

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*

*By Ned Hémard*

### **Mercers and Pattons**

Just what is a mercer? The word is derived from the Latin *merx*, *mercis*, as are the words merchant and merchandise. Mercery (from the French *mercerie*, or the notions trade) initially referred to textiles of silk, linen and fustian (heavy woven fabrics) first imported to England in the 12th century. In fact, that is when the first trade guilds (later to become livery companies) were founded in London when men and women, working in the same craft, trade or art (also known as *misterie* from *misterium* (alteration of the Latin *ministerium* meaning occupation, service or ministry), began to gather together in informal organizations. The word *misterie* is also influenced by *maistrie* meaning mastery. In *mystery plays*, medieval performances often staged by members of craft guilds, the two senses of *mystery* provided a common pun in Tudor theatre.

At first these trade guilds took the form of benevolent associations looking after members and their families. In time, they also came to regulate their individual trades within the walls of the City of London by maintaining standards. In 1562, during the reign of Elizabeth I, a statute was passed stating that no person could enter a craft or occupation unless he first served a seven-year apprenticeship in the trade he wished to pursue.

There are currently 108 livery companies in London. The Worshipful Company of Mercers is the premier livery company of them all and ranks first in the order of precedence of the so-called "Great Twelve City Livery Companies". But that was not always the case. The Grocers were once first.

The Worshipful Company of Grocers (founded in 1345) had its incarnation as the Guild of Pepperers, dating back to at least as early as the 1100s. The Company was granted the responsibility (known as garbling) for ensuring the purity of spices and drugs and preventing their alteration. The Company also set certain weights and measures and was put in charge of the King's Beam, which weighed all merchandise sold by the *aver-de-poys* weight or the *peso grosso*.

Grocer probably derives its name from the Latin, *grossarius*, meaning one who buys and sells in the gross, i.e., wholesale merchant.

The great Levant trading company (1581) was an offspring of the Grocers' Company, and in 1600 a number of London Grocers and merchants formed the renowned East India Company, so vital to the creation and building of the Anglo-Indian Empire. The Grocers held the number one spot in prominence until one of England's queens became annoyed. It is said that her majesty (in a procession after her coronation or during her jubilee) found herself behind a Grocers' camel which was emitting quite unfortunate aromas. Consequently, the Queen demoted the Grocers to second and the Mercers were promoted to number one.

The camels acted up again for the 100th birthday parade in honor of the "Queen Mum", who was, by the way, the last Empress of India. Members of the Grocers' Company were taking part in a procession, making their way to the outdoor arena on camels, to signify Britain's historic links with the spice trade (a camel is prominent in the Company's crest). "Suddenly, the camels spied the expanse of sand, and obviously thought they had somehow been transported home," according to Major Sir Michael Parker, of the Queen's Own Hussars. "Two of them went down on their knees, and the others followed suit. The Worshipful Grocers were all abruptly flung forwards in a flurry of blue velvet, then lurched back again as the camels' back legs folded."



*Grocers' Company Crest  
(notice the camel)*



*Mercers' Company Crest  
(with the Mercers' Maiden)*

The United States is proud to have had a number of prominent citizens who bore the name Mercer. Foremost among them was General Hugh

Mercer (1726 – 1777), soldier and physician. He first served with British forces during the Seven Years War but later emerged as a brigadier general in the Continental Army and a close friend to George Washington. He was mortally wounded at the Battle of Princeton and died a hero in the American Revolutionary War.

Mercer was born in Aberdeenshire, Scotland, to Presbyterian Minister, Reverend William Mercer and Ann Monro. He studied to be a doctor and served as assistant surgeon in the army of Bonnie Prince Charlie in 1745, and was present at the Battle of Culloden when Charles' Army suffered a crushing defeat on April 16, 1746. Forced to flee Scotland, the young doctor emigrated to America, settling in Pennsylvania. In 1760, Mercer made his home in Fredericksburg, Virginia, where he established a medical practice and apothecary. He purchased Ferry Farm (Washington's childhood home) from George Washington.



*General Hugh Mercer*

Succeeding generations of the general's family have distinguished themselves in various fields of endeavor. Famous among his direct descendants were his great-grandson and Mayor of New Orleans Isaac W. Patton and the mayor's brothers (who included Confederate Lieutenant Colonel Waller Tazewell Patton (born 1835) and George Smith Patton (born 1833). George Smith Patton died of his wounds in 1864 during the Third Battle of Winchester. He is buried with his brother, Waller Tazewell Patton, who was mortally wounded during Pickett's Charge at Gettysburg, in Winchester's Stonewall Cemetery.

Four years after George S. Patton's death, his 11-year-old son, originally named George William Patton, asked his mother for permission to change his name to George Smith Patton, to honor his heroic father. His mother gave her permission, and the boy changed his name. He became a prominent attorney in California, and his son, named George Smith Patton, Jr., went on to become the U.S. Army's most successful battlefield commander of World War II, General

George Smith Patton, Jr.



*General George S. Patton, Jr.*

George C. Scott, in the popular biopic "Patton", like his real life counterpart, carried an ivory-handled Single Action Army pistol in his holster with the initials "GSP" engraved on the grip. General Patton's was an 1873 Colt. When a reporter asked him about his "pearl-handled revolvers", Patton snapped back, "They're ivory. Only a pimp from a cheap New Orleans whorehouse would carry a pearl-handled pistol."

Another local connection is the late Colonel Charles B. Odom, M.D., former Coroner of Jefferson Parish, Louisiana, who was previously Third Army Surgical Consultant and General Patton's personal physician during World War II. From North Africa to Sicily and Europe, Odom was involved in the creation of the medical system that saved thousands of lives during the war. Colonel Odom was the most decorated doctor in the European Theater of Operations and won the Purple Heart in 1944 after being wounded by a sniper's bullet during the battle of the Falaise Gap.

Besides General George S. Patton, other direct descendants of Hugh Mercer include Confederate General Hugh Weedon Mercer (also CSA) and prolific songwriter Johnny Mercer.

Isaac W. Patton, born in Fredericksburg, Virginia, became the 39th

mayor of New Orleans (serving from November 18, 1878, to December 16, 1880). His father, John Mercer Patton, represented the Fredericksburg district in Congress for ten years, and was a noted lawyer of some influence in Richmond. Isaac was educated at Fairfax Institute, near Alexandria, and at a young age took on the study of law in his father's office. Not long after, the Mexican War broke out and Isaac abandoned his books to enter the army. President James Knox Polk gave him a commission as second lieutenant in the Tenth United States Infantry.

Later, in 1855, he married Frances E. Merritt, daughter of a noted Richmond physician, and two years after resigning from the army he decided to move to Louisiana. He first engaged in cotton planting in Madison Parish. He was also involved in a sugar plantation situated below New Orleans, owned by his father-in-law. When the Civil War broke out, he quickly offered his services to the state.

Shortly before the arrival of Farragut's fleet in New Orleans, Isaac was ordered to take command of the Chalmette batteries below the city, but the enemy's vessels ascended the river and captured the Crescent City. Captain Patton was later made colonel of the Twenty-third Louisiana Infantry, with which he served until the close of the war. He fought during the siege of Vicksburg where he was wounded in the hip, taken prisoner and shortly after exchanged to resume his place at the head of his regiment in Mobile.

At the end of the war Colonel Patton returned to New Orleans and entered into the commission business. He was elected criminal sheriff in 1872 and mayor six years later. The foremost feature of Mayor Patton's administration was to improve the management of the city finances, which he did. Also, during the years 1879 and 1880 great progress was made in constructing railroad lines, which provided New Orleans greater access to the West and Northwest.

Much beloved in the City of New Orleans was Mayor Patton's granddaughter, Marian Patton Atkinson, who for many of her ninety-eight years was a regular fixture at Galatoire's, where she first dined in 1916. Proud cousin of General George S. Patton, Jr., Marian entertained him when he visited New Orleans. Her dinner ritual began with her husband Eugene Atkinson, a cotton factor, who decided soon after retiring to never dine at home again. After his death in 1980, Marian continued the tradition, arriving for dinner by private limo every Tuesday through Sunday (Galatoire's is closed on Mondays). It is said one of Marian's ancestors was a doge of Venice. The delightful doyenne had her special table, which she was usually able to secure by arriving early. The evening always began with two Old-Fashioneds, for as Marian would always say, "A bird can't fly on just one wing."



Marian Patton Atkinson was born January 22, 1902, to Mercer Patton and his wife Rose Voorhies at their residence on Esplanade Avenue. Marian's father, Mercer Patton, was Mayor Isaac W. Patton's son.

Meanwhile, back in Savannah, another cousin is much esteemed. John Herndon "Johnny" Mercer (1909 – 1976) was a successful lyricist, songwriter, singer and co-founder of Capitol Records.

Writing lyrics to countless standards in the Great American Songbook, Johnny Mercer penned the words to such great songs as "I'm Old Fashioned" (Cousin Marian would have loved that), "Skylark", "Too Marvelous for Words", "Hooray for Hollywood", "Jeepers, Creepers", "Tangerine", "That Old Black Magic", "You Must Have Been a Beautiful Baby", "Moon River"; the list just goes on and on. Mercer received nineteen Academy Award nominations and won four for Best Original Song. Amazingly, he wrote the lyrics to more than fifteen hundred songs. He even wrote a New Orleans song, "While We Danced at the Mardi Gras".

New Orleans' own Mac Rebennack, aka Dr. John, recorded a successful album of Johnny Mercer songs right before Hurricane Katrina hit, entitled "Mercernary: the Songs of Johnny Mercer". "He always appeared to me to have that Southern something about him," Mac said. "He was a great singer, a great A&R man, a producer ... So we started looking at some Mercer stuff."

Another New Orleans Mercer connection involves Dr. William Newton Mercer (1791 – 1879), whose stately home on Canal Street is today

home to the Boston Club. Born in Maryland, Dr. Mercer was the son of Benjamin James Mercer and Anna Stophel. He built this residence, after leaving his previous mansion on Carondelet Street, where he entertained Henry Clay during the statesman's visit to New Orleans. Mercer was one of Clay's intimate friends, and it is rumored that Dr. Mercer graciously and anonymously paid off debts incurred by Clay in later life. After Dr. Mercer's death, his Canal Street mansion became home to the Pickwick Club (1881 to 1883) before the Boston Club took up residence.

Early and noted men of the Boston Club (named for a card game) included Judah P. Benjamin, second Jewish senator in U.S. history and Confederate Secretary of State. Known as "the Brains of the Confederacy", Benjamin later became a distinguished British barrister and in 1872 was appointed Queen's Counsel. Another member was John R. Grymes, also a prominent lawyer. Thomas Jenkins Semmes and General "Dick" Taylor, CSA, son of U. S. President Zachary Taylor, were members, as well. And Jefferson Davis visited the Boston Club whenever he was in the Crescent City.

There is a Patton Street in New Orleans that runs between Constance and Laurel streets, beginning at Joseph Street and ending at Audubon Park.

"One for My Baby (and One More for the Road)" is one of the most popular songs written by Johnny Mercer, first performed in film by Fred Astaire and made even more popular by Frank Sinatra. Cousin Marian Patton Atkinson would say it another way in the toast she frequently made at Galatoire's: "Whatever you wish me, I wish you twice more."

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