

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Don't Paraphrase Me, Braud!

Denis Braud was New Orleans' first printer, and he acquired that position back when the French still governed Louisiana. Jean-Jacques Blaise d'Abbadie was the governor of French Louisiana back then, and in 1764 he requested Versailles' permission to operate a printing press in the colony. Denis Braud was such an enthusiastic printer that he printed paper money from a copper plate press even before his printing equipment arrived from Paris. Meanwhile other events were transpiring.

The Seven Years' War did not go well for France in Europe, Canada or India, and it ended with disastrous consequences for the government of Louis XV. It caused France to lose its American colonies, and the loss of Canada (according to historian Charles Gayarré) "caused a painful emotion in Louisiana". Worse yet, the king had signed in 1762 a secret treaty ceding Louisiana "as well as New Orleans, and the island in which that town is situated" to his cousin in Spain, his Catholic Majesty in Madrid. Signed at Fontainebleu by Grimaldi for Spain and by Choiseul for France, it was not immediately made known.

This unhappy treaty was revealed in Louisiana in an "*Extrait de la Lettre du Roi à M. Dabbadie*" bearing the imprint "*De l'Imprimerie de Denis Braud, Imprimeur du Roi*" and was the first known letterpress-printed document, dated (by a handwritten endorsement by the New Orleans council's chief clerk) September 16, 1764. The sole surviving copy of this publication by Braud was in the private collection of E. A. Parsons of New Orleans, but is now at the University of Texas.

This transfer of Louisiana to Spain caused a whole new array of problems. Some of Louisiana's French colonists told the unpopular Spanish Governor Ulloa hello and goodbye (and don't bother to come back). This prompted the publication of the first book printed in Louisiana, entitled *Mémoire, des habitans et négocians de la Louisianne, sur l'événement du 29 octobre 1768, Chez Denis Braud, Imprimeur du Roi*. It was a justification of the rebels' actions against

Ulloa and a petition for the restoration of the Louisiana colony to France. The *mémoire* was attributed to Nicolas Chauvin de Lafrénière (or possibly Julien Doucet).

Spain did not take this lightly and sent in General Alejandro O'Reilly, an Irishman in the service of the King of Spain. O'Reilly arrived in New Orleans in August 1769 with 3,000 men-at-arms and took formal possession of the colony. October of 1769 was a busy month for "Bloody" O'Reilly. On the eighth of that month he issued a proclamation allowing twelve taverns, six billiard halls and one *limonadier*, or lemonade seller, to serve alcoholic drinks. Closing time was to be eight in the evening.

On the twenty-fifth of October, things were not quite so frivolous. It was on that date that the new governor executed six of the rebels (often referred to locally as patriots and martyrs), including Lafrénière. Other sentences were carried out including imprisonment and banishment, but Denis Braud was granted a pardon. The royal printer had been arrested and tried, but he offered the explanation that he was required by law to print whatever was presented to his press for printing that carried the official endorsement of the *ordonnateur* (to paraphrase his testimony). For this plausible reason he was soon released with a light punishment.

It is believed that Denis Braud did not live very much longer after that, but (in the half a dozen years or so that he was the town printer of New Orleans) he did print some twenty titles of various sizes. Some were rather substantial. Other printers came along until eventually the first newspaper was printed on March 3, 1794. It was called the "*Moniteur de la Louisiane*" and was begun by Louis Duclot. Over time there were newspapers in many different languages in the Crescent City.

The first printer in New Orleans to print in English was James Lyon of Vermont, who came out with the first issue of his newspaper exactly one week before the Louisiana Purchase's official transfer ceremony at the Cabildo on December 20, 1803. The newspaper came out on December 13 and was called the "Union, or New-Orleans Advertiser and Price Current".

On the second floor of the "*Casa Capitular*" (or "Capitol House"), the city hall as well as the administrative capital of the new Louisiana Territory, French Colonial Prefect Pierre Clement de Laussat and William Charles Cole Claiborne and General James Wilkinson of the United States gathered to sign the official transfer treaty.

New Orleanians call their "Capitol House" the Cabildo, which takes its name from the Spanish municipal governing body that met there, the "Illustrious Cabildo". The word "*cabildo*" has the same Latin origin

(*capitulum*) as the English word "chapter". It is also the Spanish word for a "cathedral chapter", a body of clerics assembled to advise a bishop.

The original council chambers used by the "*cabildo*" had been destroyed in the Great Fire of 1788. The Cabildo was rebuilt between 1795 and 1799. Eventually Mansard roofs would be added. But back at its very beginning, among the very first *regidores* (or governing members) of the newly formed Spanish Cabildo was the former French royal printer Denis Braud – luckily saved from execution for printing that historic and once incendiary tome.

NED HÉMARD

New Orleans Nostalgia
"Don't Paraphrase Me, Braud"
Ned Hémard
Copyright 2009