

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Up on the *Azotea*

The Iberian peninsula (Spain and Portugal) entered written history as a land populated largely by the Iberians, Basques and Celts. After a period of arduous conquest, this territory came under the rule of the Roman Empire. The Visigoths were next on the scene, invading Italy and famously sacking Rome on August 24, 410. They eventually settled in the Iberian peninsula, where they founded a powerful kingdom.

In the early 8th century Moorish invaders (populations of Berber, Black African and Arab descent) crossed over to Spain from North Africa and established control of what they called *Al Andalus*, comprising large segments of what is now Spain and Portugal. While the rest of Europe was still struggling with feudalism and food shortages, Moorish Spain was a center of science, trade and culture. The Moors brought to the arid Spanish plains a system of irrigation and crops such as oranges, pomegranates, lemons, sugar cane, cotton, rice, figs and grapes, to name a few. The Moorish conquest and subsequent colonization of Spain had many good effects on Spanish and European culture, including its architecture.

In a process that took centuries, the small Christian kingdoms in the north gradually regained control of the peninsula. In 1105 the Christians captured Toledo, where the Muslims held vast libraries of Greek, Roman and Arabic books on philosophy and mathematics. These books included the classics of Rome and Greece, lost to the west for hundreds of years, texts on medicine, astrology, astronomy, pharmacology, physics, biology, botany, chemistry, mathematics, algebra, geometry, trigonometry, music, geography, mechanics, navigation and history. These transcripts were torches to help kindle the light of the Renaissance.

The last Moorish stronghold fell in 1492, the same year Columbus reached the New World. Spain was on the path to a global empire, which eventually included Louisiana. Some Moorish influences came along with them, but not all were kept.

The original French city of New Orleans (founded in 1718) has come to be known to New Orleanians and visitors alike as the French Quarter or *Vieux Carré* (Old Square), but most of its homes and buildings were constructed during Spain's rule over Louisiana. These years (1763 – 1803) witnessed the Great New Orleans Fire of 1788 and another fire in 1794, which destroyed much of the original French architecture. The colony's new Spanish overlords required strict new fire codes, which mandated that all structures be physically adjacent and close to the curb to establish a firewall. The city soon rebuilt beautiful structures with deep, narrow buildings and rear courtyards surrounded by the adjoining buildings. The new Creole townhouses were built with steeply pitched roofs, side-gabled and with several roof dormers. Exteriors of wood were banned and replaced with fire-resistant brick or stucco, painted in pastel colors fashionable at the time. Accompanying the thick colorful walls came beautiful lacy ironwork balconies, all adding to the Mediterranean ambiance. Since Spain was for so many years under Moorish influence, its architecture and that of Old New Orleans became more North African, or Arabic, in its influence. The sheltered courtyards that make the Crescent City famous are really symbolic of what goes on "behind the veil" of this enchanting city.

But not all Arabic architectural influences were continued, once tried. There is a much forgotten historic flat-roofed architectural feature from the Spanish colonial period called an *azotea*. It is much forgotten because, as anyone from New Orleans might tell you, the flat roof is unsuitable to the heavy rainfall of South Louisiana. The word *azotea* comes to the Spanish language from the Hispano-Arabic and Arabic words *suteih* (*satih*) or *sutayh* (*as-sutáyha*) meaning "flat and spread out".

Azotea is essentially a terrace or rooftop patio nestled atop a one or two-story flat roofed Creole cottage or townhouse. These terraced rooftops (often with gardens) were important meeting places for the family in the evening, where cooler breezes could be best enjoyed. In colloquial Spanish, *azotea* can mean one's noggin or head, apparently since it's flat up there. In Spanish "*estar mal de la azotea*" means "to be messed up in the head" or "to be off one's rocker". *Azotea* is a flat or terraced roof common to many Latin-American urban Creole houses, only not so much in New Orleans ... where one would have to be "*mal de la azotea*" to build too many of them.

There is, however, a significant remaining example of an *azotea* at 707 Dumaine Street in the French Quarter, while numerous others around the *Vieux Carré* have been roofed over. This roof feature was long abandoned due to termites and leaky roofs, but it is possible with modern roofing techniques that the concept could be revived. In colonial houses, the *azotea* was also used for collecting rainwater, which was fed into cisterns (*algibes*). In addition, *azotea* is a term for a flat-roofed adobe or stone-walled adobe or stone-walled house (also

not constructed in Spanish colonial Louisiana).



707 Dumaine Street azotea enclosed by stacked tejas curvas

Teja means "roof tile" and *tejado* means "tile roof" in Spanish, and the "quarter-round" roof tiles one sees above are called *tejas curvas*. One can observe in the photograph above how these rounded tiles have been stacked to form a see-through railing around the terraced rooftop. Offering the ability to look out through the openings, at the same time, one cannot see too much going on within (offering a certain degree of privacy).

Perhaps Louisiana's most famous Spanish colonial governor was *Bernardo de Gálvez y Madrid*, Viscount of Galveston and Count of Gálvez (July 23, 1746 – November 30, 1786). Besides being governor of Louisiana from 1777 to 1785, he was also governor of Cuba, and later Viceroy of New Spain. Galveston, Texas, and Galveston Bay are named in his honor, as is Orleans Parish's neighboring St. Bernard Parish, Louisiana. So is Galvez Street in New Orleans, usually referred to as North or South Galvez (depending on which side of Canal Street it lies). Gálvez was an excellent colonial administrator and military leader who aided the thirteen American colonies in their quest for independence and commanded Spanish forces against Britain in the American Revolutionary War. He worked closely with Irish-born Oliver Pollock, an American patriot and financier of the American Revolution, shipping gunpowder, muskets, uniforms, medicine and other supplies. Gálvez ordered his *vaqueros* to round up cattle to be driven north to

feed Washington's armies.

Gálvez carried out a well-crafted military campaign and defeated the British colonial forces at Manchac, Baton Rouge and Natchez in 1779. The Battle of Baton Rouge on September 21, 1779, freed the lower Mississippi Valley of British forces and relieved the threat to colonial Louisiana's capital city, New Orleans. The following year, Gálvez recaptured Mobile from the British and defeated the British at the Siege of Pensacola in 1781. The losses of these two ports left the British without a base in the Gulf of Mexico except for Jamaica.

In recognition of his aid, George Washington, placed Gálvez to his right in a July 4th parade, and the American Congress cited him for his valuable assistance during the Revolution.



Galvez Restaurant and its azotea

Governor Gálvez is also remembered in a beautiful restaurant in the French Quarter that bears his name. It overlooks the Mississippi River. One will notice in the picture above that Galvez Restaurant has an *azotea* bordered by a railing of stacked *tejas curvas* (curved roof tiles), just like the ones atop 707 Dumaine. Additional overlapping *tejas curvas* border Galvez's gable roof.

It was also during the tenure of Governor Gálvez that the Canary

Islanders came to Louisiana. During the years of the Spanish empire the Canaries were the main stopover for Spanish galleons on their way to America because of the favorable easterly winds. Contrary to its name, the islands are not named for the yellow bird known as the canary. Rather, it is the bird that is named after the islands. The name *Islas Canarias* is likely from the Latin *Insula Canaria*, meaning "Island of the Dogs", which historian Pliny the Elder came up with because the major island in the group contained "vast multitudes of dogs of very large size".

Back when Gálvez was colonial governor of Spanish Louisiana, between the years 1778 to 1783, about 3,000 hardy *Isleños*, or Islanders (also called Canarians), as opposed to *Penisulares*, which are people from the Spanish mainland), made the journey to Louisiana in order to make new lives for themselves and serve the King of Spain in his attempt to secure Spanish territory against possible British incursions into the region.

Previously, the Treaty of Fontainebleau (1762) was a secret agreement in which France ceded Louisiana (New France) to Spain, ostensibly as compensation for its loss of Florida to Britain, after Spain was urged late in the Seven Years War to enter into battle on the French side. This treaty was kept secret even during the French negotiation and signing of the Treaty of Paris in 1763, which ended the war with Britain following the Seven Years' War. The Treaty of Paris divided *La Louisiane* at the Mississippi River: the eastern half was ceded to Britain, while the western half (containing New Orleans) was nominally retained by France. Spain did not contest, as it already knew it would gain western Louisiana. France's ceding Louisiana to Spain was not made public until April 1764, when France's colonial governor Aubry was notified by the King.

It was also under Spanish colonial rule in Louisiana that Acadians (Cajuns, as we call them today) were welcomed to South Louisiana after their expulsion from Canada by the British.

Galvez Restaurant sums up this blending of the French and Spanish: "As the French and Spanish cultures integrated, and melded with the local Native and African Americans, they exchanged meals and recipes. In fact, it's rumoured that the first Gumbos and Jambalayas that we enjoy today had their origins in the classic Spanish dishes of Caldo Gallego and Paella."

Another possible *azotea* in New Orleans is at the home of an eighth-generation New Orleanian named Peter Moon Yokum at 723 Toulouse in the French Quarter. Interviewed by *Times-Picayune* columnist Angus Lind, Yokum reveled in the elegant decay of "peeling paint". He resides in a "decadent Toulouse Street Creole town house, Casa

Hinard, which his family believes was acquired by Spanish banker Don Geronimo Hinard in 1797." A portion of the two-story brick structure may date back as far as 1720. Early maps reveal a house on the site back in 1728.

"Upstairs," Yokum told Angus, "is an 'azotea,' a raised open-air porch." This so-called porch overlooks the Court of Two Sisters patio. What Yokum called his *azotea* is similar to ones in the interior of the Pontalba Apartments. "The Spanish were big on this, but most of them were closed in to make another room," Yokum related. "I come out here and read my books in the morning. What a view."

Le Corbusier, who pioneered modernism in architecture and laid the foundation for what became the *Bauhaus* Movement, or International Style, would have loved the Spanish *azotea*. His *Les 5 Points d' une architecture nouvelle*, which he formulated in 1926 included as its fifth point the roof garden (restoring, supposedly, the area of ground covered by the house). Best-selling author Tom Wolfe attacked these ideas in "From Bauhaus to Our House", characterizing this architecture and its political philosophy as inapplicable to America, arguing, for example, that it was silly to model American schools on "worker's flats" for the proletariat. Still, rooftop terraces and gardens work well in places like Spain, Portugal, Greece and other sunny locales.

The Drifters (in their hit by Carole King and Gerry Goffin) sang it best:

"On the roof it's peaceful as can be,
And there the world below can't bother me."

If it weren't for all the rain in New Orleans, that place to escape could have been "Up on the *Azotea*".

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