

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

The Philanthropic Miser

He was "a man who was little appreciated during the later years of his life; his eccentricities overshadowed his nobler qualities, but to-day he is known far and wide as a man whose good deeds have lived after him and have borne fruit an hundred fold. His name ranks with that of Paul Tulane, Stephen Girard and George Peabody, those great educational benefactors, who are numbered among earth's noblest philanthropists."

These words were printed in the May 3, 1890, issue of *The Week*, a school newspaper of the McDonogh School in Maryland. They refer to John McDonogh (December 29, 1779 – October 26, 1850), born in Baltimore, Maryland, who began his career working for a flour merchant, moved to New Orleans and (through wise business acumen and canny real estate investments) died leaving an estate valued in the range of two million dollars.



*Postcard of the McDonogh Monument, Lafayette Square,
from the collection of Ned Hémard*

Thought by many to be a miser or a parsimonious recluse for having been disappointed in love, McDonogh in his will provided for the free education of poor children (specifically white and freed black children) in his native Baltimore and in his adopted city, New Orleans. This was rather controversial in its day and resulted in the will being contested by his heirs. After a review by the Louisiana Supreme Court, his will was eventually executed eight years after his death, with New Orleans and Baltimore each receiving a settlement of over \$700,000. Court costs and attorneys ate up the balance (over a half-million dollars). The money laid the foundation for the public school system in the Crescent City, funding the construction of over thirty schools in the New Orleans area, a number of which are still in operation. Baltimore already had an adequate public school system, so it used its money to fund a single free school, the McDonogh School, a 775-acre preparatory school for boys in 1873. Today it is co-educational.

McDonogh's employer in Baltimore sent him by ship to Liverpool, England, to take possession of a cargo of goods for the Louisiana market. Arriving in New Orleans at the age of twenty-one, he decided to stay, going into the "commission and shipping business" for himself. He traded in indigo, sugar, molasses, furs and pig iron, becoming quite a success. Real estate followed.

The young McDonogh fought in the Battle of New Orleans as a member of Beale's Rifles. Two or three years later, he moved to the West Bank where he would live until his death. His home was located on Adams Street between Newton and Homer streets in Algiers (where he also owned a brick kiln). Known as "*Monplaisir*" ("My pleasure"), the house was originally built by the Chevalier Jean de Pradel in 1750. It and numerous other buildings in the area succumbed to the Mississippi River due to crevasses and other forms of erosion.

McDonogh owned much of the property in a community known as McDonoghville. Established in 1815, it straddled what is now the West Bank boundary between Orleans and Jefferson parishes. Part of the town was absorbed into Algiers, which is in Orleans Parish, while the remainder on the Jefferson Parish side became part of Gretna in 1913.

It has been the subject of rumors for many years that the young McDonogh may have been unlucky in love. Although there is no written evidence to indicate that this is at all true, he is said to have been rebuffed in courtship by Micaela Leonarda Antonia Almonester (November 6, 1795 - April 20, 1874), later to become the Baroness de Pontalba, one of the most headstrong and intriguing characters of New Orleans history. He may have also experienced another matrimonial rejection. This plus an unsuccessful run for the U.S. Senate in 1818 may have set the stage for a reclusive life focused on investments.



Shown as it appears today, the first monument to the eccentric philanthropist was dedicated on his birthday, December 29, 1898. \$7,000 had been raised to pay for it, mostly by five-cent contributions of school children.

Working long hours, McDonogh toiled long and hard administering his vast land holdings. He labored under a set of rules for his personal guidance, two of which are:

"Remember always that labor is one of the conditions of our existence.

Time is gold; throw not one minute away, but place each one into account."

All of this hard work, however, was not without the advantage of slave labor. In 1822 he conceived of a plan whereby his slaves could earn

their freedom. This process of manumission lasted about fifteen years, at which time he would set them free. He contributed, as well, to the American Colonization Society, which provided passage to some of his (in 1842), and many other, freed slaves to Liberia.

The 1890 article in *The Week* also describes the cartoon below: "Strange to say, the only picture extant of John McDonogh was a caricature representing him crossing the Mississippi river in a skiff, rowed by one of his negro slaves". The caption reads, "McDonogh's last trip and last picayune saved for the lawyers poor." New Orleans artist George Schmidt has painted a giant canvas recreating the event.



An old cartoon of John McDonogh being rowed by his slave, presumably saving the "picayune" it cost for the ferry

The city's ownership of City Park was also a byproduct of the estate of John McDonogh. Soon after the founding of New Orleans in 1718, the acreage upon which the park was established belonged to François Héry (upon which he may have grown indigo). Santiago (Jacques) Lorreins acquired the land in the 1770s when Héry died. Lorreins' daughter Françoise inherited the plantation, which took the name of her husband, Jean Louis Allard. Louis Allard, Jr., had to mortgage the property to finance a crop and lost it at a sheriff's sale in 1845. That's where McDonogh came on the scene, acquiring the acreage with 140 head of cattle. Most accounts state that McDonogh allowed Allard to live out his few short years (Allard died in 1847) on the property. McDonogh died shortly thereafter, in 1850.

The interesting part of the park deal was that both Baltimore and New Orleans inherited the property. George Edwin Waring wrote: "The lower city park, on Metairie ridge, was expropriated at a valuation of \$40,880 from the estate of John McDonough, the cities of New Orleans and Baltimore being equal heirs to the greater part of that estate, which included this tract. Baltimore abandoned its undivided half to New Orleans in payment of taxes." The city acquired the park by taxing Baltimore for its share until they finally surrendered, and New Orleans obtained clear title to the Allard tract (along with fourteen Garden District rights-of-way from the estate).

McDonough was interred in the cemetery at McDonoghville before his remains were removed in 1860 to his native Baltimore. His body was again exhumed and moved to the campus of the McDonogh School in 1945. McDonough made a small request in his will that "it may be permitted annually to the children of the freeschools to plant and water a few flowers around my grave." That they did, in May of every year beginning in 1875, when delegations of students were brought to Lafayette Square to place flowers at his monument on "John McDonogh Day". But on May 7, 1954, the African American public school students, teachers and principals protested in one of the city's first organized civil rights protests. It wasn't so much in protest of McDonough or that he owned slaves, but because the annual ceremonies were unfairly segregated. In those days, the black students had to wait in the hot sun for a separate ceremony after the white schools. The protest was repeated the following two years, after which the ceremony was soon integrated.

Today only McDonogh No. 26 School honors the tradition. Its students place flowers on McDonough's cenotaph at the site of his former tomb in the McDonoghville Cemetery. Suffering from years of neglect, the tomb was restored in 2002 by the City of Gretna. The McDonogh No. 1 school on Laurel Street (completed before the Civil War) was the first to be named after him. In 1889, after renovations were made to the Carrollton Courthouse at 719 South Carrollton Avenue, it opened as McDonogh No. 23. It would later be home to Ben Franklin Senior High (before moving to the UNO campus) and Lusher's 6-8 extension (beginning in 1990, now Lusher Charter School). McDonogh No. 23 is now the location of Audubon Charter School.

By the early 1970s, twenty McDonogh schools remained in the city. Some schools had his name removed in the 1980s and 1990s in a movement to remove the names of former slaveholders. Post-Katrina, which took an unforgiving toll on the existing New Orleans public schools, the following John McDonogh schools are still in operation: No. 7 (on Milan), No. 15, No. 26, No. 28, No. 32 (now a "Literacy Charter School"), No. 35 (in Tremé) and No. 42.

On November 16, 1960, three black children, Tessie Prevost, Leona Tate and Gail Etienne became the "McDonogh Three" when they arrived at the previously all-white segregated school called McDonogh No. 19 in New Orleans.

Among the documents in the archives of the McDonogh School in Maryland are letters from the frugal philanthropist's former slaves thanking him for his scheme to allow them the opportunity to earn their freedom. One of the school's graduates is John R. Bolton (1966), former United States Ambassador to the United Nations.

It is somewhat of a mystery that not many people knew much about John McDonogh during his lifetime. It was surely a great surprise when (at death) the supposed misanthrope turned out to be a wealthy and generous benefactor to white and black alike.

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