

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

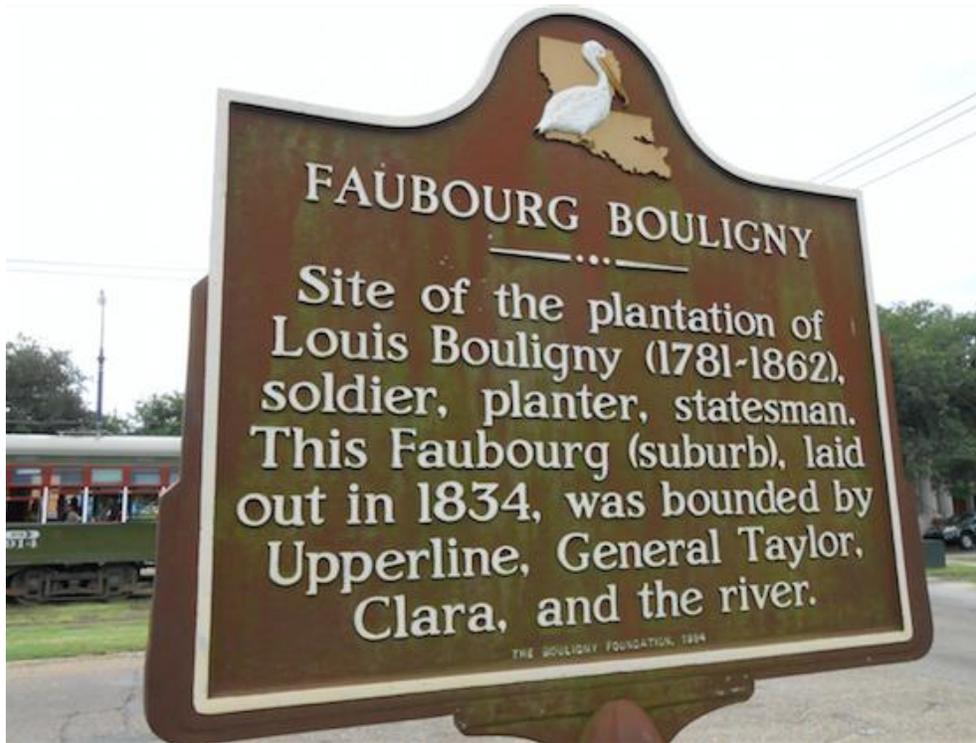
Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Not all Napoleonic Street Names Were Victories

Napoleonic street names were given to eleven streets that run perpendicular to St. Charles Avenue in what was once the Faubourg Bouligny. Many New Orleanians were taught that they represented Napoleon Bonaparte's numerous victories. It is true that some of them were but, in fact, the majority of them were not.

It all began back in 1834 when developers Samuel Kohn and Laurent Millaudon acquired a half-interest in the Faubourg Bouligny and hired Surveyor Charles F. Zimpel to lay out the new subdivision.



Some think that promoters Millaudon and Kohn may have named the streets in their new suburb after the Emperor Napoleon I and various locales that played a part in his career. Others, like John Chase in his definitive book on New Orleans streets, *Frenchmen, Desire, Good Children ... and Other Streets of New Orleans!*, made a convincing

case that the Napoleonic nomenclature was due to Zimpel, who he explained had "a running over enthusiasm for Napoleon, which ... spilled into the streets of every major subdivision of Zimpel's design."

New Orleans historian John Kendall, with a differing view, wrote in 1922, "The Napoleonic streets — Austerlitz, Milan, Marengo, Berlin and the avenue which bears the great soldier's imperial name — testify to the enthusiasm for the emperor's cause which was felt by General Burthe, owner of what was for a time called Burtheville."



Napoleon's camp on the eve of the Battle of Austerlitz

Noted historian, humorist, journalist (and my former Louisiana History professor at Tulane) Charles L. "Pie" Dufour (1903 - 1996) explained that the Napoleonic streets were "named, in all probability by Pierre Benjamin Buisson, actually one of the Little Corporal's old officers." "Pie" went on to explain that in 1834 "Buisson, a former lieutenant of Napoleon, was official surveyor for Jefferson Parish and the town of Lafayette, now the Garden District. Historians believe it was his influence which gave the name of Napoleon to the main avenue in the tract and names identified with Napoleon's career to a number of streets on either side the central street."

As for the streets of the Garden District, Kendall wrote, "The numbered streets — First, Second, Third, etc. — were "yankee-named," as the old inhabitants said, contemptuously."

While not all historians concur with the authorship of the Napoleonic street names, they do agree that the city was experiencing a bit of "Napoleon Fever" in 1834 with a visit by Dr. Francesco Carlo Antommarchi, who had attended Napoleon in exile until the Emperor's

death in 1821. Bonaparte's physician arrived in New Orleans and opened an office on Royal Street and presented the Emperor's bronze death mask to the city.

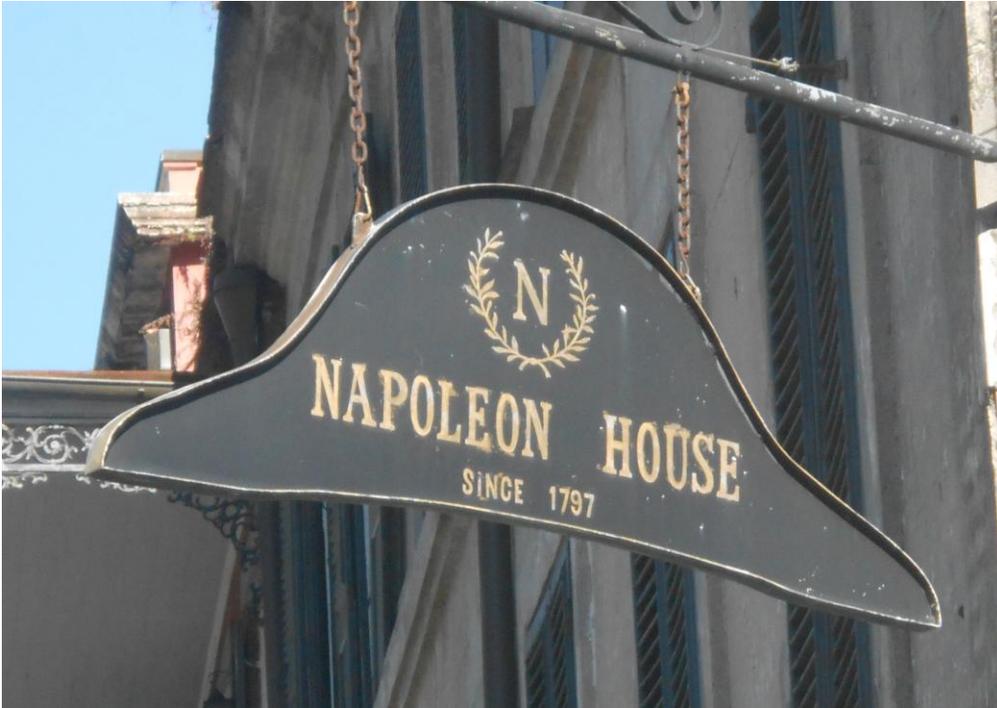


Antommarchi's Death Mask of Napoleon

The mask itself has an intriguing past. In 1853, city officials moved the death mask from the Cabildo to Gallier Hall. During the uncertain times that accompanied the Civil War, the mask disappeared. A former city treasurer spotted it in 1866 as it was being hauled off in a garbage wagon. Instead of returning the mask to the city, the treasurer took the mask and put it on display in his own home. Somehow Napoleon's death mask turned up in Atlanta, Georgia, in the home of Captain William Greene Raoul, president of the Mexican National Railroad. Raoul read a newspaper article about the missing mask and, in 1909, wrote to the Mayor of New Orleans concerning its whereabouts. In exchange for appropriate recognition, Raoul agreed to donate the death mask to New Orleans, where it was transferred to the Louisiana State Museum the same year. Many New Orleans residents have seen it on display in the Cabildo.

Nine of the eleven Napoleonic streets intersect St. Charles Avenue. The exceptions are Austerlitz, which ends at Perrier, and Lyons, which merges with Upperline at Prytania. The entire eleven street list in the Napoleonic sequence is as follows:

Austerlitz Street — named for the Battle of Austerlitz (also known as the Battle of the Three Emperors), which was indeed a major victory of Napoleon's *Grande Armée* over the Austrians led by Holy Roman Emperor Francis II and the Russians led by Tsar Alexander I on December 2, 1805. Austerlitz is a village in the Czech Republic. Austerlitz Street is the first street above General Taylor.



Traces of Napoleon are all over New Orleans

Constantinople Street — “Pie” Dufour’s explanation for this city’s inclusion in the Napoleonic sequence “is that Napoleon always considered Constantinople the key to world power and he once said he would never be content until he had enacted the Peace of Constantinople.” Perhaps the naming of Constantinople Street had something to do with Napoleon’s victory over Seid Mustafa Pasha’s Ottoman army on July 25, 1799 in the Battle of Abukir during the French campaign in Egypt.

Marengo Street — wider than most of the other streets in the Napoleonic group, is named for the Battle of Marengo, fought June 14, 1800, one of Napoleon’s greatest victories. The battle’s location was Spinetta Marengo, Alessandria, Piedmont, present-day Italy. It was immediately after that battle when First Consul Bonaparte, totally famished, hungered for a celebratory meal. His cook, Dunand, obliged after scrounging for ingredients worthy of the future Emperor. Chicken Marengo was the result. General Louis Charles Antoine Desaix de Veygoux was killed by a musket ball at the Battle of Marengo and has a street named for him in Gentilly.

The Battle of Marengo was the victory that sealed the success of Napoleon's Italian campaign of 1800. After a daring crossing of the Alps, Milan was taken on June 2, 1800.

Milan Street — mispronounced "my-lin" by New Orleanians, who accent the first syllable and use a long i (ī), it is named (according to "Pie" Dufour) for the Milan Decree which Napoleon issued on December 17, 1807 to enforce the Berlin Decree of 1806 which had initiated the Continental System. This reiterated Napoleon's blockade against British trade. Of course, this blockade was only a "paper one" since Napoleon had no fleet capable of making it effective against the powerful British Navy.

Another reason for the choice of Milan may have been that it was at Milan Cathedral in 1805 that Napoleon I was crowned King of Italy. His title was "Emperor of the French and King of Italy."

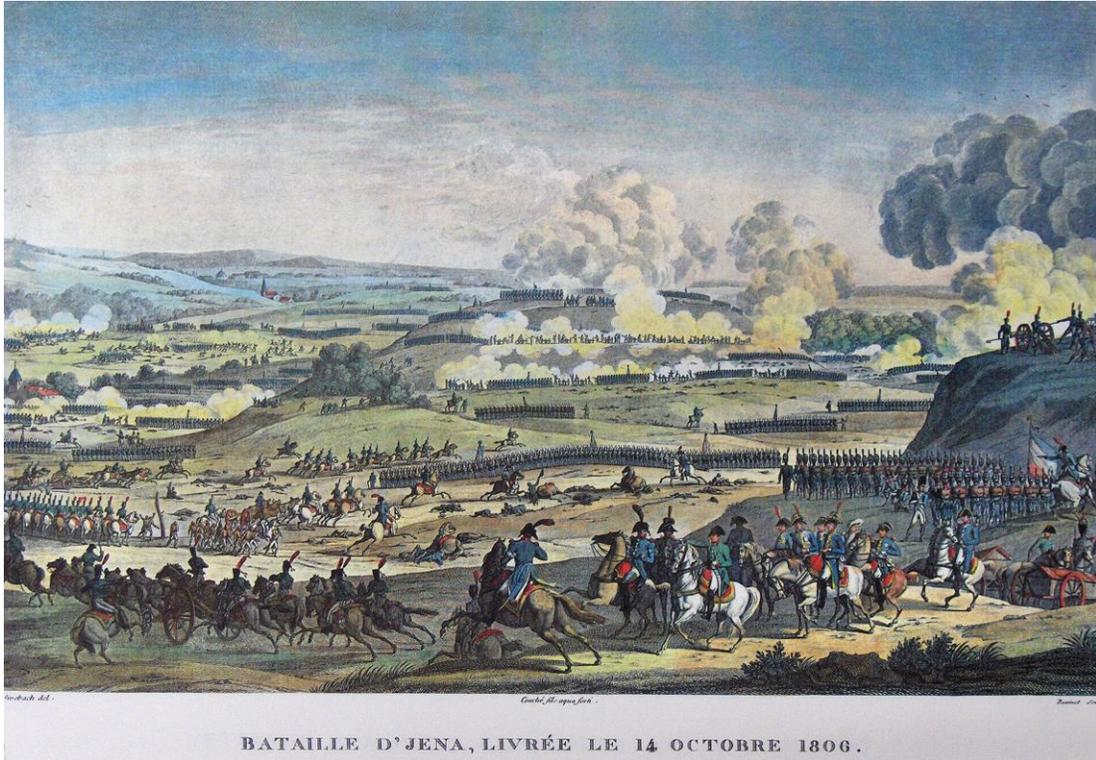
Berlin Street — as mentioned above, was not named for a battle but for the Berlin Decree (according to "Pie" Dufour), in which Napoleon proclaimed a blockade of England and closed the ports of Europe to British trade. It remained Berlin Street for more than 80 years until strong anti-German sentiment in the city during World War I brought about a name change to General Pershing in 1918. It has been General Pershing ever since.

In 1936, Meigs O. Frost wrote in the *Times-Picayune* that people forgot Berlin Street "commemorated a licking of the Germans by the French, instead of honoring the then-hated Germans." The Prussians, who were indeed Germans, took a licking at the twin battles of Jena and Auerstedt (fought on the same day), which resulted in Napoleon and his forces entering Berlin.

Still, in July 1965, "Pie" Dufour made an earnest, yet humorous, plea to reinstate the name "Berlin" to the city's Napoleonic street nomenclature. The City Council had just assented to an ordinance to rename a triangular park area bounded by S. Galvez, Tulane Avenue and Banks, known as Billy Goat Place, to Pershing Square. It comes as no surprise that it did not escape a humorist-historian named "Pie" that "a pie-slice plot" was being called "a square." "Pie" wrote at that time that "Berlin Street" should return since the "World War I hysteria declared on all things German" had ended. But General Pershing Street endured.

Napoleon Avenue — the broad, main tree-lined boulevard named for the Corsican-born French Emperor himself. Running through the very heart of Uptown, it is where almost all of the Mardi Gras parades in New Orleans commence.

Jena Street — Jena is a German university town and the second largest city in Thuringia. It's bad enough that the people of New Orleans mispronounce Jena (like "henna" with the "j" sounding like the "j" in jam). The "j" should be pronounced "y" as the "j" in the "ja," the German word for "yes." Fortunately, they do not have to pronounce the twin battles of Jena and Auerstedt (older name: Auerstädt), fought on October 14, 1806 on the plateau west of the river Saale in modern day Germany. It was on that date that Napoleon won a decisive victory over the Prussian forces led by Frederick William III, after which the Prussian army collapsed. Later that month, Napoleon and his *Grande Armée* entered Berlin.



Battle of Jena, October 14, 1806

Cadiz Street — "Pie" Dufour had an interesting comment on Cadiz, which New Orleanians also mispronounce "kay-diz" by accenting the first syllable and using (in this case) a long a (ā): "Why a hero-worshipper of Napoleon included Cadiz in the sequence, I can't say. Napoleon's armies had little or no luck in that neighborhood."

The Siege of Cádiz, which lasted two and a half years, was not successful for the French at all. The Duke of Wellington's Peninsular War victory at the Battle of Salamanca (1812) eventually forced the French troops to retreat from Andalusia. Adjutant-General Ned Pakenham, who died in combat three years later in the Battle of New Orleans, was praised for his performance at Salamanca in which he commanded the 3rd Division and battered the flank of the extended French line. In addition, the Battle of Trafalgar, a tremendous loss for

Napoleon, was near enough to Cádiz, on the coast of southern Spain, for the guns to be heard.

Valence Street — *Valence-sur-Rhône*, situated on the left bank of the Rhône River, is a commune in southeastern France where the young Bonaparte was stationed as lieutenant of artillery. He reported to first posting at *Valence-sur-Rhône* October 30, 1785, with the *La Fère* Artillery Regiment. On June 1, 1791, Napoleon was promoted as lieutenant and transferred to the 4th artillery regiment, at Valence. Valence later greeted him warmly on his return from Elba in March 1815. Valence, it must be remembered, is a city in France — not the third largest city in Spain, Valencia (as the popular teen club on the street might imply).

Bordeaux Street — In 1814, towards the end of the Peninsular War, the Duke of Wellington dispatched General William Beresford with two divisions, who seized Bordeaux with little resistance on March 12. Bordeaux was largely anti-Bonapartist and had a majority that supported the Bourbons, so the British troops were actually treated as liberators. “The reason for Bordeaux in the Napoleon sequence,” admitted “Pie” Dufour, eluded him.

The *Pont de pierre* was a bridge planned to cross the Garonne River at Bordeaux under orders from Napoleon, but its construction did not take place until the Bourbon Restoration, from 1819 to 1822. The bridge structure has seventeen arches (the number of letters in the name Napoléon Bonaparte), but that could hardly be the reason for the inclusion of Bordeaux Street in New Orleans. Then again, Bordeaux is the capital of the world’s major wine industry.

Lyons Street — The correct spelling of the French city in the *Rhône-Alpes* region is *Lyon*, but the spelling *Lyons* is sometimes specified in English, particularly in newspaper style guides. The historic city sits between Paris and Marseille at the confluence of the Rhône and Saône rivers and is known as an important area for the production and weaving of silk and for its international reputation as the capital of gastronomy in France. Once again, Lyons is mispronounced “/y-uhns” by New Orleans locals. And like Valence, the city of Lyons offered Napoleon a great welcome on his return from Elba.

Upperline Street, although non-Napoleonic, comes next, marking the upper boundary line of the Faubourg Bouligny.

Kendall’s opinion that General Burthe and Burtheville had something to do with the Napoleonic street nomenclature is worth exploring. The Faubourg Burtheville, today a well-known part of Uptown New Orleans, was once the property of Dominique François Burthe, who acquired it from Bernard de Marigny in 1831. Dominique was the younger cousin of General André Burthe (who did fight at Marengo, Austerlitz and

Waterloo) and accompanied André to Louisiana on the ship taking Prefect Pierre Clément de Laussat to New Orleans to arrange the transfer of the colony from Spain to France prior to the Louisiana Purchase. Dominique remained in Louisiana after both cousins married sisters, two daughters of the widow Delord-Sarpy. André went back to France to fight again. Dominique did not subdivide his land until 1851 to create Burtheville, bounded by the Mississippi River and Claiborne Avenue, between Webster and State streets, making it unlikely that his cousin's Napoleonic career played a part in naming the streets in the earlier 1834 subdivision of the Faubourg Bouligny. Even by 1867-1868, Burtheville was very sparsely populated according to Gardner's city directory.

So there you have it. Of the eleven Napoleonic named streets, only three (Austerlitz, Marengo and Jena) were clearly victories for Bonaparte, although Berlin and Milan could also be considered victories. Two were losses (Cadiz and Bordeaux). Two were possibly named for decrees (Milan and Berlin), one of which was changed to the name of World War I General John J. "Black Jack" Pershing.

And who was responsible for the names? Was it Kohn and Millaudon, or was it Zimpel, Buisson or Burthe? The layout of the Faubourg Bouligny is generally credited to Buisson even though Deputy Surveyor Zimpel signed the map. But the preponderance of the evidence leans toward Buisson as the namer of the streets. James Beard, writing in the *Daily Picayune* in 1911, said of Buisson, "As might be expected, the names reflect the history of the man whom all his life he most admired, his general and emperor, Napoleon."

Yet whoever Napoleon's cheerleader was, he came up a little short — with no more than half the names true Napoleonic victories.

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