that soared upwards to neatly fit beneath an 18-foot New Orleans ceiling. They are almost nine feet long and eight feet wide with massive bedposts.



*Prudent Mallard, 1853, by Pierre Eugene Jules Maison
Louisiana State Museum, New Orleans*

Prudent Francis Mallard was born in Sèvres, France, in 1809, the son of a Scottish father and French mother. After first moving to New York City, Mallard took a steamship down to New Orleans in the 1830s when the plantation economy was on the rise. There he opened a shop on Royal Street, his "*Magasin de Meubles*," in 1838. He has been hailed for years as the leading cabinetmaker of New Orleans' golden antebellum age, "manufacturing" rococo and Renaissance Revival-style Victorian furniture with elaborate carvings, but research over the last few years has revealed that Mallard might not have fashioned a single piece of furniture.

It appears that this foremost "cabinetmaker" of the Louisiana Creole aristocracy (whose showroom had many retail items like porcelain, glassware, silverware, paintings and textiles) may not have been an artisan at all but a very successful interior decorator and high-end retailer. He even referred to his shop as a "curiosity depot" amply stocked with many different "*recherché*" items for the home. That would be anything deemed rare, exotic or obscure.

One of the most elegant establishments in the city is that of P. Mallard, No. 55 Royal and No. 80 Bienville streets, where the most recherche articles of furniture, upholstery, household ornaments, etc., may be found, of the very newest styles. His card, on our editorial page, will repay perusal.

An 1866 Prudent Mallard ad in the New Orleans Times

Mallard understood good design and credited as his suppliers notable manufacturers like Frederic Roux of Paris and his brother, Alexander Roux of New York City. A man for many years linked with Mallard was Charles Lee, once believed to be a freed slave apprenticed to him. It has now been discovered that Charles Lee (not a free person of color) ran a furniture factory in Manchester, Massachusetts (c. 1856-1868), making bedsteads for the Southern market. He employed approximately eighteen men and shipped his finished pieces to New Orleans retailers such as Calvin Chandler Sampson and William and James McCracken. Of the seven retailers Lee did do business with in New Orleans, curiously, not one was Prudent Mallard. A photograph of Mr. Lee shown with his workers has been discovered, as well. He is sporting an impressive stovepipe hat.

There is a magnificent matching mahogany canopy bed and armoire at Felix Poché's Plantation on River Road once attributed to Mallard with Charles Lee as the bed's original "manufacturer". In fact, it is now

apparent that Mallard was probably never Lee's customer. Still, the man who put "manufactured by P. Mallard" or some similar label on a large quantity of furniture he sold was the man who got the credit over the years. Today we know that Mallard interpreted assembly and manufacture as virtually the same thing. He would order furniture from New York, Boston or Paris and "assemble" it in New Orleans. It may have been the mere tightening of screws, such as securing a table top to its base.

Stephen Harrison, Curator of Decorative Art and Design at the Cleveland Museum of Art, has developed the theory (which he wrote about in a 1997 article about the nineteenth-century furniture trade in New Orleans) that after the mid-1830s, New Orleans' dynamic cotton economy created an elite with such a demand for fine furniture that an ordinary cabinetmaker would be unable to satisfy the market. His assumption is that the upper crust of such a cosmopolitan seaport would want the latest in Rococo and *Louis Quatorze* designs that were the rage in Europe and the American Northeast. This would require expensive lathes and other machinery that Harrison finds no evidence that Mallard employed. Lathes and other tools required for turning tall bedposts were not mentioned in the inventories of Mallard's 1855 bankruptcy or the 1874 liquidation of his business. Harrison further contends that importation and retailing, not manufacturing, would have been easier and thus controlled the New Orleans furniture market of that time. Furniture historians will continue to debate this issue, but Mallard beds still sell in the \$30-40,000 range.

There have also been errors in some quarters concerning the sex of Prudent Mallard. Many still make the mistake of referring to him as Prudence Mallard. Cedar Grove Mansion and Inn in Vicksburg, Mississippi, describes a massive bed upon which General Grant slept: "We are especially proud of the Prudence Mallard bearing the signature oval mallard egg on the front."

Another popular name in nineteenth century furniture in New Orleans was Francois Seignouret, who built the Seignouret House at 520 Royal Street in the French Quarter in 1816. A native of Bourdeaux, France, Seignouret was a fine furniture purveyor and wine merchant.

But Mallard and Seignouret were not the only furniture retailers or cabinetmakers in the Crescent City. Of great significance was the firm of J. & J.W. Meeks. Founded in 1797 by Joseph Meeks, who worked first with his brother to establish the company in New York City, he later expanded the business with the help of his sons. Producing a wide variety of cabinet and upholstered furniture, Meeks also opened a distribution warehouse in 1820 in New Orleans, and his two sons operated a furniture store there from 1830 through 1839. William McCracken of Belfast, Ireland, who did business with Charles Lee as mentioned above, was another furniture retailer in New Orleans.

Furniture pieces sold by McCracken and the Meeks firm are also featured in the 1850 House.

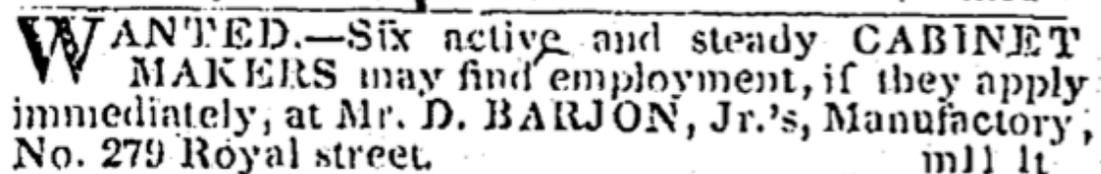
From 1835 to 1843 numerous entrepreneurs opened furniture concerns in New Orleans: Calvin Chandler Sampson, Daniel Kelham and Isaac Keen from Massachusetts; Henry Siebrecht from Germany; Cyrus Flint, James H. Jones and Henry Weil from New York; and James and William McCracken from Ireland.

One of New Orleans' most intriguing furniture-making dynasties was that of the family of Dutreuil Barjon, *père et fils*. Dutreuil Barjon, Sr., was born in Jérémie, Saint Domingue (now Haiti) in 1799 and came to New Orleans in 1813. A free person of color, Barjon honed his craft under a three-year apprenticeship to another free black cabinetmaker named Jean Rousseau. By 1821 Barjon had a shop of his own where he fabricated furniture in the then popular Greek style. In 1835 he partnered with Christophe Voigt to design and import furniture from Berlin and Hamburg, Germany. Barjon selected all the pieces to be shipped since he knew the tastes of the New Orleans customers.

The 1834 *Michel's New Orleans City Directory* advertised that Barjon's shop offered, "to the public a large assortment of furniture made in this city, and in the newest and most fashionable style." Barjon began having financial troubles in the 1850s and, in 1855, transferred the business to his son.

Dutreuil Barjon, Jr. (1823–1870) was an accomplished cabinetmaker like his father, and is listed as a carpenter-joiner in the city's business directories of the 1840s. He worked in his father's shop until acquiring the "Manufactory" in 1855 and continuing its operation until 1867. In 1856, Dutreuil Barjon, *père*, escaped his creditors by fleeing to France with his mistress.

A beautiful armoire bearing the stamp, "Dutreuil Barjon Jr.," was sold by Neal Auction Company at Bocage Plantation in late 2007.



WANTED.—Six active and steady CABINET MAKERS may find employment, if they apply immediately, at Mr. D. BARJON, Jr.'s, Manufactory; No. 279 Royal street. ml l'

1845 Barjon advertisement

And then, on a hot August evening in 1854, there was a terrible homicide. Michel Honoré lay dead near the corner of Ursuline and Roman streets, stabbed thirteen times: six in the breast, four in the back and three in the left arm. He had been in a quarrel with his killer five months earlier at the Globe ballroom. That night, only one of the

two deadly foes would come out alive: It was Dutreuil Barjon. Honoré drew a pistol and fired on Barjon, who struck back forcefully with his dirk. As the paper reported, "Honoré fell dead on the banquette." Whether it was Barjon Sr. or Jr. is unclear, the paper stating that both Honoré and Barjon were "natives of the city, and well-known". Of interest was the fact that a heavily loaded pistol was found on the person of the deceased, but the weapon that was actually discharged was not to be found. It also appears that Barjon was never convicted of a crime in connection with this bloody event.

HORRIBLE ASSASSINATION IN NEW ORLEANS.—Our city has again been made the theatre of a most revolting and bloody murder. About nine o'clock last night a free colored man named Michel Honore, was brutally assassinated by another free colored person named Dutriel Barjon, (both natives of this city, and well-known)

As for Prudent Mallard, misleading "manufactured by" labels aside, he was unable to compete financially with the spiraling growth in mass-produced and secondhand furniture prevalent by the mid-1870s. Also, many of his former clients had been ruined by the Civil War. His career as the most sought after purveyor of household furnishings in New Orleans was over. Louisiana's "Mallard Dynasty" came to an end in 1874.



Rococo carved rosewood half-tester bed "manufactured" by Mallard

NED HÉMARD

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