

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Old Levee Street

The first census of the City of New Orleans was taken in 1726. Monsieur Trudeau is listed with his wife and six children. They resided on the *Rue de la Quai*, which would later be known as Old Levee Street. It would become one of the most picturesque areas of the early metropolis with its low embankment of earth raised up (hence the term, *levée*, which in French means that which is raised) to halt the encroaching waters of the Mississippi. There was a landing place and market for a diverse selection of produce and goods brought to town and shipped abroad. Eventually it would be known as the French Market.



1906 view of the French Market in New Orleans

Here flatboats, keelboats and barges would arrive in great numbers, with their timbers often disassembled and used to build shops and even taverns there along the river. John Williamson Cray was amazed at how much commerce and activity there was in 1835, even on "the Lord's Day". He wrote: "As I proceeded down Old Levee Street, the gambling and liquor saloons were all open and in full blast." He thought the whole scene to be "unique, grotesque and profane".



"View of the Principal Gates of Chartres and Levee Street" (circa 1819-1820), watercolor, pen and ink sketch by Benjamin Henry Boneval Latrobe (1764 – 1820)

Along Old Levee Street stood what is reputed to be New Orleans' oldest dining establishment, the *Café des Réfugiés* (but not its original location) and the adjacent *Hôtel de la Marine*, later known as the *Trémoulet House Hotel*. It was located at the corner of St. Peter and *rue de La Levée*. Renowned architect Benjamin Henry Boneval Latrobe, who did the above sketch, stayed at the *Trémoulet* while in New Orleans.

At the corner of Old Levee Street and Toulouse stood Governor Claiborne's residence and the State House. A yellow fever epidemic struck in 1805, killing Claiborne's wife Eliza and two-year-old daughter. The State House had been constructed in 1761 under French rule, but during the administration of Mayor Louis Philippe Joseph de Roffignac (1820-1828) a fire destroyed the building and others along the street. Then Colonel (and later President) Zachary Taylor distinguished himself in fighting the fire. Buildings were rebuilt. Mud streets in town were paved with cobblestones, and Samuel J. Peters was the contractor who got the job in 1822. New Levee Street would later be named for him. New Levee Street was created prior to 1815 when a new street forked off Old Levee at Conti into the batture. Later it continued across Canal Street, creating what would become

North and South Peters. Margaret Haughery, philanthropist and beloved provider for the orphanages in the city, operated her bakery at 76 New Levee Street.

Due to the action of the mighty river altering course, Old Levee Street was no longer on the levee. So in 1870 Old Levee Street was named Decatur Street for the American Naval Hero, Stephen Decatur, Jr., who defeated the Barbary Pirates (the nation's first middle-eastern terrorists). This action was in response to the frequent and continued piracy of American ships on the Mediterranean and the capture and enslavement of American crews for huge ransoms. President Thomas Jefferson, known for his aversion to standing armies and the navy, found it necessary to act counter to his own beliefs, and head for "the shores of Tripoli." It was the first military action in foreign lands and seas authorized by Congress.



Naval Hero, Stephen Decatur, Jr., boarding a pirate gunboat 1804

This lively street, today known as Decatur, claims the most celebrated panoramic view in the city (as it did when it was Old Levee Street). Across Jackson Square is the St. Louis Cathedral, flanked by the Cabildo and the Prebytere. On each side are the Pontalba Apartments, and across the street toward the river is *Café Du Monde* serving hot *café au lait* and delicious *beignets*.

A coffee house was once located at 9 Old Levee Street (now 115 Decatur) and called the "Rising Sun". What is unsure is whether it was "the ruin of many a poor boy," because it seems there are quite a number of other contenders for the original "House of the Rising Sun". The song never really says for sure that it was a bawdy house, and it must be remembered that "coffee house" in New Orleans was a

euphemism for a place where one could obtain alcoholic concoctions. A house of "ill repute" or purveyor of alcohol – or not that house at all, I'll leave that for you, the reader, to decide.



British group, The Animals, recorded the song in 1964

At 28 Old Levee Street lived a free woman of color named Julia Mathew, who legend claims is the namesake for Julia Street. But she lived quite some distance from Julia Street. It is generally accepted by historians that Julia, originally written Julie on early maps, was a nickname for Julian Poydras.

Butchers operated from the *Halle des Boucheries*, part of the French Market complex. Elizabeth Kettenring was married to one, became Madame Begué, and opened her famous restaurant on Old Levee Street. Eventually, it became Tujague's Restaurant, still in operation today.

At 93 Old Levee Street, between Conti and St. Louis streets, stood the establishment of confectioner Ernest Turpin, manufacturer and dealer of all kinds of chocolate, gumdrops and fancy candies. He was the father of Ben Turpin, the "cross-eyed" comic of the silent film era.

From 1858-1861, Monsieur P. Camille was listed as a daguerreian

operating at 108 Old Levee at the corner of Hospital Street (now Governor Nicholls). Another resident was Joseph Macheca who, on May 24 1859, purchased a site for his wholesale fruit business on Old Levee Street. He would later be gunned down in 1891 by an angry mob that stormed Parish Prison. He and several other Italian defendants had stood trial for the murder of police chief David C. Hennessy, but the outraged crowd took matters into its own hands.

Decatur Street today is home to the Jackson Brewery and its collection of specialty shops and dining (opened in 1984). The Hard Rock Café was once part of the complex but has moved to 125 Bourbon Street. Started as a rice mill, in 1891, a group of investors began the brewery (which was designed and constructed by architect Dietrich Einseidel, born in Saxony, Germany). By the late 1890s, restaurateur Lawrence Fabacher acquired the Jackson Brewing Company, which purchased the "JAX" beer name from a brewer in Jacksonville, Florida, in 1956. That was the birth of "Mellow JAX" Beer.



Also along Decatur Street is an equestrienne statue of Joan of Arc (a gift from France when Charles de Gaulle visited New Orleans in 1959) and (where the two Levee Streets forked) a monumental sculpture Of New Orleans founding father Bienville by Angela Gregory. One of her most widely acclaimed works, the bronze grouping is of Bienville, an American Indian and Father Athanase Douay (the French priest who accompanied Bienville). It was originally erected at the Bienville Plaza near Union Station in April 1955.



Angela Gregory's Bienville Monument

Angela Gregory, called the doyenne of Louisiana sculpture, was born on October 18, 1903 in New Orleans. Her mother, Selina Bres Gregory, also an artist and a member of the first class in pottery decoration at Newcomb College, studied art under William Woodward and Ellsworth Woodward. Angela, too, studied at Newcomb, where she graduated in 1925, focusing her attention on architectural sculpting.

After her time at Newcomb, Angela Gregory was awarded a scholarship to the Parsons School in Paris and Italy. While in France, she studied under noted prolific sculptor Antoine Bourdelle (for years top *praticien* in Rodin's studio before establishing his own). Upon her return to New Orleans, Angela opened her own Pine Street studio in 1928 (where, in 1943, Kirk Douglas and his first wife - Michael's mom - had their wedding reception). In 1940, she returned to Tulane's campus and earned a Master's degree in Architecture. As an educator, Gregory taught at Newcomb, St. Mary's Dominican College and was State Supervisor for the Work Project Administration Art Program During World War II.

Angela would later sculpt numerous architectural sculptures and monuments in Louisiana, including work done on the Orleans Parish Criminal Courts Building, the Louisiana State Capital and several churches and other public buildings.

Also notable in the life of Angela Gregory were her friendships with mythologist Joseph Campbell (1904 - 1987) and Pulitzer Prize winning novelist and playwright Thornton Wilder (1897 - 1975). Angela Gregory's work has been exhibited in museums nationwide, and is recognized around the world. In 1982 she was named *Chevalier de L'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres* by the French minister of culture. She died in 1990.

What was once Old Levee Street is today a bustling mecca for visiting tourists, as well as a pleasant diversion for sightseers in their own home town.

P. S. Today New Orleans has a Levee Baking Company, an appropriate name since "levee" and "leavening" both have a common etymology: ultimately derived from the Latin *levare*, meaning to raise. Christina Balzabre is the CBO (Chief Baking Officer), whose experience includes having worked as sous chef for Donald Link Restaurant Group Pastry Kitchen. Her banana bread is made with dates, benne seeds and chocolate chips. That's "confection, goodness knows!"

NED HÉMARD

New Orleans Nostalgia
"Old Levee Street"
Ned Hémard
Copyright 2006 and 2015