

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

State Funerals – New Orleans Style

Two New Orleans Funerals in two different centuries. The first was in December, the second in July. Both men were honored by having lain in state at Gallier Hall, and they both had huge, well attended funeral processions. I marched along for a time in the latter of these two significant cortèges. The first of the two men was an American President, the second an Emperor. Another state funeral held two years later honored a King. It could only have happened in New Orleans.

The Emperor's domain was not only his native New Orleans but the "Universe", and the city knew and loved the man born Ernest Kador, Jr., as the great Ernie K-Doe (February 22, 1936 - July 5, 2001). Ernie recorded as a member of a group called the Blue Diamonds in 1954 before making his first solo recordings the following year. He is best known for his 1961 hit single "Mother-in-Law", an Allen Toussaint composition that hit #1 on the *Billboard* pop chart. New Orleanians loved him for "Mother-in-Law", "Hello My Lover", "Tain't It The Truth", "Wanted 10,000 Reward", "Te-Ta-Te-Ta-Ta" and many more terrific tunes.

The city also couldn't get enough of K-Doe's self-promoting megalomaniacal antics in the 1980s on radio shows on New Orleans community stations WWOZ and WTUL. "Burn, K-Doe, Burn!" was a frequent catch phrase. Calling himself "Mister Naugahyde" for a time, he was ordered to cease and desist by the owners of the faux leather company's trademark. K-Doe explained it was all simply a big misunderstanding: according to him he had actually been billing himself as "Mister M-Nauga-Ma-Hyde", a title he himself invented.

In the 1990s the flamboyant K-Doe moved up in rank from vinyl upholstery fabric to "The Emperor of the Universe" and began wearing a cape and crown to go with the new title. Always the consummate showman, K-Doe now had a soulmate to share his visions of grandeur. Antoinette Dorsey (New Orleans R&B singer Lee Dorsey's cousin) had known Ernie for some time before they became an item around 1990.

“Miss Antoinette” was a great cook and costume designer, fashioning outlandish suits for Ernie and elaborate dresses for herself.

After Ernie K-Doe’s spectacular jazz funeral procession in 2001, he was interred in Saint Louis Cemetery #2. His second “Mother-in-Law”, Antoinette’s mother (with whom he was actually very close), died and joined him in the tomb shortly thereafter. K-Doe’s widow, Antoinette K-Doe, continued to operate K-Doe’s eclectic music club and bar at 1500 N. Claiborne Avenue, “Ernie K-Doe’s Mother-in-Law Lounge”, within which was housed a life-size statue of the “Emperor” himself.

On August 02, 2009, the “Mother-in-Law Lounge” became the venue for K-Doe being inducted into the Louisiana Music Hall of Fame (along with Allen Toussaint and Benny Spellman). Only Toussaint could attend. Benny was in assisted living and, sadly, Antoinette died earlier that year – on Mardi Gras day.



“Ernie K-Doe’s Mother-in-Law Lounge”

By now you are probably wondering which President was it that had such a memorable funeral in the Crescent City. This Kentucky-born American statesman, who died in New Orleans, graduated from West Point and served in the U.S. Army for a few years (including the Black Hawk War). In 1835 he married the daughter of future President of the United States, Zachary Taylor, but she died of malaria three months later. He was sent to Congress representing his state in 1845 but resigned the following June to join his volunteer regiment at New Orleans, which he conducted to the army of then General Zachary Taylor on the Rio Grande. Both before and after serving in the cabinet of President Franklin Pierce as Secretary of War, he served as a U.S. Senator. Have you guessed yet? The President in question is Jefferson Finis Davis (June 3, 1808 – December 6, 1889), who served as President of the Confederate States of America.

The American Civil War was the deadliest in our nation's history and a tremendous challenge for Jefferson Davis. His administration of the government of the Confederate States must be viewed in the light of the extraordinary difficulties that had to be encountered straight away by a fledgling republic. Some of his decisions might have been more efficacious than others. Historians have fairly, or unfairly, criticized his executive abilities. Reluctant to delegate responsibility, he often neglected civil matters in favor of military ones.

When the war was over, Jefferson Davis was captured and charged with treason (although never tried). Eventually many Southerners came to admire his ideals and refusal to accept defeat. Over time, his pride and defiance made him a hero to many in the postwar New South (including New Orleans). By the late 1880s, the former President of the Confederacy encouraged reconciliation, instructing Southerners that it was time to be loyal to the Union.

Davis finished his two-volume history, *A Short History of the Confederate States of America*, in October 1889. The following month (November 6), he left his beautiful home on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, Beauvoir, to inspect his plantation at Brierfield, south of Vicksburg. On the steamboat voyage upriver, he became ill. A week later, Davis left Brierfield to return to New Orleans. Second wife Varina Howell Davis, who had taken a different boat to Brierfield, met her ailing husband on the river, and he finally received some medical attention. Having arrived in New Orleans on the 16th, Davis was taken to 1134 First Street in the Garden District, home of Associate Justice of the Louisiana Supreme Court Charles Erasmus Fenner (son-in-law of the home's owner, Jacob Upshur Payne). Payne was a cotton factor and friend of Jefferson Davis.

Though Davis remained in bed, he was relatively stable for the next two weeks. But in the first week in December, he took a turn for the

worse. Appearing to show improvement, Davis became unconscious on the evening of the 5th. In the presence of a few friends, he died at age 81 at 12:45 early Friday morning, December 6, 1889, with his hand in the hand of his wife, Varina. A messenger was then speedily dispatched to wake Mayor Shakspeare and deliver the sad news. Jefferson Davis was dead.

Chiseled in stone on a marker in front of the house that is now the Strachan residence at 1134 First Street are the words "Here, in the Home of His Friend, Jefferson Davis First and Only President of the Confederate States of America," followed by the date Davis died, the words "A Truly Great American" and a short verse.



*Payne-Strachan House (1849–50) on First and Camp streets,
where Jefferson Davis died*

At seven in the evening of December 6, a black hearse drawn by white horses carried the body of Jefferson Davis from First Street to City Hall, now Gallier Hall, where he was to lay in state until his funeral. Church bells rang out and by the afternoon all the public buildings of New Orleans (and most of the shops and private homes) were draped in black crepe. Everywhere flags were flown at half staff, but not on the U.S. Customs House. The American government would not recognize the man who had presided over the recently put-down rebellion. At the War Department in Washington, actions normally taken to honor a former United States Secretary of War were ignored.

But in New Orleans, it was a different story.

Mayor Shakspeare, after paying his respects to the newly-widowed Mrs. Davis, put together a committee of leading citizens of New Orleans to plan Davis' funeral. This committee, under the direction of William Preston Johnston, Tulane president and son of famed Confederate General Albert Sidney Johnston, set the funeral for noon, December 11, 1889. It was one of the largest in the South.

When Jefferson Davis lay in state, the massive columns outside Gallier Hall were shrouded with black cloth and wrapped with ivy. Within, Davis' body lay in a copper-lined coffin atop a catafalque supported by marble pedestals flanked by two 12 lb. howitzers. The upper half of the coffin was opened to reveal the face of the President dressed in a civilian suit of Confederate gray while the lower half was draped with a Confederate battle flag. At each end stood a sentry, one of which was a Confederate veteran of New Orleans' own Washington Artillery.

An estimated 100,000 people came to view the body of the former Confederate President in the almost four days during which he lay in state. Throughout the city shops, schools and factories were closed and there was, according to the *Picayune*, "a grand outpouring of the masses to do honor to the departed leader." Across from Gallier Hall, Lafayette Square was "thronged with people" and the streets along the cortège route were "crowded with spectators".



Jeff Davis' New Orleans Funeral Procession

After the mourners finished viewing President Davis, eight soldiers carried the casket down the steps of Gallier Hall and placed it on a caisson drawn by six black horses with silver trimmed harnesses (as seen in the photograph above). Eight carriages of the Davis family followed behind the caisson including Mrs. Davis, who "was attired in heavy mourning, which covered her entirely: not even her hand was exposed." Then came a brass band leading hundreds of veterans from the Confederate Armies and fifteen forlorn Union Army veterans. Eight Southern governors followed with Mayor Shakspeare, various judges,

tax collectors and other government officials. The funeral procession was composed of six divisions in all. Almost like a super krewe carnival parade, it took an hour and twenty minutes to pass any given point. It proceeded up St. Charles Avenue to Calliope and from Calliope moved on to Camp Street (which became Chartes in the French Quarter) to St. Louis to Royal and then right on Canal Street down to Metairie Cemetery.

After the procession, Davis was first entombed at the Army of Northern Virginia tomb at Metairie Cemetery in New Orleans. After a hymn and the doleful notes of taps were sounded, the Episcopal Bishop of Louisiana offered a tribute. In 1893, Mrs. Davis made the decision to have her husband's remains reinterred at Hollywood Cemetery in Richmond, Virginia. After the remains were exhumed in New Orleans, they lay for a day at Memorial Hall of the newly organized Louisiana Historical Association, with many mourners passing by the casket, including Governor Murphy J. Foster, Sr. The body of the Confederate President was transported by rail to Richmond on a Louisville and Nashville Railroad car, where a continuous cortège accompanied his body along the route from New Orleans to Richmond.

The impressive Greek revival structure known as Gallier Hall has served as New Orleans' City Hall for over a century. There were other important figures in Louisiana history that lay in state there in addition to Jefferson Davis and Ernie K-Doe. Confederate General Pierre Gustave Toutant Beauregard also had that honor, as did local music legend Earl King (February 7, 1934 – April 17, 2003).

Born Earl Silas Johnson, IV, in New Orleans, Earl King's compositions include Professor Longhair's "Big Chief", Willie Tee's "Teasin' You" and Lee Dorsey's "Do-Re-Mi". Earl's signature recordings are the much-covered "Come On (Let the Good Times Roll)" and the hilarious local favorite, "Trick Bag". King lay in state wearing a vibrant purple suit and was also honored with a raucous jazz funeral. Rock royalty came out that day, May 1, 2003, (along with local fans) twirling umbrellas. Earl was interred in the same tomb with close friend, Ernie K-Doe. Just imagine, a King, an Emperor and a "Mother-in-Law" all in the same tomb – joined by Antoinette when her time came along.

Thousands of mourners filed through Gallier Hall that July 2001, to pay their respects to Ernie K-Doe, who was decked out in a white costume with a silver crown and scepter. Nick Spitzer (Tulane University folklorist and producer/host of the weekly two-hour New Orleans radio program, *American Routes*) was there and observed, "When Ernie K-Doe was lying in state at Gallier Hall ... I noticed that K-Doe's Jheri curls were almost identical to the hairdo of the French explorer LaSalle, whose portrait hung near the casket. The similarity is

provocative, because Ernie K-Doe was a cultural explorer and a creator for the ages – New Orleans style.”

NED HÉMARD

New Orleans Nostalgia
“State Funerals – New Orleans Style”
Ned Hémard
Copyright 2012