

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Lost The Presidency and Lost At Love

Thomas Jefferson almost lost the presidency in 1800 to Aaron Burr. Each candidate received seventy-three electoral votes. The tie had to be resolved in the House of Representatives. One vote broke the deadlock and made Jefferson our third chief executive. One of those votes that made the difference was that of William Charles Cole Claiborne, a native of Virginia elected to represent Tennessee in the U.S. House in 1796 and again in 1798. Jefferson rewarded him by appointing him governor of the Territory of Mississippi in 1801. After the Louisiana Purchase, he governed Louisiana until becoming its first elected governor upon statehood in 1812. Incredibly, Claiborne's deciding vote was probably illegitimate.

Born in 1775, he did not meet the constitutional age requirement of twenty-five years for election to the House until the last year of his second term. He is still the youngest member ever elected to that body. Yet had he not cast that vote, Jefferson may not have purchased Louisiana and there would have been no Louisiana for Claiborne to govern. Claiborne may not have married into an aristocratic Creole family or been around for the Battle of New Orleans. And there'd be no Claiborne Avenue.

But this is a story of another extremely close election. Samuel Jones Tilden (1814-1886) was a New York-born corporate attorney with many railroads as clients. A successful legal practice and a talent for wise investments made him a rich man. Entering politics, he became chairman of the Democratic state committee and up against the corrupt practices of Boss Tweed. Tweed's ring had all the New York judges in its pocket, but Tilden helped expose their misconduct. As reform governor of New York in 1874, his success in breaking up the "canal ring" landed him the Democratic presidential nomination.

Tilden was a Bourbon Democrat: capitalistic, anti-imperialistic and anti-machine. In late 1876, New Orleans was suffering through another year of Reconstruction, while at the same time founding the first "Lawn Tennis Club" in the nation. (That's "Lawn Tennis", not

"Lawn and Tennis".) In November of that year, Louisiana would become the center of attention in the pivotal presidential race between Tilden and Republican candidate Rutherford B. Hayes.

Republicans had taken over southern state governments during Reconstruction, and three of them (Louisiana, Florida and South Carolina) proved to be a problem. Each had dual sets of electoral votes, one for Republican Hayes and the other for Democrat Tilden. Tilden had won the nation's popular vote and 184 electoral votes. All he needed was one more electoral vote from any of these three states. In order to avert a constitutional crisis, congressional leaders created a commission to determine which votes were valid. In the end, a deal was struck whereby Hayes would "win" the presidency, Francis T. Nicholls would become governor of Louisiana and federal troops would be withdrawn from the South. Reconstruction would be over, but Tilden would be robbed of his victory. Tilden graciously accepted his fate stating that he could retire knowing that the people elected him but "without any of the cares and responsibilities of the office."



Almost President: Samuel Jones Tilden

About four years later, Samuel Tilden met and became enamored with a remarkable young lady. Over forty years his junior, Marie Celeste

Stauffer was the youngest daughter of Isaac Hull Stauffer (head of New Orleans' largest hardware business, Stauffer, Macready & Co., later Stauffer-Eshleman Co.). There was already a double "presidential" connection in her family. Celeste's brothers had each married Zachary Taylor's granddaughters whose father, General Dick Taylor, had been a strong Tilden supporter. Celeste and her parents left their stately New Orleans mansion (today the site of the Orpheum Theatre) for annual visits to Greystone, Tilden's estate near Yonkers, New York. Former Governor Tilden found Celeste so engaging that he had long letters delivered to her twice a week by private courier.

An 1886 article in the Williamsport (Pennsylvania) *Daily Gazette & Bulletin* described the object of his affection:

"Her manners, conversation and innocent grace and airs, acquired from the native creoles of New Orleans, fascinated the old man. She seemed to be very fond of Mr. Tilden and anticipated his every wish, even in the most trivial attentions at the table, or in the presence of a social gathering. Her glorious physique displayed on horseback was the object of Mr. Tilden's undisguised admiration. She is an intrepid and accomplished equestrienne. Miss Stauffer's greatest art for the enchantment of men, both young and old, lay in her conversational powers. She could talk with wonderful understanding upon any subject, from the smallest of small talk to the most recent theories of philosophy and science."

Celeste, who reigned as Queen of Carnival in 1885, had other noted suitors, such as Ernest Benjamin Kruttschnitt, attorney and nephew of Judah P. Benjamin, and Dr. William M. Polk, but she continued to correspond with "The Sage of Greystone". The Gazette reported that a match between Tilden and Miss Stauffer "did not take place because Mr. Tilden felt his strength failing and thought she deserved a younger husband whose span of life was not so nearly run."

He turned out to be correct, for he died August 4, 1886. Never having married, he left Celeste \$100,000 in his will. The man who almost became the nineteenth president once confided to a friend that he had never slept with a woman in his life. The bulk of his multi-million dollar estate was bequeathed to establish and maintain a free public library in New York, which was challenged in court by his family.

Celeste Stauffer later married George Spencer Eastwick, manager of the sugar trust in New Orleans, on Wednesday, December 26, 1894. According to the *New York Times*, the wedding took place in the "richly decorated" that afternoon at the "Jesuit church on Baronne Street", and the "gifts were many and magnificent". According to the marriage records, they were both the same age.

Was Once Tilden's Fiancee.

NEW ORLEANS, Dec. 27.—George S. Eastwick, manager of a sugar refinery and a member of the firm of Havemeyer & Eastwick, and Miss Celeste Stauffer, the young lady who was engaged to Samuel J. Tilden and to whom he left \$100,000 in his will; were married at the Jesuit church.

Celeste's final resting place is in the impressive Eastwick family mausoleum in Metairie Cemetery in New Orleans. When she died, she left a substantial part of her estate to the Eye, Ear, Nose and Throat Hospital. This money was used to construct a modern annex to the hospital.

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