

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*

*By Ned Hémard*

### **From Don Giovanni to Rosa Park**

This is not the story of Rosa Louise McCauley, wife of Raymond Parks, who bravely refused to give up her seat on a Montgomery, Alabama, bus on December 1, 1955. This icon of the Civil Rights Movement has nothing to do with the prestigious New Orleans street that meets St. Charles Avenue one down from State, but "Rosa Park" (the opulent uptown street) has a very interesting history of its own. It is named for a New Orleans socialite and actress known for her philanthropy and beauty, and how that came to pass is nothing short of fascinating.

The 1978 movie "Animal House" takes place in 1962 at Faber College whose motto is "Knowledge is Good." The Civil Rights Movement and other important cultural events seem to go unnoticed at this mediocre center of learning where the film begins with freshmen Larry Kroger (Tom Hulce) and Kent Dorfman trying to pledge a fraternity. Six years later, Hulce's performance as Mozart in "Amadeus" gained him an Oscar nomination in 1984. He lost to his co-star, F. Murray Abraham, who played Salieri. Salieri (at least in the film) could not accept how God could bestow such genius upon the likes of Mozart. In reality there was a brilliant librettist, Lorenzo da Ponte, who wrote for both Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Antonio Salieri.

Lorenzo da Ponte (March 10, 1749 – August 17, 1838) is most famous for having written the librettos to three of Mozart's grandest operas: *Don Giovanni*, *Le nozze di Figaro* (The Marriage of Figaro) and *Così fan tutte*. Many scholars consider them the top three of all operas. Born a Jew (nee Emanuele Conegliano) in Ceneda (near Venice), Italy, who later converted to Catholicism, he was trained to be a priest and teacher. Unable to conduct himself properly in either profession (such as chasing women with Casanova), he was exiled from Venice and made his way to Vienna. There he was appointed official court poet of the new Italian opera at the *Burgtheater* by the Holy Roman Emperor, Joseph II, and collaborated with Mozart and Salieri. Leopold II succeeded his brother as Emperor but died March 1, 1792. The new Emperor, Franz II, could offer da Ponte only a small financial benefit.

In August of that year, immediately after his marriage to Nancy Grahl,

daughter of an English merchant, da Ponte left Trieste for London where Nancy's sister lived. With mixed success in London, there was some traveling back and forth across the channel to other European opportunities. In 1793 an offer came from London's Haymarket Theatre, and in 1794 da Ponte adapted mainly Italian operas for London audiences. By 1800 he was bankrupt with visits in and out of debtor's prison. In imminent danger of being jailed again by his creditors, his family left for America in 1804.



*Lorenzo da Ponte*

He followed, arriving virtually penniless in Philadelphia on June 4, 1805, with little more than a box of violin strings and a few books in Latin and Italian. This longhaired (and now toothless) poet and one-time priest (who had in his youth been a courtier, gigolo, gambler and brothel impresario) had lost all his money gambling on his voyage to the City of Brotherly Love. He then sold groceries, medicinal products, ran a distillery, taught Italian and returned to New York to open a bookstore. He met and made friends with the man who is believed to be the author of an 1823 poem greatly responsible for America's contemporary conception of Santa Claus: his appearance, the sleigh and reindeer, their names and number, and the bringing of toys to children. That man was Clement Clarke Moore, and the poem was "A Visit from St. Nicholas" (also known as "The Night Before Christmas").

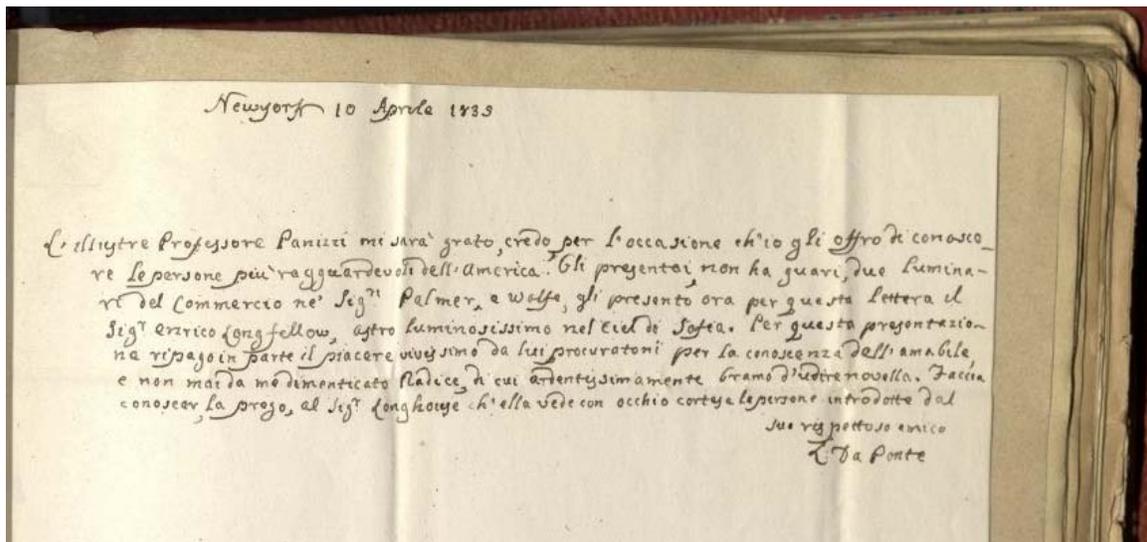
Moore's father Benjamin was an Anglican bishop and head of Columbia College (today Columbia University), and through Moore da Ponte

gained an appointment as Columbia's first Professor of Italian Literature. He began teaching Italian at Moore's salon, as well as his own home, and basically introduced this discipline to America. Lorenzo and Nancy's son, Lorenzo Luigi da Ponte, also became an Italian teacher in New York and Maryland and was an expert in classical Greek. He wrote a "History of the Florentine Republic" and translated *Don Giovanni* into English. In 1826 he married the great-niece of President James Monroe, Cornelia Durant, and they had a son named Durant da Ponte.

Durant (born in New York) came to New Orleans in 1840 as a boy of twelve and became a reporter on the *Crescent*. He worked his way up to editor-in-chief of the *Daily Picayune* and later published the *Delta*. The American Civil War was a difficult period for the City of New Orleans. Before Durant left for the war, he presented a sixteen-year-old girl, Clara Solomon with a blank notebook to record her observations on the war and on his columns. She would become a noted Civil War diarist. Durant would later go on to study law, become a financier, and emerge as a stock and real estate broker-developer. Like his father and grandfather, he was great at languages (being fluent in seven). To him and his first wife, Sophia Brooke, sons Henry S. (Harry) and Lorenzo were born. In 1882 Durant married Clara's sister, Rosa Solomon, a beautiful socialite and amateur actress.

Durant da Ponte, along with John M. Bonner, invested in a tract of land on St. Charles Avenue in 1887. In January of 1891, an advertisement announced New Orleans' first residential park (before Audubon Place), named "Rosa Park" for Durant's wife, Rosa Solomon. At the da Ponte residence at 3512 St. Charles, Rosa held elegant and elaborate social functions and even built a miniature theatre. Years later, friends described some of the extravagant parties held in Rosa's house. There were Egyptian-themed balls, as well as teas in caverns of ice.

"Rosa Park" is today a distinctive and beautiful private residential street with an elongated *cul-de-sac* (touted in the January 1891 ad as "a terraced mound"). Rosa Solomon da Ponte was certainly able to do things her way, but then beautiful women are like that ("*così fan tutte*").



P. S.,

America's great poet, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807 –1882), whose works include "Evangeline", "The Song of Hiawatha" and "Paul Revere's Ride", was also the first American to translate Dante Alighieri's "The Divine Comedy". With a good knowledge of Italian and its dialects, Longfellow corresponded with Lorenzo da Ponte. The letter above is da Ponte's letter of introduction for Longfellow (dated April 10, 1835), the same day Longfellow embarked on his second European tour. In the letter, da Ponte offers glowing praise of Longfellow, calling him "*astro luminosissimo nel ciel*" ("the brightest star in the heavens").

Clara Solomon, besides being a significant Civil War diarist and having Rosa Solomon da Ponte as an older sister, had a younger sister, Josephine, who was the grandmother of popular early folk singer Sam Hinton (1917 -2009), who recorded 56 songs for the Library of Congress in 1947. He was also a marine biologist.

Clara's first husband, well-to-do New Orleans merchant Julius Lilienthal, was the brother of German-born photographer Theodore Lilienthal (1829 - 1894), who was lauded for his photographs of 1867 New Orleans. Comprising every aspect of the Crescent City, from the Garden District to factories and breweries, these photographs were exhibited at the Paris World Exposition of 1867 before being presented to Napoléon III, Emperor of France. Gary A. Van Zante has authored an excellent book on these stunning photographs.

Just off the intersection St. Charles and Rosa Park, at 5809 St. Charles, is the mansion known as the "Wedding Cake House". According to *New Orleans Architecture: The University Section* (Vol. VIII), the residence is "an outstanding example of the picturesque mode of the Colonial Revival style." The house was first constructed for wholesale grocer Nicholas Burke. Toledano and Wogan helped

rebuild the house after a 1907 electrical fire. Nicholas and Rosalie Chisesi took "pride" in a major renovation in 1993. And, today, it is home to Calvin and Frances Fayard.

I like to think of it as an exquisite wedding cake prepared for the Marriage of Figaro.

## **NED HÉMARD**

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