

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

The Three Municipalities

An early sketch of the Faubourg Marigny shows an Indian family roaming freely before the home of Bernard de Marigny in 1821. A huge weeping willow dominates his front yard, and the Native American mother is carrying a papoose upon her back. Anglo-Americans, as well, had been in town for a while, causing somewhat of a cultural clash with the Creole residents who had been there so much longer.

What is now known as downtown, or the CBD, had not yet been built. It would come to be known as the American Sector, the Faubourg St. Mary (or Sainte Marie) or the Second Municipality. Of the two biggest movers-and-shakers in the development of this American District, one was from Canada and the other from England. Neither would be considered "Kaintocks" or keelboat men, those rowdy Americans that claimed they "was raised on alligators and weaned on Panther's milk! Ya-hoo!"

Samuel Jarvis Peters, who died in 1855, had come to the Crescent City from Canada. Born in 1801, Peters started out in the city as a grocery clerk, became an influential businessman and president of his own grocery company, a city councilman and bank president. He is recognized as the founder of the New Orleans public school system and one of the principal founders of what would be called the Second Municipality.

Englishman James Caldwell was actor, theatre impresario, *bon vivant*, builder, city planner and entrepreneur, all rolled into one. Some time about 1828, he and Peters had made a proposal to Bernard de Marigny, who owned the huge faubourg downriver from the Vieux Carré, to construct impressive theatres, hotels, docks, gas works and cotton presses on his plantation so that his lands would be the location of a vast and important commercial center. Marigny accepted but, when the day came to sign the deed of transfer, Madame de Marigny was nowhere to be found. Without her signature before the notary, the deal was dead.

Peters was peeved and furiously responded to the quixotic and eccentric Creole aristocrat. "Sir," he exclaimed, "I shall live, by God, to see the day when rank grass will choke up the gutters of your old faubourg!" Peters stormed off thinking this was some sort of ruse on Marigny's part, but a lawsuit soon filed by Marigny's wife for restitution of her paraphernal rights seems to exonerate Marigny of any bad faith. In any event, Marigny's faubourg soon would be eclipsed by another.

Other reasons persisted for a rivalry between American and Creole factions. The city below Canal Street outvoted the Americans and always elected the mayor and the majority of the council. Consequently, revenues were spent more upon improvements to the Creole section (such as the Carondelet Canal and the Pontchartrain Railroad, "Smoky Mary").

The Faubourg Ste. Marie came back with its own canal. Additionally, the Giquel-Brooks (Creole vs. American) duel and subsequent trial in the mid-1830s caused an angry mob to attack the home of Judge Bermúdez and his wife. After many struggles, the American Sector forced the legislature to withdraw the city charter and provide another, which divided the city into three municipalities. Each were to have its own separate council, Taxing power, recorder and police force, but with a single mayor (an unholy trinity that would exist for sixteen years until 1852 when a new charter would return the city's government to but one municipality).

The First Municipality was the original French city bounded by Canal Street, the River, Esplanade all the way back to the Lake. At its center were its Place d'Armes, Cathedral, Cabildo and Prebytère. Its domed St. Louis Hotel tried to compete with Caldwell's opulent St. Charles Hotel in the Faubourg Ste. Marie. This six-story colossus on St. Charles was the tallest building in New Orleans; and to rival the Americans' City Hall built by Gallier, Mansard roofs were added to the Cabildo and Prebytère.

The Second Municipality was bounded by Canal Street, the River and Felicity Street (the Jefferson Parish line at that time). There began the City of Lafayette (annexed by the City of New Orleans in 1852 when the three municipalities came together as one). We know it today as the Garden District. Grace King writes that the Faubourg Sainte Marie "left its Creole rival so far behind". She tells of how "truck gardens were shoved into the swamp" and a "wretched waste was converted into Lafayette Square" and how the "the City Hall, First Presbyterian Church, Odd Fellows Hall, were grouped with fine effect around it."

The Third Municipality stretched from the boundary of the First Municipality to the shores of Lake Borgne. It encompassed the Faubourg Marigny and the Bywater, and it did get its cotton press.

But Municipality Number Two got most of the action.

The City authorized a seal on June 18, 1852, to symbolize the reunification of the three municipalities. It contains thirty-one stars for the number of states at that time. Twelve stars with a larger one in the center represent the thirteen original states. An additional twelve stars form an outer circle and represent the states admitted to the Union after the original thirteen until June 15, 1836. Louisiana was one of these. There are another six stars (three on each side) for the states admitted from January 26, 1837, until September 9, 1850. In the center of the seal are two Indians leaning against a shield with a white-bearded Neptune represented "Old Man River". The Indians are standing beside three wigwams, over which the sun's rays are shining. And an alligator at the bottom brings to mind the Louisiana swamps and perhaps the food upon which those early "Kaintocks" feasted. The cost for the seal back then, its engraving die and printing was a mere \$16.00.

One can observe this 1852 seal (surrounded by the River's Crescent) on the patches on the sleeves of the New Orleans Police Department. Before the street paving and developing done by Caldwell, Peters and other visionaries, alligators would've been quite at home in the muddy streets that once crossed the three municipalities of the Crescent City. Today the safer bet is on those sleeves or in a *sauce piquante*.

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