

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Shakespeare in New Orleans

For the rest of this month, May 2016, Tulane University School of Liberal Arts is justly proud to have been selected as a host site for *First Folio! The Book that Gave Us Shakespeare*: a national traveling exhibition of the original printed anthology of the Bard's plays, of which only 233 copies are known to exist. The Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, D.C., in partnership with the Cincinnati Museum Center and the American Library Association, is touring the First Folio in all 50 states, as well as Washington, D.C., and Puerto Rico.



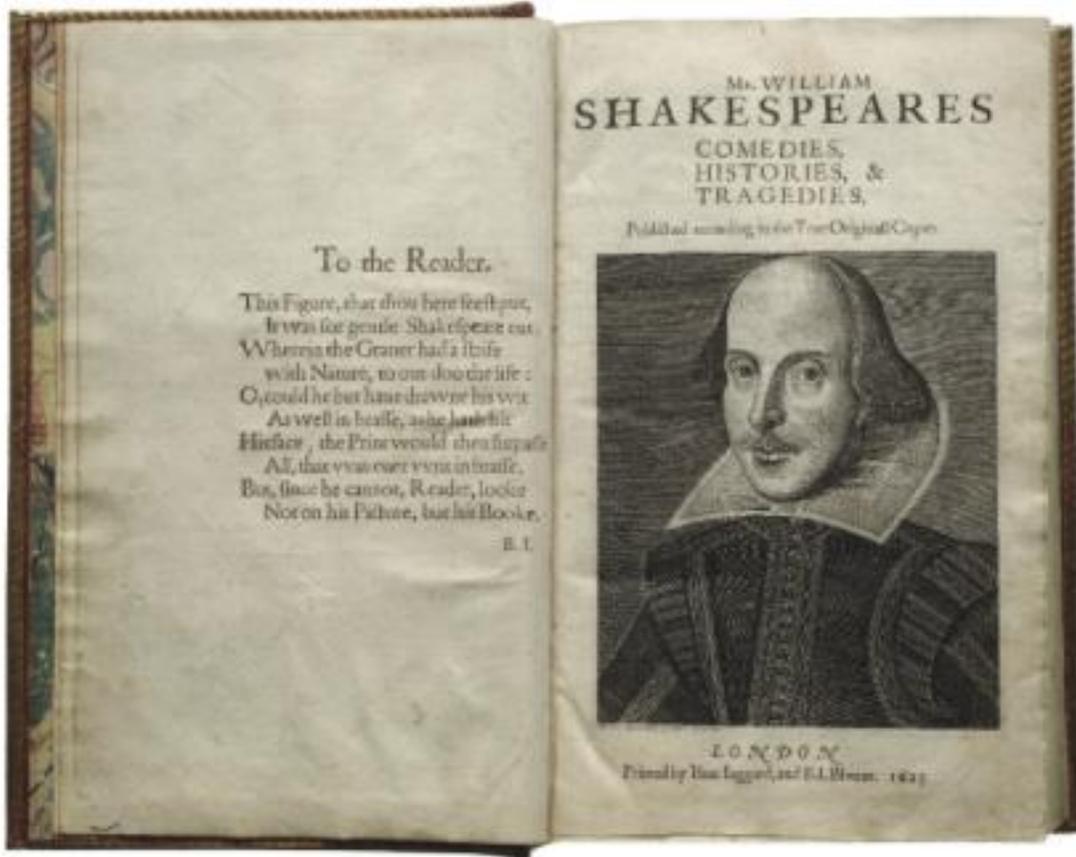
The Bard of Avon

Maskers in Stratford

Published in 1623, seven years after Shakespeare's death, by two of his fellow actors (John Heminges and Henry Condell), the First Folio is one of the world's most important and treasured books. Within the past 20 years, an example of this rarity sold for \$6.5 million. Without this volume of thirty-six plays in a deluxe format, the world would never have seen the texts of eighteen of Shakespeare's works,

including *Macbeth*, *Twelfth Night*, *The Tempest*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Julius Caesar*, *As You Like It* and *The Comedy of Errors*.

Installed at the Angela Gregory Gallery of the Newcomb Art Museum, on Tulane's uptown campus, the exhibition has been free and open to the public since May 9th and will continue through the 31st of May.



Shakespeare's First Folio, 1623

William Shakespeare, whose father was a successful glover and alderman, was born in Stratford-upon-Avon, England. Baptised there on April 26, 1564, Will's actual date of his birth remains a mystery, but is traditionally observed on April 23, Saint George's Day. This is also the day he died in 1616, four hundred years ago, a date which has proved appealing to historians and biographers.

It is no wonder that Tulane and New Orleans earned First Folio hosting honors according to Michael Kuczynski, Chairman of Tulane University's English Department. Reason Number One, "New Orleans could do something no other city in America could do," he explained. "Give him (Shakespeare) a proper jazz funeral."

Reason Number Two, according to Kuczynski, is the fact that the First Folio was to be opened to the "To Be or Not to Be" soliloquy from *Hamlet*. Citing this passage as one of particular relevance for the

Crescent City post-Katrina, Kuczynski said, "Hamlet confronts whether he wants to embrace or avoid his destiny." What is more, "(After Katrina), New Orleans decided to embrace its destiny and move forward."

In England, the Stratford-on-Avon District Council and Stratford-upon-Avon Town Council loved the jazz funeral idea. In charge of the Shakespeare's Birthday Celebrations' parade, they were delighted to welcome one of the Crescent City's preeminent jazz trumpeters, Wendell Brunious, and his band. Tulane sent the band across the Atlantic for the April 23rd parade and New Orleans jazz funeral. In traditional fashion, the "Grand Marshal" displayed a sash naming the honoree, William Shakespeare. Viewed by and including notable visitors, diplomats, local dignitaries, community groups and school children, the procession also featured a "second-line." Wending their way to the Bard's grave at Holy Trinity Church that day were rhythmically twirling umbrellas and waving handkerchiefs.

SHAKESPEARE'S CELEBRATIONS STRATFORD-UPON-AVON



Here in New Orleans, the festivities began on the opening day of the exhibition, May 9th, when Michael White and the Liberty Brass Band provided the music for Will's jazz funeral. A great time was had by all here, as it was in the Bard's hometown. The First Folio exhibition at Tulane is truly worth a visit before the end of the month.

Two truly great reasons for the First Folio coming to New Orleans, indeed, but there is another historical connection that makes this city an ideal site for the exhibition: New Orleans once had a mayor named Shakspeare.



Wendell Brunious Band on the streets of Stratford April 23, 2016

Joseph Ansoetegui Shakspeare (April 12, 1837 – January 22, 1896) was twice mayor of New Orleans (for the years 1880–1882 and again from 1888 to 1892). The reader will notice that the spelling of the mayor's name lacks the letter e that is usually present immediately behind the k, as in the Bard's name.

Elizabethan spelling was very erratic, and the spelling of the name of England's great playwright has varied over the last four hundred years. It was not consistently spelled in either manuscript or in printed form, although spelling in London tended to be more uniform and modern than in the rest of the country. "Shakespeare" with an e over the centuries is the most common spelling by a wide margin, but Mayor Shakspeare of New Orleans spelled his name without it.

Born in New Orleans of Quaker descent, he worked for the Shakspeare Iron Foundry started by his father and studied iron design in New York City at the Novelty Iron Works. He later returned to New Orleans circa 1858 to become a partner and eventually president of Wheeler, Geddes & Co., later Shakspeare, Swoop and Co. He became a bank director, served on the board of an insurance company and the boards of several other businesses. He married Antoinette Kroos in 1863, and the couple had five children.

Elected November 7, 1876, to the legislature from the Second Ward, New Orleans, on the Democratic ticket, he served from 1877 to 1878. Elected mayor of New Orleans, November 2, 1880, as a reform candidate determined to take power from "The Ring," a scandal-ridden local political machine.

During his first term, there was hostility from the seven-member City Council still controlled by "The Ring." He devised the "Shakspeare Plan" to reduce gambling and finance the Shakspeare Almshouse; he rescheduled the city's significant post-Civil War indebtedness; established the City Smallpox Hospital and brought in new revenue to the city by selling a franchise to the Carrollton Street Railroad. Street improvements were undertaken, and Coliseum Street was the first street in the city to be paved with chert (a fine-grained silica-rich sedimentary rock) and gravel. That was truly innovative at the time.



Touro-Shakspeare Home in Algiers

Shakspeare tried to remove political patronage from the police and fire departments, but was thwarted by City Council. Under the mayor's administration, a new municipal charter was enacted that created a new thirty-member City Council with legislative power, and increased the mayor's term of office from two years to four.

He decided not to run in 1882 but was reelected mayor on April 17, 1888 (this time for a four-year term), serving until April 25, 1892. The second time around, he was a reform candidate running against "The Ring" on Young Men's Democratic Association ticket. During his second term, he reorganized the police department and instituted a paid fire department, introduced electric streetlights and streetcars and further reduced the city debt. The Howard Library was formally opened in March 1889. In July, Sophie Newcomb College for young women was built on Washington Avenue, the generous gift of her mother, Josephine Louise Le Monnier Newcomb. Later that year, Jefferson Davis, former president of the Confederacy, died in New Orleans, and thousands of people filed past the coffin and turned out for the funeral procession. After Mayor Shakspeare's appointment of David Hennessy as chief of police, treachery ensued. The Chief's

assassination in October 1890, allegedly by members of the Sicilian Mafia, sparked an anti-Italian mob that stormed the parish prison that resulted in eleven Italian immigrants being lynched. This event created an international crisis, for which the United States Government had to pay an indemnity to the Italian Government. Under Mayor Shakspeare's second term, the city began construction on the "new" courthouse and jail facility on Tulane Avenue.



Richard III appearing at the Varieties Theatre, New Orleans, 1872

Mayor Shakspeare ran again on the same ticket in 1892 but lost. It was said that the mayor was a man of commanding presence and of a noble bearing. Well respected in the community, he nevertheless avoided publicity. He was described as an engaging conversationalist, whose eyes would sparkle, and was in possession of an inexhaustible supply of anecdotes, qualities that must have fit in well with being a member of numerous boards, organizations and clubs, including the Pickwick, Boston and Tally-Ho Clubs in New Orleans.

Shakspeare also reigned as Rex, King of Carnival in 1882, the only mayor of New Orleans to do so. A number of years later, the New Orleans *Times-Democrat*, February 10, 1891, reported that Mayor Shakspeare fell off his horse in the Monday Rex parade. Perhaps he wanted to say the lines from *Richard III*, "A horse! A horse! My kingdom for a horse!"

Mayor Shakspeare is interred in Metairie Cemetery in New Orleans in a tomb of polish red granite.

The Shakspeare Almshouse eventually became the Touro-Shakspeare Home, adding the name of philanthropist Judah Touro. The facility,

once located Uptown on Danneel between Joseph and Nashville, moved to General Meyer Avenue in Algiers in 1934. Combining elements of Neo-Classical Revival and Jacobethan Revival styles, the institution functioned as a city-owned nursing home until Hurricane Katrina hit in 2005. Abandoned and neglected, the building is in great need of restoration. There is also a park in New Orleans named for Mayor Shakspeare where the Mardi Gras Indians meet. Now known as the A.L. Davis Park, it was previously known as Shakspeare's Park. Papa Celestin immortalized the historic park in his recording of "Marie Laveau":

"I see him kissin' a young girl in Shakspeare's Park,
Standin' near an oak tree in the dark.

Oh Marie Laveau, Oh Marie Laveau,
Oh Marie Laveau, Oh Marie Laveau,
Oh Marie Laveau, the Voodoo Queen,
Way down yonder in New Orleans."

According to the Historic New Orleans Collection (THNOC), the Crescent City is closely connected to Shakespeare in other significant ways. "In the 19th century, the growing English-speaking population of New Orleans was establishing itself alongside the deeply entrenched French and Creole communities. One way of championing Anglo identity was through the performing arts, specifically by showcasing the work of the greatest known practitioner of the English language." Shakespeare is also a frequent subject of the city's parading krewes, which make great use of "literary and mythological sources in planning the themes of their parades and in designing their floats." The first King of Carnival himself, Lewis Salomon, borrowed his Rex raiment from actor Lawrence Barrett at the Varieties Theatre. It had been used in the actor's role as *Richard III*.

In addition to the Varieties Theatre, two other theaters in the Central Business District catered "specifically to the Anglo population," the St. Charles Theatre, located on the 400 block of St. Charles, and the American Theatre, on Camp Street near Poydras.

As the Newcomb Art Museum hosts the First Folio this month, THNOC is presenting "*Merry as the Day Is Long*": *Shakespeare's Hand in New Orleans*, a small-scale exhibition at the Williams Research Center examining the enduring influence of Shakespeare's life and work in New Orleans. Included in the exhibit are playbills for Shakespeare productions from local theaters, as well as original float designs, such as the 1878 Momus float inspired by *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Other items on display include materials relating to the New Orleans

Shakespeare Club, which had club rooms at the corner of Dryades and Canal streets. On December 18, 1872, a fire inflicted approximately \$90,000 in damages to the Club. In 1920, the group celebrated the Bard's birthday on April 23rd with a fine dinner, the club's first large entertainment in its new home at St. Charles Avenue and Exposition Boulevard, purchased the previous April.

While it is interesting to learn that Coliseum Street was the first street in the city to be paved with "chert," I was indeed amazed to discover that today paving can be done effectively with "crap," an acronym for "crushed recycled asphalt product." When a demolition project calls for the removal of asphalt pavement in large chunks (not unlike the broken concrete known as "rip-rap"), rather than dispose of the debris, it can be re-constituted as "crap," costing less and helping the environment.

Shakespeare would have called this "skimble-skamble," words he put into the mouth of Hotspur in *King Henry IV, Part I*, who complained about Owen Glendower continually bending his ear with "Such a deal of skimble-skamble stuff."

To skimble-skamble, or not to skimble-skamble, that is the question!

But I assure you, all I have told you is true, for as Polonius wisely advised Laertes in *Hamlet*, "And it must follow, as the night the day, Thou canst not then be false to any man."

NED HÉMARD

New Orleans Nostalgia
"Shakespeare in New Orleans"
Ned Hémard
Copyright 2016