

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Whiskey and Disorder

Today's conscientious tippler, after having imbibed one-too-many cocktails in the Crescent City, either has lined up a friend who is a "designated driver" or hails a taxi, pedicab or calls Uber. That is, if he or she finds it possible to properly tap the app.



New Orleans in 1841 with the dome of the first St. Charles Hotel dominating the skyline, just left of center, color engraving by William J. Bennett from a sketch by Antoine Mondelli

But in those rough-and-tumble days gone by, when having too much to drink in this raucous port city brought you before one of the City Recorders, it was a totally different scenario. At the beginning of the 19th century, these city officials had the power to fine and imprison mischief makers, without the aid of a jury. This swift administration of justice was found to be necessary in a city where there existed numerous saloons and gambling establishments.

In the 1840s and 50s, the New Orleans *Daily Picayune* frequently provided colorful accounts of the drunks and petty criminals being tried and sentenced by a Recorder.

Here are a couple from the May 17, 1848, report in the *Picayune*:

A person named "James Settle was found on the Levee night before last, so drunk that he could not possibly locomote, and the watchman resorted to the Pickwickian expedient of toting him off in a one wheeled coach, and accordingly procured a wheelbarrow and trundled him to the lock-up. On being asked by the Recorder how he come to get so far gone, he could not for the life of hime explain whether it was owing to the strength of the whiskey or the weakness of his head. The Recorder told him that not being an old settler, if he would pay the cost of transportation and settle for his night's lodging, he would liberate him. He took advantage of his honor's leniency and departed."



Unable to locomote, Mr. Pickwick is discovered in a wheelbarrow

"TIGHT – Manuel Waterhouse Ridey, when asked by Recorder Baldwin yesterday morning how he came to get tight the preceding evening, replied that it was in consequence of getting too many gin toddies in Toulouse street."

On November 15, 1852, the *Picayune* reported "over fifty arrests made" the previous day and evening "in different parts of the city".

"WHISKEY AND DISORDER" was the caption. Nearly all of the arrests were "for being drunk and for disorderly character. Whether it was the cool weather that caused such an effect to whiskey we cannot say, but certain it was that extra loads of the ardent were heaped up on many constitutions too weak to carry the burden handily at one load."



Mid-1800s carte-de-visite view of the corner of Canal and St. Charles streets in New Orleans, with the second St. Charles Hotel (center) in the distance (minus the great dome after fire of 1851)

The Friday, June 19, 1840, issue of the *Picayune* reported a downpour of activity in the Recorder's Court – Second Municipality:

"It never rains but it pours" applied to the "great variety of cases" handled the previous Wednesday night. In fact, a "flood of loafers and loaferesses" literally "poured into the watchhouse and who overflowed the prisoner's dock in Recorder Baldwin's office yesterday."

"John D. Herbert was found drunk and disturbing the peace," but one of the watchmen whose job it was to apprehend tipsy violators strayed from his job.

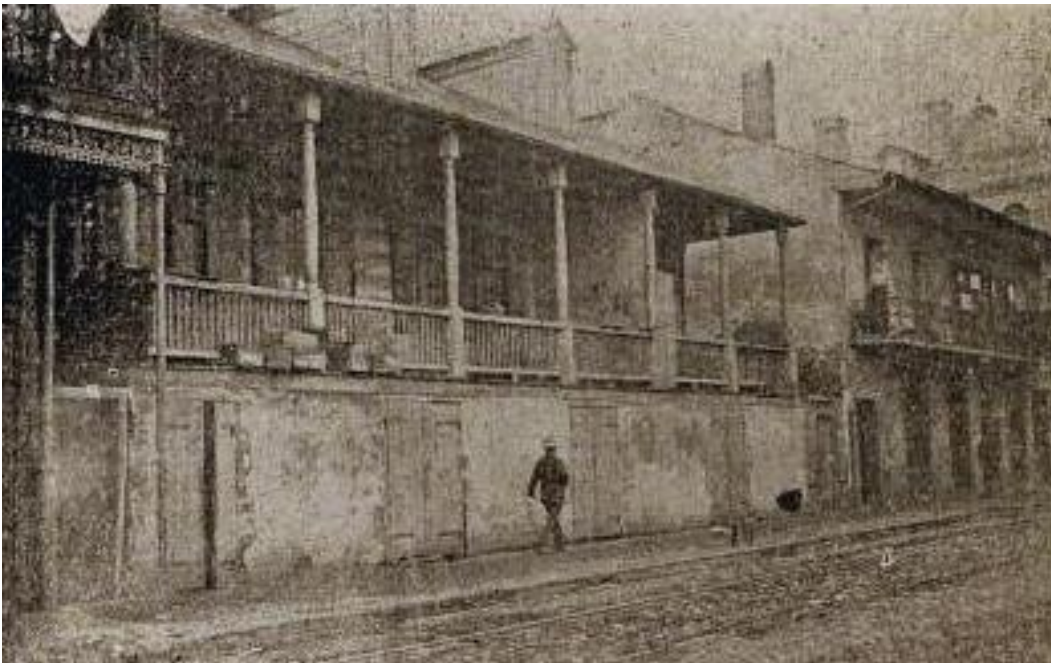
"C. Donovan, a watchman of the third ward, got drunk and wandered off from his beat. He was found by his honor the Mayor in Carondelet street, and taken to the calaboose. The Recorder told him to pay \$1 37 ½ for his lodging, and then gave him his 'walking papers.'" William Freret was "his honor the Mayor" from May 11, 1840 to April 4, 1842.

James and Katy Patterson were found "drunk and fighting" and "using improper and indecent language." They were fined ten dollars and bound to keep the peace.

Two other women were found drunk, one an old woman "who swore it was the first time." She promised the Recorder "if his Honor would acquit her, it should be the last in all her life that ever she would get drunk." The Recorder showed leniency and she was discharged.

Not all of these stories had happy endings. The New Orleans *Daily Creole* reported on Wednesday, August 13, 1856, that an unfortunate "Irishman by the name of Daniel Ryan" got drunk and fell into the river the previous Monday night "from the 3d District wharf, at the foot of Louisa Street. He was a man of family." He presumably drowned, as the body had "not been found yet."

In that same report, the *Daily Creole* wrote that "Joseph Bisquera, for getting drunk and taking the banquette as sure enough bed, was sent down for 60 days." This was back when the City's sidewalks were called *banquettes*.



Walking along the banquette, Rue Dumaine, New Orleans

On September 28, 1848, the *Picayune* reported:

"DRUNK – Julia Healy was last evening brought to the First Municipality guard-house, at the request of her husband, for being so glorious drunk that he could not manage her." The reporter mused, "Julia must be an interesting wife."

On Wednesday evening, August 26, 1852, according to the *Picayune*, a poor wretch named McNamara was picked up in a terrible state. The Second District police found him "lying drunk in the street," beset with "THE HORRORS," the "blue devils, or the man with the poker, which

generally follow men who make miserable, senseless wretches of themselves by habitual intoxication.”

But for “the drollest of the droll,” i.e., being curious or unusual in a manner that provokes utterly dry amusement, there could be no match for Con O’Donnell. Upon his appearance before the Recorder’s Court – Second Municipality, on August 20, 1840, the *Picayune* described him as “a book worm, a walking encyclopedia of learned lore, a living edition of ancient and modern literature,” well, you get the idea, grammatically entertaining after having imbibed too much.

“O’Donnell,” said the Recorder, “you are charged with being drunk last night.”

“*Difficilem oportet aurem habere ad criminal,*” which means put not trust in the assertions of a Charley (Charley being a nickname for a city watchman), replied Con O’Donnell.

“Drunk, sir,” O’Donnell continued, “is a vulgarism, a shaverism, or barbarism as it is generally called – it is a bakerism, or to resort again to the vulgar, it is a loaferism. Instead of accusing me of being found drunk, if your honor had told me that I was in a state of mental hallucination brought about by having imbibed certain inebriating potations, I could understand you; but when you speak of drunkenness to Con O’Donnell; you become perfectly unintelligible.”

“Term it what you will,” replied the Recorder, “you still seem to labor under its influence. Why is it that you so often get drunk?”

“*Dum vivimus vivamus,*” O’Donnell explained his motto, the free translation of which is “never to refuse a brandy toddy or gin cock-tail when I can get it.”

Interestingly, O’Donnell’s motto was the same as that of the Knights of Momus. His appearance before the Recorder’s court, however, was more than thirty years before the founding of the historic Carnival Krewe.



Knights of Momus and motto

"The watchman says that you were not only drunk, but that you acted like an insane person," came back the Recorder.

"*Nil propriam ducas, quod mutari potest,*" replied O'Donnell – who is more like a mad man than one under the influence of inebriation.

Perhaps impressed with his ability to quote Latin in such a state, the Recorder decided to let him go "this time" if he promised "to keep sober".

"I shall endeavor, may it please the court, but *haret lateri lethalis arundo,*" the deadly arrow (of intemperance) still sticks in my side – I cannot pluck it out.

Upon completing these utterances, this loquacious, yet literate, lush withdrew from the dock and was released.

Recorder Baldwin, mentioned above, was Joshua Baldwin, a native of Chester County, Pennsylvania, but a long-time resident of New Orleans. He was a respected judge, prominent citizen and a member of the Whig political party. He died in January 1852.

By the early 20th century, the city made use of the Recorders' Courts to enforce public health ordinances. The city had brushes with various diseases, and supervision was needed for the city's rendering plants, dairies and slaughterhouses.

Before long, automobiles were ubiquitous and traffic violations overwhelmed the courts. It became necessary for the traffic division

to be split off with its own jurisdiction.

The Recorder and Recorders' Courts should not be confused with the Orleans Parish Recorder of Mortgages. That office has been consolidated into a single division, along with the Register of Conveyances and Custodian of Notarial Archives. The three offices are now all in one, the Land Records Division, for filing, recording and indexing all parish land records such as sales, mortgages, building contracts and judgments of possession. The division continues to be a part of the Office of the Clerk of Civil District Court for the Parish of Orleans.

Dum vivimus vivamus, which in Latin is actually translated as "While we live, let us live," also serves as the motto for the Porcellian Club at Harvard, founded in the 1790s. New Orleans' Knights of Momus embraced this Epicurean motto over eighty years later.

Remember, consume *aquae vitae* responsibly and designate others to "locomote" you home. Preferably not in a *pabo*, which is Latin for wheelbarrow.



"the Pickwickian expedient"

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