

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*

*By Ned Hémard*

### **New Orleans in 1849**

1849 was an eventful year in New Orleans and the nation as a whole. On Valentine's Day in New York City, James Knox Polk became the first serving United States President to have his photograph taken (with Matthew Brady snapping the shutter). Polk was about to leave office, making way for the only U.S. President to have lived in Louisiana: Zachary Taylor, the hero of the Mexican-American War.

Taylor had inflicted over 1,800 Mexican casualties at the Battle of Buena Vista in February 1847. Defeated, the Mexican forces under Santa Anna retreated, ensuring a far-reaching victory for the Americans. Taylor, known as "Old Rough and Ready", set sail for home in late November 1847. The following month, he received a hero's welcome in New Orleans and Baton Rouge, setting the stage for his 1848 presidential win. Word of his nomination had been dispatched by mail to Taylor at his home in Baton Rouge, but (since he refused all postage due correspondence) he did not receive notification of this until several days later.

Taylor was scheduled to take office as the twelfth U.S. President March 4, 1849, but refused to be sworn in on a Sunday. That took place on March 5th. Some allege this would have made David Rice Atchison President for a day. Atchison was President *pro tempore* (and thus Acting Vice President, under the presidential succession law then in place), but his tenure as President *pro tempore* had already expired when the Thirtieth Congress adjourned *sine die* on March 4.

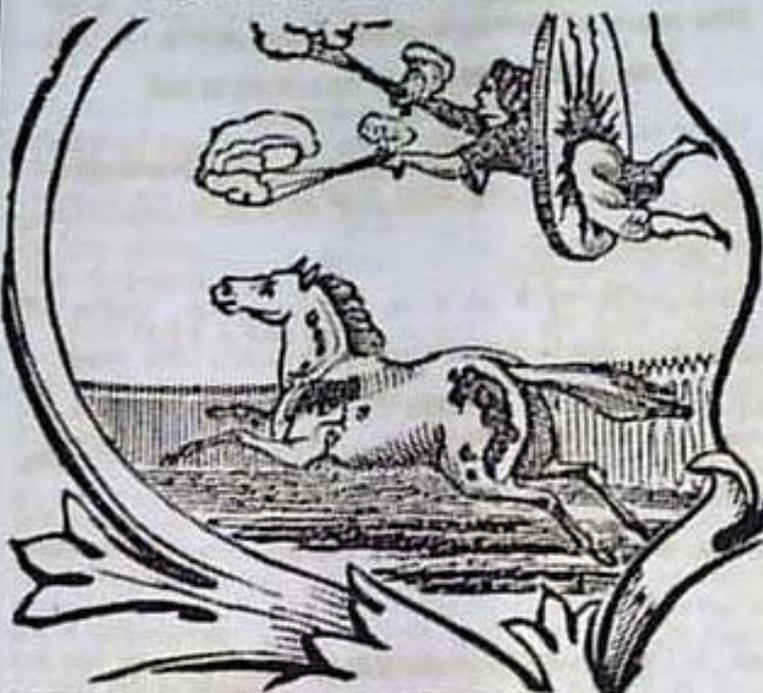
Not everyone was happy about the Mexican War. In 1849, Henry David Thoreau published his essay *Civil Disobedience*, recounting his refusal to pay his poll tax as a means of protesting the war.

On April 10, 1849, Walter Hunt of New York patented the safety pin. Envisioned while trying to think of a way to pay off a \$15 debt, he sold his rights for \$400. Even Abraham Lincoln applied for a patent that year, the only U.S. President to do so. A youthful Lincoln had taken a boatload of merchandise down the Mississippi River to New Orleans.

During this journey, his boat slid onto a dam and was freed up only after heroic efforts. This event and a later sandbar incident led Lincoln to conceive "A Device for Buoying Vessels Over Shoals", for which he received Patent #6,469 on May 22, 1849.

Back in Louisiana, the state capital officially moved from New Orleans to Baton Rouge in 1849. Not every circus was a political one. For those wishing to view a more traditional one in 1849 with "equestrian and versatile performances", Sam Stickney's New Orleans Circus (Levi North, Samuel Peckhill Stickney and J. W. Jones, proprietors), "brilliantly illuminated with gas" as advertised below, was your ticket.

NEW-ORLEANS CIRCUS.



**NORTH, STICKNEY & JONES, PROPRIETORS.**  
**T**HIS celebrated Company, composed of the first Equestrian Performers in the world, will continue their representations every evening during the week. The spacious Pavilion is brilliantly illuminated with gas, and every arrangement necessary for the comfort and accommodation of visitors and family parties have been made. The acts of the circle will embrace the very highest order of equestrian and versatile performances, for particulars of which see small descriptive bills of the day. A performance for families and juveniles, will be given on *Thursday and Saturday*, at 2 o'clock, P. M.  
Dress Circle, 50 cents. Children and servants, half price.

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Two great schools (and future sports rivals) saw their beginnings in 1849. Holy Cross (high school and middle school, now on Paris Avenue) was founded by a French Priest recently beatified, Blessed Father Basil Moreau of the Congregation of Holy Cross in New Orleans. Beatification is the third of four steps toward canonization in the

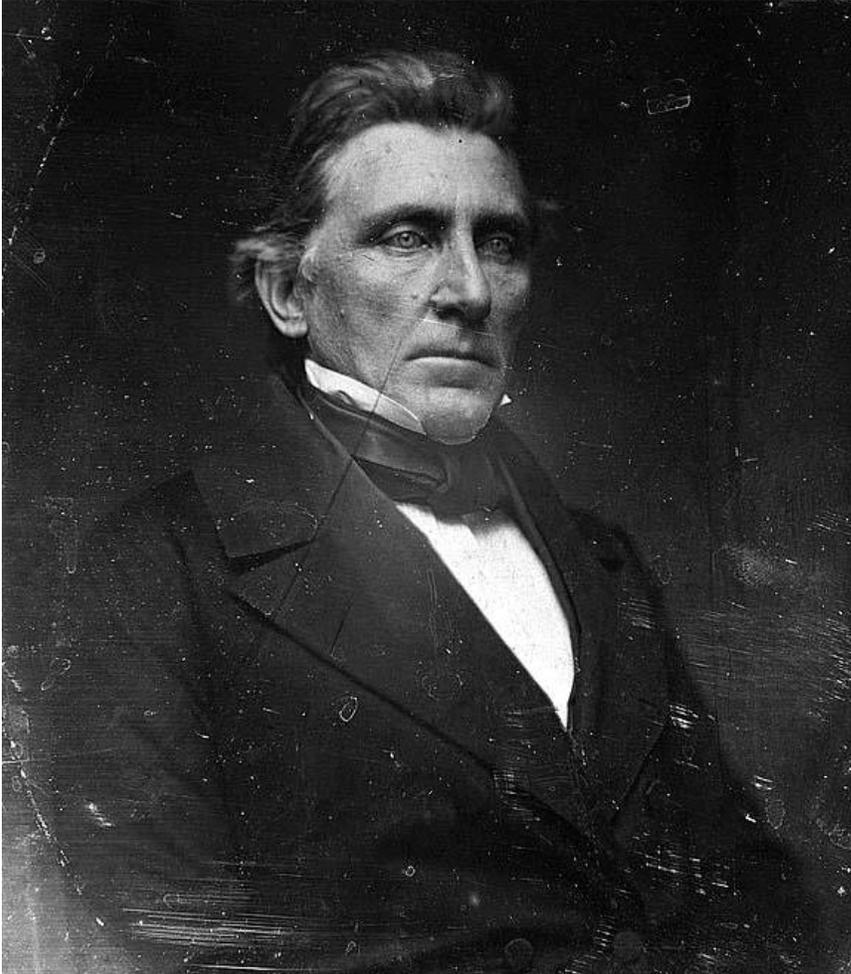
Roman Catholic Church.

Jesuit High School was founded in 1847 as the College of the Immaculate Conception but did not open until 1849. First located downtown at the corner of Baronne and Common streets, Jesuit later moved to Carrollton and Banks. Jesuit today ranks among the top private schools in the nation in the number of National Merit semifinalists. The Jesuit Blue Jays, whose mascot is a blue jay with raised fists designed by *Pogo* cartoonist Walt Kelly, continues to battle the Holy Cross Tigers in sports competitions.

The year 1849 began with some exciting news taking hold. President Polk confirmed it in his state of union speech on December 5, 1848. Gold had been discovered in California! When the paddle steamer *SS Falcon*, dispatched four days earlier from New York City for California, reached the Crescent City, it was deluged by passenger requests. The *Daily Picayune* reported on January 28, 1849, "Seven gentlemen, citizens of this city, left last evening on the steamer *Rowena* for the gold regions, via New Orleans, Chagres, and Panama, their final destination being the city of San Francisco." Another group "leaves this morning," writes the paper, "on the steamer *St. Joseph*, destined for the same point." The paper lamented, "We regret the loss of such worthy and estimable citizens, yet cannot but wish them a pleasant voyage and unbounded success in their adventures."

One who took off for California was William McKendree Gwin. His father, Tennessee pioneer and Methodist preacher James Gwin, had fought in the Battle of New Orleans, serving Andy Jackson as his chief chaplain on the Louisiana expedition. After earning his medical degree, Dr. William McKendree Gwin retired from practice in 1833 on being appointed by President Jackson United States Marshal for the District of Mississippi. He was elected to Congress as a Democrat in 1841 and served one term. At the end of the Mexican War he was appointed Commissioner of Public Works for the Port of New Orleans, a very lucrative position. It was his job to superintend the building of the new U.S. Custom House on Canal Street. He oversaw the building's foundation and proceeded with the work until Zachary Taylor became President. He resigned and set out for California, where he arrived on June 4, 1849. There he participated in the 1849 California Constitutional Convention. He also purchased some property upon which a gold mine eventually yielded millions of dollars, providing him with a fortune on which to live. He also organized a wing of the Democratic Party known as the *Chivalry*, which was opposed by the Whig wing. The ultimate creation of the Pony Express was due to a tenacious struggle waged by now Senator Gwin, who in January, 1855, introduced his first bill in the American Congress. In it he sought the establishment of "a faster weekly letter-express service between St. Louis and San Francisco."

This colorful character engaged in a duel with Congressman Joseph McCorkle with rifles at thirty yards over an argument concerning alleged mismanagement of federal patronage. Shots were fired, neither man was hit, but an unfortunate donkey some distance away was shot dead. An outspoken advocate for the South, Gwin was arrested during the Civil War, but President Abraham Lincoln intervened for his release.



*William McKendree Gwin*

Back in New Orleans, the Custom House, noted for its Egyptian Revival columns, took thirty-three years to complete. In 2008, it became home to the Audubon Insectarium (the largest free-standing American insect museum).

In addition to the Custom House, other activity was transpiring on Canal Street in New Orleans in 1849. It was the year that Daniel Henry Holmes opened his first store on Canal Street. He had come to the Crescent City from Ohio ten years before to open a dry goods emporium. A part-time operation on Magazine Street gave way in 1842 to a French Quarter location, then the commercial heart of the city. But D.H. Holmes envisioned the growth occurring on the American

side, so he opened his department store on Canal Street. Beloved by locals for years (many called it "Home-zez"), it came to include twenty-one stores in Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Florida. Eventually the chain was sold to Dillard's in 1989. "Under the clock at D.H. Holmes" on Canal became the place to meet someone downtown, as revealed in John Kennedy Toole's novel *A Confederacy of Dunces*. It was there that Ignatius Reilly agreed to meet his mother. His statue stands in front of the former main store, which is today (since 2012) the Hyatt French Quarter Hotel.

For boating enthusiasts, the Southern Yacht Club of New Orleans was founded in 1849, but it wasn't originally anchored in New Orleans. The second oldest yacht club in the United States traces its roots to the Mississippi Gulf Coast resort of Pass Christian where, during the summer months, many New Orleanians retreated to escape the temperature, humidity and yellow fever. A popular place for them to visit was the Pass Christian Hotel where, on July 21, 1849, SYC's organizational meeting was held. In 1857, the club relocated to New Orleans at West End on Lake Pontchartrain.

Besides yellow fever, cholera was a huge problem for New Orleans during the early part of 1849. On December 30, 1848, reports from Pittsburgh said that cholera was responsible for thirteen deaths aboard steamships that had all docked in the New Orleans harbor. Shipping was vital to New Orleans, but it also brought disease. People began exiting the city by the hundreds. Business halted. Through January 11, 1849, there were an average of over one hundred deaths per day. Luckily, the death rate diminished and by February 17, 1849, people had started returning to the city and normal order was restored.

With disease came death, and with death the city needed more cemeteries. Odd Fellows Rest was dedicated on Feb. 29, 1849, by a benevolent society known as the independent Order of Odd Fellows. The property, at 5055 Canal Street at its intersection with Metairie Road (now City Park Avenue), was dedicated with a large ceremony and a grand procession bearing the remains of the cemetery's first sixteen Odd Fellows. The cemetery contains several interesting tombs and monuments. One bears a plaque with the German words "*Freundschaft, Liebe and Wahrheit*" or "Friendship, Love and Truth" in English. Another notable tomb is for the Howard Association, a group composed of young men whose mission was to provide emergency aid during the yellow fever epidemic. The cast iron gates surrounding the cemetery bear symbols of fraternity tied to the Odd Fellows: The beehive, the widow and her children, the Diety's all-seeing eyes, the world, the cornucopia, the initials of the Order, five-pointed stars and the Bible. Thieves, sadly, have stolen many of these.



*Odd Fellows Rest*

Carrollton Cemetery, also known as Green Street Cemetery, was also founded in 1849. At the time, Carrollton had not yet been annexed by the City of New Orleans. That would take place in 1874. When the cemetery began, the first plot was sold on November 8, 1849, for only \$15.

In 1849, the Dryades Market opened at the corner of Dryades and Melpomene (Now Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard), one of the largest markets in the city. It was expanded by the city three years later to better accommodate butchers, seafood mongers, and fruit vendors (on the downtown side of Melpomene) and for vegetable and poultry purveyors (on the uptown side).

New Orleans was witness to a devastating accident on the evening of November 15, 1849. Just as the steamboat *Louisiana*, lying at the foot of Gravier Street, was leaving port for St. Louis, its boilers exploded with a concussion that shook all the houses in the city for many squares. Telegraphic dispatches announced a dreadful sacrifice of life, one reporting a hundred persons being killed. One of the iron fragments from the boilers cut a mule in two, and then struck a horse and dray, instantly killing both driver and horse. These steamboat explosions were commonplace in those days, but were accidents and not acts of terrorism. Duels and explosions, it seems, were especially unkind to donkeys and mules.

A few words must be said of New Orleans' chess genius, Paul Morphy. He played numerous games in 1849, against such opponents as James

McConnell and Eugene Rousseau. Three years earlier, when another Mexican War hero General Winfield Scott visited the city, Scott let it be known that he desired an evening of chess with a formidable local player. Although chess was a mere pastime of his, the General considered himself a strong player. After dinner, his hosts brought in a diminutive, nine-year-old boy. Scott was at first offended by the young Paul Morphy, thinking he was being made the object of a jest, but he agreed to play after it was explained that his opponent was a "chess prodigy" who would give him a run for his money. Young Paul beat the General handily not once, but twice, the second time with a forced checkmate after only six moves. That was all the General's ego could endure, so he retired for the night, never to play the young champion again.

## **NED HÉMARD**

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Ned Hémard  
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To get an idea of what types of jobs people had in 1849 New Orleans, please read my previous article "Former Occupations". To learn about the massive flooding of the city in 1849, please read my 2006 article concerning the main break in the river levee known as Sauv e's Crevasse. Entitled "Civil Law and Levee Flaw", it is featured below.

### **Civil Law and Levee Flaw**

Pierre Sauv e, born in France in 1749, came to Louisiana in 1769 to engage in sugar planting. After the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, Thomas Jefferson signed a document (on display at Destrehan Plantation) appointing Sauv e and others to membership in the Legislative Council of the Territory of Orleans. The men chosen by Jefferson to constitute this council were given the responsibility to form the new provisional government and ease the territory into representative democracy. He chose esteemed men from Creole families with long histories in the area, in order to effect a smooth transition.

Pierre Sauv e's plantation was some seventeen miles upriver from New

Orleans in what is now the River Ridge area of Jefferson Parish. Sauvé Road is name for him. What is interesting to scholars of Louisiana law is that there was a great debate back then as to which form of law should be adopted in the new territory (which would become the state of Louisiana in 1812). Pierre Sauvé was the champion of French and Spanish civil law over English common law (as practiced in all the other states). He persuasively and successfully argued to the United States authorities that they should not tamper with a system of law that so embodied the cultural heritage of the populace and that to preserve that system would stabilize their everyday economic and social commerce. Sauvé became President of the Legislative Council in 1806 and traveled to Washington on behalf of Louisiana. He died July 7, 1822.

Another powerful force held sway near Sauvé's plantation. Poorly designed or maintained levees surrounding the city caused breaches that gave way to rising flood waters. Whole neighborhoods were inundated and thousands of homeowners were displaced. Politicians on both sides assigned blame while polluted water sat stagnant in flooded homes. Only this did not take place in 2005 but in 1849. A breach in those days was called a crevasse, and this time it was the bickering of Whigs and Democrats that caused lackluster government response. The main break occurred on May 3, 1849, and was called Sauvé's Crevasse.



*Water up to four feet deep on Canal Street, 1849 watercolor by Elizabeth Lamoisse*

The waters surged six feet deep toward the lake until stopped by the Metairie Ridge which directed the deluge into New Orleans where 220 inhabited squares were flooded and over 12,000 people were made

homeless. Much of Uptown and the CBD were saturated. In Faubourg Bouligny the water reached Camp Street. Between Napoleon and Louisiana Avenues it came just short of Magazine. It ran along Bacchus Street (now Baronne) sometimes reaching over to Carondelet until crossing Canal Street between Royal and Bourbon and working its way back to the Old Basin. The First Municipality had time to raise a small levee running along the Carondelet Canal that directed water into Bayou St. John via the canal and then out to Lake Pontchartrain. This measure spared Faubourg St. John, the Marigny and downriver portions of the city.

Like today's tours of the Lower Ninth Ward, there were pleasure excursions to see the site. The Steamboat *Viola* advertised that it would take interested parties there for 50 cents and provide a "splendid band of music", a "collation" and "every comfort extended the passengers".

Some blamed *le crevasse* on *les écrevisses*. George Washington Cable wrote that when a crawfish "has burrowed in a levee, the water of the river may squirt in and out of this little tunnel" until the levee is undermined and lets in the flood "roaring, leaping, and flooding over the rich plantations". He dedicated a whole chapter of "The Creoles of Louisiana" to Sauv 's Crevasse.

Unsuccessful attempts to fill the opening continued for a month until the third of June when scientific help was finally called in. Civil engineers George Towers Dunbar and Louis Surgi, given *carte blanche* with materials and labor, succeeded seventeen days later in plugging the "17th Street Canal breach" of its day.

Ironically, many Uptown residents remember another May 3rd Flood that occurred in 1978. Torrential rains came in excess of ten inches with rates as much as two inches per hour at times. Drainage needs brought about a future dredging of the 17th Street Canal (originally dug in 1858), most of which was done toward the Orleans side. The canal-side levee had been shaved so thinly, water now touched the wall on the Orleans side where it once had a buffer of land. This may have had an impact on what happened there after Katrina.

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