

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

The Crescent City

A young, adventurous Yankee departed November 1, 1834, from his hometown harbor of Portland, Maine, aboard the merchantman *Plato*. His journey down to New Orleans, and subsequent trip upriver to Natchez, became the basis for a travel journal published in 1835, entitled *The South-west by a Yankee*, and firmly established an enduring popular name for the city of New Orleans: "The Crescent City".

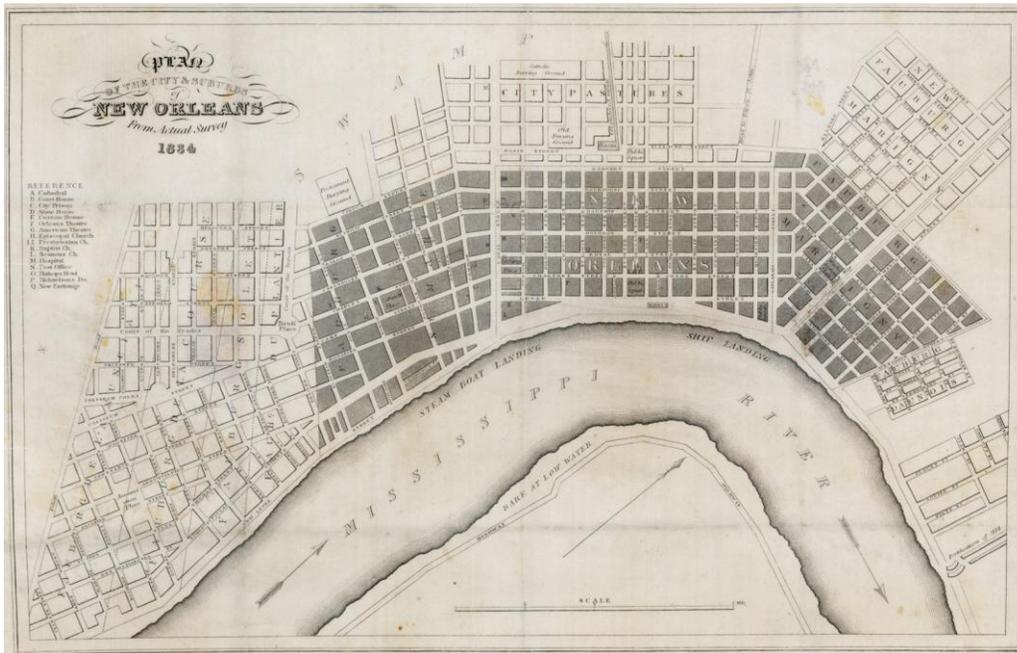
The itinerant author's name was Joseph Holt Ingraham (January 26, 1809 – December 18, 1860), only twenty-five years of age when he left New England for the South.



Joseph Holt Ingraham

Twentieth century readers were re-introduced to the travels of Joseph Holt Ingraham in 1971 with the book *New Orleans Is My Name* by

James Register, printed by Mid-South Press of Shreveport. The Baton Rouge *State-Times* reported in an article dated November 4, 1971: "The expression of New Orleans as 'the crescent city' used as it appears from time immemorial with no thought of its author, comes to light in Register's book," a thoughtful condensation of Ingraham's guidebook. With "vivid word-pictures" Ingraham described the "Creole French, market scenes, French cafes and Creole belles, a gaming house, a Spanish beauty, theaters, bachelors and their haunts," to name just a few categories in his travelogue.



Map of New Orleans, 1834, the same year Madame Delphine LaLaurie's house was sacked by a mob of outraged citizens. The slave-torturing Creole socialite escaped to France with her family.

The paragraph in which Ingraham first mentioned New Orleans as the "crescent city" is as follows:

"After passing the market on our right, a massive colonnade, about two hundred and fifty feet in length, we left the Levée, and its endless tier of shipping which bordered one side of our walk all the way, and passing under the China-trees, that still preserved their unbroken line along the river, we crossed Levée-street, a broad, spacious esplanade, running along the front of the main body or block of the city, separating it from the Levée, and forming a magnificent thoroughfare along the whole extensive river-line. From this high-way streets shoot off at right angles, till they terminate in the swamp somewhat less than a league back from the river. I have termed New-Orleans the crescent city in one of my letters, from its being built around the segment of a circle formed by a graceful curve of the river at this place. Though the water, or shore-line, is very nearly semi-circular, the Levée-street, above mentioned, does not closely follow the shore,

but is broken into two angles, from which the streets diverge as before mentioned. These streets are again intersected by others running parallel with the Levée-street, dividing the city into squares, except where the perpendicular streets meet the angles, where necessarily the 'squares' are lessened in breadth at the extremity nearest the river, and occasionally form pentagons and parallelograms, with *oblique* sides, if I may so express it."



View of New Orleans and the river's "crescent" from Algiers, circa late 1830s (domed St. Charles Hotel - center left - completed 1837)

Additional descriptions of the city, all of them moniker-worthy, are in Ingraham's account of the city:

"We are at last in New-Orleans, the queen of the South-west – the American Waterloo, whose Wellington, 'General Jackson' – according to the elegant ballad I believe still extant in the 'Boston picture-books,'

-- 'quick did go

With Yankee (?) troops to meet the foe;
We met them near to New-Orleans
And made their blood flow in streams.'

New-Orleans! the play-thing of the monarchs. 'Swapped,' as boys swap their penknives. Discovered and lost by the French – possessed by the gold-hunting Spaniard – again ceded to the French – exchanged for a kingdom with the man who traded in empires, and sold by him, for a 'plum' to our government!"

It's not that "crescent" was not used earlier by others to describe New Orleans' location on the Mississippi. In *OBSERVATIONS RESPECTING LOUISIANA AND THE WESTERN COUNTRIES ADJOINING THE MISSISSIPPI*, made during a visit to the city in 1801 and published in the appropriately named *Crescent Daily Advertiser*, New York, New

York, April 17, 1802, it was noted:

“Opposite the city the river takes a considerable sweep, forming a beautiful crescent, along which New Orleans is situated; at this place it may be about three-quarters of a mile wide.”

According to Richard Campanella, our city’s excellent geo-historian, even the city’s founder, Jean-Baptiste, Sieur de Bienville, described the city as “one of the finest crescents of the river...” and “the very fine crescent of the port of New Orleans ...”. But it wasn’t until Ingraham coined the phrase “crescent city” in 1835 that the use of that nickname expanded exponentially.

Before long there was a Crescent City Bank, a Crescent City steamship and a local newspaper, the *Daily Crescent*, of which the poet Walt Whitman was a co-editor. He was fired, however, after a few months for his antislavery views. It was reorganized in 1851 as the *New Orleans Daily Crescent* under the management of Davy Crockett’s son.



As for Ingraham, with over one hundred titles under his belt, he was one of the most prolific authors of his time. His works comprised nearly ten percent of the total novels printed in the 1840s. Many of these paperbound novels, known as “story papers,” involved less expensive production and were aimed at younger readers. Edgar Allan Poe was critical of Ingraham’s work, writing:

“The novelist is too minutely, and by far too frequently *descriptive*. We are surfeited with unnecessary detail. Every little figure in the picture is invested with all the dignities of light and shadow ... Not a dog yelps, unsung.”

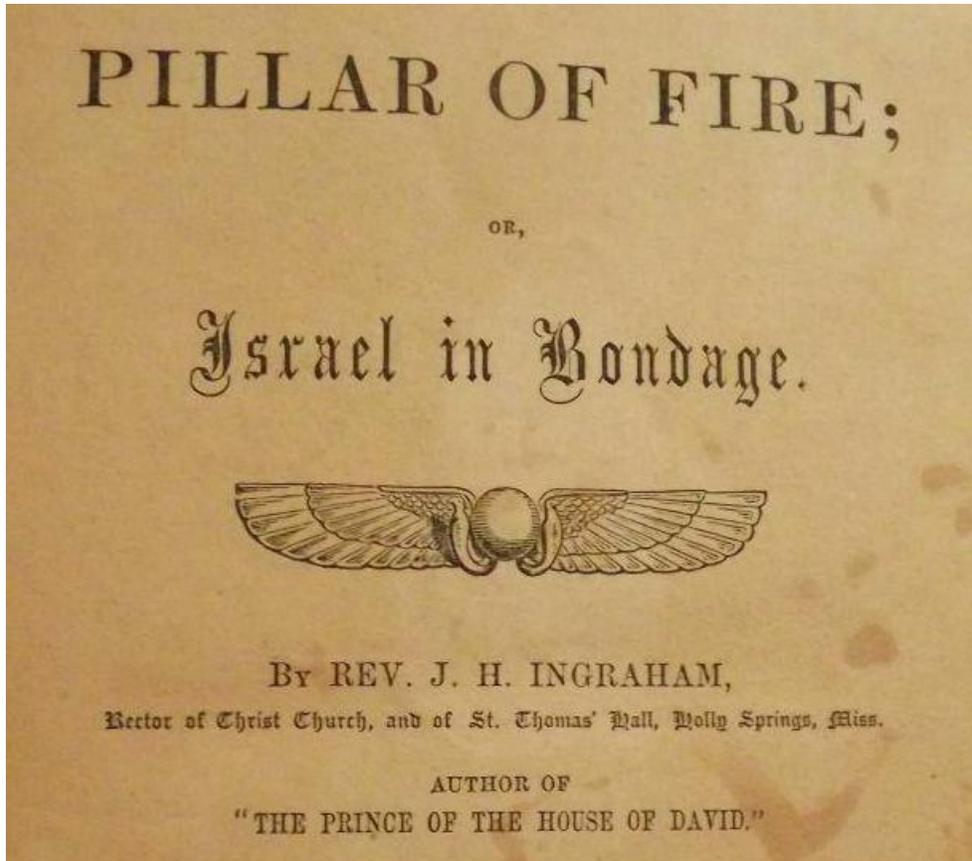
As for reading Ingraham, Poe was of the opinion, “Nevermore!”

Among Ingraham’s extensive works was a Louisiana-based adventure, *Lafitte: The Pirate of the Gulf* (1836), loosely covering the life of the smuggler, privateer and colorful hero of the Battle of New Orleans.

Moving to Natchez, Mississippi, Ingraham married Mary Brooks and in the early 1850s became an Episcopal clergyman.

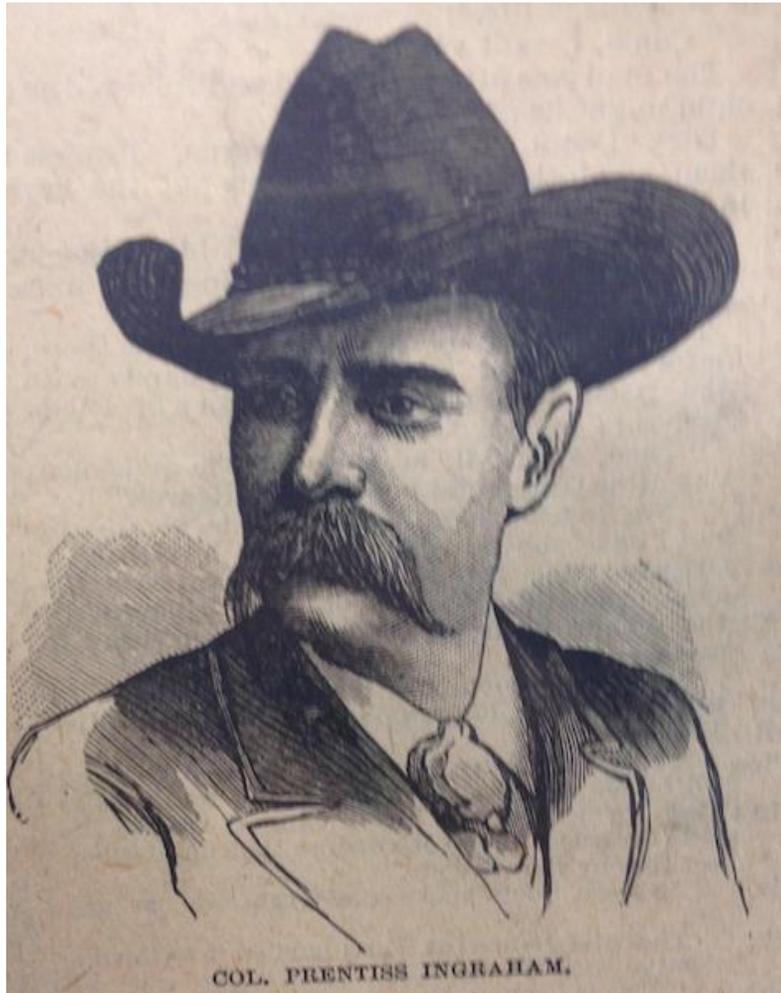
His later novels involved biblical themes, such as *The Pillar of Fire; or, Israel in Bondage* (1859), which was used as one of the bases of Cecil

B. DeMille's epic blockbuster film *The Ten Commandments*, starring Charlton Heston as Moses.



The man who gave New Orleans its renowned nickname died at age 51 in Holly Springs, Mississippi, where he was then Rector of Christ Church. Ingraham's death was presumed to be accidental. After taking a loaded pistol from a drawer in the vestibule of his church, the gun slipped from his hand and was discharged. The wound caused the dying priest intense suffering for some ten days.

His teenage son, Prentiss, would go on to achieve fame of his own in a number of fascinating fields. Born near Natchez, Mississippi, Prentiss attended St. Timothy's Military Academy, Maryland, and Jefferson College, Mississippi. He continued his education at the Mobile Medical College, but soon left to enlist in the Confederate Army where he served from April 1861 to April 1865. He saw combat through the first attack on Vicksburg and was wounded in the siege of Port Hudson. After the close of the Civil War, he became a soldier of fortune, traveling to Mexico to fight on the side of Benito Juárez against the French and still later in South America.



Colonel Prentiss Ingraham (December 28, 1843 – August 16, 1904)

Prentiss Ingraham fought in Austria as a member of General Max Hoffman's staff and in 1866 saw service in Crete against the Turks, as well as in the Khedive's army in Egypt. In 1869, he journeyed to London England, but soon returned to the United States to take up with Cuban revolutionaries against Spain. He served aboard the former Confederate Navy's blockade running *Hornet*, which was involved in several filibustering expeditions to Cuba under the names *Hornet* and *Cuba*. A filibuster refers to someone involved in an unauthorized military expedition. Prentiss Ingraham became a Colonel in the Cuban army, as well as a Captain in their navy, and was captured, brought to trial as a filibuster and condemned to death by the Spanish, but managed to successfully escape. His exciting career was far from over.

Back in the United States Colonel Ingraham met up with Colonel William F. Cody, better known as Buffalo Bill, where he worked as an advance agent for the "Wild West Show".

Look out for the Street Parade by the Indians on Horseback, headed by
Buffalo Bill's Military Band, on the above date.

COL PRENTISS INGRAHAM,
Treasurer,

JOSH S. OGDEN,
Business Manager

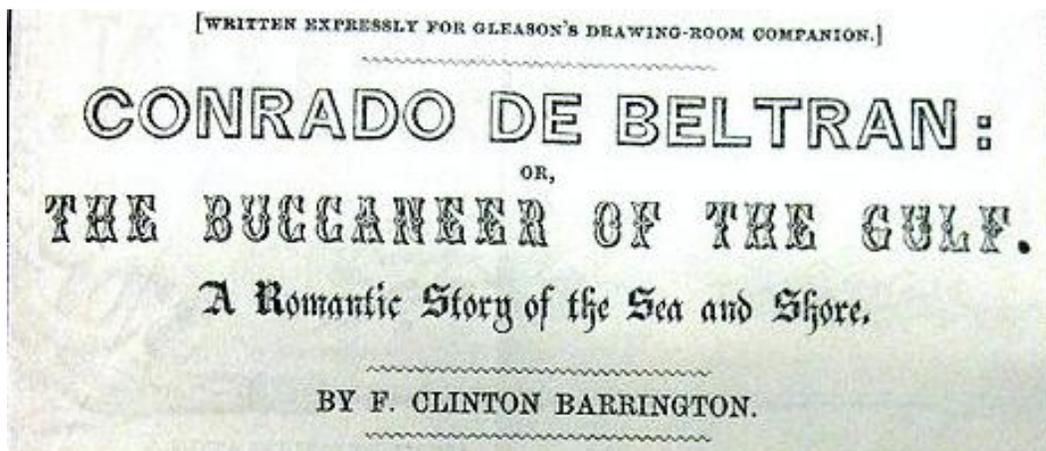
An 1880 ad for the Wild West Show listed Col. Prentiss Ingraham as Treasurer and asked the public to "Look out for the Street Parade by the Indians on Horseback".

In addition to his job as Treasurer, Colonel Ingraham began writing dime novels and promotion pieces for Bill Cody. He wrote well over one hundred Buffalo Bill stories, plays and short sketches. An article published in *The Clarion*, Jackson, Mississippi, on May 7, 1884, called Ingraham "the great sensational dime-novel writer". In fact, he exceeded his father in his abundant literary output and was among the most prolific dime novel authors of his day. Of course, his own life was as thrilling and colorful as those of the heroes in his stories.

The adventurous Mississippi native typically penned one story per week (containing around fifty to seventy thousand words), and for this received two to three hundred dollars per story. Other writers would later churn out such thrillers on a weekly basis, but that was after the introduction of the typewriter in the 1870s.

Many were tales about pirates, or as the *Advocate* reported in 1969, "traditional 'southern seas' romances, in which New Orleans merely served as the mysterious 'port of call.'" The works included "Merle, the Mutineer; or, The Brand of the Red Anchor (1880), The Skeleton Schooner; or, The Skimmer of the Seas (1882), Buccaneer Bess, Te Lioness of the Sea; or, The Red Sea Trail (1882)" and many others.

Prentiss Ingraham used numerous pen names, such as Dangerfield Burr, Major Henry B. Stoddard, Colonel Leon Lafitte and Harry Dennies Perry. His father had done the same, often using F. Clinton Barrington as his *nom de plume*.



One of Joseph Holt Ingraham's Buccaneer tales published in Gleason's Drawing-Room Companion under his pen name, F. Clinton Barrinton

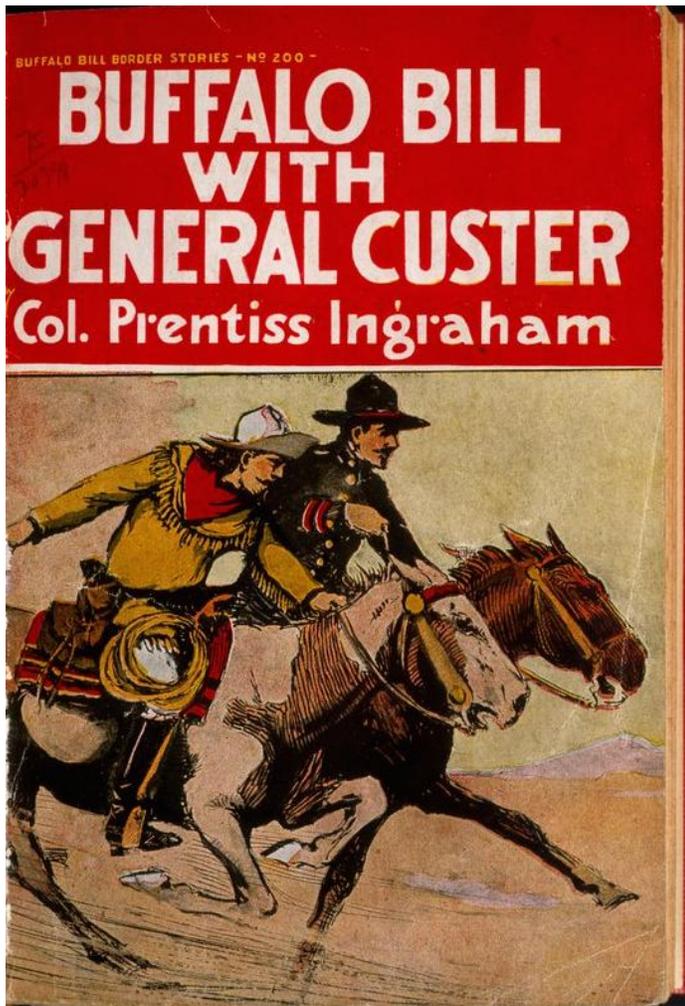
Dime novels had their origin in 1860, when publishers Erastus and Irwin Beadle released a new series of cheap paperbacks, entitled *Beadle's Dime Novels*. Short works of fiction, they usually revolved around the daring exploits of a single heroic character. As the name implies, they were sold for a dime (or sometimes a nickel), and were light, portable and featured colorfully illustrated cover art. Lawyers, doctors and even presidents of the United States (Abraham Lincoln and Woodrow Wilson) were among those who relished diving into these novels with great enjoyment. Mark Twain drew from a Beadle novel for the Shakespearean revival episode in *Huckleberry Finn*. These books were also very popular with soldiers during the Civil War. Yet critics called them "cheap, demoralizing, blood and thunder publications."

Famous frontiersman Kit Carson, once shown a dime novel cover with himself pictured slaying seven Indians with one hand while holding a fainting maiden with the other, remarked after studying the cover for a long period of time:

"That there may have happened, but I ain't got no recollection of it."

The dime novel authors, and Ned Buntline and Prentiss Ingraham were among the most popular, didn't always let the facts get in the way of a good story. Still Prentiss Ingraham experienced many exciting real-life adventures of his own, which surely helped make his stories ring true.

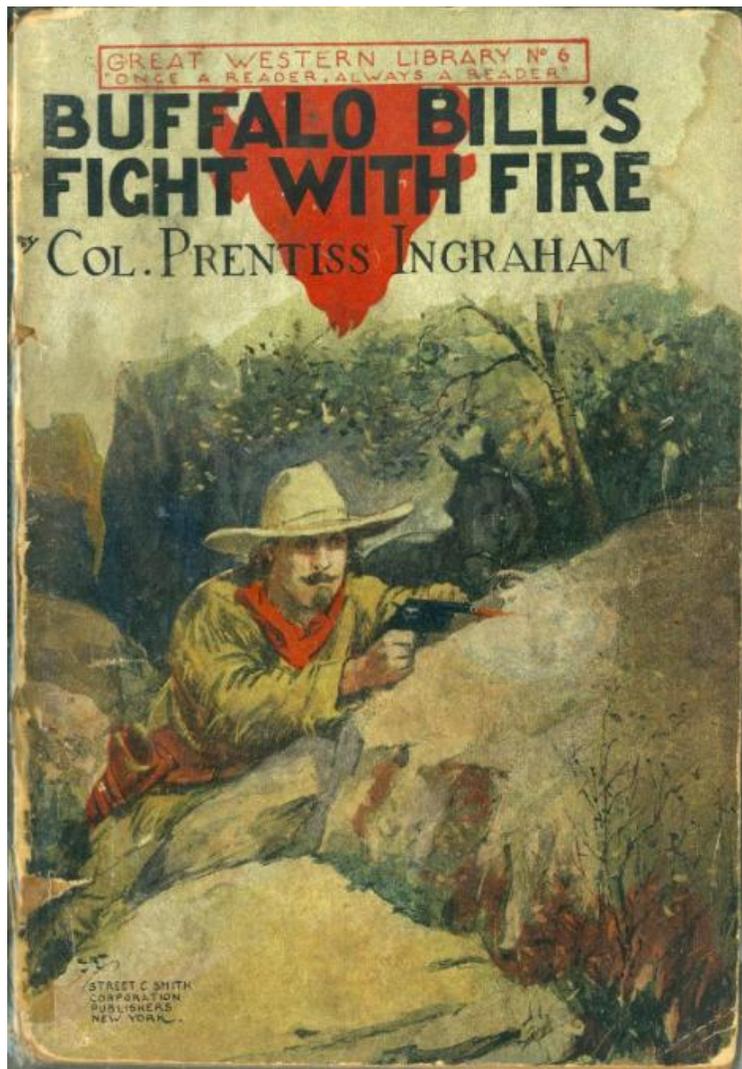
Ingraham's dime novels were numerous and popular. He was the author of *The Masked Spy* (1872) and *Cutlass and Cross; or, The Ghouls of the Sea* (1883), but is best known for his Buffalo Bill series. Like his father, he wrote about Jean Lafitte and his men, writing several romances – including one set in New Orleans after the Battle of New Orleans. In 1900, Prentiss Ingraham claimed to have written over 600 novels.



One of Prentiss Ingraham's Buffalo Bill dime novels

After having traveled down to the Mississippi Gulf Coast from Chicago, Colonel Prentiss Ingraham spent his last days at the Beauvoir Confederate Soldiers' Home in Biloxi, Mississippi, on the grounds of Jefferson Davis' post-war residence. There he was diagnosed as being gravely ill with Bright's Disease, known to modern medicine as nephritis, as well as "locomotor ataxia". He died there four days later on August 16, 1904, aged 60, and was buried in the cemetery at the Beauvoir Soldiers' Home. The *Biloxi Daily Herald* reported in his obituary: "He calmly sleeps at the historic spot where his dust will remain until the great day of assizes."

Survivors included his wife, Rosa; daughter Rosa of Chicago; another daughter, Mrs. Austin Cole of Los Angeles; and a son, Mr. Langley Ingraham of Atlanta, Georgia.



Another colorful tale of Buffalo Bill's exploits by Prentiss Ingraham

When Joseph Holt Ingraham visited his "crescent city" in 1834, the city was undergoing great progress. The early 1830s in New Orleans witnessed great new innovations including gas lights and railroads. The Pontchartrain Rail-Road was the city's first railway, carrying people and goods between the Faubourg Marigny and Lake Pontchartrain and beginning service on April 23, 1831. The following year, 1832, was the city's first steam-powered cotton press, and in 1834 both the United States Mint and the Medical College of Louisiana (today's Tulane University School of Medicine) were established. The city's population was 50,000 and growing. Of the 20,000 white inhabitants, 15,000 were Roman Catholic. 30,000 black inhabitants, both slaves and free persons of color, rounded out the rest of the population.

When we look at a map of New Orleans today, we automatically see this giant crescent that wraps around the city from downtown all the way upriver to Carrollton and the Orleans/Jefferson parish line. But this was not the crescent referred to by Bienville or Joseph Holt

Ingraham when he called New Orleans the "crescent city". In 1834, the city was actually located along the river's crescent that formed around Algiers and Algiers Point. On the east bank, this bend extended from the present-day Bywater and Faubourg Marigny past the French Quarter (or original city) and on through to the Irish Channel. This is undoubtedly the crescent that was referred to as the "beautiful crescent" in 1802 and Ingraham's crescent in the 1830s.

Since that time, the "Crescent City" has served New Orleans well as an aptly descriptive and beautiful nickname.

NED HÉMARD

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